



**THE ABCS OF DEATH**  
Jean-Pierre Léaud as the Sun King and Aksil Meznad as the dauphin in Albert Serra's *The Death of Louis XIV*





# FRAIL MAJESTY

*The great Jean-Pierre Léaud plays the Sun King in Albert Serra's 'The Death of Louis XIV', a film that offers both a quasi-documentary portrait of the actor's own frailty and a poignant reflection on mortality for all those who have watched him growing up on screen*

**By Jonathan Romney**

In 1997, the Cannes film festival was celebrating its 50th edition, and in the excitement, the world seemed to have forgotten the event's claim to being an exalted sanctification of the Seventh Art. That year, the media coverage seemed to be all about the Spice Girls, Michael Jackson (or possibly a visiting doppelganger) and the crowds around the short-lived local branch of Planet Hollywood. Meanwhile, the festival had organised an outdoor photo exhibition in the gardens near the Palais, celebrating its history. Walking past one evening, I noticed someone standing distractedly inspecting the displays: a stooped but elegant middle-aged man in a black suit, with a dandyish floppy haircut. No passerby seemed to give him a second look, yet here was someone who, as much as anyone alive, could claim to be a living icon of the festival and of the history of French cinema – Jean-Pierre Léaud, whose debut appearance in 1959, aged 14, in François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (*Les 400 Coups*) launched the French New Wave and cemented Cannes's reputation as the worldwide launching pad for innovations in film.

Nineteen years on, in 2016, Léaud was much more in the spotlight in Cannes. He was not only awarded a lifetime achievement award – a *Palme d'Or d'Honneur* – but starred in one of the festival's most applauded films, *The Death of Louis XIV*, by Catalan director Albert Serra. The film, based partly on the memoirs of the Duc de Saint-Simon, records the slow expiring over three weeks in 1715 of Louis, the Sun King, as he succumbs to the ravages of age, diabetes and gangrene. Although Serra's film isn't strictly a solo affair – the king is constantly surrounded by servants, courtiers and doctors – nevertheless this claustrophobic chamber piece, shot in densely



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atmospheric chiaroscuro by Jonathan Ricquebourg and largely confined to the royal bedchamber, centres very much on Léaud's imposing presence.

'Presence' rather than 'performance', you might also say, as Léaud's playing appears altogether minimalist. His king sometimes attempts to get up and walk, but thinks better of it; at one (very amusing) point, calls for his vast feathered hat in order to give the ladies of his court a gracious 'salutation'; at another, lets out an extended cry of pain. For the most part, however, Léaud gives the impression not so much of acting as simply being. Decked out in a series of vast wigs, so that much of the time he seems to be peering out of a cloud, he slumps further and further in his bed, and says increasingly little, with the occasional close-up allowing us to register a delicate quiver in his cheek. Through Léaud's own fragility at 73 – only three years younger than Louis when he died – we become intensely aware of the discrepancy between the abstract transcendental symbol that the king represents and his all too concrete corporeal inertia as a mortal body.

Inevitably, the film also comes across as a quasi-documentary portrait of the actor's own frailty. Serra offers a disturbing but deeply poetic close-up of mortality as a process – which explains why, receiving his award in Cannes last year, Léaud chose to quote Jean Cocteau (who cast him in his 1959 film *Le Testament d'Orphée*): "Cinema is the only art that captures death at work."

The slow creep of mortality is all the more poignantly striking in Serra's film since audiences over the decades have been able to watch Léaud growing up on screen, settling into adulthood, then going into an old age whose effects are all the more striking because there's no escaping the youth that has haunted the actor like an albatross. He spent 20 years playing Truffaut's fictional alter ego Antoine Doinel, in the series that began with *The 400 Blows* and ended with *Love on the Run (L'Amour en fuite)*, 1979), also appearing in other films by his mentor: *Anne and Marcel (Les Deux Anglaises et le Continent)*, 1971) and *Day for Night (La Nuit Américaine)*, 1973). Léaud also came to embody a French generation discovering its radical political identity in films by Jean-Luc Godard, notably *Masculin féminin* (1966) and *La Chinoise* (1967). With another Nouvelle Vague mainstay, Jacques Rivette, he entered into the improvisatory adventure of *Oui!* (1971), playing one of the film's detective figures, an obsessive, harmonica-playing conspiracy hunter. And he reached a peak of vulnerable sensitivity as the agonised young lover in Jean Eustache's *La Maman et la Putain* (1973).

From the 80s on, Léaud seemed to age fast. The alert,

heron-like beauty of his younger self had faded, but he was still inimitably intense as a solitary hero attuned to the dry minimalist register of Aki Kaurismäki's *I Iired a Contract Killer* (1990); he became a dapper elder statesman figure in films by Olivier Assayas, Lucas Belvaux and Catherine Breillat. Increasingly haggard and eccentric in his gestures and emphatic intonations, Léaud found himself the actor of choice to play unpredictable auteur characters: Assayas's *Irma Vep* (1996), Bertrand Bonello's *The Pornographer* (2001) and Serge Le Péron and Said Smihi's *I Saw Ben Barka Get Killed* (2005), as Georges Franju. Léaud has also figured as a totemic representation of his own history in Tsai Ming-liang's Truffaut tribute *What Time Is It There?* (2001), a magically unexpected apparition in Paris's Père Lachaise cemetery.

Léaud's appearance today, as seen in *The Death of Louis XIV*, suggests a physical decline as radical yet as magnificent as that of another great French cultural figure, Antonin Artaud – someone you might dream of Léaud playing. On the closing night of Cannes 2016, Léaud was on good form and gave an imposing and eloquent acceptance speech, recalling his 1959 debut at the festival: "I was born in Cannes." However, when I go to interview him there a few days earlier in his hotel room, he isn't in the best condition. The experience is very much like an audience with an ailing monarch: a dishevelled Léaud is lying on his bed in suit trousers, shirt and socks, packs of medicines piled on the bedside table. He speaks in a low, throaty voice, intermittently broken by fits of intense coughing, which makes his French hard to follow – very different from the stentorian delivery he gives on stage a few days later. He's not used to doing interviews, he tells me; nevertheless, he's happy to be talking to a journalist from London because it reminds him of working there with Kaurismäki: "He managed to capture a London which wasn't the London of Margaret Thatcher."

I'm curious about a phrase Léaud had been using about his work with Serra, calling *The Death of Louis XIV* a "permanent improvisation". What did he mean? The film, he says, is "a series of permanent improvisations on the theme of suffering and death. It's a film without a subject – there's no story, no historical references. It's quite simply a sort of permanent improvisation on death, and also on something that really got me inside a character I wasn't familiar with – that is, *sovereignty*. I was able to provide the deep intensity that would make credible the sovereignty of a man faced with suffering."

Why, I ask, did Serra particularly want to cast him in the role? "First of all," Léaud says, "because no other actor would have taken the same kind of risk. There were three cameras filming me non-stop, so I had to permanently improvise in front of them. That's where you get the intensity that let me into this character, who's in such a profound situation as a man and a monarch – there's nothing more terrible than the end of life, than death and suffering. I don't think any other actor would have improvised like that, walking a tightrope every day."

When Serra first approached him with the project, Léaud says he wasn't quite convinced. "Then he brought me a more detailed script with really interesting dialogue, in the French of the period, and bit by bit, I found my way into the part. It was complicated, but I found the right note to play it on. But then, to my amazement, Albert cut all the dialogue in the edit. What's left

**COLOSSAL YOUTH**  
Jean-Pierre Léaud as the young misfit Antoine Doinel in François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959), the role to which, the actor says, he owes everything







is simply the intensity of a king facing death in absolute silence, without a word. Of course I was a bit frustrated—I wanted to express myself, I wanted to *act*.”

When we think of L aud’s acting style, we think of a certain extravagance, a flamboyant body language. What characterises his playing in *Louis XIV* is its minimalism – taken, as the film progresses, to the point of absolute immobility. “Waving your hands around is out of the question – this is a monarch whose every gesture is very precise, very delicate. It’s a very ascetic body language.”

L aud sees his new film as closing the circle of his career. “In playing Louis XIV, I’m saying my definitive farewell to Antoine Doinel and saying hello to Jean-Pierre L aud in his 70s – I can now enter old age by playing a dying king. It’s like entering deep into death, descending in a diving bell. This film means a lot to me and it’ll follow me to my grave.”

The 14-year-old he once was, and the adolescent he once played, might – according to some accounts of L aud’s career – have haunted his subsequent life to damaging effect. But during our conversation, L aud refers to “Antoine Doinel, to whom I owe everything”. Since we’re in Cannes, I ask whether he had any idea, on his first visit, just how important his debut film would be.

“I was 14. I had no way of knowing that I was working with the most ferocious film critic of his day. I knew nothing about Fran ois before we met. All I knew was that I wanted to escape from those prisons, the boarding schools I’d been in. You can see that in my screen tests. I’d been kicked out of every school – that’s what made me so wild, so alive – and that’s what fuelled Fran ois’s film. All those teachers raking me over the coals because I had spirit – that became the motor of *Les 400 Coups*.”

L aud later acquired another mentor in the shape of Truffaut’s erstwhile comrade-in-arms Jean-Luc Godard, who fell out with his old friend in the late 60s as his own cinema became more political and intransigent. “Jean-Luc really introduced me to politics,” says L aud. “I was

completely involved in his political cinema, to the point of complete intellectual turmoil – and then, on the other side, there was Fran ois. After a meeting of the Dziga Vertov Group, I went to see Fran ois and described it to him, and he very gently explained to me, ‘Well, that’s very interesting but look, you’ve also got Bertolt Brecht...’ So he directed me towards a different kind of politics underlying cinema, the politics of storytelling.”

As a screen presence, L aud has always seemed essentially a law unto himself, but did he have any actors he modelled himself on? “When I was 14, my favourite was Montgomery Clift. Ah, *chapeau* – hats off to him! Elia Kazan’s *Wild River* [1960], Hitchcock’s *I Confess* [1953] – he’s perfect in them. When Kaurism aki first approached me to work with him, he said, ‘Absolutely no expression, OK – make it totally Bressonian.’ I said to a director friend, ‘You know what? I’ll do it like Clift.’”

Despite his Palme d’Or d’Honneur, it’s hard to see L aud as a comfortable part of any kind of mainstream tradition – as witness his fondness for working with idiosyncratic figures such as Kaurism aki, Breillat, Tsai, Philippe Garrel and now Serra. “The choices I make,” he says, “are about permanent renewal. I was never interested in pursuing a career – never. I only wanted to work with people I liked. I became a symbol of the New Wave, and there are a lot of people around like Aki and Tsai Ming-liang whose lives were really affected by those films, and who wanted to work with me years later. Like Serra – he didn’t want to film anyone else dying, he wanted it to be me.”

At one point, L aud breaks out in a painfully long fit of coughing, and exclaims, “*Je vais mourir, moi! C’est la mort de Louis Quatorze!*” (“I’m going to die! It’s the death of Louis XIV!”). As I prepare to leave, he makes a rueful comment that’s possibly as true for the viewer of Serra’s film as it is for L aud himself. “You don’t emerge intact from a film that’s entirely about death and suffering.”

**i** *The Death of Louis XIV* is released in UK cinemas on 14 July and is reviewed on page 66

**URBAN LEGEND**  
Jean-Pierre L aud in (clockwise from top left) Jean-Luc Godard’s *La Chinoise* (1967) and *Masculin f eminin* (1966), Fran ois Truffaut’s *Love on the Run* (1979) and Jean Eustache’s *La Maman et la Putain* (1973)



## THE STORY OF HIS DEATH

Catalan director Albert Serra explains why a little confusion on set can help create just the right combination of chaos and mystery to ensure he gets the very best out of his actors

By Jonathan Romney

**Jonathan Romney:** Jean-Pierre Léaud has called his role in the film a "permanent improvisation". What does that mean?

**Albert Serra:** It was not so different from what I did with my actors in the past. I always shoot with three cameras, I never rehearse with any actor before shooting, so the first day they come dressed for the part – in this case, Jean-Pierre was dressed as Louis XIV for a fortnight. I have a script I can use, but I never prepare shots, I always shoot the whole scene, and sometimes I run scenes together, with variations. I don't like the word 'improvisation', but it's like a flow of variations on the same idea that keep coming round again. I always talk during a shot, I make suggestions, throw in a few confusing things just in order to create chaos, mystery, whatever. So the actor is really pushing and pushing – against nothing, or against the unknown. I don't have ideas of what I'm doing – or if I do have ideas of what I'm doing, or of meanings, or what I want to show, I don't know. For me it's always a discovery. If the actor is there, he has to show me something – if not, I don't know why I'm there.

**JR:** How do you use Léaud's physical presence in the film? You have a character who is at once a 'sign' – legend, myth, divine royal presence – and at the same time, the real body of a man who is dying. And you have a lead actor who hardly moves throughout the film.

**AS:** It's infinite power set against a finite body, a finite life, a finite illness. You cannot escape that. There's the idea of going from moving a lot to gradually not moving. In the film, it's a really precise balance. At the beginning, the king moves a bit; then he moves off the bed, tries to walk but can't; then he stays in bed, seated at first, but gradually lying down, lower and lower... When films deal with the subject of death, it's usually a drama – there are no comic films about death. And death in cinema is always about the affirmation of life – there's always a last sentence, a last moment, a last gesture, a last impact. But that isn't real. In this film, death is like it really is – there's no drama here, just death progressively and slowly eating life. There's no possibility of a last dramatic affirmation of life.



Bedtime story: Albert Serra with Jean-Pierre Léaud on the set of *The Death of Louis XIV*

When the king is dying, you don't understand exactly what's happening – in the last 15 minutes, the editing is very beautiful. We're in one shot, then we move, with continuous sound, and suddenly there are three people who weren't there before, then back to the king and maybe he's wearing a different wig... You never know exactly where you are – it's a sort of mental flow.

**JR:** When you first approached Léaud for the role, how did you convince him? How did you tell him why you wanted him?

**AS:** This was originally going to be a performance at the Pompidou Centre [in Paris], for a commission five years ago. My idea was that he should be lying on a bed in a crystal box suspended in the air, dressed as Louis XIV, every day for a fortnight, dying in real time. The budget grew and grew for security reasons, then it was cancelled. But the first time I went to see Jean-Pierre, it was to do this performance – I went with a mutual friend, [critic] Jean Douchet, and it was very smooth, it was simple. I loved Jean-Pierre as a person, as a human being, and he loved me, immediately. I love his integrity – he never made a commercial film.

Years passed, we met several times, and then the possibility came up of doing it cheaply as a feature. He considers

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himself the absolute monarch of French cinema – he said, "I already have the most important prize as a citizen: the Légion d'Honneur. Now, with this film, I have won an important prize as an artist." He was really focused on it as an artistic challenge.

**JR:** Were there echoes of his past as an actor that you wanted him to bring to the role?

**AS:** No. I felt this would be speculative, I didn't want to. But suddenly it appeared in the film, by chance – for example, when he looks at the camera, people said to me, "It's beautiful because it closes the circle." I didn't know what they meant, but when we were doing interviews, people were talking about the closing shot of *The 400 Blows*... I'd forgotten that shot. For me, if it appears, it should be very spontaneous. Cinema is not a big influence on my work – I'm more influenced by literature, music, my own life – and French cinema is especially not a big influence. I respect the masterpieces Jean-Pierre has made in the past, but it's not my aesthetic.

**JR:** You choose to depict a moment in the life of a monarch when he's completely outside history – when he's shut away, and history is going on without him.

**AS:** Everything is outside – it's the beginning of the decline of the French state. There's one small political thing, when Louis talks with the child [the dauphin, the future Louis XV] and he says, "Don't imitate my passion for buildings or my passion for war, because the state is close to bankruptcy." Absolute power doesn't mean anything. Even if you are the Sun King, if the banks give you money and you don't give it back, you're fucked. ☹