

PERSMAP



ARMADA FILMS and VENDÔME PRODUCTION
present

HAUTE CUISINE

A film by CHRISTIAN VINCENT

CATHERINE FROT JEAN D'ORMESSON & HIPPOLYTE GIRARDOT

Hortense Laborie (Catherine Frot) is een gerenommeerde chef-kok uit de Campagne, die tot haar grote verbazing door de Franse president (Jean d'Ormesson) gevraagd wordt voortaan in het Parijse Élysée-paleis zijn maaltijden te bereiden. Ondanks de afgunst van het reeds aanwezige personeel, bevestigt Hortense al snel haar goede reputatie. Met haar authentieke gerechten weet ze de president voor haar te winnen, maar binnen de paleismuren liggen nog veel meer obstakels.

HAUTE CUISINE is gebaseerd op het waargebeurde verhaal van de privé-kok van president François Mitterand.



2012 • FRANCE • 1H35M • SCOPE • DOLBY DIGITAL • COLOR

Release datum: 25 oktober 2012

Distributie: Cinéart

Meer informatie:

Publiciteit & Marketing: Cinéart

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Persubriek inlog: cinéart / wachtwoord: film

CREW

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Screenplay by	Étienne COMAR Christian VINCENT
Freely inspired by the life of DP	Danielle MAZET-DELPEUCH Laurent DAILLAND
Production Manager	Jean-Jacques ALBERT
Unit Manager	Didier CARREL
Sound	Cyril MOISSON Vincent GUILLON Stéphane THIEBAUT
Casting	Aurélie GUICHARD
Editor	Monica COLEMAN
Original Music	Gabriel YARED
1st Assistant Director	Laure PREVOST
Continuity	Marianne FRICHEAU
Production Designer	Patrick DURAND
Costume Designer	Fabienne KATANY
Chief Wardrobe	Sandrine DOUAT
Chief Make-up	Chantal LEOTHIER & Anne-Valérie CHIABAUT
Hair Stylist	Joëlle DOMINIQUE
Culinary Photography	Tibo & Anouchka
Producers	Étienne COMAR Philippe ROUSSELET
Production	ARMADA FILMS VENDÔME PRODUCTION
Co-production	FRANCE 2 CINÉMA WILD BUNCH
In association with	FRANCE 2 TPS STAR CINE + LA BANQUE POSTALE IMAGE 5
Distributed in France by	WILD BUNCH DISTRIBUTION

CAST

Hortense Laborie

The President

David Azoulay

Nicolas Bauvois

Jean-Marc Luchet

Mary

Pascal Lepiq

John

Coche-Dury

Jean-Michel Salomé

Perrières

Arnaud Fremier

David Epenot

Anthony

Catherine FROT

Jean D'ORMESSON

Hippolyte GIRARDOT

Arthur DUPONT

Jean-Marc ROULOT

Arly JOVER

Brice FOURNIER

Joe SHERIDAN

Philippe UCHAN

Laurent POITRENAUX

Hervé PIERRE (member of the Comédie Français)

Louis-Emmanuel BLANC

David HOURI

Nicolas CHUPIN



How was the idea of the film born?

I've wanted to make a film about culinary passions for a long time. Three years ago I read a portrait of Danièle Delpeuch by Raphaëlle Bacqué in *Le Monde*: a whole page in which she talked about the years she spent working in the private kitchens at the Élysée Palace. Her story captivated me immediately because for once this was not about a famous chef or restaurateur, but an ordinary, genuine woman cook... Since I happened to be in the Périgord, I made contact with Danièle Delpeuch. "Come for lunch on Sunday," she said. I went to La Borderie, a superb place, more of a guesthouse than a farm, where she established her base years ago. We spent five hours at the table where we ate like kings; I was immediately struck by her conviviality, her way of making her guests take part in the meal. We talked about her life for a long time. Over and above the fact that she had cooked for a French president, I felt a strong novel-esque dimension to her story...

How would you describe this woman?

Her life is a succession of breaks and commitments, often acted out on impulse: she was a farmer who left her job and her husband, which was simply not done at the time in her milieu. She was one of the first, in the early 70s, to organize foie gras and truffle weekends at the farm. She went to the U.S. to teach cooking and to cook. There was the chapter in the Élysée Palace, then a long year spent in Antarctica. Her new project, on which she has been working for a number of years, is the creation of a truffle farm in New Zealand... She's an adventurer whose choices in life have always been connected with cooking.

Something else intrigued me at that first meeting: Danièle had invited me to a family lunch, and I imagined a 'rustic' atmosphere. But there was a surprising mixture of guests at the table: intellectual friends from New York, a journalist specializing in economics, an international lawyer and indeed, members of her family from the Périgord. The very different types of people present emphasized our host's complexity. Danièle combines a respect for tradition with great openness to the world and an acute sense of modernity... She is both local and worldly, simple and complicated, a great character for a story.

What happened next?

I returned from this encounter full of enthusiasm and immediately imagined the film it could become. I started to write... Early on Catherine Frot was an obvious choice to play Danièle. They share the highest professional standards. I just had to find a director with a real feeling for gastronomy. I knew through mutual friends that Christian Vincent was passionate about food (on top of being a very good actors' director). He is an oenologist who loves the type of authentic cuisine in which Danièle specializes; he cooks himself and loves to share his passion with others. We both agreed quickly on which way the screenplay should go: a film that would be about both "the power of cooking" and "the cooking of power". This double theme was the most interesting aspect of the story... To create contrast, we also decided to add Danièle's adventure in Antarctica to the intrigue at the Élysée. Thus, Hortense will receive at the far end of the world the recognition and warmth that eluded her at the Élysée.

In 1997 Danièle Delpeuch published her book, *Mes carnets de cuisine, du Périgord de L'Élysée*. Did you and Christian Vincent draw inspiration from it?

Not much. We used a few comical details, moments with the President... The screenplay is an entertaining melange of real events and pure fiction. We had to ensure that we captured Hortense's sensation of being made to feel totally unwelcome when she arrives at the Élysée. She doesn't know the first thing about protocol, her only concern is her work, she's in direct communication with the President and doesn't pay any attention to the advisers who try to

interfere with her cooking. But it backfires on her: more and more people want to have their say in what goes onto the President's plate, given his health problems. It was fun to write, even if we had to go to the heart of the matter. As for Hortense's last day in Antarctica, it's completely fictional.

In the screenplay you refer to Édouard Nignon's book *Éloge de la cuisine Française*, which triggers poetic exchanges between the President and his cook.

Danièle introduced us to this book during one of our visits to La Borderie and we were very keen to include it. It's a magnificent book for which Sacha Guitry wrote the preface. Even though Édouard Nignon is not widely known, chefs, gastronomes and historians love him. One of the great French chefs of the early 20th century, he worked for political men such as Tsar Nicolas II and the Emperor of Austria - thus cuisine meets history. His recipe book is a literary masterpiece, a collection of poems dedicated to gastronomy. With him, love of cooking is also love of the word.

In the film, why is cooking so important for the President?

It's a combination of his personal taste and his position. For Pompidou - Mitterrand and Chirac too - the ceremony of the meal was very important, a convivial ritual, a way of genuinely appreciating France, its geography, its produce, its culture. When the President says: "Give me the best France has to offer!" it's slightly ridiculous, but at the same time it's a sign of deep attachment to French excellence.

It might seem paradoxical but there appears to be a connection between *Of Gods and Men*, which you produced and co-wrote with Xavier Beauvois, and *HAUTE CUISINE*: we feel an almost religious fervour in *Hortense*.

I wouldn't go that far... But it is true that when Hortense is cooking she literally removes herself from this world in order to give the best of herself... In this sense there is a fervour that one can find in monks, but also in everyone who has a vocation. I find people who have true humility towards their discipline very moving; they serve their art. There is the same high moral imperative to do things as well as possible, even if it means rubbing others up the wrong way. Hortense's private life always comes second to her mission.

***HAUTE CUISINE* benefited from a few full days' shooting at the Élysée, which is unheard of.**

We were incredibly lucky. It all started with a screening of *Of Gods and Men* at the Élysée. I already had this film in mind and took the opportunity to ask if I could have a look at the kitchens. Unforgettable! Christian Vincent and I went back later to visit the sculleries... It is said that the Élysée is the finest house in all France: it has the most beautiful sets of tableware, silverware, the most beautiful crystalware... We immediately knew that it would be wonderful to use all this in the film.

At the same time we found it ironic and funny to write a story set in the Élysée, at the very heart of the state, and not mention politics even once!

How did you manage to shoot around the preparation of all these dishes?

It was crucial that the culinary feeling was translated into images. Next to the set, we posted a team of three people in a real kitchen: Gérard Besson, the Michelin-starred chef formerly at Le Coq Héron (and who concocted the marvelous recipe, *l'Oreiller de la belle Aurore*), Guy Leguay, another Michelin-starred chef, previously at The Ritz, and Elisabeth Scotto, a culinary stylist who works for *Elle Magazine*. We made only one demand: all these dishes had to be beautiful, but they had to be edible as well. We wanted them there, in front of the actors, not the fake objects you often see in ads. We knew that the details of the food constituted one of the key elements to the film's success.

You've been both producer and screenwriter for a number of years now.

In my work as a producer I've always preferred thinking about a concept and its artistic elaboration to the financial aspect. Writing came as natural extension of this preference. It allows me to go deeper into the projects and into my collaboration with directors whom I respect first and foremost because I never forget that it is ultimately they who create the film.

I'm currently writing Xavier Beauvois' next film with him, as well as a screenplay for another project. And fortunately I allow myself to produce films I don't write.



HAUTE CUISINE follows the journey of a cook, Hortense, whom we first meet on a scientific base in remote Antarctica, where she's spending the last few days of a long assignment, before discovering that she was, for two years, the private cook of the President of France at the Élysée Palace. It's a remarkable story.

When Etienne Colmar talked to me about this woman who had been tracked down in the Périgord to be the President's cook, I knew right away that we had something very original and very strong. I loved the idea of entering the Élysée Palace through the basement and showing behind the scenes. But that was perhaps not enough to make a film. It was when we discovered that this woman had applied to work in a scientific base lost in the Antarctic Ocean that I really saw the movie. There were two great storylines that offered wonderful possibilities - the opportunity to show a character confronting two entirely opposing worlds.

The beginning of the film is quite disconcerting. We're on a scientific base, following an Australian journalist making a film about the Antarctic Ocean islands. Then we encounter a cook, grumbling behind her stove, without imagining for one second the kind of life she had before.

It is disorientating. The spectator who thinks he's come see a film set in the Élysée could wonder where he is! Who could this not particularly pleasant person be, living in harsh conditions some 12,000 kilometers from France, who brightens up and even laughs heartily when the young people of the base organize a farewell party for her? I loved the contrast with the riches of the Élysée: the clash of the two eras was marvelous. On one side we're at the top of the pyramid, the red carpet is rolled out for Hortense, she knows every accolade, is in a state of grace, then everything goes from bad to worse for her. On the other side, we are thrown into a hostile natural environment, beautiful but very rough; she has to cook with tinned foods for a bunch of scientists in the middle of nowhere, completely cut off from the outside world, but at the end of her assignment, she is congratulated, people thank her. In this double adventure, there's a reflection on both recognition and ingratitude.

And a great praise for cooking. You yourself have a reputation for being a cordon bleu.

I've always loved cooking. It calms me. I also love being in the company of people who cook. I love to watch them work. Cooking is very precise. It requires quite a bit of technique and a lot of generosity. You have to be generous to prepare food for others. You can't be mean; I love generous people. I also think that my profession is a bit like theirs; I sometimes think that a cook preparing his menu asks himself the same questions I do. Like me, he works with living material. He plays with colours, forms and consistency, mixes crunchy and soft, hot and cold, raw and cooked... He aims both to surprise and to reassure. He draws on tradition while trying to innovate. He has to make sure that one dish isn't like another by diversifying his methods, the accompanying dishes...

So is the character of Hortense you?

Yes, inevitably. Her worry is mine. And her dissatisfaction with herself... Her difficulty in accepting compliments even though her profession is trying to please others... And sometimes, like me, she feels like asking: "So, did you like it?" But we never do.

There is an important moment in the film about this. It's when the President has her come into his quarters to thank her for the lunch she has prepared for his brothers and sisters. She should be proud of the compliments that he gives her; the Maître de, who witnesses it all, tells her: "That's wonderful, isn't it?" Well, no, it's not as wonderful as all that. In the screenplay she answered, almost sadly: "If you say so." I decided not to have Catherine say that when we filmed it; I worried it would be too demonstrative. I simply wanted us to feel her slight disappointment. She's one

of these people who have set a high goal for themselves and who, once they've reached it, ask themselves: "Was that it?"

Danièle Delpeuch is the only woman who has ever cooked at the Élysée.

As far as I know, yes. And she was not necessarily welcome.

Why?

Because she wasn't from the establishment and she was a woman. She didn't dress like the chefs of the time - she always wore black. That just wasn't done in the eighties. And everyone must have thought it was strange for the President to decide all of a sudden to appoint a woman to cook at the Élysée. Danièle was the first. She's a remarkable person, a pioneer, an adventurer, a woman who has had many experiences, who has travelled widely abroad... That's what I liked about her, not her "woman in the kitchen" aspect.

How has she reacted to the film?

Very well. She knew Etienne and I had taken certain liberties with her story, that Hortense was a lot like her but was not her, and she agreed to that. Apart from a few scenes taken from the book, everything is fictional. At no point did we attempt an historical reconstruction of the "Mitterrand years". We weren't interested in that. The time in which the action of the film takes place is only vaguely specified... let's say before mobile phones, Sat Nav, and molecular cooking...

Catherine Frot is extraordinary in the role of Hortense.

I thought of her right away. She was exactly the same age as the character, with an earthy side that suited the role perfectly. There's nothing la-di-da about Catherine Frot. You put her in a market in Brive and it just works; you set her up in a kitchen and it's entirely believable. She's comfortable, even if she isn't a cook herself, even if she doesn't have the gestures of a professional.

Although when she is cooking, Hortense's moves seem to possess the precision of a surgeon.

That's cinema! My work as a director, and hers as an actress, was to make us believe she belonged in a kitchen, that she was at ease there and had been cooking all her life. Catherine had to occupy the space. That's what it's all about, taking possession of the space! The rest is details. Cooking is a demanding profession, with precise gestures. But ultimately we see very little of Catherine performing technical moves. We see her sautéing cockles in a wok, peeling a carrot, preparing a stuffed cabbage and that's about it...

Next to Catherine Frot, a huge surprise: Jean d'Ormesson in the role of the President.

Jean arrived at the last minute; he wasn't planned at all. Three days before we were due to start shooting, the agent of the actor who was going to play the President called my production manager to tell him that he couldn't be in the film anymore. Preparing a film is always a bit like this. You always expect something to go wrong. So, we held a crisis meeting, I announced that we hadn't got an actor. We've seen legions of actors play Presidents of the Republic but, however talented they are, it tends towards trivialization. In my film you don't see a lot of the President but if you want the scenes with Catherine to have impact, you have to surprise. We decided to look elsewhere, among intellectuals, famous lawyers... all this in half an hour. Names came from all sides, among them the name of Jean d'Ormesson... and very quickly we decided it was him. Etienne Comar contacted him; I went away to shoot in Iceland for a week and met him for an hour when I came back. He found the project entertaining. He has always dreamt of being an actor... and we made the film with him.

Did he have to audition?

Of course! He wanted to as much as we did! He insisted that if he wasn't good we shouldn't use him.

And?

The first take - quite a long scene - was a disaster. Jean was intimidated by the set and also by Catherine. Then, with each take, slowly, things got better. We still had a long way to go but I thought we had our President. Once the audition was over I walked up to him and told him: "You're hired."

Let's go back to the Élysée private kitchen: did you visit it?

No, it's forbidden to go to the private area. This kitchen had remained unused for a long time until François Mitterrand had it restored when he came to power. He then asked to have a cook brought from the outside. This was taken very badly by the main kitchen, as it deprived them of the most prestigious part of their work.

You shot the parts set in Paris in the Élysée, in Marigny, at Chateaux de Chantilly and Vigny and in a studio in Bry-sur-Marne, yet one would think the whole film took place at 55, rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, at the Élysée.

That's because we were lucky enough to be able to shoot at the Élysée for a few days during the G20 summit in Cannes. Sarkozy was not in Paris, we were granted a pretty exceptional authorization, and when Hortense arrives at the Élysée Palace for the first time, it's the real thing. Everyone knows the Official Courtyard. We see the car arrive, stop and Catherine emerge. The following scene, the one when the Private Secretary greets her, was shot in the Department of Labor... then we come back to the real steps of the Élysée Palace, we see them going down to the basement which we shot in the Ferrandi School basement in the 6th arrondissement... and so on. What mattered to me was to film the arrivals, the exits, the steps or the hall, which are familiar to everybody...the rest was easy.

Let's talk about Hortense's time in Antarctica.

Of course it was out of question to go with the crew: it takes a couple of weeks at least to get there. So we looked for similar landscapes in the northern hemisphere, in Europe. Finally, we decided on rural Iceland. It's completely untouched, not a plane in the sky, no pylons, not a soul – two-thirds of the population lives in Reykjavik. Another advantage is that Icelanders are used to film shoots: many American films are shot there, Clint Eastwood's Letters from Iwo Jima for example. But conditions are tough, communication difficult, the weather changes all the time. We had a few storms and some days we weren't able to shoot at all. During the scene in which Hortense explains to the Australian journalist that she has found the ideal spot for her truffle fields in New Zealand, it was pouring and the wind was blowing like crazy. It doesn't show.

Was it a big challenge to structure these two periods, constantly going back and forth?

It's always tricky to build a film set in two different eras with a lot of back and forth between them. We had to make it work: the film is built on the opposition of these two worlds.

We feel an immense loneliness in this woman who has just spent a year on the base.

Yes, but I think she voluntarily and completely cut herself from the world. At the Élysée, for two years, she was on call 24 hours a day. She didn't always know if the President was going to eat there, she was told at the last minute. In the film, she leaves like a dog, without one word of thanks; I imagine she felt used. And here, on this island in the middle of the Antarctic Ocean, where people live on very familiar terms, she wins their applause and finally lets go, cries and... laughs! The important words at the end of the film are "Thank you." On one side, in the Antarctic, people thank her and show her their appreciation for what she has done. On the other, in the Élysée, she is dismissed, pushed out, driven away.

One can't help being amazed by the diversity of subjects you have broached in your films.

Someone once asked me why I made films and I replied: "So I never have to work" ... To avoid the routine of waged work. Cinema offers the best possible timetable. There's the time of writing, which is often done on your own... the time of preparation which is the time of discovery: you travel, discover new places, cities, streets you didn't know, visit apartments, encounter new people... the time of shooting which is a time of madness, anxiety and pure joy... a time of absolute control where everything escapes you... then finally there is the time for editing which is the moment of truth, when you are confronted to what you have done. So the diversity of my subjects probably comes from this.



What was your first reaction when you were offered the role of Hortense?

I immediately felt it was a beautiful part, interesting but not easy. Hortense is an original character. I have to admit that I wasn't quite sure which way to start with her at first.

That's not something that would stop you.

On the contrary, I like a challenge.

Can you talk about your first meeting with Danièle Delpeuch.

As soon as Etienne Comar talked to me about the project he suggested we go to the Dordogne to visit Danièle. We'd barely arrived before she took me to the market. When it came time to prepare the meal, without hesitation she tied a big apron around my waist and began to initiate me into her work - the gestures, the knowledge of cooking. I'm not a very good cook so I had to learn to create the illusion, as I did when I played the piano in Denis Dercourt's *The Page Turner* : people think I'm a good pianist when in reality everything is done with the thumb and the little finger.

What did you find most impressive about this woman?

First off, where she lives. You find yourself in a very old environment, everything is in its original condition: the house, nature, the way she cooks. Everything seems unchangeable. There's something very reassuring about it. It's very moving to think that this woman who cooked at the Élysée for more than two years comes from here. She's totally connected to her house and to the history of her house (which was her mother's and her grandmother's - both great cooks). You understand that it is from this land of the Périgord that she has drawn her equilibrium and the courage that animates her. It's a remarkable strength of character. Then curiosity pushed her to travel and experience all sorts of projects, all connected to cooking. Danièle is a genuinely warm person with an extraordinary appetite for work, entirely dedicated to the joys of food.

There's an uncanny similarity between you too.

Yes, the forehead, the cheekbones. But for the film it doesn't matter, people don't know her. It's not just a matter of physical resemblance. We can feel you share the same demand for excellence – you and she as a cook.

Her rigor fascinates me and I have to admit that I identified with her a little: I like to take my work seriously. I played this woman by absorbing all the emotions I had perceived in her, while finally staying close to myself. Hortense is part Danièle and part me.

How did you construct the character?

I wanted her to be feminine, wearing simple yet very nice clothes. She has a certain kind of elegance: she comes from the country but she's also from somewhere else. She has natural authority and distinction. In her book, Danièle mentions her necklaces, her high heels. This mixture of genres has inspired me in the choice of wardrobe.

Is costume important to you?

It's vital. I couldn't wear just anything for a part - even the least stylized or the most real character. I wouldn't understand what I was doing. I need to know why I'm wearing these shoes, this dress. It's absolutely necessary for me.

Whether in the kitchen of the Élysée Palace or its more rustic counterpart at the Antarctic base, Hortense conveys her art with infinite love and a truly fascinating precision of gesture.

So much the better. As far as I'm concerned, in an actor's work, everything has to be precise.

But I did have to take lessons. I spent one week with Danièle. She taught me the pleasure in the gestures, in the colours and shapes of food. I really learned how to prepare cabbage stuffed with salmon. It was one of the most important scenes of the film: I had to be seen preparing it. I can cook one for you tomorrow and I promise you it will be delicious! There is a lot of poetry in food. *Poularde demi-deuil* (hen in half-mourning) - isn't that a magnificent name? Though when you're preparing it you mustn't be afraid to slide your whole hand under the skin of the chicken. That's the magic of gastronomy. You're at the pinnacle of life's pleasures and I love that.

It feels as if you have brought all your past roles to this character. This accentuates Hortense's complexity and mystery.

Perhaps because I have played all kinds of characters... I've played tragedy and comedy; the women I've played have been rather stylized, almost fabricated, like puppets. I went deep into naïveté and comical territory in Cédric Klapisch's *Un air de famille*, in Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's *Odette Toulemonde*, with Pascal Thomas. I explored severity with Safy Nebbou in *Mark of an Angel* and with José Alcala in *Coup d'éclat*. With *HAUTE CUISINE* I feel as if I've gathered all these contrasts together, to reach something intimate.

As the President of the Republic, Jean d'Ormesson seems to evoke the same feeling.

He evokes many generations - an entire political history. It's France as it was. His presence grants the film a great poetic dimension.

The relationship between your characters is astonishing.

What's most interesting is how the barriers between them just disappear. They take great pleasure in meeting and exchanging thoughts about cooking. He looks at her, she looks at him, and there's no formality between them. Hortense is a simple person, who doesn't overburden herself with things, and somehow the President meets her in this unaffectedness. Neither feels any embarrassment. They know why they are there, they love their work and are not accountable to anybody - unlike the intermediaries swarming around them, never daring to speak their minds, these awkward courtiers, always maneuvering to get to a better position and trying to interfere in their relationship - and succeeding, by the way. The film says a lot about power, hierarchy, and political maneuverings...

Hortense aims at excellence. The bureaucrats you are referring to are mediocre.

They are. Moreover, when she lands in the *Élysée*, she doesn't understand a thing about this flurry of technocrats. This human hubbub is beyond her. All she wants is to cook as well as she can, to perform the task that was assigned to her and satisfy the President. She puts a lot of zeal and pride into it. She has high moral standards and will fight if she has to. She demands quality. Hortense is brutally ousted from the *Élysée*

Being pushed away like this was total humiliation for her. I find the letter she wrote to the President very beautiful. She describes their relationship and also talks about her pain.

How was working with Jean d'Ormesson?

We tried to find the best way together. We had to find the right tone. It wasn't so easy at the beginning because he is not an actor, but he quickly got the hang of it. Because of the life he has, because of who he is, Jean had within himself the poetic disposition for being a president. On set he was like a young man. It touched me deeply.

We sometimes feel an almost theatrical breeze sweeping through the cooking scenes.

Yes, and Christian Vincent chose really good stage actors for the supporting roles, among others: Hippolyte Girardot, Laurent Poitrenaux, Charlotte Clamens... These actors bring a great deal of humanity and comicality to their characters.

We're all familiar with the Dean of the Académie Française, the philosopher, the man of letters and the columnist. And now, in HAUTE CUISINE, we discover the actor. It's an activity you've been tempted by for some time apparently.

I was sitting next to Bernard Murat a few years ago while we were having lunch at the French Open and I confided in him that one of my biggest regrets was that I had not become an actor. He took me at my word and a few days later suggested I play the role of the father in an adaptation of Sacha Guitry's *My Father Was Right*. I auditioned, the result was conclusive and I set about learning my lines. Bernard Murat seemed happy. Then he announced that I had to commit to the project for three months. Three months! I was working on a book at the time and the thought of being blocked for so long frightened me. Since the character of the father was present only in the first act, I asked him if it would be possible for me to leave the theatre at 9.30. "Impossible," he said. "You have to bow at the end." I couldn't. So I missed this opportunity.

Then comes this incredible proposal to play the President.

Claude Rich, who had just finished playing in Antoine Rault's *L'Intrus* at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, was tired and decided to withdraw from the project. Etienne Comar called my editor, Malcy Ozannat, to ask her if I would consider taking the role. She passed the phone to me. "It would be to play the President in a film by Christian Vincent," he explained. "Think it over". "Think it over? I don't need to think it over, I accept!" I replied. I have rarely made up my mind so quickly. I think he also mentioned that the film was about cooking. I immediately thought of *Babette's Feast* by Gabriel Axel, which I love. At the time I had written in my column: "Whoever hasn't seen *Babette's Feast* cannot be my friend."

Did you know the story of Danièle Delpeuch, François Mitterrand's cook, who inspired the film?

Not at all. I trusted Christian Vincent and Etienne Comar completely. I had seen *Of Gods and Men*, a magnificent film, and that was enough. I met Danièle Delpeuch later. She's quite a character.

Did you audition yet again?

Of course! I would have been extremely disappointed if I hadn't been able to take part in this adventure. I mostly remember the beginnings of shoot, which were of course quite difficult. I was a beginner; I felt I was slowing everyone down. Catherine Frot was remarkably kind and extremely patient with me. I owe her a great deal.

How did you prepare for the role?

The script never left my side; sometimes I even fell asleep with it. That was useful because the scenes worked their way in during the night. I didn't read Danièle Delpeuch until later. And I read Edouard Nignon's marvelous book, *Éloge de la cuisine française*, the object of conversation between Hortense and the President. I needed to be nourished from the inside. But let's remain objective: this character of the President that you might think central, is in fact a supporting role.

You imbue him with extraordinary charisma.

Let's not exaggerate! Etienne Comar and Christian Vincent did mention to me that my humble fame was important for the role but not too much. They told me: No one must think "Here is d'Ormesson", but "Here is the President." I tend to joke a lot; I had to restrain myself a bit. They had to change the colour of my hair: it's not so white and the cut is different. That helps with getting into character. There was one moment I loved: I'm posing for the official photos and I think of Giscard d'Estaing: "I look deep into the eyes of France..."

You have known every President of the 5th Republic. You're a graduate of the École Normale Supérieure, like Pompidou, you have an aristocratic name, like Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, you are a Gaullist, like Jacques Chirac, and you were close to François Mitterrand, with whom you shared a passion for literature. Did you draw on them for the film?

Very little; I thought of Pompidou a little, as he seemed close to the character, and of Mitterrand whose spectacles I borrowed when I meet Hortense for the first time and tell her: "Give me the best France has to offer." It's the only thing I borrowed. In fact, I thought above all of my father, about how he would he have behaved in similar circumstances. Naturally, but with a hint of dignity. That's what I tried to portray. I couldn't be ridiculous, I couldn't be pompous, but we *are* talking about the President of the Republic, after all: it is a near religious post, measured in infinite details, he had to have a sacred simplicity about him. One of the problems of Nicolas Sarkozy is that he tarnished the image of the President.

The film shows clearly the incredible weight of protocol that Hortense would be happy to shake up, as well as the omnipotence of the President. Did he like the dish he was served? Did he even taste it?

On the shoot, I remembered the confidences of a friend who had found himself in the presence of the Queen of England and then of the President of the Republic. He recalled the feeling of embarrassment mixed with respect that he had felt. I had called this the noble malaise. While acting I told myself: "Think of the noble malaise, you can be cheerful, you can laugh, but you must remain dignified"

There's the very funny scene where Hippolyte Girardot, who plays an advisor, is explaining to Catherine Frot that it is absolutely forbidden to walk through the official courtyard, that one must go around it.

That's absolutely right. When I used to visit François Mitterrand, that's what the guards at the front gate would tell me: "Go around!" In the end they would let me walk through but in principle you have to go around, you can't walk across it.

You mentioned your father, André d'Ormesson, the French Ambassador. Presumably, as a child, you often visited the kitchens of the embassies where you lived.

Of course, kitchens are very appealing, but my mother didn't much like me disturbing the people who were working there.

You also spent some of your childhood in the Chateau de Saint-Fargeau, where the kitchens are reputed to be magnificent.

Much more beautiful than the drawing rooms, which were badly damaged in the 19th century. The kitchens of la Grande Mademoiselle played a considerable artistic role. Remember she had Lully for a scullery boy! There really is a connection between art and food. That is precisely what HAUTE CUISINE shows. In trying to achieve perfection, Hortense raises her cooking to the level of art and even gives it a literary dimension. Cuisine and art, literature and cuisine, that is very French and even universal. Read Rabelais, Horace, Chateaubriand, Flaubert. And it goes beyond borders: at the end of his life, Rossini gives up music and becomes an admirable cook. We owe him steak Rossini! One can also trace strong connections between cooking and politics. Cambacérès and Talleyrand got on really well in this marriage of the two.

Are you yourself an epicurean like this President, so fond of *poularde demi-deuil*?

I am very susceptible to food. I loved the scene with the truffles. We had to do it several times; it's very difficult to be filmed while eating. The result was that I had to eat three, and it was delicious. When I was young I would sometimes visit the establishments of Bocuse or Troisgros. I enjoyed the great restaurants. And I have on occasion, like the president I play, read books on the subject.

Did you discuss gastronomy with François Mitterrand?

We talked about literature and religion; death worried him greatly.

Any funny anecdotes from the shoot?

During preparation, the wardrobe mistress told me: "You're going to need suits and shirts..." I replied smugly: "You know, my suits are very similar to those of the President, when I go to the Académie, I even wear the Legion of Honor ribbon!" She came to my house. Indeed, my suits were appropriate. There was a slight problem with my shirts though: I'm a bit of a fetishist, I have my initials embroidered on each one. That wasn't suitable. The production ordered some shirts from Charvet. They were exactly like mine.

And less funny?

The scene when I go down to the kitchen. It was more difficult than the others. I eat and I drink in it. We had an annoying problem. I am slightly deaf so I wear hearing aids and they started to whistle. I had to remove them but I couldn't hear what Catherine was saying anymore. Horrible. I took this role very seriously, you know.