

Review #77 : *La Grande Vadrouille* (1966)

De Funès and Bourvil in French Cult Classic

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0RgFf4CR2-U>



Why is this movie so funny ? And why is it universally judged to be so by people who don't even understand French culture ? I have asked myself this question while watching it for the Nth time and while asking myself why most Hollywood comedies made today are not funny at all. I believe that the answer is that the basis of all comedy is to make fun of someone, however cruel and politically-incorrect it may be. Hollywood has become so politically-correct nowadays that it only dares make fun of a WASP male in a business suit, and of no one else. Instead it lounges in stinking jokes and clichés.

SYNOPSIS

Summer, 1941. When their RAF bomber is shot down over France by German artillery, three airmen (two English, one Canadian) parachute out over Paris on a beautiful summer's day. Peter (**Claudio Brook**) lands on the scaffold of a genial painter and decorator, Augustin Bouvet (**Bourvil**), but is wounded by German guns. The youngest of the three, Alan McIntosh (**Mike Marshall**, son of Michèle Morgan) lands on top of a concert hall and is rescued by the irascible and egotistical (but patriotic) conductor Stanislas Lefort (**Louis de Funès**) who has him disguise as a girl. The third airman, nicknamed *Big Moustache* (**Terry Thomas**), ends up in the otter enclosure of a Parisian zoo. Though neither of these men are members of the resistance, Augustin and Stanislas reluctantly agree to honour a rendez-vous at the Turkish baths to meet up with Big Moustache, but within no time they themselves become **targets of the German soldiers**. Assisted by the daughter of a puppeteer and an anti-German nun, the two unwilling heroes accompany the three airmen on a **reckless trek across France to reach the free zone** before they are caught and shot.

REVIEW

La Grande Vadrouille represents the absolute pinnacle of mainstream French comedy in the 1960s, a big budget period extravaganza that brought together three of the most popular comic actors of the era : **Bourvil, Louis de Funès** and **Terry Thomas**. Attracting an audience of 17.3 million in France, the film held onto its record as the most successful French film for forty years, until Dany Boon's *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* stole its top position in 2008. A classic in the true sense of the word, *La Grande Vadrouille* remains one of the **best loved and most watched of all French film comedies**. And it is not hard to see just why that is !

What is most striking about *La Grande Vadrouille* is how good it looks. Compared with most French comedies of this era, which tended to be low budget *navets* or badly filmed sitcoms, this one has the feel of a **genuine blockbuster** ; it is **well-paced, thoroughly imaginative, beautifully photographed** by **Claude Renoir** (nephew of the famous director Jean Renoir) with an incredible sense of light and air, and a great attention to period detail, thus rivalling many contemporary Hollywood war films. **Action / adventure comedy** was rare in France, even as late as the 1960s, and so *La Grande Vadrouille* set high standards for subsequent comedies, raising the bar for mainstream French film cinema in general with its **lavish production values and masterfully choreographed action** sequences.

La Grande Vadrouille may not be the first French comedy to make light of **France's troubled period of Nazi Occupation** and mock the Nazis but it does occasionally risk getting snagged on the thorns of controversy with its **coded allusions to collaboration**.

Directed with unstinting panache by **Gérard Oury**, also known for *Rabbi Jacob* (1973), the humour lies not in the characters, but in the **absurd situations they get themselves into**, in the best tradition of comedy. From the encounter in a Turkish baths to the spectacular chase sequence in which our heroes evade capture with pumpkins, *La Grande Vadrouille* takes us on the most surreal flights of fancy without completely losing its grip on reality.

La Grande Vadrouille is also the perfect vehicle for the **Bourvil / De Funès** act, allowing them to spar off one another brilliantly with their wildly contrasting comic personas. The **easy-going, naive and sentimental** Bourvil makes an effective contrast with the **small-minded petit bourgeois** De Funès, and the bitter class friction that underpins their characters' interplay as they try to cope with the situation is one of the funniest aspects of the film. A consummate perfectionist, De Funès spent three months rehearsing the sequence in which he conducts an orchestra through a recital of Berlioz's *Damnation de Faust*. He not only took lessons from a professional conductor but spent whole days refining his movements in front of a mirror ; his performance was so convincing that, after a flawless take, the musicians he was conducting spontaneously responded with the warmest of ovations. His other funny moments include his attempts to silence a snoring bed partner through whistles, clicks and bangs^^. His dynamic with Bourvil pops up again and again throughout the film as de Funès first steals Bourvil's shoes and then his bicycle before eventually convincing the miserable painter to carry him on his back over a mountain because he doesn't want to walk. Incredibly, the memorable sequence of the piggyback ride with De Funès sitting triumphantly astride Bourvil's shoulders was not scripted but improvised by the two actors during the shoot !

La Grande Vadrouille is one of those remarkable films you can watch again and again **without growing tired of it**, and it is readily accessible to a non-French audience. The gags are not crow-barred into the narrative, as is sadly so often the case with action comedies nowadays, but appear to **spring naturally from the plot situations**, and this is probably why the film is so **unrelentingly funny** and has stood the test of time so well : the jokes are spontaneous and mostly take us by surprise. From hilarious *malentendus* to outright slapstick, *La Grande Vadrouille* covers practically the entire spectrum of comedy, and still manages to be an adrenaline-pumping action romp. A must-see ! +++