



Welcome to the sticks

Director: Dany Boon
Country: France
Date: 2008

A review by David Cox:

Just 21 miles from Britain's shores lies a *terre inconnue* (unknown land). Well, actually, the *terre* itself is *connue* enough. In fact, it's the Brits' top holiday destination and one of their favourite countries of exile. However, the people who live there remain to their trans-manche neighbours an enigma wrapped up in Gauloise smoke, a tribe more mysterious than the Hottentots.

The French eat horses, snails and the legs of little froggies. They hardly ever go to work, but enjoy a lifestyle coveted bitterly by the wage-slaves across the water. They've cracked the secrets of life and love, though they smell funny and their women don't shave their legs. How can these things be? All we Brits really understand about our voisins d'à côté is that we hate them.



Is there a way of somehow probing the conundrum posed by this endlessly baffling breed? Perhaps their movie-going moeurs might offer a clue to their nature. So, let's take a look at the film that's just become the biggest indigenous box-office smash in French cinema history.

Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis has now attracted over 20 million admissions on its home turf. Yet, though its debut commandeered 793 French screens, it has enjoyed only microscopic exposure in Britain. That bewildering title cannot

have helped its prospects on this side of the Channel. In desperation, the UK distributors have now changed it to "Welcome to the Sticks", but, while this may sound less off-putting, it misses most of the point of what is a distinctly peculiar movie.

True, the plot is based on that most thundering of clichés, the epiphany of a sophisticate who travels fearfully to a primitive region only to be won over by its laconic denizens' rough-hewn but heart-warming life-force. This may sound like the basis for one of those vomit-inducing exercises in Gallic cinematic sentimentality that we Brits seem to swallow so happily, perhaps a sort of *Chocolat* in reverse. Well, it isn't.

The banality of the underlying concept is just one joke in a confection that, though genuinely affecting, is in essence fiendishly funny. Not, however, simply so. That "Ch'tis" business signals one of the most elaborate *jeus d'esprit* in the entire history of cinema.

The hero, Philippe, travels from suave and comfy meridional France to take up a post-office manager's job in his country's grim north. For us Brits, the gloomy, deindustrialised flatlands of Nord/Pas de Calais are somewhere to speed through sunwards as quickly as possible. Apparently, most of the French consider the area even more god-forsaken.

The inhabitants of this lost region are termed the Ch'tis in recognition of two key features of the Picarde patois. French 's' sounds become 'ch', and personal pronouns such as 'toi' and 'moi' become 'ti' and 'mi'. The blizzard of misunderstandings in which these and other dialectical oddities entrap Philippe constitute one of the most elaborate, protracted and relentlessly side-splitting linguistic adventures ever attempted on-screen.

You can see why Pathé feared this might not fly at your local multiplex. How could people be expected to laugh at intricate misapprehensions of a language they don't even understand? Believe me, there is no problem whatsoever, such is the ingenuity of the writing, the fluency and comic timing of the actors, and in particular the assured direction of Dany Boon, who happens to be a Ch'ti himself.

An unexpected pièce de résistance emerges from a surprising quarter. The subtitled succeeds in matching French mis-speaks with plausible English equivalents in a tour de force which merits the creation of a whole new Oscar category and provides British audiences (insofar as there are any) with an extra layer of entertainment denied to their francophone counterparts.



To get an idea of what all this might say about the French, imagine a parallel exercise in UK movie-making. A Berkshire postmaster migrates to Tyneside to find the Geordies booze-sodden, half-witted savages who are nonetheless endowed with hearts of gold. Well, you can't imagine it, can you? The pitch would induce cardiac arrest before the lift-doors shut. Suppose, nonetheless, that the project somehow bypassed

the political correctness commissars. Can you envisage it handling its subject with wit, sophistication and intelligence, rather than the plodding slapstick of, say, *The Full Monty*?

The French men and women who have embraced Boon's weird, exuberant masterpiece are indeed giving us some notion of what they are like. They are telling us they are cool with their own diversity, unfazed by artistic ambition and appreciative of style, flair, self-deprecation, drollery and savoir-faire. A nation, indeed, bien dans sa peau.

Rather different, then, from our own. The real sticks, the reception of this film seems to suggest, may lie a little further north than the Pas de Calais.

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