

Grande Ecole

VARIETY:

Grande Ecole

(The best of schools)

(France – 111 min.) A Pyramide release of an Ognon Pictures production, with France 2 Cinema and Eden Films. (International sales: Flach Pyramide Intl., Paris.) Produced by Humbert Balsan. Directed, written by Robert Salis, based on the play "Grande Ecole" by Jean-Marie Besset.

With: Gregori Baquet (Paul), Jocelyn Quivrin (Louis-Arnault), Arthur Jugnot (Bernard), Alice Taglioni (Agnès), Elodie Navarre (Emeline), Salim Kechiouche (Mecir), Eva Darlan, Lakshantha Abenayake, Yasmine Belmadi, Jacques Collard, Jo Prestia.

By JAY WEISSBERG

"Michel Foucault for Dummies" could be the subtitle to "The Best of Schools," a handsome but overblown look at sexual desire at an elite college. Although helmer Robert Salis successfully opens up the stage-based material, unfocused script can't decide whether to concentrate on confused sexuality or privileged ruthlessness. Gay fests may be tempted by all the beautiful flesh, but with entirely unconvincing male-male sex scenes, they'll realize they've been had.

France's "Grandes Ecoles" are designed to mold the best and brightest and put them on the fast track to be captains of industry and leaders of the nation. When Paul comes up from the south to attend one of these elite institutions, his girl friend Agnes, the liberal arts half of the pair, enrolls in a university nearby.

Paul is placed in a dorm suite with mamma's boy Bernard and aristocratic Louis-Arnault. Next to the perfect Louis-Arnault, with his impeccable styling and bearing, Paul's provincialism stands out. Hero worship turns to a big

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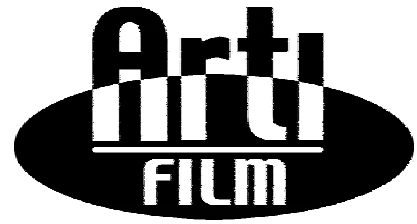
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time crush as Paul's hormones get a charge out of sitting next to a nude Louis-Arnault, his privates covered by a thin sheet, reading Chateaubriand aloud.

Never one to bother with sports, Paul suddenly develops an interest in watching the object of his desire playing water polo and showering in the locker room.

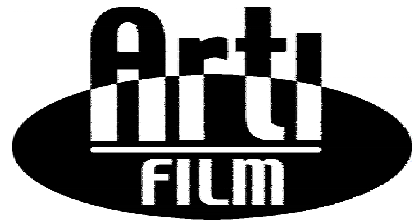
Not without a social conscience, Paul intervenes when he sees North African handyman Mecir targeted with racist epithets by his foreman. Mecir, who exchanged interested glances with Paul earlier, assumes Paul isn't simply a good Samaritan, and after an initial rejection he successfully beds Paul in a risible scene complete with a thunderstorm at the climax.

Agnes can't help noticing Paul's attraction to Louis-Arnault and is both aroused by the idea and concerned. In a bid to keep her man, she suggests to Paul that if she seduces Mr. Perfect first, they'll both give him up, but if Paul gets him in the sack first, then she'll leave.

Several plot lines are clumsily tacked on and dialogue, while convincingly delivered, too often sounds like it's derived from obnoxious self-help manuals crossed with semiotic texts. Salis is good at allowing his camera to lovingly explore desirable bodies, but he's too quick with the cliches, and in the end this tempest in an Ivy League teacup never makes any intelligent statements about life, desire or the pursuit of power. Tech credits are strong, although the overused classical music themes point to another example of lack of originality.

Camera (color), Emmanuel Soyer; editor, Catherine Schwartz; music, Eric Neveux; production designer, Arnaud Roth; costume designer, Dominique Borg; sound (Dolby SR & SRD), Georges Prat, Emmanuel Legall, Patrice Grisolet. Reviewed at Rotterdam Film Festival (competing), Jan. 27, 2004. Running time: 111 MIN.

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**Q & A with FRENCH DIRECTOR ROBERT SALIS,
HELPER OF THE FILM 'GRANDE ECOLE'**

"Grande Ecole" was recently screened as part of The Film Society at Lincoln Center's annual "Rendez-Vous with French Cinema." "Grande Ecole" has a U.S. distributor, Wellspring. At the time of this writing its theatrical release date had not been finalized. A full review of the film will appear when the film is released theatrically.

This interview is part of a forthcoming essay, Intimacy in French Cinema. Some of the comments here will be incorporated for the essay. Landmark French films, like Jean-Luc Godard's "Breathless" and Luis Bunuel's "Belle Du Jour" will be focal points. Several films from the recent Rendez-Vous Festival, including "Nathalie" (starring Emmanuelle Beart and Gerard Depardieu), and Bruno Dumont's "Twenty-nine Palms" (see Take Two B: Mark) will be discussed. Reviews of these and other Rendez-vous films will appear over the coming months.

Participants: Filmmaker Robert Salis, translator Robert Gray.

This interview is edited only for repetition and one instance where an overeager reporter mistakenly assumed he understood what was being said without waiting for Mr. Gray's assistance!

OMAR: You are by trade a documentary filmmaker, correct?

ROBERT SALIS: Yes.

O: And apparently this is your first feature film, is that right?

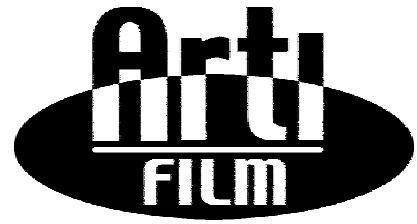
RS: No. In fact I made an earlier fiction film 23 years ago called "Lost Love Letters," so this is my return to fiction after 23 years.

O: I see. Well, "Grande Ecole" (The Best of Schools) is a very honest film emotionally, and I say this because other countries' cinema depicts relationships like the one Paul has in a very superficial way. You really explore Paul's relationship (with the male character Mecir) in your film. Comment please if you will on the nature of that exploration versus what you would see in other films in terms of same-sex relationships.

RS: What sort of films are you referring to?

O: Films like, for example, "Boys Don't Cry" in the United States, and other types of films of that genre, where there is a focus on a same-

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sex relationship between two characters. I guess my question is - more of a comment actually - I found ["Grande Ecole"] to be very honest emotionally, and I don't tend to see that in a lot of films that are released here in the U.S., and I don't know how you feel about that kind of observation, whether you would agree or not agree.

RS: I didn't want to avoid things in this subject that is very important to me. My film deals with the uneasy fascination with the circulation of desire, how desire can travel from one person to another regardless of the sex of the object of the desire, how men and women, at a certain point in their lives find themselves attracted to a person, regardless of the sex of that person. So the film deals with feelings and with desire. I don't want to compare my film to other films, but one film that I like is "Maurice," by James Ivory - it dealt with a similar subject - to say, the birth of feelings on the part of one boy for another. Many films, they use the subject of the attraction, of same-sex attraction, to make their story somehow more titilating, more appealing to straight audiences. And it's a way of exploiting the public, of drawing them in. And often such films have a moral vision that turns out to be quite reactionary at the end.

O: *How has the French public responded to "Grande Ecole"?*

RS: The problem in France is that while on one hand the French audiences were very receptive to the film and liked it a great deal, the critics were divided. Since the film is based on a [1992] stage play [by Jean-Marie Besset] and many of the stage conventions and dialogue are maintained, then there's often a suspiciousness toward theatrical elements when they're shown on film. So some critics found the film too mannered in terms of its language, the language was too polished.

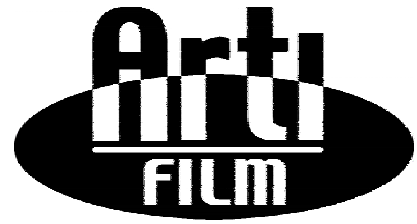
O: *How long did it take you to find an actor play Paul?*

RS: Why did you pick Paul in particular?

O: *Oh, just, how long it took you to find that actor to play him.*

RS: But why him? But why are you interested in that one actor?

O: *Oh, simply because I thought his character was tremendous. I thought the actor who played him, Gregori Baquet, it's just an excellent performance. He really gives Paul a multi-dimension, many facets. A human being with those multi-facets that are really honestly explored. So that would be the basis for my question.*

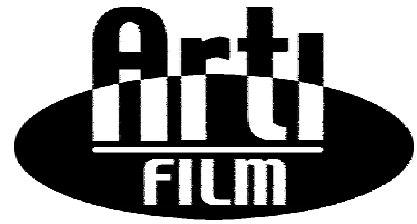


RS: Gregori will be very pleased to hear that. It's true that to play the part I met with a great deal of actors. It's true that it's a difficult part. My first idea was to try and find a young actor who was well-known because with a bankable star like that makes it easier to find something for the film. But first of all there aren't many such actors in that age group (20's) -- actors who are already well-known. And those who do exist were put off by the part, was scared off by the part because of its complexity, and also because of the scenes involving nudity. This was Gregori's first role in a fiction film and when I asked him to play the part he was both moved and flattered that I trusted him with it. But it was a very difficult role for him and a role that was also quite removed from him [personally], quite different from him because of the nude scenes. As any actor, as a professional actor he saw it as a challenge that would help in his career. He liked the idea of doing something that presents a stretch.

O: I wanted to ask about the sexual aspect -- and this is more a political-type question because apparently yourself and others have stated that in French cinema, Arabs are typically portrayed in a very negative way. And your casting of the character Mecir [played by Salim Kechiouche] in that regard is quite revolutionary. He's a very honest character. And here's my question: what do you think shocks audiences more: the fact Paul and Mecir are two people of different races having these explicit sexual experiences with each other, or is it just the fact that they're both men? What do you think might drive certain audience members to shock? Because I heard some people in the audience gasping -- in horror -- when they saw the two [men] making love together -- having sex. So maybe my question's a bit convoluted.

RS: It's true that it's very unusual to see love scenes that are involved with two men but I think that what's shocking is that -- to come back to what you said before about the stereotypes and the way that these images are usually presented -- is that often when sexuality between two men is depicted in mainstream cinema, the sex is very quick, it's very crude and it's not at all romantic or emotional. Whereas when I was shooting these scenes, I was shooting them romantically, with a great deal of tenderness and sensuality, shooting them the same way as if scenes were involving a woman and a man. In fact, to me there's no way -- I didn't make any distinction between

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filming scenes between same-sex couples and straight couples. I think the audience gasps at certain scenes because they're not used to seeing scenes involving not only two men, but two people of different origin like that and expressed also in the color of their skin. And that's precisely what interested me. The idea of showing that love knows no distinction between sexes or races, and that desire can be expressed towards anyone. It's similar in this film "Far From Heaven" (2002), with [director] Todd Haynes. In which a young woman falls in love with her black gardener and that film's very interesting in what it said about prejudice.

O: Additional question -- class differences between these two characters as well. How do you assess the class differences between Paul and Mecir and did that particular aspect cause a stir among French audiences?

RS: No, I don't know how the reaction will be here in the United States but in France the reaction was quite positive. It's not all that unusual that the French reaction was quite positive. It's not all that unusual that the French like to see young Arabs dating, going out with people of other races, so it didn't stir up any strong reaction. The reception was quite positive.

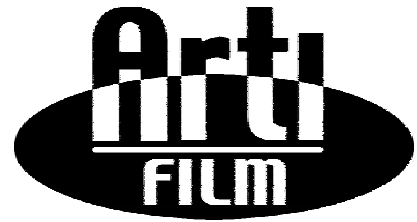
O: Just a few more questions. "Grande Ecole" is the name of your film. It seems that upon watching your film that in a very real sense there's an experiment going on among the students.

Experimentation is a large part of your film and it appears that the students are experimenting in a laboratory of emotions, so to speak. Is that what you tried to convey?

RS: I think that the school's only a pretext. The play on which the film is based takes place in the school, but I think that on the contrary in reality, it's that type of school it's not a favorable setting for experimentation of this kind and for loving excess of this kind. I think that it was only pretext. It allowed me to say -- putting the words in Mecir's mouth in the film -- that the real school where you learn is the school of life, and the school of love -- that's where we learn the most. To me the school was there mostly as a metaphor.

O: A couple of quick questions about the other characters. Agnes [played by Alice Taglioni], who is Paul's girlfriend. There's a symbolic moment at least where the two of them are having sex later on in the film, and she asks Paul where he got the chain from.

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Paul says it was a gift from himself. Agnes accepts that statement, embraces him, kisses him and kind of kisses the chain as well. Is this Agnes' acceptance of Paul's relationship with this other person, Mecir? That she loved him so much that she could allow for his relationship with Mecir, the other man?

RS: [Agnes] doesn't know about the relationship with Mecir. No, in the film when she sees the chain there, at first she thinks it's something Louis-Arnault has given him. But Paul says it's a present he's bought for himself. But Agnes thinks that Paul is in love with Louis-Arnault [played by actor Jocelyn Quivrin] but she's completely unaware of the relationship between Paul and Mecir. It's a secret relationship that no one knows about in the film, until the very end but it's something that Agnes is completely unaware of. When Louis-Arnault understands that Paul's had this relationship with Mecir.

O: Just going to Louis-Arnault for one quick second. It seems that in the film his relationship with his own girlfriend [Emeline -- played by Elodie Navarre] is very ambiguous, at best. And I wonder if that was intentional on your part, for you to leave that relationship very open-ended as far as his own potential sexuality is concerned.

RS: Why do you find that the relationship between Louis-Arnault and the girlfriend is ambiguous?

O: Oh, I feel that was simply because I didn't see a lot of emotional tenderness at all.

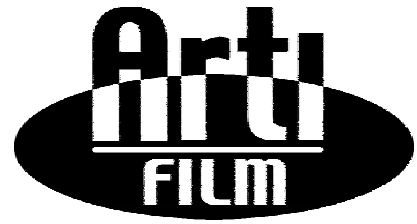
RS: That's more a question of class and expression of his upper-class bourgeoisie the way that they behave in public, is you don't express any emotions and that's what explains the way that Louis-Arnault behaves with [his girlfriend] very stiff and stilted in that way.

O: Alright -- now I think your film is a true love story, despite the amounts of sex that you see.

RS: Yeah.

O: My final questions -- which filmmakers or directors influenced you?

RS: My taste is very Catholic. I like very much Italian cinema and the films of Fellini, Antonioni and Pasolini. But at the same time I also like the films of Bergman and Fassbinder. I think that this film there were certain tips of the hat to Cocteau and Pasolini and Fassbinder because of their way of using



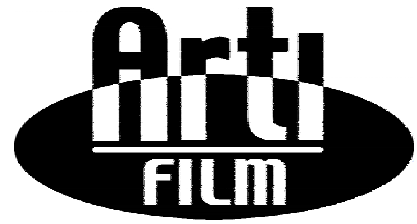
theatrical elements. But generally, more generally I see myself more in the vein of Italian neo-realism.

O: *Last two questions: was there a film that you saw that made you say, "I'm going to be a filmmaker"? Was there one film that had that kind of impact on you?*

RS: I always wanted to be a filmmaker but there is one film which I like above all others because the film really made me aware of that filmmaker's artistic undertaking and that's Fellini's "Satyricon."

O: *Any ideas for your next film?*

RS: No.



Un groupe de jeunes gens intègre l'une des Grandes Ecoles où se forment les futurs dirigeants et où s'entrouvrent les portes du pouvoir. Ils sont la crème des étudiants et seront l'élite de demain si tout se passe comme prévu.

Mais la vie a toujours plus d'imagination que nous. Grandes écoles, oui, grands amours aussi, difficiles à vivre parfois.

Le trouble du je et du jeu, des sentiments, de l'esprit et de la chair désinhiberont leurs certitudes. Ils devront faire avec eux-mêmes, devenir ce qu'ils sont et s'apercevoir que l'école qui est grande n'est peut-être pas celle annoncée.

entretien avec Robert Salis :

Qu'est-ce qui vous a donné envie d'adapter la pièce de Jean-Marie Besset ?

Interview met Robert Salis:

Wat deed u besluiten het toneelstuk van Jean-Marie Besset te bewerken?

Na mij documentaires wilde ik terug naar de fictie. Mijn eerste speelfilm, *Lettres d'amour perdues* dateert alweer van 1984. Ik zocht een onderwerp dat me in staat zou stellen te vertellen over liefdesperikelen en het verlies van een toekomstideaal en dat alles ook nog binnen een sterke sociale dimensie.

Ik had het erover met Jean-Marie Besset, die ik al twintig jaar ken en die een goede vriend is geworden. Hij liet blijken het fijn te vinden als zijn toneelstuk 'Grande Ecole' verfilmd zou worden. Dat was een verleidelijk idee, ook al wist ik dat een eerdere poging om het te verfilmen spaak was gelopen. Ik heb het scenario daarvan gelezen. Het was teveel toneel gebleven en hield geen rekening met de eisen van film.

Samen met Jean-Marie heb ik het nieuwe scenario ontwikkeld.

Waarin verschilt de film van het toneelstuk?

Ik heb het toneelkarakter niet helemaal willen wegpoetsen, maar er juist uit willen putten. Zo heb ik het vrij literaire karakter van de dialogen overeind gehouden.



Het toneelstuk speelt zich helemaal af in de flat van de drie studenten, waar de beide vrouwelijke karakters, Agnes en Emeline, vaak in en uit lopen. Meteen in het begin van het stuk voelt Agnes al de aantrekkingskracht die Louis-Arnault op Paul uitoefent en stelt ze hem de weddenschap voor: laten we kijken wie Louis-Arnault als eerste kan verleiden. Ik hield er niet van de film hiermee te beginnen. Ik wilde eerst de fascinatie tonen die Louis-Arnault uitoefent op Paul, dan het ontstaan van diens verliefdheid en verlangens en dan pas de manier waarop zijn vriendin dat allemaal aanvoelt.

In het toneelstuk komt Mecir maar heel even voor. Ik heb zijn karakter verder uitgewerkt, om de film ook een sociale kant te geven. En verder moest ik de school creëren, de directeur, het waterpoloteam, de ouders van de studenten...

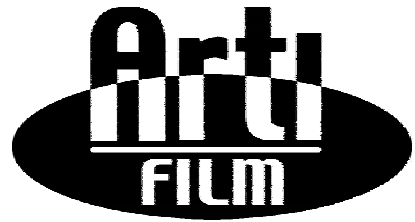
Om terug te komen op Mecir: ik wilde niet het cliché laten zien, zoals in zoveel films, van de jonge arabier uit de grote stad, die zich bezighoudt met misdaad en drugs. Hij moest dus een familieachtergrond hebben, en een vak.

Wat Mecirs broer Jamal betreft, de muzikant die paranoïa wordt van het gebrek aan succes: hij is het die, zonder het te weten, bijdraagt aan de ontknoping van de film. Als Louis-Arnault doorheeft dat Paul een relatie heeft met Mecir, is dit een ondraaglijke gedacht voor hem. Hij heeft meteen de tegenwoordigheid van geest om van de broer die net aan komt lopen de zondebok te maken door hem te beschuldigen van de aanval met het mes. Zo wil hij die relatie kortsluiten en ook het verlangen van Paul op de proef stellen. Omdat de broer, paranoïde als hij is, meteen wegvlocht, blijft er twijfel hangen. Men zou eerder Louis-Arnault op zijn woord geleven dan Jamal.

Om deze klip te omzeilen, had ik aan het eind van de film over de beelden heen deze dialoog willen laten horen:

Jamal: Ik zweer je: ik heb hem nooit eerder gezien. Ik snap niets van zijn agressie.

Mecir: Maar waarom ben je dan gevlucht?



Jamal: Ik wilde geen gedoe. De vooroordelen halen ons toch altijd weer in. Als je wilt ga ik wel naar ze toe om te zeggen dat ik er niets mee te maken heb.

Mecir: Nee, laat maar zitten. Als ik nu met opgeheven hoofd loop, is het om te voorkomen dat mijn tranen uit mijn ogen vallen.

Alleen dat laatste heb ik erin gelaten. De rest vond ik te zwaar worden.

Hoe hebt u de spelers gevonden?

Het was onmogelijk om echte "sterren" te vinden voor deze film. Ten eerste zijn die er niet zoveel in deze leeftijdscategorie. En ten tweede deden de naakt- en liefdesscènes, zoals ik die wilde draaien, velen afhaken. Maar omdat ik veel naar het theater ga en veel films zie, kon ik toch jonge acteurs vinden die niet bang waren voor risico's en voor hun "image". Ik heb echt met ze geboft. Zij dragen echt de film op hun schouders. Ze hebben allemaal al heel snel hun karakter iets extra's meegegeven en aarzelden niet mij te volgen waarheen ik wilde gaan, ook al liet ik ze expres lang in het onzekere over mijn bedoelingen. Ik denk dat ze een mooie toekomst tegemoet gaan.

Liste artistique:

Paul : GREGORI BAQUET

Agnès : ALICE TAGLIONI

Louis-Arnault : JOCELYN QUIVRIN

Emeline : ELODIE NAVARRE

Chouquet : ARTHUR JUGNOT

Mécir : SALIM KECHIOUCHE

Mme Chouquet : EVA DARLAN

Le journaliste incarcéré : LAKSHANTHA ABENAYAKE

Un ouvrier chantier Flash back : YASMINE BELMADI

Un invité : JACQUES COLLARD

Le chef de chantier : JO PRESTIA

Le frère de Mécir : JAMAL HADIR

La mère de Louis-Arnault : EVA SAINT-PAUL

Le père de Louis-Arnault : JEAN-LOUP WOLFF

Grégori Baquet (Paul) :

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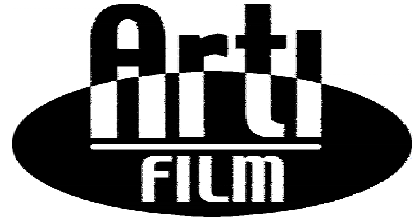
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AU CINEMA :

- 1991 • **LA REINE BLANCHE** de Jean Loup HUBERT
- 1994 • **L'IRRESOLU** de Jean Pierre RONSSIN
- 2000 • **ÇA IRA MIEUX DEMAIN** de Jeanne LABRUNE
- 2003 • **GRANDE ECOLE** de Robert SALIS

Alice Taglioni (Agnès) :

AU CINEMA :

2001

- **LE PHARMACIEN DE GARDE** de Jean VEBER
- **DECALAGE HORAIRE** de Danièle THOMSON
- **LA BANDE DU DRUGSTORE** de François ARMANET

2002

- **LE CŒUR DES HOMMES** de Marc ESPOSITO
- **RIEN QUE DU BONHEUR** de Denis PARENT
- **BROCELIANDE** de Doug HEADLINE

2003

- **UN AUTRE QUE MOI** de Laurent TIRARD
- **GRANDE ECOLE** de Robert SALIS

Jocelyn Quivrin (Louis-Arnault) :

AU CINEMA :

1992

- **LOUIS ENFANT ROI** de Roger PLANCHON, Sélection officielle Cannes 1993

1993

- **LE KRASH RECORD** de Dominique CHAMPETIER

1994

- **FIESTA** de Pierre BOUTRON
- **AU PETIT MARGUERY** de Laurent BENEGUI
- **OPTION CINÉMA** de Patrick VOLSON, Moyen métrage

1996

- **AU BOUT DE LA NUIT** de Etienne FAURE
- **COUNTRY BOY** de Raphaël SCHNEIDER et Sébastien LAFARGE

1997

- **LAUTREC** de Roger PLANCHON
- **ELIZABETH I** de Shekhar KAPUR
- **LA LEÇON DE MONSIEUR PAILLASSON** de Michel FESSLER

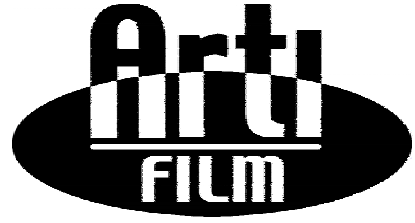
1998

- **PEUT-ÊTRE** de Cédric KLAPISCH
- **NOËL EN FAMILLE** de Aruna VILLIERS et F. BERTHAUD

1999

- **SANS PLOMB** de Muriel TEODORI

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- **LE PROF** de Alexandre JARDIN
- **PIERRE MÉGEMONT**, BEFSCHNARGE
2000
- **FÉROCE** de Gilles de MAISTRE
2001
- **QUI VEUT DEVENIR UNE STAR ?** de Patrice POOYARD
2002
- **SANS ELLE** de Anna de PALMA
2003
- **L'OUTREMANGEUR** de Thierry BINISTI
- **GRANDE ÉCOLE** de Robert SALIS

Salim Kechiouche (Mécir) :

AU CINEMA :

1996

- **A TOUTE VITESSE** de Gaël MOREL

1999

- **LES AMANTS CRIMINELS** de François OZON

2003

- **GIGOLO** avec Amanda Lear, moyen métrage de Bastian SCHWEITZER
- **TROIS DANSES D'ESCLAVES** de Gaël MOREL
- **GRANDE ÉCOLE** de Robert SALIS

2004

- **VIE ET MORT DE PIER PAOLO PASOLINI (TV)**
- **LE CLAN** de Gaël MOREL

Salim Kechiouche a été également **vice-champion de France de boxe thaïlandaise**

France – 35mm – Couleur – 1.85 – Dolby SR et SRD – 1h50

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