

column : Parisien Portrait

## Speaking Francais

by Raana Haider

**A**T a lunch hosted by the Association of Professional Women of France honouring Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, former Secretary-General of the United Nations and present Secretary-General of the Association of Francophone Countries, I was speaking to a grande dame. The distinguished lady and I were mildly arguing as to who would invite the other home first.

It transpired that we lived in the same district, the 16th arrondissement. I said that we were then living in the same banlieue (suburb). I had meant to say voisinage (neighbourhood) or quartier (quarter). The grande dame was highly amused at my choice of the word banlieue and said "how very charming

*Paris has twenty arrondissements, each headed by a Mayor. The 1st arrondissement is the area of the Notre-Dame de Paris cathedral on the Ile de la Cite, where Paris was first settled by the Parisii tribe around 250 BC. The arrondissements then work out from the centre further out in a snail-like form. As the mark of an insider, a native, one always refers to the 2nd or the 8th, as in, "I live in the 16th," and one does not reveal one's nouveau and gauche status by remarking, "I live in the 16th arrondissement."*

it was to use the word 'banlieue'! She continued to commend me as a foreigner on the use of 'banlieue' to convey the spirit of friendliness and congeniality; but... (and I knew there was a Big But coming...) She elaborated — the 16th arrondissement spells bourgeois living, a certain snob appeal — and the word for neighbourhood in this context is 'quartier' and not 'banlieue' which carries with it a strong connotation of suburban living in the outer reaches of

Paris; somewhere Out There and not exactly it. The French phrase, en province (as Parisiens dismissively describe the rest of France) captures the notion as stated in a journal, 'Living in France'. For us residents of the highly prestigious 16th arrondissement in central Paris, it was undesirable to be living in a 'banlieue' rather than a 'quartier'. Paris has twenty arrondissements, each headed by a Mayor. The 1st arrondissement is the area of the Notre-

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A hilarious source of La Vie Parisi-

enne, 'Bluff Your Way in Paris' notes that, "Lifestyle in Paris is often largely a matter of where you live and what you do for a living. If you live in the banlieue, wear leather jackets, drive a motorbike and are on the dole, then you are a loubard (good-for-nothing). If, on the other hand, you live in the Seizieme, wear designer clothes, drive an Alfa Romeo, and are not on the dole, you are BCBG... This is an extremely important social classification, standing for 'bon

chic, bon genre', a concept with no direct equivalent in English, but which connotes wealth, style and a certain social savoir-faire... The Seizieme is more than just an arrondissement: it's a complete package of haute-bourgeoise, expensive life-style... they live the life of gross, selfish, morally and politically unacceptable capitalism, the lucky bastards. They are BCBG in a big way."

The subtleties of a language were amply illustrated in this amusing and highly educational incident. The importance of a good address cannot be underestimated — therein lies what distinguishes the patricians from the plebeians and woe betide she who inadvertently misplaces the place. Never again shall I make this mistake. Nevertheless, a host of others remain to be committed.

profile

## Jacques Prévert : The Unfettered Poet

by Daniel Bermond

**T**O read Jacques Prévert is to hear him speak. His is the language of the man in the street, not the language of literature. That comment by the author Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes sums up the figure of Jacques Prévert, born at the turn of the century at Neuilly-sur-Seine, near Paris, into a priggish middle-class family whose obsessions and contrivances he would later relentlessly mock. Prévert created a new universe, one that escaped the order established by God and the "rear-admirals" (one of the many social figures he liked to ridicule). He applied his lyrical art to the most commonplace objects and extracted from his puns and word-play all the energy of their power of invention and destruction.

Poetry is everywhere, on a street corner, on someone's lips, in the folds of a collage; poetry is the air we breathe. Paroles (1946), his first published anthology, elevated him to the rank of writer, much to his concern since he saw himself more as a man of (bad) action than a man of letters. On each page of *Spectacle* (1951) and *La Pluie et le Beau Temps* (1955), we find an incredible approach to aesthetics, with no respect for all manner of conformity, spouting forth on all things of life.

Chansons poems in prose and free verse... Many of them, especially in *Paroles*, date from the years when Prévert mingled with the Surrealists, the years leading up to the Second World

War, during which he founded the October Group, the champion of caustic buffoonery. *L'Affaire est dans le sac* (It's in the bag), *Ciboulette*, *La Vie de famille*, *Il ne faut pas rire avec ces gens-là* (These people are serious) are liberation celebrations and aides to corrosive humour aimed at causing a scandal.

And yet, deep down, he too was scandalous in his uncompromising determination to preserve his freedom whatever the circumstances. Employed against my will by the factory of ideas/I refused to clock in/Limewise mobilised in the army of ideas/I deserted, he wrote in *Choses et autres*, his last published book (1972). In 1930, he broke off with André Breton — the figurehead of the Surrealists —, whom he found too authoritarian, and later distanced himself from the Communist Party, of which he never became a member. In fact, when, at the behest of Moscow, its leader Maurice Thorez rediscovered Joan of Arc and heaped praise on good old patriotism, Prévert, for his part, remained a staunch opponent of all things military and never compromised his pacifist attitude.

### Of life and love

Should one, then, talk of years of maturity? It was during that period that he began to write for the cinema. First came the script for *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* (1935), by Jean Renoir, refreshing for its libertarian ideas. While the score is by Jean Wiener, the film does feature, for the first time, a song by a composer of Hungarian origin who

*Whom do we honour most in Jacques Prévert, who died exactly twenty-one years ago (1900-1977)? Is it the poet or the screenwriter, the composer of chansons or the companion of the Surrealists, the friend of Picasso or the solitary figure who walked the old streets of Paris, the provocateur or the author of children's fairy tales? No doubt, we pay tribute to every facet of his life and work, each one inextricably linked to the other.*



Jacques Prévert and Yves Montand, accomplice and interpreter of the poet's chansons.

would later come to work very closely with Prévert, one Joseph Kosma.

Obviously, Prévert's encounter with the film director Marcel Carné became the single most important step in his career. The duo first teamed up in 1936

with Jenny and went on to create, sometimes in the face of sheer incomprehension from the critics, *Drôle de drame* (1937), *Quai des brumes* (1938; *Port of Shadows*), *Le jour se lève* (1939; *Daybreak*), works that included actors

as magical as Jean Gabin, Louis Jouvet, Arletty, Jules Berry, Michel Simon and the young Michèle Morgan.

In *The Prime of Life*, Simone de Beauvoir describes the prominent position then enjoyed by Prévert among the film-makers, the people with whom he met at the Flore, the famous brasserie in Saint-Germain des Prés: At the time, their God, oracle and mentor was Jacques Prévert, whose films and poems they worshipped, whose language and wit they sought to emulate. We, too, savoured the poems and Chansons of Prévert. We very much welcomed his dreamy and slightly lunatic blend of anarchy.

Together with Christian-Jaque, Prévert made *Les Disparus de St Agil* (1938) and, with Jean Grémillon, *Remorques* (1941) and *Jumière d'été* (1943); but it was first and foremost his work with Marcel Carné that mattered. In the darkest hour of Nazi occupation and under the worst conditions, they made the gem of a mediaeval fabliau: *Les Visiteurs du soir* (1942); then, shortly before the Liberation, *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945; *The Children of Paradise*), acknowledged as one of the best films in the history of cinema, thanks in part to the performances by Arletty (the unforgettable Garance), Maria Casarès, Pierre Brasseur and Jean-Louis Barrault. A hymn to life and love that never fails to move with every screening.

It is precisely that incomparable way

of talking about life and love which Prévert had used so effectively in his chansons. He composed unforgettable lyrics for countless songs performed by all the greats, from Juliette Gréco to Mouloudji, from the Frères Jacques to Catherine Sauvage, Serge Reggiani to Yves Montand. Autumn Leaves, taken up by Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby and Miles Davis, and Barbara (Rappelletto Barbara/Il pleuvait sans cesse sur Brest ce jour-là/Et tu marchais souriante/Epanouie, ravie, ruisselante/ Sous la pluie) are among the best known, and still there are so many others.

This apparent simplicity and strange candour are also a feature of his many tales and stories he wrote for children. In *Le Petit Lion*, *Lettre des îles Baladar*, *Contes pour enfants pas sages* (Tales for Naughty Children), *La Bergère et le Ramoneur* (1953) — a wonderful animated film re-released after his death by his friend Paul Grimault under the title of *Le Roi et l'Oiseau* (1980) —, Prévert shows perfect mastery of ingenuity in portraying the insolence of the eternally rebellious and the generous dunce who disrupts and disturbs, and then bursts into laughter.

Oddly enough, Prévert the unruly, who despised the establishment in all its forms, has been honoured by the literary institutions, which have named many schools and lycées after him. In fact, since 1992, he has been included in the prestigious literary collection of the *Pléiade* — on bible paper no less! Jacques Prévert the classic? Perish the thought....

essay

## A Journey to Tolstoy's War and Peace

By Syed Maqsood Jamil

**W**ARS have lot of stories to tell. The disruption affects life. Often changes it. Great wars are the turning points for all ages. A particular place in time, where desperation reigns, fury commands, events push people forward. The personal world is subordinated to the turmoil that goes around. Those who live and those who die, make life, by their desperation and the state of resignation, a passionate work of drama.

The drama that acts on this large canvas, does not follow a staid, quiet line of story. It builds on the twists and turns of fate. The intense human elements in it work into our emotion. Our hearts are touched, our imaginations are stimulated. Well written novels with war and peace as background make great literary works. Highly rated as a classic for all times.

My introduction to such literary work was through *Gone with the Wind* of Margaret Mitchell. The next great classic to follow was Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. It took me in its fold. I was never to part with it. That was thirty years back. The place of *War and Peace* in my literary consciousness is deeply cherished, with no sign of decline.

Leo Tolstoy, its author is widely revered by many for the goodness, simplicity and truthfulness of the life he lived. He lived with the keen outlook

of an observer. In his investigation of life, he sought with great devotion the human essence of life. This has made the many characters of *War and Peace* wonderfully real representatives of the many facets of life of the times they lived. The story of *War and Peace* has been told with an easy, lucid and natural style. An effortless narration which builds and holds the attention.

When I look back at the characters, it is Prince Andrei Bolkonsky who attracts me most. Andrei is however not the pivotal character. He is portrayed as a loner absorbed in his own world. A melancholy person living his life away from others. The many characters that come into focus in sub-plots have little or no link with Andrei.

Tolstoy, I am inclined to think, built Pierre Bezuhov on himself. He however blurred the similarity, by giving him (Pierre) a comical element or a lighter vein. The substance of Pierre is somewhat similar to Konstantin Levin of *Anna Karenina* in its outlook, except that Levin was from the landed gentry, a serious, reflective person. While Pierre is a citybred, socialite son of a member of the Royal Court. Pierre, by virtue of his presence in the central plot from the beginning to the end, is the pivotal character of *War and Peace*. Tolstoy uses him in building many subplots. In bringing to focus characters that fade away later. The illegitimacy of his birth also makes him a topic which invites drama.

He has all the human aspects to look

on him with sympathy. The infidelity of his wife Helene badly compromised his prestige. Scandalous involvement with Dolohov, a bully of an army officer, held in ill repute for womanizing, was a terrible embarrassment. It further blackened the stigma of illegitimacy of his birth. Pierre was an easy target of ridicule in the society.

He was an inoffensive person. But even his thick lenses stood against him. The common picture of him was that of a queer, comical fellow. Societies everywhere are not without their Pierres. If the ways, circumstances or background of somebody of inoffensive nature, look different from what we see in common, the person becomes everybody's whipping boy. The person is mocked at and persecuted relentlessly. It can break anyone, turning the fire even in the coolest person.

That was what happened when Dolohov provoked him to a drinking bout, and a duel. Our common reaction is that of a delight when we see that a bully has been cut to size. There was obvious joy in seeing Dolohov hit by Pierre's bullet, writhing in pain on the snowy ground of the park. That is one victory I rejoiced much in reading *War and Peace*. Pierre is a tragic example of stigma in birth and the misery of marriage without love.

The misery of wrong marriage is easily to be felt when Andrei was sharing his joy and happiness in getting the love of Natasha. Fate, as war made it to chart its course, was the final arbiter in decid-

ing who was to receive the lovely gift — Natasha Rostov. The refreshingly young and beautiful daughter of Count Rostov. Andrei was in doubt about getting Natasha. He considered him rather old for her. But, it is Pierre who convinced him that Natasha is 'a rare girl' and goaded him "marry, marry, marry .... And there will be no happier man on earth."

Although, Andrei and Natasha were formally engaged, Andrei was not to enjoy the hope and light of Natasha's love for long. For him, life without Natasha was like one of the two opposites, "the other where she is not, and then everything is gloom and darkness." And indeed he died in gloom and darkness on the way out of badly burnt Moscow.

Ironically, Pierre, who viewed his future as sombre was to see his life lighted by the "brightness" in Natasha which Andrei wanted with such great eagerness. It was the war which was to decide that Natasha was to be Pierre's.

Bald Hill, the country mansion of the Bolkonsky's was a house where fate cast lengthening shadows. Nikolai Bolkonsky, the disciplinarian, and outspokenly critical father of Andrei was to set the cheerlessly rigid ways of the house and its sombre tone. His inflexible attitude and sharp tongue without being cruelty, inspired a degree of fear and self-containment in the house. The minds of those who lived there, bent with it and turned inward. Andrei grew

to be an introspective and melancholy person. He never knew true happiness and love in life, which he later admitted to Pierre, saying "I have never lived till now. Only now am I alive and I can not live without her...." He was speaking of his deep love for Natasha. In Andrei and his wife Lise, there was a sad example of what a mismatch in marriage can do to one's life.

Lise was a citybred lady with much fondness for the glitter of life. It did not go well with the deeply romantic disposition of Andrei and the reflective nature of his ways. Senior Bolkonsky could understand the gloom in his son's life and his need for deeply caring love. He sarcastically summed up the agony when he told Andrei, "They are all alike....and there's no getting unmarried again."

Obviously, my heart went out to Andrei when he left for the front. Bald Hill was never to light up with the joy of happily married Andrei and Natasha. He won my sympathy and my regard too. He was the gracefully gentle and gallant Prince. A hero among upright men caught in a situation, ill-conceived by fate. The hero became even more endearing when he confessed to his sister Maria: "Let me tell you one thing, Masha, I have no fault to find with my wife...But you want to know the truth...If you want to know whether I am happy? The answer is no. Is she happy? No. Why is this so? I do not know...." Death brought the tragedy to an end. Lise was to die in childbirth.

And Andrei died of grievous wound received in war.

Should I miss Natasha Rostov? The most loving character of *War and Peace*. Surely not. She appears at a tender age. The young girl of the Rostovs, the darling of the family. She was filled with the exuberance and innocence of youth. Her eyes radiant with dream. But it was a different time. Russia was preparing for war. Her boys were eager to join the front.

Natasha's fate was not to follow a set plan. Boris was her first experience of youthful involvement. It was not love, but innocent exploration. The blossoming of the lady in Natasha is fascinating. She was later courted by Denisov, a friend of her brother Nikolai. An accomplished dancer, an army officer too! But Natasha did not see in him, the man she wanted.

She fell passionately in love with Andrei, a widower and rather old for her. The turmoil of war was to separate them. And later to unite them briefly in tragic circumstances, where Andrei died. Natasha belonged to Andrei. But war took her away and presented her to Pierre when peace returned. Such are the twists and turns of fate in times of war.

When the literary genius of Tolstoy's calibre gets to work, the drama of *War and Peace* becomes an unforgettable classic. Reading *War and Peace* is like a journey. A journey which offers an inward fulfillment settling deep into our consciousness. The eternity guards it. ■