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**HOW I**

A FILM BY  
**ANNE  
FONTAINE**

**KILLED**

**MY**

ONE MAN WHO  
THOUGHT HE HAD IT ALL,  
WILL FIND THAT HIS PAST  
IS THE ONE THING MISSING.

**FATHER**

The complex and fascinating relationship between 40-year-old Jean-Luc, a successful gerontologist living in a wealthy Paris suburb, and his long estranged father who suddenly appears after an absence of many years, is explored in this intelligent, moving and invigorating film. Michel Bouquet won a Caésars for his performance as the father.

FRANCE • 2002 • 100 mins • Color • In French with English subtitles

# Another Family Is About to Realize: Like Father, Like Son

KENNETH TURAN

For Jean-Luc Borde, a successful gerontologist who's practiced in affluent Versailles for 10 years, it is the crowning night of his career. The town's elite have come to his luxurious home to award him the coveted Order of Merit at an elaborate party hosted by his elegant wife, Isa. "I was like an orphan," he tells the crowd, "and you adopted me."

It is a telling choice of words. For the doctor's father, in fact, abruptly abandoned Jean-Luc and his brother decades before, disappearing to Africa without a word of explanation. And in the central conceit of Anne Fontaine's penetrating and emotionally complex "How I Killed My Father," that absentee parent has somehow chosen that special night to unexpectedly return to his sons' lives.

Fontaine's film may have a thriller title reminiscent of "I Wake Up Screaming" and "Kiss the Blood Off My Hands," but its interest is in the psychological more than the literal aspects of its name. Still, there is a palpable air of tension and suspense about this insightful film, a realization that the greatest and most provocative mystery of all is the human soul.

In this respect, "How I Killed" resembles director Fontaine's earlier exploration of the tangled complications of interpersonal relationships, "Dry Cleaning," which focused, with her trademark combination of empathy and evenhandedness, on the effect a charismatic transvestite has on the lives of a married couple.

Here, working with top French screenwriter Jacques Fieschi and an exceptional cast (including Charles Berling as Jean-Luc and Natacha Regnier, a world apart from her breakthrough role in "The Dream Life of Angels," as Isa), Fontaine has made an even greater success. Alive to nuance, unafraid of the intricate implications of emotional situations, she's made a compelling exploration of the unfinished business between fathers and sons, of the lasting influence parents have over children even if neither side wants it to be that way.

As with "Dry Cleaning," Fontaine and her collaborator have come up with a singular central character with a forceful yet enigmatic nature. Brilliantly played by the veteran Michel Bouquet, a star of theater and film for more than 45 years, Jean-Luc's father Maurice by his very nature sets off disturbances in the field from the moment he arrives. He puts pressures, perhaps unintentional, perhaps not, on preexisting fissures in his son's life, ensuring without really trying to that what's been papered over inevitably unravels.

Maurice and Jean-Luc not only look like father and son, they have other similarities, starting with the profession of medicine, though Maurice's work in impoverished Africa couldn't be more different than the kind of ultra-bourgeois, heavy-on-the-Botox practice that has made Jean-Luc wealthy. The main similarity between the two men, however, is the combination of wariness and strained formality with which they treat each other, the barbed remarks they exchange, the chill in the air that is always between them.

Certainly Maurice (and this is one of the gifts of Bouquet's performance) has an unknowability and impenetrability about him, characterized by an enigmatic half grin that can be infuriating.



Maurice is completely imperturbable, without the slightest interest in apologizing for, justifying or even explaining the desertion of his family. Even in his 70s, there is a dangerous presence about the man, the sense that every remark he makes is a move in an elaborate chess game in which he holds an unfair advantage.

Yet Maurice also has a kind of appeal that even Jean-Luc can't deny. "If I met him by chance," he tells Isa, "I'd have fallen for his charm." Which, gradually, is what those closest to Jean-Luc do, especially his wife. Even his brother Patrick (Stephane Guillon), a ne'er-do-well who works as Jean-Luc's chauffeur while moonlighting as a stand-up comic, is not immune. This even though Patrick was initially so resistant to his father for leaving when he was but 4 that he refused to so much as be in the same room with him.

For Jean-Luc, things are different. With his withdrawn, watchful intelligence and an anger that lurks coiled under his placid surface, he is still furious at his father, so much so that he seems almost to have changed places with him, to have inherited the very traits that disturbed him most as a child. When Jean-Luc tells Isa that "he has eyes like ice, he judges you calmly, down to the bone," he could be talking about himself as much as Maurice.

One of the most gratifying aspects of "How I Killed My Father" is that it couldn't be less interested in taking sides in this primal conflict. As the film's characters head into uncharted, inevitably explosive emotional territory against the backdrop of Jocelyn Pook's unnerving music, you can feel director/co-writer Fontaine's intelligence probing and illuminating this high-tension, high-stakes situation. Truly, there can be nothing as complex as the simplest human relationships, and nothing as satisfying as a film that understands that as this one does.

## HOW I KILLED MY FATHER

Director Anne Fontaine. Producer Philippe Carcassonne. Screenplay Jacques Fieschi, Anne Fontaine. Cinematographer Jean-Marc Fabre. Editor Guy Lecorne. Costumes Corrine Jorry. Music Jocelyn Pook. Set designer Sylvain Charuvelot. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes.

Cast: Michel Bouquet: Maurice, Charles Berling: Jean-Luc, Natacha Regnier: Isa, Stephane Guillon: Patrick, Amira Cesar: Myriem

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