

Three little Belgians under the Eiffel Tower

Twenty years ago I arrived in Paris with a head full of dreams. I wanted to be a film star. I reckoned it must have been about the best way there was of getting into nightclubs, getting free drinks... and lots of women. Today I am a man fulfilled. I've done the nightclubs, had the free drinks and even had a couple of girls I suppose, somewhere along the line. But I'm not a film star.

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Today I'm just a normal actor, an occasional performer, as they put it here. Sometimes I work, sometimes not. I don't go clubbing because I'm too tired. I don't try to wangle free drinks anymore because I don't drink. As for women, I'm married and have a child.

I've even opened up a small restaurant with my wife, and today it's my turn to interview the young Belgian actors who come to live in Paris.

I'm expecting the very beautiful Cécile de France and the likeable Fabio Zenoni.

It's midday. I'm sitting at my managerial table, my wife is at work in the kitchen and Fabio Zenoni has just rung on his mobile to say that he'll be late.

Very unsatisfactory behaviour, most unprofessional. He's just beginning to get into French films and he's a good-looking lad, but that's no excuse for drinking himself senseless. Just to think I must have been like that a few years ago. I'm not feeling hungry yet, so I go out into the street and start handing out leaflets to advertise the restaurant.

Business is bad just now. Suddenly I'm losing it. I'm wondering whether Bruce Willis hands out tracts in person for his restaurant. I can't remember whether I saw

myself handing out things to advertise my restaurant the day I slammed my parents' door and set off to be a film star in Paris.

Just then Cécile de France decides to show up, somewhat ahead of time. I suspect she's noticed the packet of flyers I'm holding behind my back. She who saw me in my first film. She who came to Paris and thought: if that little Belgian can make it, why can't I? I've just shattered a myth.

Cécile de France is the Belgian actress on her way to the top. Her name is on film billboards all over town and she has appointments with different directors every day. We know each other. We did a film together a few years ago, but it was never released.

Cécile is the flavour of the month, but she came by metro. I feel somewhat ashamed of this handful of flyers, but I show her in anyway. My wife brings her a ginger juice and we sit ourselves down.

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- Hi Cécile.
- Hi Riton.
- Two pecks or just the one, like in Bruxelles?
- I don't mind. In any case I'm not from Bruxelles, I'm from Namur... Mmmm, delicious this ginger juice. It's nice here.
- Thanks.
- Did you open this?
- Yes. Well, with Dominique— my fiancée here.
- Brilliant! How long ago?
- A year ago. But what are you doing in Paris? Are you working?
- Yes, lots. I mean, I've got lots of appointments at least, and a lover boy —he's a musician— he's come to live with me here. I'm playing in films, but not necessarily in Paris. Often out of town, in Europe and frequently back in Belgium. I've got lots of friends still there, doing theatre. I work with them a lot.
- Do you like being in Paris?
- Yes.
- Go on.
- Paris is great. But not everything. I really like Bruxelles, I really like Namur, I really like the country, but here it's all go, masses of people doing masses of things. Masses of concerts and exhibitions, although we never go to any of them.
- Is there anything you miss about Belgium?
- Courtesy. I like holding the door open for people in shops, or people holding the door open for me. I like saying 'if you please'.
- Is that all?
- Actually, no. In fact, I left out the most important thing: a good fricadelle.

A fricadelle with Andalusian chips at four in the morning with the mates. Funny enough, your restaurant feels a bit like Belgium.

- Oh, really? Why? It's not a Belgian restaurant. It's an African restaurant.

- Right, but it's the atmosphere. It's simple. And then there's the street outside— just like Bruxelles. Not too smart, not too pretentious. They even have burst rubbish bags on the pavement.

- Yes, that's true. Bruxelles isn't as smart as Paris. Although I dunno. It all depends on the neighbourhood. But I do think it's important for a capital city to be a bit disgusting in places, sort of wild.

I've got friends just back from New York. They say it's all clean and protected. The only smell in the streets is the smell of dosh. That's what gives me the jitters. And in any case, capital cities have always been a bit dangerous. Otherwise you might just as well stay put in the countryside.

- Well, it's obvious you're not a woman. I really like the countryside. If I were going to buy a house, I'd buy one in Belgium, in the country. I've had a scout round in the south of France, but it's too expensive.

No, the countryside in Belgium is fine, as long as you've got nothing against rain, like me.

On the other hand, lover boy won't hear of it. He doesn't mind leaving Paris, but not just so we can go off to some place where the weather is even worse, and everything looks that much greyer.

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Cécile's lover boy is right, but that's just what I like about Bruxelles— the greyness. I like the trams full of old people. And the cafés where they go dancing on Saturdays. I like those construction sites that drag on for thirty years, the wastelands and the neighbourhoods falling to bits.

One day all that will be gone. The only thing left will be your average, smart neighbourhood for the middle-class working at the European Community, everything squeaky clean. No rubbish bags on the pavements, no trams full of old people, no cafés for them to go dancing on Saturdays. Dominique, my Senegalese fiancée, arrives with a menu in her hand.

- *So what do you want to eat?*
- *What's Yassa chicken?*
- *Chicken joint cooked in onion and lemon.*
- *And what about this tiep bou dien?*
- *It's Senegalese. It's the national dish. Fish with rice and vegetables.*
- *Great. I'll try that.*

Cécile smiles and looks at my fiancée.

- *You must know Belgium pretty well, Mademoiselle. What do you think of it?*

At this, Dominique laughs heartily, displaying a set of fine teeth.

- *They're so funny, Belgians are. 'If you please' here, 'if you please' there. How can you believe they're honest when they say 'if you please' all the time?*

As for me, I'm fed up with African food. I'd give an arm and a leg for a good sausage and mash.

- But why Paris, Cécile? If you'd wanted to take up acting you could have gone to Bruxelles?

- I don't know. I just wanted to dream. My drama teacher back in Namur said, 'Go to Paris— there's sure to be something there for you'.

- You came to Paris too, didn't you. Are you doing films, theatre? What are you up to apart from the restaurant?

- I'm working on a One Man Show, or rather I'm going to revive the one I did in Bruxelles.

- A One Man Show? What about?

- A Belgian who lives in Paris and gets depressed because he's not famous enough.

- A One Man Show. That must be so hard. I wouldn't fancy it myself. I much prefer working with other people. That's another reason why I like doing theatre.

Just then Fabio Zenoni makes his grand entrance. A storm of hair billows out as he takes his cap off. He looks as though he's been dancing for the last two days in the cafés round the Stock Exchange.

Dominique arrives with the menu, but Fabio is not hungry. He's only just woken up, as if we didn't know.

- Hi there guys! Sorry. A night on the town. I didn't get to bed till five. My flat-mate came in after me, and he was so drunk he shouted his head off all night, so this morning there was no way I was going to wake up.

- Well, at least you're honest about it. Cécile you know Fabio, Fabio, Cécile....

- Hi, I think we've already met somewhere.

- Could well be. You're an actor.

- Yes, I mean, I'm just beginning to get going.

Right. Time for me to jump in with the questions again.

- So Fabio, you're Belgian, too. And you've not been in Paris that long?

- Correct.

- And you're happy about that?

- Extremely happy.

- Why?

- I don't know. But in any case, I adore Paris. Can't get enough of it Scootering along the banks of the Seine.

- Big deal. Paris isn't the only place in the world.

- I left Bruxelles because I wanted to get moving and see people, and Paris is more attractive than Liège, Mons, Lille, Roubaix or Tourcoing, don't you think? I adore Bruxelles, but you only need to be there a week and you know it all. Paris is immense. And what's more, everyone's talking about Belgian cinema. What's Belgian cinema? Two films a year? Hardly enough to keep Belgian actors working. Then there are the co-productions with France. The French actors get all the best parts, and the Belgians just have a couple of lines to say.

- Are you working here?

- Um. Not all the time. But it'll come. At the moment it's a bit tough, but if you want to get set up in Paris you need guts and patience.

- *That's true [adds Cécile]. I've had to make sacrifices, too. I had to leave my friends, and even my boyfriends. But I'm sure I've done the right thing.*

It's amazing what a positive attitude he has, our young Belgian. Compared to me, doubting Thomas. I'm so negative. Maybe it's Paris that's done this to me. I must have been here too long.

- *But if you've got no work, how do you make a living? What do you do for food?*

- *Well, for a start, I didn't say I'd got no work. I've just had a few days on a Pierre Salvadori film with Auteuil and Kiberlain. But of course, if I were in Bruxelles I'd be living like a prince, in a house downtown with a garden and a 200m terrace. Plus, this year I've worked quite a bit. In Bruxelles though. I appeared in a play my company put on.*

- *Like you, Cécile.*

- *Yes. That's right. I went back to Namur to do some theatre. So did you, Riton. You had your show at the Théâtre de Poche in Bruxelles. How long did you stay in Bruxelles this year?*

- *Six months.*

Six months... So you could say that Paris is a major capital city where artists live but don't work. All actors live in Paris, but they do films in Belgium, Portugal, Hungary, the countryside or Luxembourg.

I even know a Belgian actor who would have liked to

go back home to live in Bruxelles, but he didn't dare to because his cell phone number wouldn't have started with 06.

- *OK, Fabio. What have you missed most since you've been in Paris?*

- *A decent fricadelle. Fricadelle and chips at five in the morning with the mates.*

- *Chips. What you miss most of all is a bag of chips?*

- *Correct.*

So it's true. Chips are important to us. The French eat chips too, but we would be quite capable of going home just for a plate of chips in some godforsaken pub in the middle of the night with the mates.

The fact is, what we're missing most in Paris is our childhood, our memories, our Duvel beer and our 'if you pleases'. Luckily, we've got the Thalys.

Imagine what it's like being a young, Mexican actor when you feel like a Chili and a Tequila in a bar back in Mexico. We're a lucky lot, we Belgian actors. We can go home to meet the mates whenever we want, and when we get really bored and Bruxelles seems to be too full of old people all over again and the metro isn't fast enough, then all we have to do is take the Thalys in the opposite direction and we're away.