

So much for the promise of a discreet table. La Colombe d'Or, the fashionable auberge in the fire-ravaged hills above Nice, cannot resist the chance to flaunt a megastar such as Bernard-Henri Lévy. The man so famous in France that he is known just by his initials - BHL - clearly outranks the rock stars in the eyes of the *maitre d'*. Noel Gallagher of Oasis and his noisy blonde friends have been pushed into a corner. Low-wattage French celebrities have been relegated to the terrace. Lévy, France's most famous man of letters and noble causes, is to take centre stage.

The weapons of the *intellectuel engagé* - laptop, mobile phone and his freshly typed column for *Le Point*, a leading centre-right French weekly - are strewn across the table. But the great man, who once rented a suite in this legendary hotel before moving a few yards up the hill into Saint-Paul-de-Vence, is nowhere to be seen. A few minutes later, faxed article in hand, he appears framed in the doorway, his handsome features bathed in the last of the evening sunlight. His trademark white shirt is open pretty much to the waist and would be revealing a muscular, tanned chest were it not at that moment being tenderly fondled by a slender, younger woman, the talented actress and singer, Arielle Dombasle.

BHL and Dombasle are France's most glamorous couple, a modern-day Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe. Exchanging smouldering glances, they disentangle themselves from their public display of unrestrainable lust, looking as if spontaneous applause might not be out of the question. With a waist said to be the thinnest in Paris, a pronounced pout and the self-confident look of someone *Paris Match* described as one of the 10 most beautiful women in the world, Dombasle turns every head in the restaurant as she skips over to a nearby table of friends, leaving her husband to have dinner with me.

For more than 25 years, Bernard-Henri Lévy has been an unavoidable figure in the Parisian literary and media world. With the imminent English-language publication of his latest book, *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, an investigation into the murder of The Wall Street Journal reporter, the BHL phenomenon will soon go global. Vanity Fair devoted eight pages of its January issue to a breathless article comparing him to Charles Baudelaire, Emile Zola, Victor Hugo, Andre Malraux, T.E. Lawrence and King David. It also told the story of how the first time Dombasle saw a photograph of him, she mistook him for Jesus Christ.

Born into a wealthy family of lumber merchants in French Algeria in 1948, Lévy grew up in Paris, where he studied under Louis Althusser, the Marxist theoretician, at the elite Ecole Normale Supérieure. But his own flirtation with Maoism and the far left did not survive for long after the failure of the 1968 student rebellion. Aged 28, Lévy used his insider's knowledge of the publishing industry, gained as a precocious editor at the Grasset publishing house, to launch the *nouveaux philosophes*, a group of writers determined to break the stranglehold of Marxism over French thought. Lévy's contribution was *La Barbarie à Visage Humain*, a book that denounced communism as an excuse for totalitarian savagery.

Loathed by the left, it started with a phrase that became a slogan for a generation: "I am the illegitimate child of a diabolical couple called fascism and Stalinism." But it found a receptive audience among intellectuals still reeling from Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. As the French left's monopoly of political debate crumbled with every new revelation of communist atrocities, Lévy's youth, wit and good looks offered an attractive alternative to a Marxism that suddenly appeared *demodé*. He cultivated an image of a libertine, cruising around Paris in flashy cars and styling himself as a connoisseur of women.

In the intervening years, BHL has enjoyed a gilded existence - one that is really only possible in France - as one

of those brilliantly plumed peacocks known as *intellectuels*. In a country whose elite is formed through education rather than birth or wealth, *intellectuels*, especially the 40 "immortals" who can sign their guest op-eds with the words "of the Academie Française", are top of the pile. It explains why philosophy, training in which is the hallmark of the civilised man, is still the first exam sat every summer by candidates for the baccalaureat; why book programmes command near-prime time slots on French television; and why the French state's expenditure on education as a proportion of gross domestic product remains, at 7 per cent, considerably higher than the OECD average.

But *intellectuels* are also emissaries of French culture, moral guides and unofficial diplomats. Like his friend Bernard Kouchner, founder of *Médecins sans Frontières*, Lévy is one of a number of non-government agents who help France battle for hearts and minds across the world and, occasionally, manoeuvre the more conventionally armed American "*hyperpuissance*". He has spent the past 20 years fighting fascism, Marxism, anti-Semitism, totali-

---

He proposed the formation of a team of 'hussars to spread the values of 1789' through Afghan villages

---

tarianism, terrorism and fundamentalism from Bosnia to Bangladesh. While averaging a book a year, he has found the energy to put his ferocious intelligence to work in many other forms. He made acclaimed films, such as *Bosna!*, in defence of Bosnia's Muslims, and *A Day in the Death of Sarajevo*. He has also been an important institution-builder, helping to set up Radio Free Kabul and co-founding the anti-racism group SOS Racisme.

"I am someone who thinks he can influence things," he says. "France, as Karl Marx said, is the country of politics, of the revolution and of universalism. It's these factors that maximise the role of the *intellectuel* and which maybe explain why there is such a large place given to these bizarre personages, intellectuals, who proclaim '*le vrai, le juste et le bien*', and who see