

The press called him a buffoon, and the Bosnians still feel betrayed.

The humiliation was still fresh when he directed his first feature film, *Le Jour et la Nuit*, shot in Mexico, financed with a huge budget by François Pinault and André Lévy, who died in 1995, just before shooting began. It starred Alain Delon as a famous expatriate French writer who falls in love with a young actress (Artelle Dom-basle), who wants to play the woman who inspired his masterpiece (Lauren Bacall). It was constructed a little like Jean Renoir's *La Règle du Jeu*. Lévy's favorite film. When the movie came out in 1997, it was universally slaughtered. *Cahiers du Cinéma* called it the worst French film in decades.

"It was his first film," says Dombasle. "The characters were so tied to our lives. Delon was a mixture of my father and Hem-ingway and Bernard-Henri. When it got massacred, I was so used to it—all the interesting films get shot down—but for Beaten, Lévy retreated to the Colombe d'Or and wrote *Comédie*, a vulnerable, naked book, full of anger, but also raw and candid. He tells self-deprecating, myth-busting stories: during the student riots of May 1968 that defined his generation, he was not on the barricades, but watching over his girlfriend in a hospital; on meeting the great philosopher Jacques Derrida, all he could say was "I know your cousin the pharmacist in Neuilly." There's a litany of praise to those amphetamines that fuel French writers: "Corydane! Maxime! Ad-mirable captagon! Delicious and faithful friends!... They are the only way I know to rely only on one's own resources."

In the book, fragmented parts of his personality engage in a dialogue, in which B.H. and L. are not the same person. "Bernard would hate to be under the house around the head of Grasset. Lévy's classmate Alain Minc and his daughter, Justine, use the identical expression to describe *Comédie*: "Il nuse avec sa vie!"—He plays tricks with his truth.

"I have the writer's need for secrecy," says B.H.L. "I like secrets, compartmentalizing the intimate part of my life locked up."

The intimate part of his life is in Marrakech, where his office—laid out exactly like the one in Paris—overlooks one of the many courtyards in the Moroccan palace that he bought a few years ago. Maids wearing white kerchiefs set down pots of smoky

of development. After having studied current revolutionary movements in Mexico, he was invited to join a think tank by François Mitterrand, then the head of France's Socialist Party.

Mitterrand was a father figure, if a flawed one. Lévy knew that Mitterrand had been decorated during the war by Marshal Pétain with the notorious Francisque medal, but he never doubted his loyalty to democratic ideals. He had literary premonitions, however. In *L'Idéologie Française*, Lévy invented a patriotic scoundrel, and in his first novel, *Le Diable en Tête* (Devil in the Head), the hero is the son of a collaborator who becomes a terrorist. Lévy says that when Pierre Péan's book *Une Jeunesse Française* (A French Youth) came out in 1994, proving the extent of Mitterrand's involvement with the Vichy government, it gave him "the obscure satisfaction of a writer, because he really was the character I had written about in *L'Idéologie Française*. It is an extraordinary feeling when reality catches up with something you have set out in a book."

Lévy claims to have no childhood memories, says he rarely knows what the weather is unless he's on a reporting trip, and declares that he is completely myopic when it comes to music, food, and surroundings. "Some writers say their work comes from a faithfulness to their childhood, and others are born a second time. I was re-born through writing."

Like almost all intellectuals, Lévy exists through what he has read, what he believes, there are fireworks of dissimulation and a certain amount of grandstanding, which abate over the years to let something more human, vulnerable, and interesting come through. Starting with *Comédie*, the books all have a new lucidity. His excellent biography of Jean-Paul Sartre and *Réflexions sur la Guerre* are very different from the early work. It was another disaster, a double one, that changed him. Just before he presented his Sarajevo documentary, *Bosnia*, at the Cannes Film Festival in 1994, Lévy announced on TV that he would run for the European Parliament with a list of demands for Sarajevo. He pledged to drop out of the race as soon as his demands were assumed by one of the other candidates. To his amazement, the "Liste Sarajevo" became a huge popular movement, gathering all kinds of disaffected idealists, but when the candidate Michel Rocard took up the demands, Lévy dropped out of the race. He still regrets it: "A real politician would have taken the power, but I am not that kind of a guy, and I keep my word. I had made people believe in another kind of politics, and then I dumped them."

on whether the New Philosophers were left or right. Pivot began by asking, "Is this movement merely the Parisian effervescence of a few gifted minds... or an intellectual marketing coup... or an intelligent, original approach to truth?"

Lévy, his white shirt open over a creamy and very flat chest, his long fingers elegant by holding a cigarette, already had a way of saying "Un instant!" to Pivot that let everyone know who was top dog. He made his position clear: "The only revolutions that have succeeded in the 20th century were the totalitarian ones [of Stalin and of Hitler]." He told Pivot, "Left and right isn't real by the next day. Pivot's daughter reported that her friends said they had just seen Rimbaud on TV.

The enormous impact of the New Philosophers, and of *La Barbare à Visage Humain*, merely amused Lévy. Two years earlier, he had founded a daily newspaper called *L'Imprévu* to revolutionize the press. Bankrolled by his generous and loving father, it looked like a student newspaper and lasted for 11 issues. "What my poor father couldn't imagine was that it was going to be so bad," says Lévy. His father paid his creditors but cut him off, so Lévy sold his small studio apartment for just enough cash to take his girlfriend and some friends skiing at the best hotel in Val d'Isère. When he tried to get his old job back at Grasset, François Verny, the editor who had hired him, told him, "Listen, *mon chéri*, you're a has-been. Your failure is so terrible, you were so arrogant—it's a great pity, but you'll have to wait years to surface again." His father called Verny and said, "You don't tell a 26-year-old he's a has-been," and Grasset rehired him. Lévy recalls, "Two years later *La Barbare* comes out and the has-been invents the New Philosophers and creates this atomic cloud of ideas and debate and media and the whole big mess!"

Lévy's father, André, was born to a poor family in Algeria. He married the granddaughter of a rabbi and left Algeria in 1938 to fight in the Spanish Civil War. He later joined the Free French Forces and fought the Germans in Italy. He and his wife, Dina, had settled in France by the time Bernard-Henri was born in the small Algerian town of Beni Saf. In France, after the war, André started a lumber company, which grew into a huge business of wood imports called Becob. He became very rich, and left his children—Bernard-Henri, Philippe, and Veronique—plenty of money.

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