

Ma vie en rose

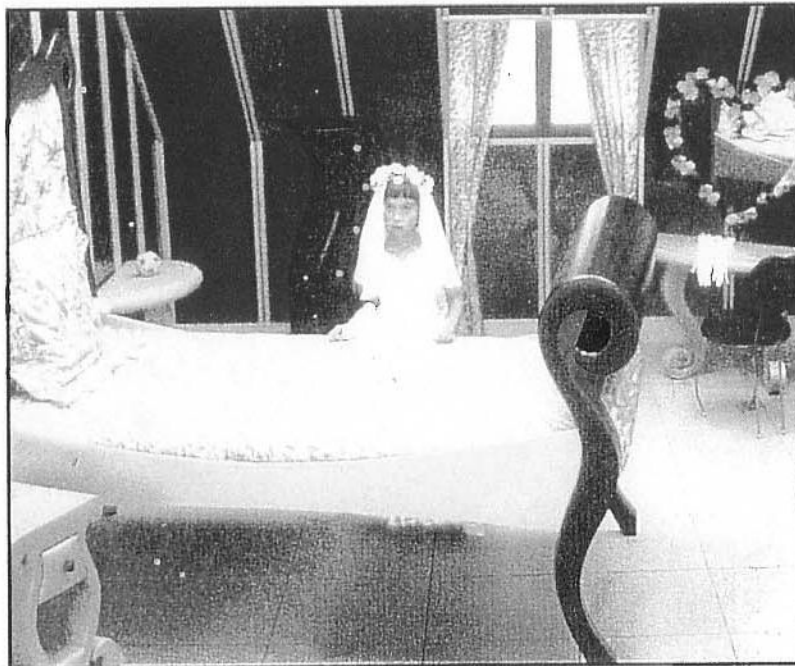
When I was making the film, I thought that it would prove controversial with audiences, but most people's misgivings are gone by the time they leave the theatre," says director Alain Berliner, commenting on his new feature, *Ma vie en rose*.

The title is significant, hinting that in a child's world nothing is forbidden. Given that this is the story of a little boy who one day decides that he wants to be a girl, it may or may not take on a political significance as well. "Only a child can make the statement 'I want to be a girl' without fear of the consequences," says Berliner. "I made the film because the subject was very original and had never before been covered. *Ma vie en rose* is a story about difference, a story about social attitudes in both the neighbourhood and family environment. I also found a great character in the little boy."

The film details prejudice, but ends on an optimistic note – eventually, the boy's decision is accepted. "The subject is taboo – and of course it is dramatically more interesting that a boy, as opposed

DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT

Alain Berliner • Belgium/France/UK



Ma vie en rose: tackling a taboo subject in a visually enchanting way

to a girl, wishes to be the opposite sex – but what the film really does is explore human relationships. The essential question is 'Will the family accept the child how he wants to be?'

Berliner's films deal with tough topical issues, but the difficulties his characters encounter are generally resolved in a poetic way. He cites Tim Burton and Ken Loach as equal influences and considers *Ma vie en rose* a hybrid of Loach's social realism and Burton's sense of visual enchantment. "The film is midway between dream and reality. The older we get in life, the more barriers spring up, narrowing the range of possibilities. I see life as a kind of funnel. That is why I make movies: to be able to go on inventing everything."

Nicholas Cunningham

Prod co: Haut et Court Prod: Carole Scotta Dir: Alain Berliner Scr: Chris Vander Stappenm Alain Berliner Ph: Yves Cape Art dir: Véronique Melery Cos: Karen Muller Serreau Ed: Sandrine Deegen Cast: Georges du Fresne, Michèle Laroque, Jean-Philippe Ecoffey Running time: 88 mins Int sales: TF1



Jean-Claude Lother/Sony Pictures Classics

, "directed by Alain Berliner.

"He was very good, he knew how to act, so we did a test. There were some girls' clothes and we told him to dress as he liked. We saw a mixture of pleasure and fear in his eyes. His parents had probably reprimanded him for dressing in girls' clothing. When he came to speak some lines, he blanked out. I understood that we could not mix fiction and reality."

In contrast, when the director finally met Georges du Fresne, whose mother is an actress and whose father owns a theater near Strasbourg, he immediately chose him. The slightly built boy could pass for a 7-year-old and he had an angelic look, but he had also acted before, and unlike other children in smaller roles in the movie, Mr. Berliner said, he demonstrated that he had great powers of concentration. When the film was first shown at the Cannes International Film Festival in May and later when it was released around Europe, Mr. du Fresne's performance won strong praise.

In Britain, critics called him "quite wonderful" and hailed "an extraordinarily poised young actor." In France, Liberation's Gerard Lefort described him as "a

Le Journal du Dimanche, heralding Mr. du Fresne as "a stunning discovery," Alexis Champion speculated whether Ludovic would end up as a "good-natured heterosexual" or perhaps as a "celebrated drag queen." The movie raises the question but has no intention of answering it.

"I wanted to make a film that was open, not one directed at a specific public of, say, homosexuals or transvestites," Mr. Berliner explained. "After all, Ludovic may just be going through a phase. And, remember, he is too young to be sexually aware. That's why we don't suggest what happens when he grows up. That's for the public to decide. But I must say, homosexuals have come up to me after some screenings and said, 'It's my story.'"

Ms. vander Stappen, while herself gay, shared the director's desire to make a film "for everyone," one that dealt with tolerance in the broadest sense, one in which Ludovic represented anyone who was different, be it physically, racially, religiously or sexually. Mr. Berliner said he had never forgotten the pressures of conformity in a tiny Belgian village where he spent many summers, "where the look of others is im-

The character at the center of 'Ma Vie en Rose' is a boy who longs to be a girl, but the film is about much more than sexual identity.

portant, where people live their lives very much as a function of what other people think."

In his second movie, "The Wall," which is now in post-production, he again looks at intolerance, carrying the perennial hostility between Belgium's French and Dutch-speaking populations to one possible conclusion. Unwilling to enter the third millennium together, they spend the last hours of 1999 building a wall to divide the nation in two. The low-budget movie, one of 10 films on the year 2000 being made for the French-German cultural television channel Arte. by directors from 10 different countries (the American director is Hal Hartley), will be broadcast late next year.

What comes after "The Wall" is still up in the air. As a screenwriter, Mr. Berliner has several projects up his sleeve, and the success of "Ma Vie en Rose" has brought him numerous offers to direct. At least now he believes he can be a movie director, and he has a better idea of what he wants.

"I like films where the audience can identify with what they see on the screen," he said, "where there are emotions and you live simple and basic things. You can have all the technique in the world, but if you don't have a good story, the film is simply not interesting." □

N.Y Times

Dec. 21 '97

TEN YEARS AGO, WHEN ALAIN Berliner made a short movie before he graduated from Belgium's pre-eminent film school, he was dismayed with the result. He felt that nothing he had told his actors was reflected on the screen. And he blamed himself. He decided he was a bad communicator; he had spent his early 20's studying directing, but he had not learned how to handle actors. Directing, he concluded, was not for him.

Recently, after working successfully as a screenwriter, he tested his premise, and he now has good reason to feel happier. His first feature film, "Ma Vie en Rose" ("My Life in Pink"), a funny, touching and sometimes disturbing story about a little boy who is confident that he will grow up to be a girl, has been heralded as one of Europe's most original films of 1997. It has won prizes at several festivals, and it is the Belgian entry in the competition for the Academy Award for best foreign-language movie.

Still, when it comes to discussing "Ma Vie en Rose," which opens in the United States on Friday, Mr. Berliner, 34, remains somewhat hesitant. Not that he minds talking about how the film came about. It is simply that he is reluctant to offer his interpretation of the film, specifically whether it is about tolerance or sexual identity or homosexuality or incipient transsexualism or something quite different.

"More than many films, I feel it belongs to those who see it," he said the other day here in an interview at his home, where he lives with his wife, Sonia, and their two small children. "People will identify with the film depending on their own experience. I'm not going to impose my vision and risk distorting theirs."

The film opens in a leafy middle-class suburb where the newly arrived Fabre family is introducing itself to its neighbors with a barbecue. When the time comes to present the boy, 7-year-old Ludovic, he makes a grand entrance dressed as a girl, with lipstick and high heels for good measure. The adults laugh about the games children play, and the party goes on. Then, slowly, it becomes apparent that Ludovic is not joking. "I'm a boy now, but one day I'll be a girl," he explains to his wide-eyed parents, Hanna and Pierre.

Their reaction seems natural enough. Hanna (Michèle Baroque) takes Ludovic to a child psychologist. Pierre (Jean-Philip Ecoffey) hauls him off to play soccer, to turn him into a man. Ludovic, played by Georges du Fresne, who was 11 at the time the film was made, goes through the motions but is unswayed. When he picks Jérôme, the son of his father's boss, as his future husband, things grow complicated. Jérôme's mother catches them enacting a wedding and promptly passes out. Jérôme's pompous father throws a fit.

As the story unfolds, Ludovic continues to live in his own world, peopled by his understanding grandmother and two Barbie-like figures, Pam and Ken, who are characters in his favorite television show and come alive as his guardian angels in his fantasy world. But the repercussions of his fantasy escalate: the parents of the other children at his school petition successfully for his expulsion, his father loses his job after a



ROLE REVERSING Georges du Fresne as 7-year-old Ludovic Fabre in "Ma Vie en Rose"

fight with Jerome's father, and eventually the entire family is more or less hounded out of the neighborhood.

When Mr. Berliner was shown the first draft of the screenplay by the Belgian writer Chris vander Stappen in 1995, he had already been thinking about trying his hand at directing. After film school, he had built a career writing scripts for television and cinema. He had begun working on a screenplay for what might become his first feature film, but he was immediately taken by "Ma Vie en Rose." It was a charming idea. It also had the ring of truth: it was, in a sense, Ms. vander Stappen's own story.

"When I was a little girl, I would pray to God and the fairies to make me a little boy, to correct the little mistake that had been made," she explained in a telephone interview. "I still do at the age 38, although I now live with a woman and have come to terms with that. Of course, my experience was different from the film; my family was different. Also being a little girl was easier. A boy who thinks he's a girl touches deep questions and fears about virility."

The two writers worked their way

through 13 more drafts before they had a final screenplay. Meanwhile, a French producer, Carole Scotta, adopted the project and, in the way things are often done in Europe these days, put together a \$3.5 million budget with contributions from 10 different sources. The film was shot over nine weeks in the summer of 1996 in an authentic Levittown at Mennecy, 30 miles south of Paris, and at studios in Brussels.

CASTING THE FILM PROVED fairly easy except for the crucial role of Ludovic. "I wanted a little boy who had a relatively mysterious and angelic appearance," recalled Mr. Berliner, a stocky, balding man. "I didn't want someone who looked too boyish or too girlish, but more like a little angel. I also wanted someone who looked younger than he really was and someone from an artistic background."

But after dozens of auditions, the director still did not have his principal actor five weeks before filming was to start.

"We came across one little boy who liked to dress up as a girl," Mr. Berliner recalled.

IMAGINE THE CONFUSION facing a 7-year-old boy who is absolutely certain he was meant to be a girl. In first-time Belgian director Alain Berliner's simultaneously fanciful and poignant "Ma Vie en Rose (My Life in Pink)," the confusion facing young Ludovic is not his — as we said, he knows who he is — but that of his family, schoolmates, and neighbors.

A hit on the festival circuit since May's Cannes Film Festival, "Ma Vie en Rose" is a fable about gender identification that doesn't preach tolerance as much as inspire it. And it does so without offering audiences a clear, tidy resolution to the question on the mind of every other character in the film: What will Ludovic be when he grows up?

Is he a genetically programed homosexual? Will his showmanship and yearning to dress as a girl lead him to the stage and future productions of "La Cage aux Folles"? Will he, worst case scenario, save up his money and have his sexual paraphernalia surgically corrected? Or is he, as the people surrounding him devoutly hope, just going through a phase?

In other words: Has nurture lost out to nature, or simply reached a non-lethal crossroad?

Since "Ma Vie en Rose" was written by a lesbian who claims to have gone through a similar early crisis, it's likely that Ludovic was leaning on the page toward a life in pink. But Berliner is as interested in the behavior of those around him, particularly of those in Ludovic's family, who may be said to be temporarily living their lives in red.

The Fabre family has just moved into a manicured, close-knit Brussels suburb, across the street from the man Pierre Fabre (Jean-Philippe Ecoffey) works for, and signs of trouble first appear at a backyard barbecue they're hosting to introduce themselves to the neighbors. This is Pierre's wife, Hanna (Michele Laroque), "the pretty one," their oldest son Tom, "the brainy one," youngest son Jean, "the naughty one," and as another son appears in a princess

marriage ceremony. Soon, Ludovic's behavior is a community scandal, threatening Pierre's job and Ludovic's schooling, and testing family bonds.

Attempts to dissuade Ludovic of his notions — dad makes him play soccer, mom enlists a child psychologist, his hair is shortened — do nothing to change his outlook, or to ease adult fears, and the family is suddenly faced



Photo by Jean-Claude Lother

Georges du Fresne plays a boy convinced he was meant to be a girl.

with ostracism.

All this over the apparent inclinations of a 7-year-old? The reaction of the adults is played straight, but is intentionally overstated by Berliner to show the effects of pressure placed on a child.

In fact, the movie spends a lot of time in either exaggerated reality or outright fantasy. Charming scenes from Ludovic's recurring dream, about the star of a TV show who doubles as his guardian angel, are intercut with actual events and sometimes merged with them. If the special effects, angel dust, sets and so on, seem a little unsophisticated, remember, it's all produced in a child's mind.

Besides Du Fresne, the film features superb performances from Ecoffey and Laroque as the parents and veteran French actress Helene Vincent as Ludovic's empathetic grandmother.

Sony Pictures Classics did well to save the release of "Ma Vie en Rose" for the holidays. Belgium's official entry in the Academy Award competition for best foreign-language film is a warm and sentimentally restrained portrait of a family wrestling with demons of society's making. If you believe that family values are rooted in love and not conformity, "Ma Vie en Rose" can be this season's "It a Wonderful Life." ■

He Enjoys Being A Girl — Uh-Oh

REVIEW

**** MA VIE EN ROSE (MY LIFE IN PINK).

(R) A family and a community confront expectations and prejudices in this funny, warm, moving Belgian movie about a 7-year-old boy who insists that he's a girl inside. With Georges du Fresne, Jean-Philippe Ecoffey, Michele Laroque. Directed by Alain Berliner. 1:33 (subtitled profanity). At Lincoln Plaza Cinema, 63rd Street and Broadway, and Quad Cinema, 12th Street off Fifth Avenue, Manhattan.

By Jack Mathews

STAFF WRITER

IMAGINE THE CONFUSION facing a 7-year-old boy who is absolutely certain he was meant to be a girl. In first-time Belgian director Alain Berliner's simultaneously fanciful and poignant "Ma Vie en Rose (My Life in Pink)," the confusion facing young Ludovic is not his — as we said, he knows who he is — but that of his family, schoolmates, and neighbors.

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costume, a pageboy haircut, high heels, and make-up, "Ludovic, the jokey one."

It's a smashing appearance. Ludovic, played to wide-eyed perfection by 11-year-old actor Georges du Fresne, has an androgynous beauty. And unless someone told you whether the actor is a boy or girl — here goes: Georges is a boy — you wouldn't know.

Ludovic's cross-dressing is no joke to the Fabres, and becomes less so when Ludovic gets his heart set on mating later in life with Pierre's boss' son, whom he is caught kissing in a mock marriage ceremony. Soon, Ludovic's behavior is a community scandal, threatening Pierre's job and Ludovic's schooling, and testing family bonds.

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Calmly Out of the Closet and Into the Clothes

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Childhood transvestism could hardly look more dignified than in the regally poised figure of Georges DuFresne, the extraordinary young actor who plays Ludovic Fabre in "Ma Vie en Rose" ("My Life in Pink"). Although Ludovic is only 7, when dressed as a girl, this dark-eyed misfit who insists he belongs to the opposite sex contemplates the world with the serene hauteur of a natural-born diva. On the rare occasions his solemn face lights up, his lower lip crinkles just like Diana Ross's when she is flashing one of her blinking-back-tears, beauty-pageant smiles.

"Ma Vie en Rose" is the story, told with irresistible good humor and minimal psychologizing, of the far-reaching consequences of Ludovic's sexual obstinacy. By the end of the film, Ludovic's fondness for dresses and lipstick and his stubbornly held dream of one day marrying the little boy next door has nearly torn apart his parents' marriage, cost his father his job and forced his family to move out of a buttoned-down French suburb where they have become pariahs.

But a story that could easily have been milked for pathos and weighty social commentary has been directed by Alain Berliner (who wrote the screenplay with Chris Vander Stappen) as a jolly modern fairy tale that is as benign as the imaginary figure who floats through Ludovic's fantasies, offering comfort and escape. That specter, a storybook princess named Pam who glides over the rooftops of the Fabres' middle-class community sprinkling glitter and lavender flower petals, is the benevolent guiding spirit behind this touching fable.

As the movie begins, Ludovic's fondness for girl's clothing is viewed



Jean-Claude Lother/Sony Pictures Classics

In "Ma Vie en Rose" ("My Life in Pink"), Georges DuFresne, left, stars as the Fabre family's young son. Jean-Philippe Ecoffey and Michèle Laroque are his parents and Cristina Barget plays his older sister.

by his close-knit family as a charming eccentricity that he will soon outgrow. The first alarm signals go off when Ludovic's mother catches him staging a wedding ceremony with Jérôme (Julien Rivière), the boy next door, and promptly faints. Making matters worse is the fact that Ludovic's father, Pierre (Jean-Philippe Ecoffey), works for Jérôme's straitlaced father, Albert (Daniel Hanssens), whom the movie portrays as a crude, insensitive bigot.

All things considered, Ludovic's parents confront the problem of their son's sexual identity with a minimum of hysterics, which is not to say that Pierre and his wife, Hanna (Michèle Laroque), don't each go ballistic at least once. But even at moments of maximum stress, they never stop loving their self-proclaimed "boygirl," who turns an impromptu

MA VIE EN ROSE My Life in Pink

Directed by Alain Berliner; written (in French, with English subtitles) by Chris Vander Stappen and Mr. Berliner; director of photography, Yves Cape; edited by Sandrine Deegen; music by Dominique Dalcan; production designer, Véronique Melery; produced by Carole Scotta; released by Sony Pictures Classics. Shown today at 6 P.M. and on Sunday at 1:30 P.M. at Alice Tully Hall, as part of the 35th New York Film Festival. Running time: 88 minutes. This film is not rated. Shown with a six-minute short, Barbara Sanon's "Breeze" (1997).

WITH: Georges DuFresne (Ludovic), Jean-Philippe Ecoffey (Pierre), Daniel Hanssens (Albert), Michèle Laroque (Hanna), Cristina Barget (Zoé) and Julien Rivière (Jérôme).

biology lesson from his older sister into an endearing ingenuous explanation for his gender confusion. When God was distributing chromosomes,

he explains gravely to his parents, the chromosome that would have made him female accidentally fell into the garbage. No sooner has Ludovic learned about menstruation than he becomes convinced that a stomachache is his first period.

For all its charm and daring, "Ma Vie en Rose," which the New York Film Festival is showing this evening at 6 and on Sunday at 1:30 P.M., doesn't come fully to grips with its subject. Except for a scattered tear or two, Ludovic maintains a remarkable composure in the face of some vicious slings and arrows. In their healthy familial togetherness, the Fabres are finally as picture perfect as "Father Knows Best." Think of "Ma Vie en Rose" as a daydream, a best of all possible scenarios unreeling in the mind of its haunting central character.