

The role that his heart is in

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By Karin Badt, Globe Correspondent | July 17, 2005

PARIS -- The serendipitous spark between rising star Romain Duris and nervy director Jacques Audiard is the power behind "The Beat That My Heart Skipped," which opens Friday.

The film, which tells the story of an amoral real-estate thug trying to escape from the brutal world in which he's trapped, is not exactly one in which you'd would expect to find Duris, best known for the spontaneous charm he brought to films such as Cedric Klapisch's "L'Auberge Espagnole" (2002) and Tony Gatlif's "Gadjo Dilo" (1997). With his easy smile, crop of thick hair, and jutting jaw, Duris seems more of a natural for stories centering on students having sexy adventures abroad.

Yet in "The Beat That My Heart Skipped," Duris portrays a man filled with rage. Rather than beaming forward in a friendly flirt, his dark eyes stare at the violent, meaningless world around him.

"I'm 31 now," explained Duris, speaking by phone from the French countryside. "The difference between my early roles and this one is that I too am at a different stage of life. At 30, one begins to ask questions about the meaning of one's existence. I started to ask myself, 'Why am I here? Why am I on earth?' I felt ready for serious roles. My own character, Tom, has a piece missing, a lack of affection. In fact, he's so vulnerable, I worry that he will be killed. Even now when I see the film, I feel afraid for him. I want to protect him.

"Xavier [the boy hero of 'L'Auberge Espagnole'] might have also been fragile," continued Duris. "But he wasn't tortured, just lost."

Duris revisited Xavier in Klapisch's sequel to "L'Auberge," "The Russian Dolls," which was released last month in Europe. It's made box-office waves there, easily topping "Batman Begins" when the two films opened on the same day in France. The "lost boy" role, however, is beginning to look strained on him.

"I'd done so many films that I developed a recipe for my roles," Duris said. " 'Beat' challenged me to explore deeper sides to myself. Audiard is all about finding the truth.

"It's exciting to work with him," Duris continued, speaking of the director with boyish energy. "There are no rehearsals. The process has an urgency, an instability. Anything can happen."

In the movie "Beat," Tom is morally confused, suspended between the need to follow his father's chaotic money-grubbing real-estate profession -- kicking squatters out of their homes -- and his own near-impossible dream of becoming a concert pianist, the legacy of his mother.

Duris himself had a more stable family heritage than the troubled Tom. The youngest son of an architect father and a dancer mother, he grew up in Paris with the "spirit of art" around him -- "thankfully," he repeated three times. His parents' support gave him the confidence to switch to an acting career at age 19, when he was approached by a scouting agent on the sidewalk as he left design school, where he was studying painting at the time.

He initially turned down the agent's proposal, but his friends were able to persuade him. And besides, Klapisch was the director on that first project ("Le Peril Jeune," never shown in the United States), and he had such human qualities that Duris was swept away.

"No, I hadn't thought about being an actor before," Duris said in his earnest, enthusiastic voice. "I was a natural actor, though. I was always clowning about with my friends, quick to joke."

The director of Duris's latest film had plenty to say about the actor's qualities when we met on a muggy day in Paris.

"He's flexible and open, but solid as a rock," said Audiard. "He has presence and can pull out many sides to himself."

Audiard himself is the opposite of Duris: jumpy and prone to eclectic statements, he moves continuously, grabbing at a sugar cookie, sipping his coffee, shrugging his shoulders, bending to turn off his cellphone, gesticulating, provoking -- in sum, as charged and creative a presence as his film is.

Like Duris, Audiard had an artistic upbringing -- his father was a notable screenwriter -- but unlike the actor, Audiard positioned himself more as a rebel. A philosophy student in the '70s, he meandered his way to being a film director by first editing, then working lights, and finally getting into the driver's seat himself in the 1980s. Indeed, all of his films have featured heroes making their way in a universe without clear codes, racing along frenetically in cities that are not even identifiable, and more than a bit confused by the ethical road signs.

A film buff who can whip out opinions on scores of films -- Scorsese, Campion, Bresson, Antonioni -- on a microsecond's notice, Audiard explained that the major difference between the film on which "Beat" is based, James Toback's 1972 "Fingers," and his own work is its ethical dimension. He dropped the caricatured gangster element and centered the story on the real-estate market, a milieu he already explored in "Read My Lips."

"Real estate for me is evil," the director says. "It's based on a fraudulent principle: property. Ownership of the earth."

So is art -- Tom's piano playing, for example -- the idealistic opposite to business?

"That's not my view at all," the director said. "This is not a film opposing business to art." He explained that to him, the point of the film is that Duris's character learns to work hard at something of his own, which happens to be piano playing: "He develops his own skill."

This turned out to be literally true for Duris himself. He had to learn to play the piano for the role, taking daily lessons with his older sister Caroline, 36, a concert pianist.

Duris concurred with the director's vision of the film, which ends with Tom's finally succeeding in becoming his own man. "He has become serene," Duris said. "He is where he is supposed to be. It's destiny coming to a head."

And perhaps the same is true of Audiard and Duris. As I left the office, the two were arranging to meet for a celebratory summer's night out, like two good friends. Or a merger of two terrific talents.

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