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## A Loving Father

### ***Aime Ton Pere***

(France-Canada-U.K.-Switzerland ) A UGC Distribution release (in France) of a GMT Prods., DD Prods., France 3 Cinema, Rhone-Alpes Cinema (France)/Transfilm (Canada)/Spice Factory, Great British Films, Enterprise Films (U.K.)/Vega Film (Switzerland) production, in association with Canal Plus, France Television Distribution, Television Suisse Romande. (International sales: President Films, Paris.) Produced by Jean-Pierre Guerin, Gerard Depardieu. Executive producer, Patrick Bordier. Co-executive producers, Michael Lionello Cowan, David Rogers, Jason Piette. Co-producers, Claude Leger, Jonathan Vanger, Ruth Waldburger. Directed by Jacob Berger. Screenplay, Berger, Ed Radtke, Pascal Barollier.

Leo Shepherd - Gerard Depardieu  
 Paul - Guillaume Depardieu  
 Virginia - Sylvie Testud  
 Arthur - Julien Boisselier  
 Marthe - Noemie Kocher  
 Salma - Hiam Abbass  
 Andre - Frederic Polier  
 Paul, age 8 - Pierre-Alexandre Crevaux  
 Virginia, age 11 - Pippa Schallier  
 Pippi - Johanna Mohs  
 Antoine Levy - Jacques Frantz  
 Sven Boland - Sten Eirik

By [DEREK ELLEY](#)

**A famous writer and his son work out their troubled relationship during a trans-Euro odyssey in "A Loving Father," a substantial sophomore pic by Swiss helmer Jacob Berger in which Depardieu *pere et fils* go the full 15 rounds. Marbled with unreal touches, and never degenerating into either a screamfest or sentimental drama, this has a shot at modest arthouse play beyond mainland Europe. Film opens in Gaul in November.**

Woken at dawn on their remote farm in the Jura mountains, writer Leo Shepherd (Gerard Depardieu) is informed by the Nobel Prize committee head (Sten Eirik) that he's won the prestigious kudos. His daughter, tightly-strung Virginia (Sylvie Testud), is delighted, as she's always thought her dad should get back to writing rather than clean out cowsheds; Leo's estranged son, Paul (Guillaume Depardieu), learns of the news and calls the farm, but his father refuses to talk to him.

So Paul drives to catch up with Leo, who's already set out on his motorcycle to journey from Switzerland to Sweden to accept the prize. By a curious fate, the two meet on a mountain road at the scene of a shocking accident that Leo has escaped from with his life. Another motorcyclist, however, has been killed and his face crushed. Leo's identity card, found nearby by the police, later leads to the dead motorcyclist being misidentified as Leo.

Meanwhile, the shell-shocked Leo is bundled into a car by Paul, who insists on taking him to hospital. Leo, however, demurs, so father and son end up driving northward through Germany en route to Stockholm, feuding as they go.

It's here, about 35 minutes in, that the movie starts to tighten its focus, as Paul finds himself (literally) in the driver's seat for once. Trussing up the ornery old Leo with tape in the back seat, Paul lets out all his buried anger: From deliberately blurred video flashbacks, the viewer learns that Paul, a troublesome child at best, was bullied and even half-drowned by his dad.

In a wonderfully sustained section of grumpy but restrained acting, Depardieu Sr. gives the stage to his son, who's more than up to the challenge. Their scenes together, staged almost like a black comedy, are free of both unnecessary verbal violence and ingratiating sentiment, preparing the way for their uneasy truce when the son cuts his father's bonds and they travel on as equals.

As Paul opens up emotionally, and Leo reciprocates, we realize they're both damaged goods: The 28-year-old had a spell with drugs, and Leo, once an inveterate womanizer, confesses he's now dried up as a writer. More than once, the pic plays like a twisted version of Ingmar Bergman's '50s classic, "Wild Strawberries," also centered on a distinguished personality recalling his youth and shortcomings as he journeys to accept an award.

Jean-Claude Petit's orchestral score turns what could have been a by-the-numbers father-son drama into a kind of emotional thriller, and the sense of dislocation from reality is heightened by Berger's direction, which is speckled with offbeat touches and humor. (Helmer's only previous feature was the 1990 "Angels," followed by telemovie work in the interim.) Ending is refreshingly free of saccharine melodrama, with a dreamlike, ironic coda.

Supporting cast is solid, with Testud essaying another of her brittle roles as the daughter who can't bear to see her father squander his talent. But the main show is between the two Depardieus, in a piece of casting that resonates beyond their roles on screen. In this one pic, Gerard reclaims his position as one of Europe's finest actors, after a recent series of unwise choices. Here he settles comfortably into a late-middle-aged persona that doesn't rely on eccentricities or pure physicality, while Guillaume definitely comes of screen age.

Technical credits are fine, with Pascal Marti's widescreen lensing clean and unshowy. (For co-production reasons, Canadian locations doubled for Germany.) Per producers, English title is meant to be ironic,

reflecting the original French, which literally means "Love Thy Father." Camera (Fujicolor prints, Panavision widescreen), Pascal Marti; editor, Cathy Chamorey; music, Jean-Claude Petit; production designer, Pierre Allard; art directors, Ivan Niclass, Kay Brown; costumes, Kay Devanthey; sound (Dolby Digital), Jean-Paul Mugel, Howard Bargroff; digital effects, Duran; assistant director, Fabrice Grange; casting, Nicolas Ronchi. Reviewed at Locarno Film Festival (competing), Aug. 8, 2002. Running time: 103 MIN.

(French, Swedish & English dialogue)

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