

**Of gowns and mustachios:
cherchez la folle in Mike Nichols' remake of *La cage aux folles***

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Since they are original pieces creating images that weren't there before, remakes, in a sense, always question the interpretation of an initial subject. However, this questioning does not necessarily mean that they offer a novel interpretation of it. Nothing ontologically prevents a remake from being a conservative or even a reactionary piece of work, that is to say, one that upholds values anterior to the piece it derives from. However, because of the very fact that a remake comes second to an initial piece, and because we are used to thinking about chronology in terms of progression, reactionary elements may not be so easy to spot in them. Yet, chronology is not always synonymous with progress, and I believe a brief analysis of the relationship between remake, genre and gender in Mike Nichols' *The Birdcage*, the American remake of Edouard Molinaro's *La Cage aux folles*, may help prove this point.

Precisely because this film revolves around questions of sexuality and gender, contending that *The Birdcage* may not be as progressive as it appears can seem surprising. Indeed, considerable social progress had taken place between 1973-1978 when French playwright and director Jean Poiret's initial play, *La Cage aux folles*, and Édouard Molinaro's first film – also *La Cage aux folles* – were produced, and 1996 when Mike Nichols' film was released. The seventies were not particularly gay-friendly times either in America, where “sodomy laws” were still in force, or in France, where

homosexuals were still living under Marshall Pétain's legislation¹, and homosexuality was at best a "mental disorder"² and at worst an official social blight liable to be fought without any form of democratic surveillance³. Understandably, coming outs were scarce and figureheads limited to artists or intellectuals like Jean-Paul Aron, Jean-Louis Bory, Tennessee Williams or Andy Warhol. True enough, things were beginning to change: feminists and lesbians were starting to acknowledge each other, gay liberation groups were budding, but life was still far from sweet for homosexuals and the friendliest way they were pictured was more often than not as comic characters⁴ – which did not necessarily please those who pleaded for a more political representation (at the end of a performance, Jean Poiret and Michel Serrault⁵ were even doused with garbage by activists protesting that not all gays were *folles*). So, even if the play met with huge and enduring success with homo- and heterosexual audiences alike, some dissenting voices were raised among the politicised gay community regarding the Georges-Albin star couple, in the repressive social and cultural context of the times⁶. 24 years later, however, when American Mike Nichols' remake of *La Cage aux folles* came out, things had changed dramatically. In France as in the US, discriminating legislation had more or less been done away with, homosexuality had been declassified as a mental disorder, the age of consent had been leveled with that of heterosexual people, the long process to domestic partnership had begun⁷, social discrimination was overtly being fought by well-organized groups as well as the law, gay pride parades took place every year, the Hays code had disappeared, President Mitterrand had been elected on a gay-friendly ticket⁸, Elton John and Martina Navratilova had flamboyantly come out... the world had become a fairer, friendlier, place for homosexuals – and surely, the success of Mike Nichols' *Birdcage* was a sign of that⁹?

Or was it not? The process of reiteration – or "reprise", to use a musical term –, that is to say, the taking up of a work of art (or of a significant element in a work of art, like

¹ In 1942, a bill was passed setting sexual majority at 15 years of age for heterosexuals and at 21 for homosexuals. This *de facto* criminalized homosexuality, which was punishable with up to 3 years' imprisonment and a maximum fine of 15,000 FF.

² As it was officially qualified by the World Health Organization.

³ The *Loi du 18 juillet 1960* counted homosexuality among "fléaux sociaux" (social blights) which the government was given power to fight through statutory orders, that is to say, without parliamentary debate.

⁴ See *Le cinéma français et l'homosexualité*, chapter 2.

⁵ Playwright, director and main actors of the play.

⁶ See *L'homosexualité dans le cinéma français*, chapter 6.

⁷ With the *Baker vs Nelson* case in Minnesota in 1972.

⁸ See chapter 7 « Sept ans de bonheur » of Frédéric Martel's book, *Le Rose et le noir*.

⁹ See Moine, Raphaëlle *Remakes : les films français à Hollywood*, p.59.

a character), at different times or in different contexts is a good tool to measure the reality of progress in a given field. Even if its artistic depth is somewhat questionable, *La Cage aux folles* is an appropriate piece for that purpose, since its opuses span over no less than 24 years, 3 media and 3 cultures. Its first instance, Jean Poiret's play, opened in 1973¹⁰, meeting with instant, long-standing and international success. Not only did it play non-stop for 7 years in Paris, but as early as 1974, it was also being produced on most European stages¹¹ and beyond: Brazil or Venezuela, to name but a few faraway places. In 1978, *La Cage* crossed generic borders for the first time and became a Franco-Italian film: Édouard Molinaro's *La Cage aux folles / Il Viziutto*, followed by two sequels in 1980 and 1985: Édouard Molinaro's *La Cage aux folles II / Il Viziutto II*, and Georges Lautner's *La Cage aux folles III / Il Viziutto III*. Generic borders (as well as the Atlantic) were crossed for the second time in 1983, when *La Cage aux folles* became Harvey Firestein's Broadway Musical *La Cage aux Folles*, which is still being played on the stages of most English-speaking countries today. Finally, Mike Nichols' *The Birdcage* was released in 1996.

From a structural point of view, *The Birdcage* feeds on the generic indeterminacy of the initial play to endow its cinematographic form with the ideology of the times. As Harvey Fierstein (librettist of the musical *La Cage aux Folles*) remarks in his introduction to the published script, the original *Cage* owes much to farce¹². It is built upon situation gags fuelling actors' virtuosity¹³, its plot relies on the confrontation of two conflicting types (cabaret drag-artists and conservatives), it is politically incorrect, makes unashamed use of bad taste, and triggers disinhibiting laughter from the audience. However, what Harvey Fierstein fails to notice is that these farcical elements are nipped in the bud as soon as they are presented. Indeed, once the initial elements of the plot have been given¹⁴, farce would demand, in order to develop, that the two conflicting parties be kept in presence for the duration of the play. Yet, Jean Poiret delays this moment which is ultimately reduced to one scene (the dinner scene) by

¹⁰ On February 5th, 1973, at the Théâtre du Palais Royal in Paris.

¹¹ Except for Spain where it was banned by Franco's censorship.

¹² HERMAN, Jerry & FIERSTEIN, Harvey, *La Cage aux Folles*, p.10.

¹³ Unsurprisingly so, since the play had been tailored by Jean Poiret to suit the comic acting duo which he formed with Michel Serrault at the time, and which had mainly performed in cabarets and on TV until then.

¹⁴ Let us quickly remind the reader what these are: Georges, owner of the drag cabaret *La Cage aux folles*, lives with Albin, its main attraction. They have brought up Laurent, George's son left by his mother, who tells them that he wants to marry Muriel, daughter of ultraconservative deputy Edouard Dieulafoi. Laurent invites the Dieulafoi to meet his family which he has falsely described to them as traditional.

multiplying secondary plots¹⁵. These serve no other narrative function than to artificially pile up obstacles one after the other in order to delay the resolution – a structure which belongs not to farce but to French vaudeville. The distinction between the two is far from insignificant. Without going over vaudeville's history in detail, let us call to mind that it is a genre which was neutered by authority. Indeed, before the French Revolution it had started as a very ontologically distanced genre, often satirical, since it interspersed its loose plot with songs made up of original (often topical) lyrics sang by the audience to famous tunes. But the National Convention followed by the French Empire's censorship tamed vaudeville, having it lose its musical numbers and increase its degree of comedy. Gradually, its comic elements boiled down to the sole mechanics of "comic fate"¹⁶, staging a situation that goes off-hand, and which characters vainly attempt to resist. By the beginning of the XXth century, vaudeville and its paradigmatic comic trait had evolved into *théâtre de boulevard*, the French genre which Jean Poiret's *Cage* belongs to, in spite of its few farcical elements. Comic or otherwise, fate is always the acknowledgement of a superior unquestionable order of things. It is what fundamentally marks vaudeville and boulevard out from farce. Farce is disrespectful, vaudeville and boulevard are conservative. My vision is that *La Cage aux folles* which America chose to import was already, because of its structure's hybridity, a play tempted by conservatism and that its American adaptation chose to play along with this rather than put to the fore the disruptive elements of farce¹⁷.

In his seminal work on popular culture, *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes defines a myth as a transcendent figure at the origin of a text, which we need to repeat again and again and which therefore gets adapted over and over through the ages. So, is it because Georges and Albin are mythical, archetypal characters that they resurrected in America 24 years after their birth in France? Probably not. Proof of that is that they flopped in *La Cage aux folles II & III / Il Viziutto II & III* and never appeared again as autonomous characters in other works. Even a film like *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*¹⁸, also dealing with cabaret, cross-dressing artists, relationships with a son, the clash with conservative segments of society, etc., does not refer (or even allude) to them. No: Georges and Albin are not dissociable from *La Cage aux folles*' plot. It is that plot,

¹⁵ The Zaza / Mercedes rivalry, Laurent's mother's meddling, Albin being taken for a visiting uncle, etc.

¹⁶ BRUNET, Brigitte, *Le Théâtre de boulevard*, Paris, Nathan, coll. Lettres sup, 2004, p. 92-95.

¹⁷ Although a discussion of the character of Jacob, the man-servant, would take us too far from this paper's subject, we can underline that he is the real farcical, insolent, disrespectful, disruptive element in the play and films. However, he holds but a very secondary role compared to Georges and Albin.

¹⁸ Stephan Elliott, 1995.

a farcical plot, i.e. the confrontation of two conflictual types, each upholding an opposed conception of gender which gives them their identity, and it is that plot whose commercial success was attempted to be renewed over 24 years, albeit transforming farce into a smoke screen behind which quite a conservative conception of gender is asserted. The commercial motivation appears in that the same person (Marcelo Danon) is the adapter, executive producer, line producer and “general organizer¹⁹” of all the films one after the other. This reads as a clear attempt to prolong an initial commercial success by trying to adapt it to a wider audience, that is to say *in fine*, to a wider market. In terms of market, the elements that are forgotten or kept, added and amplified from an initial work are always chosen to appeal to new audiences. Even if *The Birdcage* is an obvious remake of Molinaro’s first *Cage* (the plot is the same, the characters are the same, the sequence of scenes is the same, etc.), it is also, to a degree, an adaptation of the original play. Firstly, because Molinaro’s film had already added a number of elements which were not in the play and which *The Birdcage* chose to keep; secondly, because *The Birdcage* also incorporates at least one significant scene adapted from the Broadway musical that is absent from Molinaro’s film as well as from the original play. These additions to the original piece, also chosen to please a new, mainstream audience, reveal something about its expectations. It seems to me that these paradoxically seem to go against the film’s overt message of tolerance, and that they may shed a new light on the real depth of the evolution of mentalities between 1973/78 and 1996.

So, let us see what exactly is forgotten or kept, added and amplified in *The Birdcage*, and what social characteristics of gender this film really presents.

In the play, if Albin appears more feminine at first sight than his spouse George, it is because he has a drag act in their cabaret show. However, the whole play will contradict this, as, precisely, Georges is not able to hold the virile image he wants to show the Dieulafoi for very long. At the end of the play, he will stand in for Albin in the show in full drag, loving it so much that he vows never to don a pair of trousers again – which brings about Albin’s final line: “*Enfin, voyons, nous n’allons pas faire un couple de femmes, de quoi ça aurait l’air auprès des voisins !*”²⁰ The Georges/Albin couple is sexually versatile. They are feminine men, effeminate men, half way between women and men: in a word, they are “*folles*”. This composite sexual identity reflects upon their

¹⁹ “Organisation générale”, *La Cage aux folles*, 5’23; “Organisateur général”, *La Cage aux folles* 3, 2’41.

²⁰ “Good god, we’re not going to become a couple of women, what would the neighbours say!” (My translation.)

domestic roles: Georges as well as Albin talk about recipes with the butcher; and the same goes for their social roles: both are necessary to the running of the cabaret, Georges as the manager, Albin as the star. The films (the first one and even more so the American remake) transform this couple of *folles* into a socially-normed couple, that is to say, one that is composed of a man – or what is socially understood as a man – and a woman – or what is socially understood as a woman.

Firstly, Albin is feminized. He is transformed into a woman, or rather into a chauvinist conception of a woman. His dominant trait becomes infantilism: he bursts into hysterics about anything and everything, has no sense of measure, and is a general embarrassment to his companion. This transpires in the Italian title of the three first films: *Il Viziutto*, literally “the sweet little sin”, but phonetically close to “*Il Viziatto*”, meaning “the spoiled brat”, the one who throws tantrums – like a woman, like Albin. Albin becomes the only one acting in the domestic sphere. In Molinaro’s first film, the play’s scene with the butcher is transformed into him alone doing the shopping; in *The Birdcage*, not only does he do the shopping, but he also supervises the washing and the buying of the sons’ clothes²¹. What is more, he is also shown asking for protection in the form of a palimony agreement he requests from his companion²². This amplified feminization is blatant in the very last sequence of *The Birdcage*, where the shots of Albin²³ at the wedding are systematically paralleled with shots of the other feminine characters in the assistance²⁴.

Conversely, Georges is virilised. He is given a moustache, which, in the popular imagery of the times was an unquestionable sign of masculinity. An episode where he is about to yield to the sexual advances of his son’s mother (until Albin comes and spoils it all) is added. He never does anything domestic other than order the man-servant, and, in the Franco-Italian production, act as a chef in the kitchen where Albin is *non grata*. Most irrefutable of all, he never appears in drag. Here again, Georges is virilised in both films, but the American one amplifies the phenomenon, as can be seen when comparing the two “foundation clips”²⁵. Contradicting with facts rather than words his father’s assertion that he can look acceptable to the very conservative Keelys²⁶,

²¹ *The Birdcage*, 23’20.

²² *The Birdcage*, 6’50.

²³ Called “Albert” here.

²⁴ *The Birdcage*, 1h52’48 – 1h54’16.

²⁵ *La Cage aux folles*, 37’47 – 38’15; *The Birdcage*, 39’02 – 39’24.

²⁶ Called the “Dieulafois” in the play and the “Charriers” in Molinaro’s film.

Val²⁷ runs his fingers on his father's cheek and then on the wall, where they leave a foundation mark. Whereas in Molinaro's opus the camera zooms in on George's²⁸ foundation marks on the white wall, thereby asserting their visibility, in Nichols' these traces are hardly perceptible in the "sponge painted" wall kept at good distance from the camera's focus.

Parallel to the Georges-Albin couple becoming the image of a traditional heterosexual couple, the films also turn the Dieulafois into proper characters. In the play, the conservative deputy and his wife are little more than actancial forces whose function it is to fuel the roly-polly dynamics of farce when they clash against the *folles*. But in the films, their story constitutes an important sub plot which puts them on a narrative par with Georges and Albin. Consequently, they are turned into fully fledged characters, endowed with a personality and motivation for their actions. Here again, the American film goes further than the Franco-Italian one, and the Dieulafois/Keelys become all the more believable that they keep making topical references (they stop off at Jeb Bush's, know Margaret Thatcher personally, invite Bob Dole at their daughter's wedding, and so on). Not only do they acquire verisimilitude through documentary reference, but they also soften up, which makes them closer to real people and takes them away from farcical types. True enough, Kevin Keely is the Vice-President of the Coalition for Moral Order, but he is also vulnerable, chain-eats sweets, needs his wife when under pressure, and gets on with Albin/Albert, when he does not know he is a man, etc.

So whereas the play confronted *folles* and conservatives, the films put into presence a mock-heterosexual couple with a mock-villain one. Clash is no longer a narrative necessity (which it is in farce): it too becomes a mockery, a veneer, behind which common ground between mock-conflicting parties is subtly built up. Significantly, *The Birdcage* takes up and adapts a scene from the musical that invalidates the parties' antagonism. The Broadway piece has many melodramatic features, notably the use of music. Let us just remember that melodrama is an ideologically conservative genre, whose function it was/is to assert that there is a right, unchangeable order of things – a form of fate nullifying any form of conflict. Music is instrumental to the conveying of that message, since it is supposed to open up hearts and bring about universal harmony, where everybody's place is rightly set. In the musical, both families go to a

²⁷ Called "Laurent" in the play and in Molinaro's film.

²⁸ Called "Renato" here.

restaurant and Albin, asked to sing a song, complies. Gradually, all the characters stand up, all singing the chorus together, each of them vocally finding their place in the general harmony. *The Birdcage* takes up this scene²⁹ no longer set in a public place but in the two men's living room, where Georges³⁰ plays the piano with Mrs Dieulafoi/Keely, and where everybody sings, dances and has a great time. So deep is the human harmony brought about by music that when it gets disrupted by the Dieulafois/Keelys' finding out who the two men really are, Albin/Albert can restore it by genuinely declaring that he agrees with "*family values and a return to a stricter moral code*"³¹ – this very same "code", these very same "family values" upheld by the Dieulafois/Keelys that exclude homosexuals from the public field. Of course, this punchline is presented as ironic, but the traditional role given to this supposedly disruptive character throughout the film casts a serious doubt on how genuine this irony is.

So, if times had changed for the best between 1973/78 and 1996, why did a gay-friendly film need to transform a couple of *folles* into a couple of conservatives in order to sell to a wide audience? My belief is that if some undeniable advances had been made in the legal field for example, such was not the case with the fundamental structure that socially en-values gender and shapes mentalities: that of the transmission of money. Indeed, according to Frederick Engels' *The origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*³², it is the structure of a given society which assigns genders their respective roles, in view of its perpetuation. He contends that in our culture, the monogamous family composed of a man and a woman ensures that money gets kept in a private structure and transmitted to a legitimate heir who is a private person too, as opposed, for example, to it going back into the common social pot; it is that particular social function that the heterosexual monogamous family serves. What follows is that questioning the family, even through funny characters in a farce, means questioning the way our society is structured. And from what we see in *La Cage aux folles* cinematographic opuses, that does not seem to be permitted in mainstream cinema, either in France, in Italy, or in America, particularly in a "family entertainment" film.

²⁹ *The Birdcage*, 1h30'.

³⁰ Called "Armand" here.

³¹ *The Birdcage*, 1h53'.

³² Engels, Friedrich, *L'Origine de la famille, de la propriété privée et de l'état*, 1883, Paris, Éditions Sociales, 1954.

The reason I don't think this is any wild ideological interpretation from my part is that the films (but also the musical) add a financial thread that is not in the play to their story, a thread that definitely equates the Dieulafois and the *folles*. Here again, the American film goes further than the Franco-Italian one. In the play, money is only mentioned to put Georges and Albin under pressure so as to enhance the farcical mechanics. The son tells them that the Dieulafois are rich to explain that he has to compete against many suitors, therefore that it is all the more important that they conceal their gender indeterminacy to impress them favourably. In the musical, money is a more serious stake. The Dieulafois³³ heavily insist on their daughter's large dowry, emphasizing that they have to "approve of her choice of a husband"³⁴. This is taken over in *The Birdcage*³⁵, where Mrs Dieulafoi/Keely wonders about her prospective son-in-law's fortune several times ("*I wonder if he is old money*")³⁶. But it is not so much the quantity of money that matters as the structure which permits its conservation and transmission. That can be seen in the financial link between Georges and Albin, indigenous to the films – and, again, amplified in the American one. In Molinaro's first film, money is at risk. It belongs to the wrong person, Albin, bearing no legitimate tie with George's son. This, however, is treated comically. That financial weight gives Albin an enhanced *pouvoir de nuisance*: because "he owns 80% of the company's shares"³⁷, he, in effect, buys his presence at the meeting with the Dieulafois/Charriers, thereby playing havoc with it. In *The Birdcage*, this is no laughing matter. Women having financial power over men is not even conceivable. Not only does Georges/Armand own the club, but he also financed his son's mother's business. The palimony agreement he signs with his companion does not so much show how generous he is as establish a socially recognized contract which blueprints the circuitry of money. Yes, half of the son's inheritance may then be given away, *but* only to someone as close to a legitimate spouse as possible. "There, we're partners"³⁸, says Georges/Armand when the contract is signed. Life partners / business partners – the synonymy is meaningful: there is no difference between the two. The Dieulafois/Keelys have no need to fear. Even if the son is not as rich as expected, they will still marry their daughter into a home structured just like theirs: one composed of what is as close to a man and a

³³ Called "Dindon" here.

³⁴ *La Cage aux Folles*, p.94.

³⁵ Although not in the first film.

³⁶ *The Birdcage*, 26'.

³⁷ Georges: "Il a 80% des actions de la boîte", *La Cage aux folles*, 52'19.

³⁸ *The Birdcage*, 1h07'35.

woman as possible, and where the private ownership of money is legally protected in view of its transmission to a private person. The song "We are family" that closes the film is not as tongue in cheek as it pretends to be.

What I hope to have demonstrated in this paper is that remakes can be seen as amplifying chambers that bring to the fore significant elements in a given issue, and help assess its progress – or lack of. As far as the question of genre is concerned with *La Cage aux folles*, it is because the initial play always wavers between conservative boulevard and disruptive farce, never fully deciding to be one or the other, that mainstream cinema (French, Italian, American) was able to pick the gender-defining elements in it, so as to develop them, amplify them, and finally turn them into films that played along with the conservative ideological value of gender deriving from the material structure of society that had not really changed that much between 1978 and 1996. Remakes and adaptations should indeed be considered as works of art in their own right. They are autonomous pieces which deserve as much attention and respect as the works they choose as their primary material. The fact that they also constitute a sociological gaging tool only adds to their richness and interest.

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Appendix

A short parallel history of *La Cage aux folles* and of homosexual social discrimination advances

Date	1973		74	75	76	77	1978	79	1980	81	82	1983		1985		1990		92	93	1996	
Genre	Play						Film		Film			Musical		Film							Film
Country	FR						Fr/ Ital		Fr/Ital			US		Fr/Ital							US
Title	<i>La Cage aux folles</i>						<i>La Cage aux folles</i>		<i>La Cage aux folles II</i>			<i>La Cage aux Folles</i>		<i>La Cage aux folles III</i>							<i>The Birdcage</i>
Playwright / Director	Jean Poiret						Edouard Molinaro		Edouard Molinaro			Harvey Firestein & Jerry Herman		Georges Lautner							Mike Nichols
Marcelo Danon							Producer, Adapter, "general organiser"		Producer, Line producer, Adapter					Producer, "subject provider", Adapter "general organiser", Line producer							Line producer
Manager	Georges						Renato		Renato			Georges		Renato							Armand
Star	Albin						Albin		Albin			Albin		Albin							Albert
Son	Laurent						Laurent		Laurent			Jean-Michel		Laurent							Val
Deputy	Edouard Dieulafoi						Simon Charrier		Simon Charrier			Edouard Dindon		Simon Charrier							Kevin Keely
Social & political advances			U S	U S	U S	U S	US	U S		F R	F R					World + US		U S	U S		

This list is by no means complete.

1974: Abrogation sodomy law MA & OH.

1975: Abrogation sodomy law NH, NM, SD.

1976: Abrogation sodomy law CA, ME, WA, WV.

1977: Abrogation sodomy law IN, SD, VT, WY.

1978: Abrogation sodomy law, IA, NE.

1979: Abrogation sodomy law, NJ.

1981: Suppression from the list of mental diseases in France.

1982: Decriminalization in France.

1990: Suppression from World's Health Organization's list of mental diseases.
Suppression from the list of reasons to be refused immigration to the US.

1992: Domestic Partnership WA.

1993: Don't ask don't tell military policy (US army).