

## An Excerpt from *Leonard Maltin's 151 Best Movies You Haven't Seen*

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### THE DINNER GAME

1999

**Directed** by Francis Veber

**Screenplay** by Francis Veber

Based on the Stage Play *Le dîner de cons* by Francis Veber

**Actors**

Daniel Prévost

Jacques Villeret

Catherine Frot

Thierry Lhermitte

Edgar Givry

Francis Huster

Christian Pereira

Alexandra Vandernoot

Pétronille Moss

When people ask me to name the funniest movie I've ever seen, I usually rattle off the names of classic comedies of the silent and early-talkie era (from Chaplin to The Marx Brothers)...and as I do, I see their eyes glaze over. "No, no, no," they're thinking, "I don't mean something ancient."

All right, then. How about a picture from 1998? I can't remember any film that's made me laugh out loud as much as Francis Veber's *The Dinner Game*. The audience I saw it with was practically in tears—even my daughter, then just nine years old, loved it—yet it's another foreign film that received only scant release in the U.S.

The premise is simple but ingenious: a successful book editor (played by popular French leading man Thierry Lhermitte) chances to meet a man on a train trip who strikes him as a perfect candidate to bring to his weekly dining group. The object of this dinner game, played by a gathering of successful, self-confident men, is to bring along the stupidest guest they can find...and this latest patsy (Jacques Villeret), a tax accountant whose wife ran off with another man, is very stupid indeed.

In the best tradition of French farce, this idea grows and grows, like a snowball gaining momentum as it rolls downhill. Before long the well-meaning interloper plays havoc with the publisher's well-ordered life, upsetting his relationship with his ex-wife, his mistress, his son, and various others. Yet this cherub-faced fellow remains clueless about the chaos he is creating, while the victim becomes increasingly frantic.

The story plays out with effortless precision, because it was honed to perfection on stage in Paris by its creator, Francis Veber.

Veber is hardly unknown on these shores: he is the man who wrote and directed *La Cage Aux Folles* back in 1978, which was later transformed into a popular stage musical and a successful American movie called *The Birdcage*, with Robin Williams and Nathan Lane. He has continued to write and often direct extremely popular farces for stage and screen in France, and many of his movies have been acquired by Hollywood studios with English-language remakes in mind.

I was lucky enough to attend a screening of his subsequent film, *Tais-Tois* (or *Ruby et Quentin*) in Los Angeles, which is almost as funny as *The Dinner Game*, and also involves a character who is blissfully stupid, played in that case by the great Gérard Depardieu. That evening, at the annual City of Lights—City of Angels Festival, Veber discussed his philosophy of filmmaking—and comedy.

First and foremost, he believes in simplicity. He explained that he lives in fear of boring an audience, so in recent years he has streamlined his plots to revolve around one main character and jettisoned any subplots that might seem extraneous.

He also believes the old axiom that brevity is the soul of wit. *The Dinner Game* runs a mere 80 minutes, while *Tais-Tois* is 85 and *The Valet* is also just under an hour and a half. I doubt that anyone leaves the theater feeling shortchanged. (Veber said his script supervisor estimates that these films will run longer, but he tells his actors to hurry!) Universal Pictures thought enough of the film to acquire U.S. distribution rights, but gave it only a half-hearted release. Another studio reportedly acquired remake rights, but Veber confessed to his audience at the L.A. screening that they insisted on “opening it up.” In other words, they were determined to improve it by making it longer!

*The Dinner Game* (*Le Dîner de Cons* in its original language) was nominated for six César Awards, France’s equivalent of the Oscar, and won three, for Best Actor (Jacques Villeret), Best Supporting Actor (Daniel Prévost), and Best Writing (Veber).

To get the most of out this film I would urge you to watch it with friends, to create the feeling of an audience; the trigger effect of laughter will be your reward.

## **BRICK**

2006

**Directed** by Rian Johnson

**Screenplay** by Rian Johnson

### **Actors**

Noah Segan

Joseph Gordon-Levitt

Meagan Good

Lukas Haas

Emilie de Ravin

Nora Zehetner

Brian White

Noah Fleiss

Richard Roundtree

Matt O'Leary

*Brick* was made in about a month's time for less than half a million dollars, but if it weren't any good those statistics would be meaningless. The fact that it *is* so good is a tribute to an inspired idea, a clever screenplay, a talented acting ensemble, and a filmmaker who had the passion and determination to get this movie made. It also proves that money is irrelevant to a film's success: it all starts with a good idea.

In this instance the idea was to transpose the hard-boiled world of film noir to a Southern California high school. The talented (and underappreciated) Joseph Gordon-Levitt stars as Brendan, a student who's pretty much of a loner, until he discovers the dead body of his former girlfriend at the edge of a sewage tunnel. He then takes it upon himself to discover who is responsible for the

murder, which means infiltrating various social strata in and around his school—and ultimately getting in to see the local “Mr. Big” drug dealer.

*Brick* is not without a sense of humor; there’s a wonderful irony in setting a dark story like this in sunny California. But the reason the movie works is that it isn’t a spoof or a parody: what’s at stake here is deadly serious. The characters speak in a stylized argot that writer-director Rian Johnson patterned after the dialogue of Dashiell Hammett; it takes a little getting used to, but it’s worth the effort. Another ingredient that recalls bona fide film noirs of the 40s—but is conspicuously missing from contemporary movies about teens—is a series of fistfights. Again, this isn’t play-acting: you can feel that those punches really hurt.

The tone is everything in a movie like this, and *Brick* never missteps. Its visual style, its performances, and most of all its screenplay coalesce remarkably well. If I have any criticism it’s that it goes on longer than it needs to, but that’s a small price to pay for such an exhilarating piece of entertainment.

*Brick* marks Rian Johnson’s feature-film debut, but he wrote the script shortly after graduating from USC, and spent the next nine years visualizing it (along with fellow grad Steve Yedlin, who shot the film). Perhaps that’s why it’s as polished as it is: a lot of thought went into the project before the cameras ever rolled.

When my daughter and I saw *Brick* at the Sundance Film Festival in 2005, we learned that distributors were reluctant to acquire it because they thought it was “too smart” for average teenage audiences. Given the typical run of teen

movie fare, they may have been right...but that doesn't take away from the film's unique qualities or its singular achievement.