



2 March 2009

THE 400 BLOWS (Les Quatre Cents Coups)

(France 1959)

Directed by François Truffaut

Starring: Jean-Pierre Léaud, Claire Maurier, Albert Rémy

99 mins / cert tbc

A BFI release

Release date: 10 April 2009

Opening Venues: BFI Southbank, Curzon Mayfair, Barbican, Everyman Hampstead and key cities

On 15 May 1959, the announcement of the major prizes at Cannes heralded the start of a new era when *The 400 Blows*, the directorial debut of 27-year-old François Truffaut, carried off the award for Best Director. Truffaut, a provocative young film critic for the controversial *Cahiers du cinéma*, had previously been banned from attending the festival. The triumph of *The 400 Blows*, described in *Cahiers* itself as 'the rocket that burst right in the middle of the enemy camp', marked the arrival of the French New Wave on the world stage. Fifty years on, Truffaut's groundbreaking masterpiece is to be re-released by the BFI, screening at selected cinemas in London and nationwide.

Blending documentary and fiction techniques, *The 400 Blows* follows a few months in the life of 12-year-old Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Léaud) who, misunderstood and mistreated by his neglectful parents and repressive schoolteachers, seeks refuge in truancy, petty crime, and the cinema. The film's French title (the traditional English translation of which is over-literal) actually means 'raising hell' or 'going for broke', and Antoine's rebellion against rigid social norms, breaking out from the confinement of stifling classrooms or his parents' cramped flat, is exhilaratingly captured in Henri Decaë's lyrical location shooting on the streets of Paris, mostly around the Montmartre area where the director himself grew up.

Truffaut's own childhood, like Antoine's, was lonely and difficult, with parents who took little interest in him and a disastrous school career. In 1947 he was arrested at his father's prompting for running a cine-club he had created with stolen funds. *The 400 Blows* is thus the director's most autobiographical film. 'I have the feeling,' he said, 'that I will never again find a subject as direct, as deeply felt.' Truffaut discovered the lead actor for this very personal project by placing an advertisement in *Paris Soir*. Testing dozens of youngsters, he found one – the 14-year-old Jean-Pierre Léaud - who resembled himself as a child and was very natural in front of the camera. The result has been acclaimed as one of the greatest ever performances by a child actor, and the collaboration between Truffaut and Léaud was to last a further two decades.

The 400 Blows was released to worldwide acclaim, scoring a huge critical success in New York where it opened in December 1959 and in London on its release the following March. Fellow filmmakers and critics showered it with praise: Jean Cocteau had 'never been so moved in the cinema', while Henri-Georges Clouzot was 'positively thrilled', and Akira Kurosawa called it 'one of the most beautiful films I've ever seen'. Now regarded as one of the all-time great coming-of-age movies, the film that launched a cinematic revolution still offers a big screen experience that is funny, fresh, truly inspiring and profoundly affecting.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

The 400 Blows is released on 10 April 2009 at BFI Southbank, Curzon Mayfair, Barbican, Everyman Hampstead and key cities. It screens at BFI Southbank as part of the **Nouvelle Vague** season 9 April to 31 May. www.bfi.org.uk/releases

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