

# For whom the media rolls

## PHILOSOPHY

Lanie Goodman meets  
Bernard-Henri Lévy,  
a thinker who is never  
far from the action

IT'S hard to be arrogant at eight o'clock in the morning. And when French writer Bernard-Henri Lévy opens the door to his palatial apartment on Boulevard St-Germain, Paris, and ushers me into his book-lined study, apologising for the hour – he has to catch a plane for Mexico – I'm taken aback. Nothing corresponds to his media star image and alleged aristocratic airs. Even his legendary uniform of white V-neck and black designer trousers has been replaced by a fully buttoned shirt tucked into well-worn jeans.

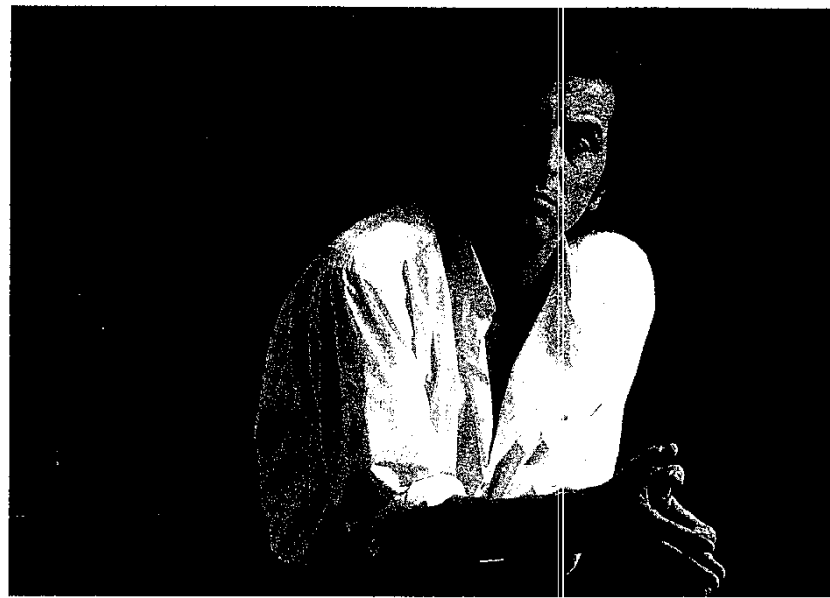
Dubbed the 'prince of the new philosophers' by the press, BHL, as he is also known, is the model of today's French intellectual. Articulate, self-assured, and handsome, he has a finger in every cultural pie – novels, plays, journalism, essays, films – and prides himself as a defender of human rights.

He is also one of the wealthiest writers in France (a fortune inherited from his father's lumber business) and is married to model-actress Arielle Dombasle, a pouty blonde best known for her role in Eric Rohmer's film *Pauline à la plage*. The mix of left-wing politics and jet-set lifestyle may have occasionally dented Lévy's credibility but has not deterred him from pursuing his causes.

After studying philosophy at Paris's Ecole Normale Supérieure, Lévy published his first book in 1973 on the revolution in Bangladesh. At the age of 30, he became the spokesman for an emerging group called *les nouveaux philosophes* which denounced Marxist dogma, arguing that totalitarianism led to the gulag.

Over the past decade Lévy's virulent criticism of French intellectuals in works such as *Adventures on the Freedom Road*, and frequent appearances on radio and television, have contributed to his reputation as a media-hound, sniffing for controversy. The last time the media focused on Lévy in a big way was following his disturbing documentary *Bosna!* which was the talk of the 1994 Cannes film festival.

The spotlight is on him again with the publication of his latest book, *Le lys et la cendre* (The Lily and the Ashes), in which Lévy presents us with his journal of the past four years of his life. In between a dozen visits to Sarajevo, the author also recounts meetings with heads of state and political



The very model of a modern intellectual:  
Lévy has a finger in every cultural pie

leaders, from François Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac and Alain Juppé to Margaret Thatcher, Pamela Harriman and Alija Izetbegovic. In his scathing portraits no one is spared his sense of disillusionment.

So why publish a book of memoirs at the relatively young age of 47? He says: "I wanted to tell it like it is: I say everything in this book. It's a statement for my contemporaries and for tomorrow's historians who will some day judge those who have power."

The writer pours tea from an enormous silver pot. "It is my testimony – raw and unrectifiable in its truth."

Friends and foes alike agree that Lévy is a force to be reckoned with. "This journal is an extraordinary document," says French author Philippe Sollers. "It is the first time we have a writer's day-by-day perception of the almost surreal side to politics."

However, there is also a feeling among his many critics that if there's a cause to fight he'll find it. He has been described as an archangel and a scoundrel rolled into one.

Tongues in France are increasingly suggesting that the very calling of philosopher belongs to the past. In an increasingly sex-soaked culture, French women at least seem more interested in the contents of his white shirts than in what is going on in his head. In a recent poll in *Elle* magazine, Lévy emerged in the top ten list of France's sexiest men.

My gaze inevitably wanders to the numerous photos of Dombasle. Doesn't his marriage (his third) to a film star contribute to his glamorous image? "Nobody knows a

thing about my life with her!" he says defensively. Still, it's hard to forget that in June 1993 they were happy to hold their wedding reception at the glitzy Colombe d'Or in Saint-Paul-de-Vence in a blaze of publicity.

So far, there has been very little artistic collaboration between them. In 1992 Lévy's play *Le jugement dernier*, which starred his wife Arielle, flopped, but the author believes that the problem was that he was not able to direct it. When one reporter asked about their separate careers, Dombasle shrugged: "I go to Christian Dior and Bernard goes to Sarajevo."

Lévy is unwilling to reveal too many details about his trip to Mexico, but he does admit he'll be looking at locations for his next project, which is a film about Ernest Hemingway's final years.

"What seduces me is his physical side," says Lévy. "He was a man of action." Like Lévy, Hemingway was also a freedom fighter and a dashing lover who was also quite capable of punching his enemies on the jaw.

Not surprisingly, if Lévy had been able to trade places with any writer for 24 hours, he says that he would have chosen to experience Hemingway's liberation of Paris on 26 August 1944. It sounded like a lot of fun. After chasing Nazi snipers on the rooftops, the battle-grimed soldier-writer raced off to 'liberate the cellar' at the Ritz.

Lévy quotes his hero's advice: "All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence you know," wrote Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast*. "Truth has its consequences," says Lévy. "Believe me."

*Le lys et la cendre* by Bernard-Henri Lévy (Grasset, Paris, Ffr145) ■