

The door opens and a Sri Lankan butler in a white jacket leads the way into an elegant sitting room, filled with exotic wooden carvings, velvet-covered divans and freshly cut flowers. It looks like the lair of some oriental pasha but this is where France's most famous philosopher holds court.

He has just published a book about the murder of the American journalist Daniel Pearl. In a country that accords its intellectuals the celebrity status reserved elsewhere for footballers, Bernard-Henri Lévy, literary lion of the fashionable Parisian left bank, is looking for more than a favourable review.

"I like to think I can influence events," said Lévy. His influence, it seems, is being felt these days even in Britain.

Last Thursday evening in London, Lévy, renowned for a brooding, Byronic air exemplified by his flowing dark locks and habit of wearing a shirt undone to the navel, turned his piercing gaze and considerable brain power to an audience of British media figures gathered at the Royal Geographical Society in Kensington.

They were attending a debate on the motion that "the American empire is a force for good" and until Lévy's intervention they had been divided roughly down the middle. The French intellectual's nonchalant dismissal of anti-Americanism as a "boring cliché" was enough, it seems, to turn the vote in America's favour.

In an instant, British views of the French thinking classes were rapidly revised and Lévy, initially seen as the representative of a country eager to seize any opportunity to do America and Britain down, was the toast of London luminaries at a party held later that evening at a mansion in Notting Hill.

Once branded a "philosopher stud", the 54-year-old thinker was approached by women seemingly anxious to test the legendary powers of seduction attributed to him since he wrote long ago in one of his books: "What writer can deny that the reason he writes is to seduce women?"

By Friday, the author was back in his natural habitat on the Boulevard Saint Germain, where he once sat in cafes with Sartre and where he is so familiar a figure to so many French that they refer to him just by his initials: BHL.

Should they hear of BHL's British adventure, however, the neighbours will no doubt conclude that France, as is argued by many of the country's other intellectuals these days, really is in decline: America-bashing is one of the chief sports of the left bank literati for many of whom Lévy is a hero: down the road at Les Deux Magots — Sartre's favourite cafe is just as much of an office for a new generation of Gauloise-smoking *intellos* — they will no doubt be wondering if the philosopher king has been recruited by the CIA.

Lévy is unrepentant. "I don't care what my peers think, I've always been a free spirit," he said,

slimmest waist in Paris and who was described by Paris Match this year as one of the 10 most beautiful women in the world.

Lévy emphasises that like most other people in France he was against the war in Iraq and does not like President George Bush or Tony Blair. "I think that Bush and Blair, who I have called 'Bliar', have committed a terrible error in Iraq," he said. "In spite of that, one of the great sicknesses of the modern world is anti-Americanism."

America, he said, was often wrongly accused of waging a religious war against Muslims yet it had, in fact, "waged three successive wars to liberate Muslim people in Bosnia, Kosovo and in Afghanistan". The tendency by "morons" to blame America for all the evils of the world results in "diverting attention from the real problems of poverty in the Third World. It is like a smoke screen behind which the real problems are never resolved".

Interview



Matthew Campbell meets

Bernard-Henri Lévy

Lévy, at least, has first-hand experience of some of those problems: from Kosovo to Kabul there is scarcely a hot spot around the globe into which the writer and his designer wardrobe have not inserted themselves. His research tells him that the Americans have done well to get involved in such places: "In fact, in Afghanistan, I wish they would be a bit more imperial because of the new problems I am hearing about there."

His book about Pearl, murdered last year in Pakistan after being kidnapped on his way to an interview took the form of an investigation in which he followed in the journalist's footsteps and tried to discover the motives of the killers. It was in the interests of promoting the book that he had travelled to London.

In America it is a bestseller raising the prospect that the BHL phenomenon — until now uniquely a French affair — is about to go global.

For long a favourite of the French glossy magazines, for whom Lévy's private life is as much of an obsession as his oeuvre, the writer has already been the subject of an eight-page spread in Vanity Fair magazine, which compared him with Baudelaire, Emile Zola and Victor Hugo and

It quoted a friend saying of Lévy in his bachelor years: "He'd go to a dinner party and know he'd sleep with the hostess within the week."

When Dombasle went to one of his book signings, his appreciation of her was evident in the dedication that he wrote for her: "To Arielle Dombasle, while waiting." As usual, he did not have to wait long.

They were married after a seven-year affair and divide their time these days between the flat in Paris and a Moroccan palace which they acquired from their friend Alain Delon, the actor, who starred with Dombasle in *Day and Night*, a film that Lévy directed.

He may have become part of the Parisian beau monde but Lévy has made a habit of being fashionably out of stride with orthodox thinking and it was a book that he wrote in his late twenties about the horrors of communism that first put him under the spotlight. Then he was part of a group of French writers who were trying to break the stranglehold of Marxist thought over the French left and his telegenic good looks and brilliance made him the darling of the French chattering classes.

He has never looked back, even if these days he is also the subject of mild mockery on account of eccentricities such as the undone shirt that has become his trademark for all seasons. Sweeping into the room on Friday, he took off a tweed jacket and flung it onto the floor. At one point he left the room, only to return several minutes later barefoot.

Startling as it is to hear France's most famous intellectual decrying the evils of anti-Americanism, he is, in fact, just one of several authors who have recently challenged their countrymen's cosy assumptions about their superiority over the rest of the world.

Tired as they are of being written off in America as "cheese-eating surrender monkeys" for their failure to support the war in Iraq, the French are taking it on the chin from their own side in a season of autumnal introspection and doubt about their place in the world.

This is reflected in the appearance of numerous books with titles such as *French Arrogance* and *France in Freefall*, whose authors unapologetically argue that, for all its crowing, France has fallen woefully behind.

Lévy added another unflattering epithet to the list by putting the spate of breast-beating down to "French narcissism", but added that the state of France and the country's periodic obsession with its own character was not a subject of interest to him.

"I am first and foremost a European," said Lévy, with an imperious wave of his hand. "I am not a Frenchman. I am a European of French origins. So the destiny of France interests me only for the time that it can have an influence on the destiny of Europe. For example, I am in favour of an ambitious French foreign policy because that can lead Europe."

When it comes to foreign policy

that President Jacques Chirac's use of the veto to deprive America of a United Nations mandate for its invasion of Iraq was justified. He also accuses Bush and Blair of lying about the nature of the threat posed by Saddam Hussein.

"Saddam Hussein was under control," he said. "This was an ageing dictator. The killing was all in the past." Could that be one of the "anti-American boring clichés" that he so deplures?

At the same time he says that

America was right to liberate Bosnia and Kosovo from "Serbian fascism" and to prise Afghanistan from the grip of the Taliban.

He had no patience for "French cretins", claiming that "Bush equals Saddam Hussein. They don't have the right to say that. It's insulting to democrats and flattering to dictators."

"It was French fascists who invented anti-Americanism in the 1920s and 1930s. They were partisans of a racially pure country

against the cosmopolitan melting-pot America of blacks and Jews."

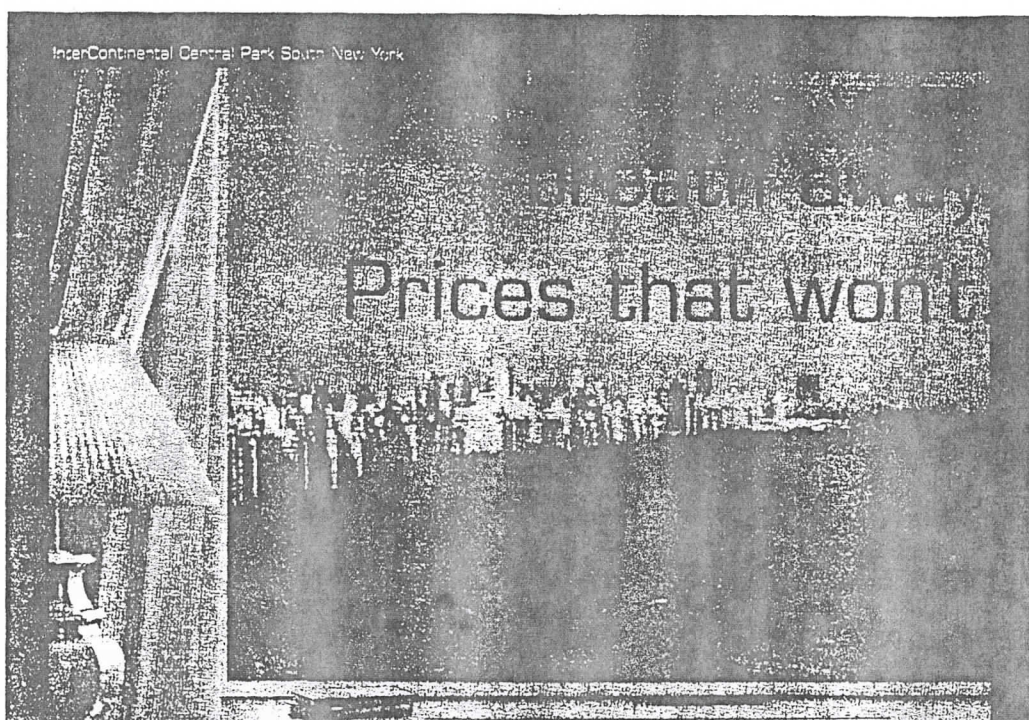
A protégé of the famously seductive President Mitterrand, Lévy likes to describe himself as one of the "engaged" intellectuals — such as André Malraux, who fought in the Spanish civil war or Zola, who denounced the French army in the Dreyfus affair — whose belief in their ability to change the world dates from the French revolution. Britain has no such tradition, he says, because it had no revolution.

Even so, he says that he enjoyed taking part in Thursday's forum in London.

"We do not have that tradition in France of debating things in that way," he said. "It was very amusing."

Meanwhile, BHL is looking for another project and believes it will again be connected with Islamic fundamentalism and the war against terror.

"It is," he said, "a subject that will dominate the rest of our lives."



Experience unique hotels and first class service for less with an InterContinental Weekend Break.

Until 28 February 2004, take advantage of these special weekend rates and sample for yourself the exclusivity that sets InterContinental apart. With unique hotels, the best locations and unparalleled views you feel more than a guest – you become part of the city. **We know what it takes™**

All prices are per room, per night and include full buffet breakfast and tax.

Europe	from	Europe	from	Rest of World	from	Rest of World	from
Amsterdam	£225	London	£165	Bangkok	£93	Mexico City	£96
Athens	£131	Madrid	£144	Beijing	£103	Muscat	£95
Barcelona	£110	Paris	£204	Cairo	£42	New Orleans	£75
Berlin	£94	Prague	£121	Chicago	£96	New York	£144
Budapest	£89	Rome	£263	Dubai	£66	San Francisco	£130
Cannes	£118	Stuttgart	£95	Hong Kong	£163	Singapore	£56
Cologne	£100	Venna	£104	Houston	£91	Taipei	£108
Geneva	£124	Warsaw	£103	Hungary	£51	Toronto	£127
Hamburg	£93	Zurich	£81	Miami	£130	Washington	£158

Also available at over 100 additional luxury hotels and resorts worldwide.

Book now on
0800 096 4478
www.intercontinental.com/weekendbreaks

When calling please quote Sunday Times offer



INTERCONTINENTAL
HOTELS & RESORTS

Available at participating hotels. Rates are per standard room, per night inclusive of breakfast and applicable taxes for up to two adults sharing the same room. Additional local taxes may apply. Offer subject to availability and valid for stays through 29 February 2004. Stay must include a Saturday night (Thursday or Friday in Middle East) and a minimum 2 night stay. A deposit of one night's stay is required at time of booking. Cancellation of booking within 7 days of arrival will result in a charge of one night's stay. All rates subject to change without notice. © 2004 InterContinental Hotels Group. All rights reserved.