

# HOLLYWOOD'S FRENCH AFFAIR

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Two of the biggest American stars have taken French-speaking lead roles in new releases that will feature in the 2026 French Film Festival

In recent decades, French artists including director Louis Leterrier (*The Incredible Hulk*, *Clash of the Titans*) and Oscar-winning actor Marion Cotillard (*La Vie en Rose*, *The Dark Knight Rises*) have made deep inroads into Hollywood, while maintaining their European careers.

Now, in a striking cultural reversal, two of Hollywood's biggest names not only star in Gallic films but have tackled French-speaking lead roles. Oscar winners Angelina Jolie and Jodie Foster anchor new French-language films *Couture* and *A Private Life* respectively – and both titles feature prominently in the 2026 Alliance Francaise French Film Festival, Australia's biggest cinematic festival.

Festival CEO Frederic Alliod says that when it comes to their French-speaking roles, Jolie and Foster are “the best ambassadors we could have”, and he jokes George Clooney might be next. “Maybe next year we will have a movie with George Clooney, maybe that he's French now?” Alliod speculates over Zoom, flashing an impish grin. (Clooney's recent revelation that he and his high-profile wife, Amal, had become French citizens triggered Donald Trump, who, in a social

media dummy spit, mocked the “totally mediocre” movies of the A-listers – a critic of the US President – and attacked France's “horrendous” immigration record.)

French Film Festival chair Francois Romanet also believes Jolie's and Foster's lead roles amount to “a powerful statement. In *A Private Life*, Jodie Foster performs entirely in French, while in *Couture*, Angelina Jolie embraces the language with elegance and confidence. When two Hollywood icons choose *la langue francaise*, it sends a clear message: French cinema is vibrant, relevant and beautifully global.”

In *Couture*, Jolie offers an emotionally and physically exposed portrayal of a film director and divorcing mother working for the fashion industry in Paris when she is diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer.

Jolie's mother died of cancer aged 56, and in 2013, after testing positive for the BRCA1 gene mutation, the actor famously underwent a preventive double mastectomy. She later had surgery to remove her ovaries and fallopian tubes. In a performance some critics have described as her best, the Maleficent star puts her body and emotions on the line in *Couture* as she evokes the fear and fragility of a middle-aged woman confronting a serious illness while working in a milieu that emphasises physical perfection.

“Beyond the glamour of Angelina Jolie, this is a part you will be able to relate to, whatever your culture,” Alliod says, noting the film, directed by France's Alice Winocour, also focuses on the stories of other women working at Paris Fashion Week – a makeup artist and a teenage African model too young and raw to understand barked commands such as “seduce the camera”.

In *A Private Life*, Foster, who has already appeared in smaller roles in three French films, takes on her first French-language lead role as a psychiatrist convinced one of her patients has been murdered. In a first for an American, Foster was nominated for a 2026 Lumiere Best Actress award for her turn in this thriller cum dark

comedy, directed by Rebecca Zlotowski and co-starring Virginie Efira and Daniel Auteuil.

Hollywood stars aside, Australia's French film festival has grown with astonishing rapidity in its 37 years to become the biggest showcase of French film outside France. French ambassador Pierre-Andre Imbert says the 2025 festival generated a record 199,000 admissions, “confirming its place as one of Australia's most vibrant and cherished cultural events”. Mr Imbert added: “This success reflects both the passion of Australian audiences for French cinema and the dedication of the Alliances Francaises who bring the festival to life across the country.” (Australia's 29 Alliance Francaise language institutes play a key role in helping to organise the festival.)

At a time when streaming giants pose a threat to cinema attendances, Alliod says the festival's large audience reach reflects how it markets itself not just as a film showcase, but as a “lifestyle event” where moviegoers can combine French food and drink or dedicated ladies' nights with their chosen films. “Australians are very Francophile,” he says, “They really like France, so they like its cinema.”

The festival's geographical footprint is vast: for the 2026 season, running from March 3 until

April 26, it will span 40 venues and 18 Australian cities, including all state and territory capitals and regional centres Dubbo, Victor Harbor, Bendigo and Bunbury. While not all of the event's past sorties into smaller centres have worked, Alliod says taking it to new areas challenges the myth that subtitled

films are only for inner-city hipsters and film aficionados. “We should not forget these people all around Australia – and this is really the point of the festival, reaching out to them and bringing part of our culture (to the regions as well as metropolitan areas),” he says.

The festival CEO says travel is an overarching theme this year, given the 38 films he has chosen cross genres, time periods and continents. “This year, I feel like French cinema is your passport to

the world,” he says.

Redress, from Oscar-winning director Regis Wargnier, is set in Normandy and Taiwan and explores the fusion food scene as well as the mysterious disappearance of a Michelin-starred chef. The missing chef's daughter – a chef herself – is played by French-Argentinian actor Julia de Nunez, who portrayed Brigitte Bardot in the limited series *Bardot*.

Tense political thriller *13 Days*, *13 Nights* revisits France's evacuation of its nationals and hundreds of Afghan citizens from Kabul in 2021, while in the poignant and whimsical docudrama *Ride Away*, actor-director and grieving father Mathias Mlekuz retraces his late son's journey from France to the Black Sea by bike with his equally unfit best buddy, performer Philippe Rebbot.

The Stranger, Francois Ozon's stylish and sensuous black-and-white adaptation of Albert Camus'

classic novella, last month took out the coveted best film prize at France's 2026 Lumiere Awards and has been nominated as an official highlight of Alliod's program. Starring Benjamin Voisin as an emotionally remote French clerk on trial for murder, Ozon's adaptation is set in Algeria during the 1930s French colonial era and features subtle updates that serve to humanise the absurdist narrative's North African characters.

Alliod says his program's “international reach highlights France's ability to tell stories that resonate far beyond its borders”. But it also includes a film, *The Richest Woman in the World*, that explores a quintessentially French scandal that galvanised the nation for a decade.

French superstar Isabelle Huppert stars in the film, which is inspired by the true-life Bettencourt affair involving the late L'Oreal heiress Liliane Bettencourt and her platonic gay toy boy, to whom – against the wishes of her family – she gifted more than \$1bn.

Huppert – who will shortly star in a one-woman play, *Mary Said What She Said*, at the Adelaide Festival – plays the title role (her character is given a fictional name). While the story involves



immense wealth, mother-daughter tensions and a legal case centred on allegations of elder abuse, Alliod says its power lies in Huppert's ability to humanise the loneliness and boredom of a billionaire – a figure who could easily have been a caricature. "I think she can play anything," he says of French cinema's grand dame.

Opening the festival in Sydney on March 3 is Cédric Klapisch's *Colours Of Time*, a visually lush homage to France's impressionist art heritage set in the present and 1895, and a story about the "invisible ties" that shape families across generations.

Rapier-tipped satire finds a home in the program with *The Party's Over!* which features Sex Education alumnus Sami Outal-bali and Call My Agent star Laure Calamy. Known for her sympathetic roles, Calamy here shows a different side of her acting chops as simmering tensions between an upper middle class Parisian couple and the caretakers of their lavish holiday home boil over. Noting the film's "specific French sense of humour, of dark comedy", Alliod says it is also a compelling study of petty human behaviour and hypocrisy.

No French film festival would be complete without a headlining period movie and another official program highlight, Jean Valjean, offers a fresh if sombre perspective on Victor Hugo's 19th century epic, *Les Misérables*. Starring Gregory Gadebois as the hulking title character, this film serves as an origin story, depicting the early journey of ex-prisoner Valjean, who has internalised 19th century society's damning view of him. Alliod says this film is beautifully shot and "you see the portrait of a man where the world has not been kind with him ... I think (his redemption) is a beautiful message to share."

Contemporary film *The Little Sister* is a queer coming-of-age drama by Hafsia Herzi and features French-Algerian breakout star Nadia Melliti as a devout Muslim struggling to come to terms with her homosexuality. Melliti was discovered by a casting agent on a Paris street and went on to win the 2025 Best Actress award at Cannes, with this, her debut role. Alliod says this feature is part of the festival's mission to "to mirror

society as it is, in all its diversity".

French screen royalty Cotillard reigns in another coming-of-age tale, a fantasy titled *The Ice Tower* and inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's *The Ice Queen*, which *The Hollywood Reporter* has described as "a twisted retro fairytale that sits somewhere between *Frozen* and *Mulholland Drive*".

Every festival program revives a French classic, and this year Alliod has chosen Claude Lelouch's *Palme d'Or*- and Oscar-winning *A Man and A Woman*, which is marking its 60th anniversary with a 4k restoration. Starring Jean-Louis Trintignant and Anouk Aimee, Lelouch's classic depicts a young widow and widower who meet at their children's boarding school and form an unexpected bond, while remaining haunted by their profound losses.

Alliod says programming what he regards as "maybe the most famous romantic film in French film history", is "a way to celebrate the movie for its anniversary with a beautiful version ... I think it will be a people pleaser".

Closing the festival is another people pleaser – romantic comedy *Rodrigue In Love*, set at the heart of France's most famous theatre festival in Avignon. Directed by Johann Dionnet, this movie centres on a burgeoning love story as it traces the battlelines drawn between thespians immersed in "boulevard" and classical theatre.

Alliod is a cultural diplomat as well as festival CEO. He has long been an ardent follower of South Korean film, and acknowledges the French film festival's role as a tool of "soft power" for France. He describes how the United States, and more recently South Korea, have heightened their global influence by exporting their culture, and especially their cinema.

"It's about promoting what we call soft power," he says. "I mean, just look at the South Korean example. Twenty years ago, nobody could identify South Korea on a map. Now it is a cultural powerhouse."

"The Americans have done it forever, and they do it perfectly. But yes, of course, if you give some cultural product (overseas), that brings awareness."



**Lyna Khoudri and Roschdy Zem in 13 Days, 13 Nights**



**Andre Marcon, Laurent Lafitte, Paul Beaurepaire and Isabelle Huppert in The Richest Woman in the World**



**Mathias Mlekuz and Philippe Rebbot in Ride Away**



**Jean-Louis Trintignant and Anouk Aimee in A Man and A Woman**



Angelina Jolie in an image from *Couture*; right, Jodie Foster in a still from *A Private Life*



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**FRENCH FILM FESTIVAL CEO  
FREDERIC ALLIOD (ABOVE)**  
ON TAKING THE FRENCH FILM  
FESTIVAL TO REGIONAL  
CENTRES

*The Alliance Francaise French Film Festival runs from March 3 to April 26 across the country. View the full program at [affrenchfilmfest](http://affrenchfilmfest)*