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SUBHEADLINE: Michel Blanc, well-known French actor and director, took some time from his busy schedule in Paris and visited Thailand recently _ a place he could almost call his second home

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At a time when French movies are the talk of the town _ as the 4th French film festival is at full swing this week at Emporium Siam United Artist's _ a monument of the French movie industry made a surprise yet well-timed appearance.

His small build, very farang looking, could almost have gone unnoticed merging into the pink-complexioned-clientele of the Oriental Hotel, daydreaming around the turquoise blue swimming pool.

Yet in Europe especially in France, no one would mistake the star's jolly face and balding head.

Michel Blanc, 49, has been in front of the cameras _ and lately behind _ for the past 26 years, and is among the top French comedians. Coming from a background of theatre workshops, he joined his high school peers Josiane Balasko, Marie-Anne Chazel, Gerard Jugnot, Christian Clavier and Thierry Lhermitte to form the thundering ``Equipe du Splendide''.

As an auteur, Blanc is behind many of the team's success like Les Bronzes (French Fried Vacation), Les Bronzes Font du Ski, Ma Femme S'Appelle Reviens, Viens Chez Moi J'habite Chez Une Copine, Circulez Y'a Rien A Voir!, all of which are among French cult films which have made generations of French people laugh till they cried.

After encountering phenomenal success with a string of traditional comedies [from 1974 till 1984], Blanc ventured little by little away from his familiar territory for something along a more serious vein.

In 1986, he won an acting prize at the Cannes Film Festival for his role in Tenue de Soiree (Menage) 1985, directed by Bertrand Blier, taking everyone by surprise by playing a poor bum who _ in order to preserve his menage _ accepts the advances of an exuberant homosexual thief (Gerard Depardieu). He ends up liking it, and turns into a transvestite and prostitute.

From then on, Blanc, a key figure of the French cinema stage and actor of considerable range, held a different status, no longer confined to playing grouching hypochondriacs, or desperately frustrated womanisers.

Soon he showed signs of becoming every bit as successful as a director.

After directing and starring in Marche A l'Ombre (1984), Grosse Fatigue (Dead Tired) in 1994, Blanc challenged himself in 1999 in the English-language drama The Escort.

It is more or less at this stage of his career that he arrived in Bangkok, one nonchalant afternoon to be met in the warm decor of the Oriental's Author Lounge, his friendly features framed behind straw-coloured glasses under a clean shaved head.

`` It's a long story ... Actually most of my closest friends in Paris are Thai. I dreamed about Asia in my youth and I started to come here when I began to encounter a bit of success at home and could afford to travel. After visiting China and Bali, I was told about Thailand as a formidable country, with charming and fascinating people," Blanc explained.

Of course, he made no mistake. Blanc, who says he was `` foolish enough to come", made a habit of visiting Thailand for the past 15 years, coming twice a year or so for short vacations sprinkled with work `` in order to avoid feeling guilty" he says. His Thai friends have initiated him to the delights of speaking and writing the Thai language.

`` It is hard to explain what attracts me _ it is a whole, beyond mere tourist reasons. I like this country's mentality, I love Thai food and I am fond of Asian sculptures. I find the Sukhothai period fascinating. It is like being in love. One finds it hard to explain precisely why _ although one usually knows with accuracy why one hates something" he continued.

Blanc's present visit to Thailand is in time for the French Film Festival, although it's a mere coincidence. Yet as none of his films are on show as part of the festival, Blanc _ in Thailand until today _ refrained from joining the events, feeling somehow `` in the way".

However, there is no doubting that he is a champion of the French film industry. French through and through, the Paris-born actor displays in person the typically tricolour identity which transpires in all his films.

`` As [Gerard] Depardieu says, one cannot change a zebra's stripes. I am French enough to keep to my identity. I am not saying that it's good or bad, but that's the way it is," Blanc said.

Although he started venturing into the Anglo-Saxon film industry with movies such as *The Escort* with the original version in English, the actor in no way repudiates his roots.

`` *The Escort* was a film completely French," he retorts. By shooting the movie in English, Blanc was simply scrupulous about the principle of realism, for his tale about a middle-aged Frenchman (Daniel Auteuil) leaving his wife and son in Paris to jet off to London and shack up in a dingy Bayswater hotel, all in hope of writing a novel.

`` I think it's hard to decree an international career without losing one's soul. There is no calculation, no ulterior motives behind it. I believe in doing things with sincerity, the way one feels it," Blanc says, a man who doesn't mince his words about the steamroller-like Hollywood industry.

`` Working for Hollywood implies that one fits into a specific mould. It is very special. A movie director becomes an employee of the producer, he is not the owner of his creation. He can be replaced all of a sudden, or his editing might be completely reviewed. There is a cynicism behind it which is coherent with their industrial logic. But which doesn't fit in with my logic which is rather artistic," he said.

`` Masterpieces, attracting a worldwide audience are sincere films, with a true identity such as *All About My Mother* from Spanish director Pedro Almodovar. This kind of success, with a typically French film, would be for sure the greatest thing I could experience."

Conversely, Blanc the actor would not sneeze at playing for foreign directors and cherishes the idea of working with John Malkovich or Pedro Almodovar for example. His foreign career has not really taken off simply because the roles which have been offered to him didn't thrill him.

Blanc will start shooting his next movie in July; a comedy inspired by Joseph Connolly's book *Summer Things*. "To have a film in your mind is like having a mountain in front of you," sighs Blanc. For this reason too, escaping the hubbub of Paris for the soothing shores of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya is all the more tempting.