

Why the French are addicted to American TV shows

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# It's Keira Knightley, but not as we know her

For decades dubbing artists have been the unsung - and unseen - heroes of French TV and cinema. Now all this is starting to change

By Amanda MacKenzie

We're sharing a sofa with Keira Knightley while John Travolta runs through his paces. Except that this isn't Keira or John, not today at any rate. Communing with a screen and an autocue at a small recording studio in Paris, these are some of the unsung stars of showbiz - the voice-over artists who bring Hollywood into homes and cinemas across the French-speaking world. Millions hear them every day without having the haziest idea what they look like. But that is beginning to change. France's stars de l'ombre are finally coming out of the shade.

It's the Disney effect. When Hollywood studios took to casting box office stars in animation roles, their French distributors did likewise, generating a wave of interest in established voice-over artists. Gone are the days when

dubbing work was seen as the poor cousin of TV or theatre. Some voice-over pros even privately complain that stars are stealing their work. That's not the view of Nathalie Karsenti - aka Keira - now in her twelfth year as a dubbing artist. 'We've all benefited from the publicity,' she says. 'It's brought us out of the shadows a bit and made people realise that dubbing is a profession in its own right. The stars are the first to admit that it's a lot harder than it looks.'

A shapely, pretty brunette, Karsenti's voice-over credits include Gabrielle Anwar in the US spy series, *Burn*

*Notice*, and *January Jones*, the willowy Betty Draper in *Mad Men*. Karsenti laughs, anticipating the reaction: 'She's blue-eyed, blonde, Hitchcockian and I'm absolutely nothing like her. That's one of the things about dubbing, appearance has got little to do with it. You can be quite ordinary looking and play someone who's drop dead gorgeous, you can be fat and play a thin person, you can be white and play a black actor or vice versa. What really matters is the voice.'

In Karsenti's case, it is soft, feminine and singular (enough for taxi drivers to clock her, even now apparently, as 'her out of *Love, Actually*'). It is also clean, because dubbing artists have to be able to enunciate clearly without tics, clicks or distracting consonants. They must read without seeming to read, and inhabit the character without making body movements that could be picked up by sensitive recording equipment. There's also little time to rehearse tricky lines.

Luck can play a part too. Patrick

Noémie's break came when he landed a role shadowing a good looking, but unknown, actor in a new medical drama. The series was *ER* and the actor was George Clooney. Noémie subsequently stayed with him for four TV seasons and a string of movies.

'I got to know his rhythms and inflexions without even having to look out for them,' says Noémie. He is also one of the few dubbing actors to have met his opposite number in the flesh. 'I was scared stiff,' he admits. 'For five and a half years, I'd been doing this man's voice and suddenly I was about to find out how he felt about it.' ('Your voice is my voice,' was Clooney's verdict.)

'In a way, it's not important whether the film is brilliant or not,' concludes Noémie. 'What really matters is that you're all alone in front of an image with a voice full of emotion and you become that voice. Sometimes at the end of a reel, you forget who you are. You're him, and you're you - but you're not really you, you're him.' He shrugs: 'It's complicated.' TFP

“For years I'd been doing George Clooney's voice - now I was to find out how he felt about it”

Who's who in the DUBBING world?



George Clooney >



< Patrick Noémie



Uma Thurman >



< Juliette Degenne



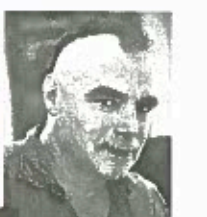
Angelina Jolie >



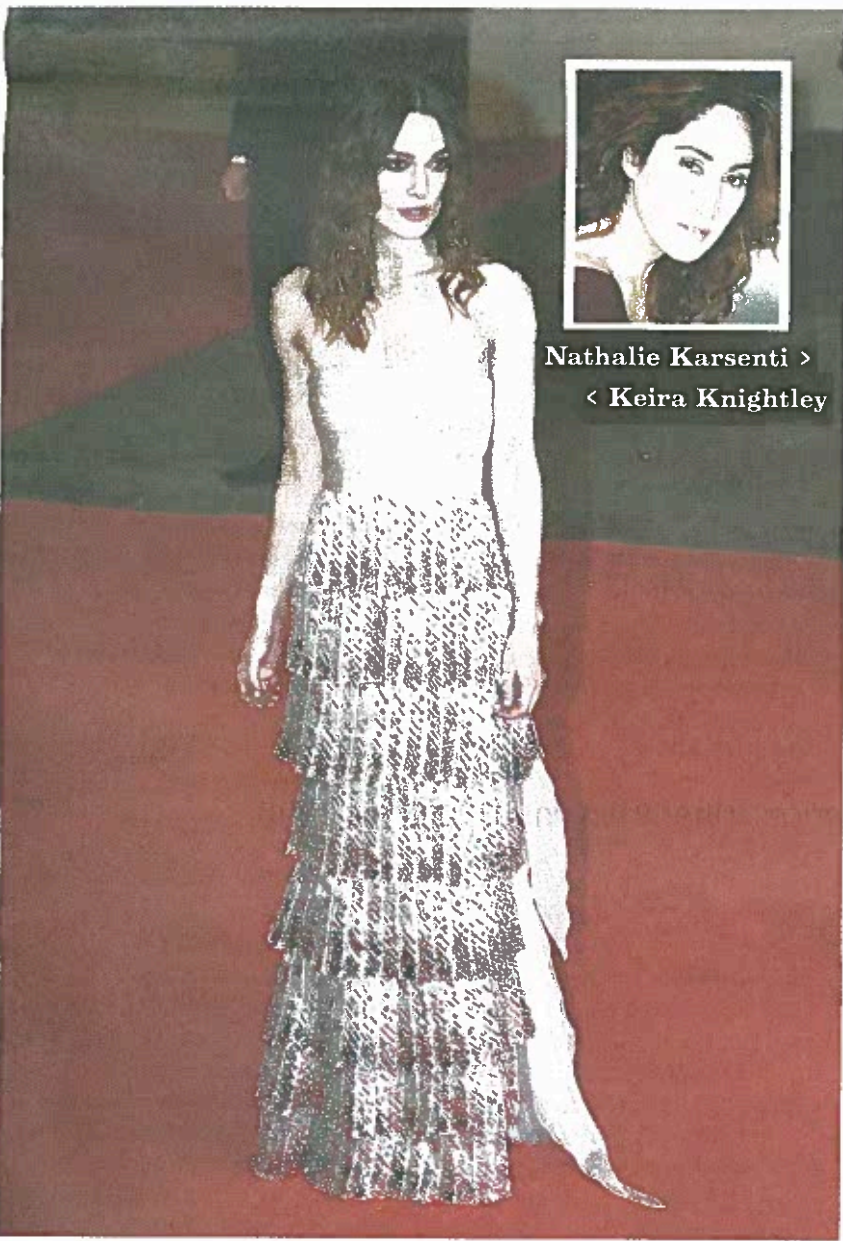
< Françoise Cadol



John Travolta >



< Antoine Tomé



Nathalie Karsenti >  
< Keira Knightley

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DUBBING > THE LOW-DOWN

\* The French dubbing industry supports around 600 actors and nearly  
\* Successful dubbing artists keep their eyes on the eyes - one look at

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