

By Hu Bei

Famous for using non-actors in his movies, the late French director Robert Bresson (1901-1999) was always considered an outsider in the film industry, even among his own peers.

But today his work is finding a new generation of fans, and a season of his films is being screened until April 8 at venues around the city including the Shanghai Film Art Center, the Institute of European Film of the Shanghai Normal University, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai (MoCA Shanghai).

During his career Bresson completed 13 features and wrote a seminal book about the film industry, *Notes On Cinematography*. The season is being organized by the French Consulate in Shanghai and the films will be accompanied by a series of lectures.

"New Wave" mentor

"Mention French movies in China today and most people think of the 'New Wave,' (films which explored the social and political upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s) and the directors associated with that movement such as Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut and Eric Rohmer," Wang Fang, the director of the Institute of European Film at Shanghai Normal University told the Global Times.

"However, they seldom realized that although Bresson was not one of the 'New Wave' film directors, he inspired almost all of them. He is actually the master of those masters," Wang said.

Wang and Xu Feng, an associate professor from the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing have been researching Bresson and his films for more than 10 years and first introduced the film master to Chinese audiences in 2001.

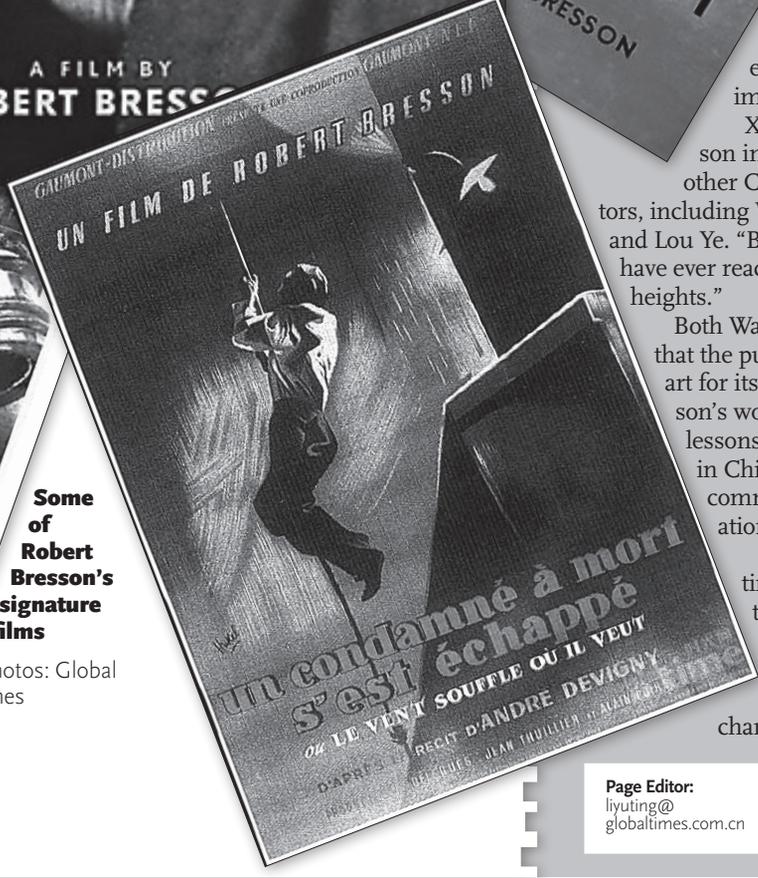
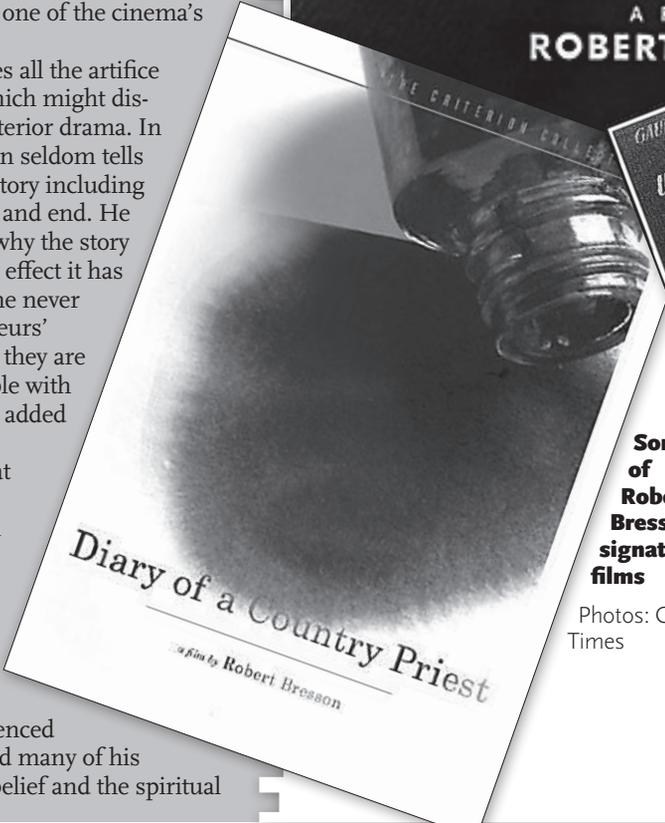
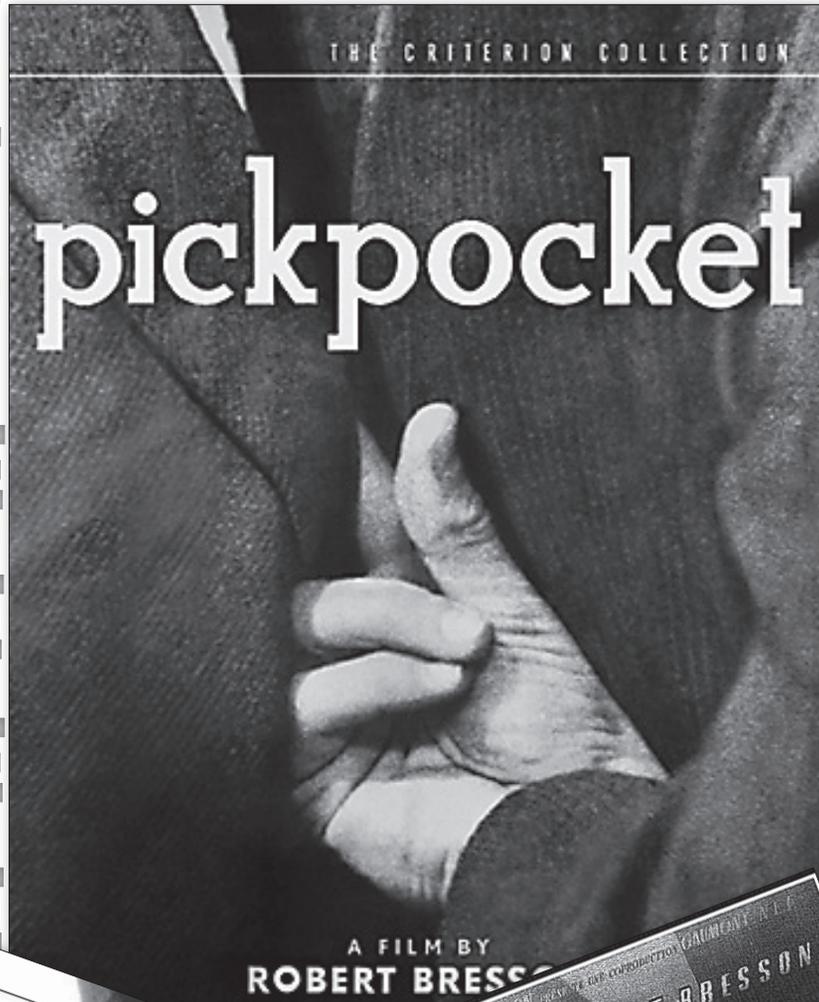
"Chinese people are still not familiar with him, and Bresson never came to China," said Xu. "In his whole career, he always adhered to the principle, that 'less is more,' and that 'simpler is richer.' The power of Bresson's style can be described as austere, yet deeply affecting, controlled, yet replete with compassion, and this style makes him one of the cinema's pure enigmas.

"He eliminates all the artifice from cinema, which might distract from the interior drama. In his films, Bresson seldom tells you a complete story including the start, middle and end. He only shows you why the story happens and the effect it has on people. And he never calls his cast 'acteurs' (actors), because they are all ordinary people with no acting skills," added Xu.

Wang said that Bresson spent a period of time in a prison of war camp during World War II where he met a Catholic priest. "This experience influenced Bresson a lot, and many of his films are about belief and the spiritual

▶ Season of films by one of history's most spiritual directors

CINEMA'S PATRON SAINT



Some of Robert Bresson's signature films

Photos: Global Times

world of humans," Wang said.

Diary of a Country Priest (1951) is based on a novel of the same name by Georges Bernanos, and tells the story of a young, sickly priest, who tries to live a pure life, but is treated by his parishioners with scorn and indifference.

"The novel was regarded as a religious work, but in Bresson's film, there are very little traces of religious teaching. Rather it's an exploration of pure spiritual beliefs. And this film was the last time that Bresson used professional actors in his films," Wang said.

Autobiographical film

A Man Escaped (1956) is the true story of a French prisoner of war who escaped a Nazi stronghold. "It is generally thought to be autobiographical, and it remains Bresson's greatest popular success," said Xu.

Pickpocket (1959) is Bresson's homage to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and in the film, Bresson distills the original while remaining true to both the Russian writer's vision and his own.

Xu added that the Chinese director Jia Zhangke's film, *Xiao Wu* (*The Pickpocket*, 1997) is inspired by *Pickpocket*, and that Jia has admitted he is a huge fan of Bresson.

"In another example, Bresson's *Lancelot of the Lake* (1974) was envisaged as a huge historical war film with large numbers of horses and thousands of guns firing, but in



Bresson's lens, you only see a horse's hoof or the head of a gun," said Xu. "He believed in allowing viewers to use their own imaginations."

Xu added that Bresson influenced many other Chinese directors, including Wang Xiaoshuai and Lou Ye. "But none of them have ever reached his dizzying heights."

Both Wang and Xu said that the purity of cinematic art for its own sake in Bresson's work has important lessons for a film industry in China driven by purely commercial considerations.

For details about times and venues, go to www.consul-france-shanghai.org. All screenings are free of charge.