Claude Chabrol's

VIOLETTE NOZIÈRE


From the start of his career back in the late '50s, Claude Chabrol has seemed a far more conventional filmmaker than most of his colleagues who, collectively then, were known as the French New Wave. In comparison with Godard, Truffaut, Rivette, and Resnais, Chabrol showed little interest in innovative forms or unusual subjects. His early films lacked both the audacity of Truffaut and the intelligence of Godard and, for the most part, they remained firmly planted within the conventions of middle-class life. In this way, it was easy not to take Chabrol too seriously. He seemed just another filmmaker, making films in a traditional way about the tired conventions of the middle-class.

By the late '60s, however – by the time Chabrol had made La Femme Infidèle, Que la Bête Meure and Le Boucher – even his detractors had to admit that this most conventional of filmmakers was handling these conventions with exceptional authority. True, he was still making movies about middle-class life and was still concerned, in his Hitchcockian way, with the delineation of character and with the creation of suspense. There was a Langian dimension to his work as well – the sense that his characters were the helpless pawns of fate. They were all victims of their own conditioning, of the social repressions and genteel expectations of their class.

As Chabrol's work increased in skill, it grew rich in texture. All the tiny details of all his characters' lives were so minutely observed and so persuasively presented that he came to be known, not entirely playfully, as the Balzac of the cinema. Now if Karl Marx could admire Balzac because his novels demonstrated the contradictions within bourgeois ideology, we might admire Chabrol in much the same way. In the best of Chabrol's films (for he has certainly made some clinkers)–supremely in the three films mentioned above—he exposes with loving detail and extraordinary nuance the repressed tensions in middle-class life that make all of our lives at least partially a lie. And since there is no bourgeois like a French bourgeois, Chabrol could turn out pictures of elegance and charm, both in their execution and in their subject-matter, which revealed to us the repressed emotions that all this elegance denies – negative emotions of jealousy, vengeance, sexual need, and hate. In all his films, these are the emotions which, bit by bit, break apart the apparently tidy complacency of his characters' lives.

Dealing with family life as he had done, Chabrol has been unique in the prominence he has given to children—so often the justification of all the platitudes that hold family life together. But his children are rarely innocent. They often possess an insight, mute though it may be, into the falsities that their parents have long ago ceased to recognize. Yet there is an ambiguity in Chabrol about his children, sometimes wittily indulged in. In Que la Bête Meure, was it really Charles, the man seeking vengeance, who killed Paul, the hateful father, or was it Paul's own son? In Les Noces Rouges, when the daughter writes to the police about her mother, is it innocently to clear her name or actually to turn her in? We can speculate about these matters but Chabrol makes it difficult for us to come to any confident conclusions.

In his latest film, Violette Nozière nominally, minimally, a Canadian French co-production—Chabrol has chosen for his source material an actual event which is studded with ambiguities. As the facts have been collected for us by the French journalist, Jean-Marie Fitère and shaped for the film by Odile Barski, Violette tells the story of a young woman in the '30s who lived a double life. School-girl and prostitute, a potential libertarian who was nevertheless capable of the most self-deceiv-
Jean Rabier
almost to Cinevideo 'come at his finest. Working with the government of de Gaulle. Why was she?

FILM REVIEW

Violette Nozière, Isabelle Huppert has a far more active role to play than she had in La Dentellière (The Lacemaker); and an extraordinarily restrained performance as her cellmate, is given by Bernadette Lafont— one of France's most underrated actresses. For those of us familiar with other films by Chabrol, many of the recurring elements are present in Violette— particularly the site of the dinner table as the place around which the formal hypocrisies of middle-class life are most consistently enacted. Chabrol plays with this— almost to the point of self-mockery. The night that Violette decides to poison her parents, she has them all dress up as if going to the opera and the table is laid with special care and festive candles— an elegance indeed appropriate to the seriousness of the occasion, as if for a wedding, a Christmas feast, or a funeral!

Violette Nozière is a film both to be enjoyed and reckoned with. In a recent interview, Isabelle Huppert suggested that, nowadays, Violette would probably be a terrorist. This gives us food for thought. She was a protestor against the established norms of our not-too-satisfactory society. It is to the credit of Chabrol and one of the lasting values of the film that Violette lasting values of the film that Violette Nozière not only presents us with the study of a woman but also of a set of social codes which prompted her to act as she did. Murderess or revolutionary? The film leaves that question for us to decide. For such a "conventional" filmmaker as Claude Chabrol, this is not the most conventional way of handling a piece of cinematic entertainment.

Peter Harcourt

Claude Chabrol's BLOOD RELATIVES

French director Claude Chabrol is slowly heading for Hollywood— via Canada. Never fully appreciated in his homeland, Chabrol is finally branching out in an attempt to gain greater world recognition. Fortuitously, or not, depending on your viewpoint, he has crossed paths with Montreal producer Julian Melzack who is also experiencing growing pains. The meeting of these talents is Blood Relatives.

While infinitely better than Tomorrow Never Comes, another Melzack production, Blood Relatives is a disappointing Chabrol film. Had it been made by a Canadian director, it would be hailed as a masterpiece, or falling back on that hackneyed word, a "breakthrough." Still, a lesser Chabrol picture is much better than most of the gunk that American distributors pollute the box office with.

Blood Relatives, a dandy double-edged title, is another venture into a genre Chabrol has made very much his own: the 'why-dunnit.' Chabrol has always been keen on examining the personalities surrounding a murder, the ambience of the crime and all the pres-