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CAUGHT IN THE ACTS

(DELITS FLAGRANTS)

(FRENCH — DOCU — 35mm)

A Connaissance du Cinema release of a Pascale Dauman presentation of a La Sept Cinema/Double D Copyright Films co-production with the participation of the CNC, Canal Plus and West-deutscher Rundfunk Koln. Directed by Raymond Depardon. Camera (color), Nathalie Credou; editors, Roger Ikhlef, Camille Cotte, Georges-Henri Mauchant; sound recording (Dolby), Claudine Nougaret, Sophie Chiabaut; sound mixing, Dominique Hennequin. Reviewed at Saint-Andre-des-Arts cinema, Paris, Nov. 2, 1994. Running time: 107 MIN.

By turns hilarious and touching, "Caught in the Acts" is populated by a riveting array of petty criminals who have been caught red-handed and taken to Paris police headquarters where their often fanciful version of events is recorded by legal specialists. Clearly guilty of entertainment in the first degree, engrossing docu should be sentenced to a long life of fests, tube dates and educational sales.

Opening text explains the steps that follow an arrest. French law allows a suspect to be held for observation without bail for up to 48 hours, before meeting the *substitut de procurer*, whose job it is to take down an accurate first-person statement. The *substitut* is crucial because he or she can decide whether to let someone go, schedule a court date months later or send the suspect to appear before a judge for immediate sentencing.

Ace photographer and docu-maker Raymond Depardon was granted special permission to film real detainees: Of the 86 suspects who agreed to be filmed, 14 appear in the finished docu. Skeleton crew, shooting in crisp 35mm and recording in Dolby stereo, was permitted to lens suspect and *substitut* only in a two-shot, in profile. Rigorous, no-nonsense framing and long takes, sans close-ups or zooms, perfectly echo the sober reality of captivity and heighten the often ludicrous exchanges.

Audience has ringside seats as legal reps — who have certainly heard and seen it all before — weigh the circumstances and humor, sometimes chastising their delinquent customers. Helmer captures priceless moments with universal appeal, as suspects play innocent only to be presented with detailed lists of the prior arrests and convictions that seem to have slipped their minds.

A sign that says "Do not disturb: interrogation in progress" is chained to the door — presumably to discourage kleptomaniacs. In a nondescript room, suspect and *substitut* communicate across a utilitarian desk. A slightly deaf teenager who recently turned 18 is bowled over by the news that he can now go to prison for the same sorts of infractions he committed as a minor. "Gosh, I'll have to stop now, otherwise I'll get in trouble," is his amazed reaction.

Some repeat offenders evidently live in a world of their own. A woman who was nabbed outside a Paris department store with over \$1,000 worth of shoplifted garments and accessories complains, "They could

have asked to see my receipt," then babbles on about how it's not as if she'd taken a radio or a camera or "something that you can re-sell."

A young man insists that he would *never* punch a woman — women you merely slap, *men* you punch. Informed that the woman he "slapped" required five stitches and will have a scar, he replies that scars are no big deal and starts to display his own.

Interview sequences, though never dull, are broken up by a few roving shots of suspects being led down endless subterranean corridors, of *substituts* conducting phone business and of the lovely views outside the Palais de Justice in central Paris.

Parade of human dramas leaves viewers with the impression that justice is sometimes served and that, given the right circumstances, anyone can end up in handcuffs.

—Lisa Nesselson