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Author(s)	Robert Heide Robert Heide
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# Words With an 'Enfant Terrible'

BY ROBERT HEIDE

The femme-fatale half of the incestuous brother-sister relationship of "Les Enfants Terribles," Nicole Stephane, stood outside the D. W. Griffith Theatre just after the opening of the Cocteau-Melville film which has been conspicuously absent from movie houses for over 10 years. As the sinister enfant terrible supreme we had just seen her on the screen violently pursuing her brother into an untimely poisonous death—and vehemently making the choice to shoot a fatal bullet into her own head rather than face a world without her beloved brother Paul. The tragic inevitability inherent in this Cocteau fable of incest, youth, and homosexuality unfolds before us as a mad, intense dream that is more real to our sensibility today than in the early '50s when it was originally presented to the befuddlement of critics. We can begin to recognize today the germ of insanity in all love, however altruistic or puritanical. Nicole Stephane, as actress, makes us experience the exact moment in which our own intentions, needs, desires can convolute and become the ravaged emotions of insane power and control.

A cult, a legend, the spectre of a profound actress, is beginning to surround Nicole Stephane due to this single performance as Cocteau's enfant terrible, Elisabeth. Standing outside the theatre aglow, imperious, tousled blonde, and blue-eyed she seemed almost unchanged in the 25 years since the film was made. Warm, generous, and open as we spoke, I could see that she had become a beautiful French woman in the tradition of Signoret or Arletty and that she was enjoying the unanimous critical acclaim she is receiving this time around.

Two years after she made "Les Enfants Terribles" she had a serious automobile accident and had to give up acting. Later she decided she would become a film producer. "In order to escape the loneliness of being an actor," she produced "To Die in Madrid," "Promised Lands" by Susan Sontag (to be shown on NET's channel 13 in April) and is currently undertaking the mammoth project of producing Marcel Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past," which has been adapted for the screen by Harold Pinter and is to be directed by Joseph Losey. Negotiations are underway for Marlon Brando to play M. de Charlus.

RH: What is the main theme you want to bring forth in "Remembrance of Things Past"?

NS: Mr. Pinter's script concentrates on homosexuality, the emotion of jealousy, the end of a generation, the end of the bourgeoisie, memory, and the span of memory. Proust.

RH: What attracts you personally to this work?

NS: "A la Recherche du Temps Perdu" is one of my favorites. When I was growing up—my own family—they had a Proustian air... an aura... about them. I suppose I think of myself as Proustian... aristocratic. I come from that sort of a background. Ah, yes... now I am a left-wing radical. From one extreme to the other.

RH: Can you tell me what the script for this film intends to encompass?

NS: The script I must tell you will be Pinter's masterpiece... at least

for film... Samuel Beckett just read it... and he agrees. Mr. Pinter is the only contemporary writer who has developed this sense of the mastery of time. I felt, only he could be true to Proust... the sense of time... and of silence... that is Proust. Pinter knows this. He has been working on the scenario for a year. It is difficult to explain... the span of memory... the detail of the work is excellent. Pinter understood what we wanted. There are those who attempted to do this as a film before... Visconti for one. Those who know me know that I can and will do it—bring it together. For the director Losey seemed right. There is no director in France to do it. They are afraid of it. To the French this work is the masterpiece of masterpieces... untouchable.

RH: The homosexuality—how do you handle that?

NS: Charlus has a very blatant affair with an officer... then there is the relationship of Swann and Charlus which was alternately ambivalent and frustrating. Charlus is the dark, brooding character, the manipulator just as I was in "Les Enfants Terribles"—yet Swann is a character you can feel involved with. The homosexuality? It is to be true to Proust's textual intentions yet we may find ourselves taking certain liberties. Who can say.

RH: What actors do you have in mind?

NS: Hopefully bilingual actors with... yes... stature—actors who speak French and English. Jeanne Moreau and Simone Signoret... you know, Proustian types... and then of course we are negotiating with Marlon Brando to play M. de Charlus. Isn't that exciting?

RH: Can you conceive of yourself in any of the roles?

NS: Not just at this time.

RH: Would you act in a future film then—would you consider acting again?

NS: Ah... yes, I... yes.

RH: Your performance as Elisabeth in "Les Enfants Terribles" is now considered by critics and film buffs to be one of the great performances in the history of film. Can you tell me or talk about how you got into the role originally?

NS: I think of my transformation into Elisabeth as just that—a miracle—a miraculous transformation... well, it was hard work... I had studied acting, but this was dif-

ferent. There was an aura of destiny surrounding it. I was in the film "Silence of the Sea" from the novel by Vercors. This novel was written during the war when the occupation was on and this book became in the underground a symbol of resistance. It was the first film Melville directed and it took enormous courage for him to do it. After the completion of the film there was a large gathering. At this party I was introduced to Jean Cocteau who said to me, "you are my Elisabeth." He was so impressed with Melville's work that he gave him the rights to "Les Enfants Terribles" which previously he said could never be filmed. Anyway, Cocteau had written the novel in 17 days, after an opium cure. He had done many drawings of Elisabeth and Paul during this time—and the drawings were me—and Edouard Dermithe too... it was uncanny. I believe some genie was pushing us

all together. As a girl of 14 I was caught reading Cocteau's book and my parents set it on fire. It was forbidden.

RH: How old were you when you made the film?

NS: Twenty-two... and I had just at that time been having an intense relationship with a boy who resembled the character of Paul. It was sort of a between-friendship and love-affair and sometimes we would not be able to make the emotional differentiation. A lot of anger. A sensitive boy, he was younger than I then—17. I don't know... it allowed me to identify even further with the character of Elisabeth.

RH: Can you talk about your relationship with Cocteau? Was it a close relationship?

NS: Yes, I would say so... he was magnificent, wonderful... impeccable. Everyone adored him, workers, actors. Cocteau had a special love for actors, you know. We would film only by night, like the nocturnal owl, from eight o'clock in the evening till six o'clock in the morning. I loved doing that—the intensity of the night. Cocteau would arrive with sandwiches at midnight after doing the rounds of the theatres and bistros he loved. In the beginning there was an incredible rapport, a unity. We all created together. However, after the film was released Melville became furiously jealous because people would call it Cocteau's film. This created a great deal of animosity. I believe this may have had something to do with the film being held back these last 10 years.

RH: Did Cocteau do any of the actual directing?

NS: Well, he was always there. He conferred with Melville, with us. One day Melville was ill so Cocteau did take over. It was the day we stole in the shop by the sea.

RH: Oh, the shoplifting scene.

NS: Yes, that was a lot of fun.

RH: I wanted to talk about some of the other relationships, like Edouard Dermithe.

NS: We had a good relationship but as an actor he was tortured and miserable working with Melville. Melville disliked him, feeling he'd been forced on him because he was Jean's lover. Previously, he had played the small part of Cegeste in "Orpheus" directed by Cocteau. Cocteau would not interfere in Melville's problems with Dermithe for fear of jeopardizing the completion of the film.

RH: How would you describe the Dermithe-Cocteau relationship?

NS: Well, they were lovers. You see... he was also legally adopted by Cocteau and named his heir. He handles all the affairs of the Cocteau estate. So he was both son and lover... and that is, well, the French. Cocteau had been living with Francois Villiard.

RH: We talked the other night about the incest scenes that were cut.

NS: One shot only was cut...

RH: What went on in that scene?

NS: I got into bed and began to make love to my brother... toward the end of the movie—one of the last scenes—to kiss him. It was not pornographic as films are today... not so literal... but they cut this section. Instead we see one of Cocteau's infernal smiling, all knowing statues... with a moustache yet.

RH: When Melville directed you,

did he use an inner psychological approach or did you as an actress have to fend for yourself?

NS: Melville was difficult, strong-headed like Otto Preminger. I was once called into his office at 2 a.m. and he said, "you must play this scene like Bette Davis—more exaggerated." I looked at him in horror. He wanted me to... how you say... 'camp' it up. I said, "No. I won't do that—never." The part is somewhat theatrical—but Bette Davis? I was not about to impersonate her.

RH: So you found the part?

NS: That's it.

RH: In the 1950s there was a rumor circulating naming you as Cocteau's illegitimate daughter. How does this kind of myth begin?

NS: That's a new one. But in a way we were all like sons and daughters to him. If he had a daughter I do believe that I... this girl... Elisabeth would be... could be her. It was the great sadness of his life—I think—not to have a child. I don't know why... it was his dream.

RH: But he had actors and artists.

NS: Yes, that was it.

RH: In your opinion what is the most important theme in "Les Enfants Terribles"?

NS: Incest. You know an important Jungian psychiatrist once told me that of all relationships incest was the most intense, then homosexuality, then heterosexuality. The most passionate—incest.

RH: So heterosexuality is third?

NS: Yes. It is not necessarily my opinion, but interesting, no?

RH: Well, you were part of these relationships. You saw them happening—the Cocteau entourage, his lovers. What do you think of the gay liberation movement or woman's movement happening now?

NS: I am for the liberation of people to be free... everyone, everywhere. That is my purpose as an artist... to open things up—to free the emotional slaves, all the minorities, the marginals. Simone De Beauvoir she is a friend of mine.

RH: You yourself were in the French resistance?

NS: Yes, I was in the army; and escaped France, as a Jew. I was part of the resistance and in the Free French Army until the war ended in 1946. Then I decided I would become an actress.

RH: Did you study modern French philosophy?

NS: I have read Sartre but now I am reading Henri Bergson's "Creative Evolution." He was a cousin of Proust's by marriage and he influenced Proust's work with his inventive theories of time.

RH: This may seem a trivial question; but who is your favorite actress? Or actors?

NS: You know Cocteau told me that he had originally thought of Greta Garbo when he wrote "Les Enfants Terribles"—it was her face he saw. Recently on French TV I watched her in "Camille" and she was superb. Garbo is one of a kind—and Katharine Hepburn, Marlon Brando, of course... our choice for Charlus. I also like the new American actor Robert DeNiro. He is very interesting.

RH: After "Remembrance of Things Past..." what will you do?

NS: I have a documentary in mind... I can't talk about it yet. It is too soon.

RH: What are your favorite films?

NS: I think Leontine Sagan's "Maedchen in Uniform" is one, the first major film to deal with lesbianism... and "Citizen Kane"... Jean Renoir's "Rules of the Game" is a masterpiece. Fellini's "8½," "POTEMKIN," "IVAN THE TERRIBLE," King Vidor's "THE BIG PARADE" and "THE CROWD," Chekhov's "Lady With the Dog."

RH: What about a film like "L'avventura"?

NS: I prefer Godard to Antonioni. Antonioni's films of boredom seem dated now. I thought Godard's "Breathless" was the best of the French new wave films.

RH: What about "Les Enfants Terribles"?

NS: This is so close, to me it is hard to see it as a favorite. That takes distance.

RH: Someone compared you to Arletty of "Children of Paradise" the other night. Garance.

NS: No, no. If I were to be compared to anyone please make it to Yvonne De Bray—a terrific person—and actress... the mother of Jean Marais. I met her at the opening of my film in the 1950s. She starred in "Les Parents Terribles," the film about mother and son incest. Her own son Jean Marais actually played opposite her on stage and on film. I loved her. She held me and kissed me at the opening... yes.

RH: Jean Marais and Cocteau—they were lovers too?

NS: Yes, for 10 years. He was also like a son to Cocteau. You know I meant to tell you that the story of Elisabeth and Paul in "Les Enfants Terribles" was a roman a clef... how do you say, a true one... it actually existed. Their real names were Jean and Jeanne Bourgoignot. Gertrude Stein had once asked Cocteau if they were the models for "Les Enfants Terribles" and he said they were. She had known of them. Jean was a wealthy designer... they came from an aristocratic family. The girl, Jeanne, was beside herself, mad, and suicided on Christmas eve in 1929. The brother, who was said to be somewhat cruel and severe then became a Trappist Monk and later went into the service in Africa winding up his days working in a leper colony. He died in 1968, four years after Cocteau. I think. A true story of incest. I'm sure there are many but...

RH: Are you married?

NS: No.

RH: What are your ideas about marriage?

NS: I don't believe in marriage.

RH: Why?

NS: Because I think it is rotten. Ha... if I was married I probably couldn't be doing most of the things I am now enjoying doing.

RH: You think people in marriage have a tendency to hold one another back?

NS: Yes. I am for love, but I am against marriage. Even if you want children in your life I don't believe you need to be married.

A long hard stare.

RH: Are you sure you are not the illegitimate daughter of Cocteau?

NS: Cocteau had many illegitimate children. □