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PARIS Eric Rohmer, who is perhaps the French filmmaker most faithful to a genre he created, has made a surprising new movie. The father of the New Wave, the auteur movement of the '60s, is known as a master of elegant dialogue in movies that range from the frivolous to the philosophical. If his series on romantic rendez-vous look more literary, more formal than sensual, his treatment of proverbs and fables, summer, winter, spring and autumn tales are light as air. His films have captivated audiences since "Ma Nuit Chez Maud" (1969).

Now, at 83, he has made "Triple Agent," a political-historical thriller that was shown at the Berlin festival this month.

"I don't like to play the traveling salesman with my films, so I don't plan to go to Berlin," he said before the festival, from his Right Bank production office, his haunt of many years. "I live outside the film circuit. I like my tranquillity."

And it is a quiet room, bare of the usual trophies, with a door that doesn't shut properly. He gets up to give it a shove. "As [Alfred de] Musset says, 'Il faut qu'une

porte soit ouverte ou fermée, '[a door must be open or shut]," comments the director, who has himself been called the Musset of cinema. "Not that I think anybody is going to overhear our conversation."

"Triple Agent," which covers the period from the rise of the Front Populaire in the 1930s to the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact in 1939, is a spy story, gripping and baffling to the end. "You probably need to see it twice, like my other films," he suggests. The movie probes our recent past, with a hero who predicts the collusion between Russia and Germany, and who pays for his clairvoyance.

"It's about a vital moment in world history - the start of World War II," the director says. "I inserted newsreel footage to give the film a historic dimension it wouldn't have otherwise."

"Triple Agent" looks unlike any other Rohmer film - it may be that the weight of the past has borne down on the director. A student of German literature, he made his career under the spell of history. There were films such as "La Marquise d'O" from the story by Heinrich von Kleist, and "Perceval le Gallois" in the 1970s. "L'Anglaise et le Duc," in 2001, was set among aristocrats during the French Revolution.

"Triple Agent" is inspired by the unsolved mystery surrounding Nikolai Skobline, a Russian general in exile, who settled in Paris during the 1930s and disappeared suddenly. "The characters are invented, however, because I didn't want to make a historic movie but a work of fiction. Yet, things that seem false - kidnapping, spying neighbors - are historically true."

In the movie, the general leads several secret lives under the nose of his beautiful Greek wife. We know that he is a secret agent, but we don't know for whom - the White Russians, victims of the Revolution, the Soviets or the Germans. "The plot is complex," Rohmer says, "we know the story through the wife's eyes and through what her husband says, but we don't know if we should believe everything he says."

Courteous, and precise, the director is not one to reveal too much about his plots or motives. "I am somebody who respects secrets. Sometimes actors I work with tell me things, and they know that I will keep silent as the tomb. In France, we're not allowed to talk about people's private lives, it's a tradition. I keep the secret of my profession, even though I am not a spy," he adds with a small smile.

In the film, Skobline, played by the Ukrainian actor Serge Renko, comes home briefly between missions. His wife, played by the Greek actress Katerina Didaskalou, is a painter who has little contact with the outside world. The wife is befriended by a French couple in the apartment below theirs, French Communists who are enthusiastic about the newly formed Front Populaire government.

The story takes place mostly in the intimate space of the couple's apartment. They appear to live their love intensely between the general's mysterious trips. He says he is going to Brussels, and when a friend informs his wife that he has been spotted in Berlin, he smiles and says that he went to Brussels on the way to Berlin.

You cannot help wondering how the poor woman can be happy with a husband who hides his life from her. "But he can't tell his wife," the director says, "because that is his job, just the way a priest or a lawyer has to keep things to himself."

Despite the small size of the couple's apartment, the fittings are sumptuous, their clothes elegant, their manners exquisite. "I always keep an eye on detail," Rohmer says, "and in this movie, the details are more luxurious than usual: The apartment looks like a Vuillard painting, brimming over with details."

An air of suspense, a shadow of suspicion is cast on their lives. Even random encounters are charged with mystery. "The film has the tone of comedy, and suddenly turns tragic - we never suspect what is going to happen," he said.

Rohmer has given the film a marvelous stagey quality, something like the look of early Hitchcock movies in which everybody acts guilty. The director, who was the founding editor of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and who wrote a book on Hitchcock with Claude Chabrol, had specific movies in mind. "Yes, 'Suspicion,' with Cary Grant and Joan Fontaine, along with a couple of spy movies that I reviewed back then, such as Mankiewicz's 'The Quiet American,' from Graham Greene's novel - it wasn't the novel that inspired me, but the way Mankiewicz changed it."

"Triple Agent" is true to his style in the use of dialogue. The characters talk all the time in this movie too, and he was attentive to the way they speak. "My characters are foreigners, so they speak French carefully," he said, "and I made the wife Greek so they could speak French together - otherwise they would have had to speak in Russian."

Rohmer lived during World War II between Paris and the provinces. "I had learned German at the lycée before the war broke out, but it was literary German. The Franco-German hostility left over from the first World War was very sad."

After the war, he taught literature, and made shorts on a shoestring. His first feature film, "Le Signe du Lion," about an American musician whose life unravels suddenly one summer, was considered a disaster at the time. And Rohmer's romantic comedies were perceived as less radical than films by his New Wave colleagues: François Truffaut's "400 Coups," Jean-Luc Godard's "À bout de souffle," Jacques Rivette's "Paris Nous Appartient," Claude Chabrol's "Le Beau Serge." But if he appeared older than the others, professorial, over the years, he

has rejuvenated his creativity and become one of the most popular French filmmakers abroad.

He still refers to the New Wave, aware that it has fallen out of favor with today's generation. "What's left of the New Wave? I think I am still here, and I am faithful to a certain way of filming. I keep the spirit of the documentary. I like to leave something open, a little room - even in this movie, which was very prepared and scripted - for improvisation."

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