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Carlos Clarens

The Last Metro
Screenplay by Francois Truffaut, Suzanne Schiffman and Jean-Claude Grumberg
Directed by Francois Truffaut

TRANSIT SLOWDOWN

Take three premises:

1. A theater troupe in a Nazi-occupied European city attempts to carry on and stage a new play, only to have its leading players drawn into the Resistance.

2. A famous actress who has resolved to ignore politics and devote her life to the theater becomes romantically involved with an officer in the German Occupation Army.

3. A collaborationist critic pans the play of a homosexual playwright while singling out for praise the leading man, who happens to be the playwright's lover: whereupon the actor beats the critic up at the risk of his career and even of his life.

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These situations relate to the moral position of actors in an occupied country (or under a repressive system), to the isolationism of the theater world and to the larger and riskier issue of collaboration with the enemy. They once provided the stuff of drama for one good picture, one fair play and a juicy footnote to the chronicle of Paris during the Occupation. The first served Ernst Lubitsch for *To Be or Not to Be*, a comedy full of uneasy laughter and Jewish ruefulness that was probably the cinema's first attempt at modern black humor. The second provided Jean Renoir with the plot of *Carola*, a play that hardly compares to his films but is nonetheless ripe with characteristic reflections on reality and theatrical illusion. (Leslie Caron and Mel Ferrer appeared in a TV version a dozen years ago, directed by Norman Lloyd who, alas, was no Renoir: yet it made an impression.) The third is factual: the actor Jean Marais thrashed the critic Alain Laubreaux for denigrating his then-lover Jean Cocteau.

These anecdotes, fictional and real, have been incorporated in some measure into the screenplay of Francois Truffaut's *The Last Metro*. The title communicates a certain urgency — even today the Paris Metro closes at half-past midnight and there is a mad last-minute scramble to get in — yet Truffaut's film has almost none. Truffaut surely must remember the Occupation: he was 8 when it began and 12 when the American Army liberated Paris. Yet instead of delving into his own memories of the period, he has sought his inspiration in films of and about the Occupation. As a result, *The Last Metro* gives an impression of being twice removed from its subject, as if its makers feared to tread where demons and angels, real or imagined, once rushed in.

At his press conference last October (when the film closed the N.Y. Film Festival) Truffaut stated with typical modesty that he admired Lubitsch too much to attempt an imitation; elsewhere he paid frequent homage to Renoir as his film mentor. Even if he had been willing, it is doubtful that Truffaut would have come up to snuff. For one thing, *To Be or Not to Be* was not afraid to be in bad taste: Lubitsch, like Renoir, had a seemingly inexhaustible reserve of personal experience, which is why their films seem so first-hand and lived-in, even when some are actually remakes of previous pictures. The worst Truffaut pictures are remakes of films that were either perfect the first time around or so bad to start with that no one should have bothered with them. (*Mississippi Mermaid* was ersatz Hitchcock, *The Man Who Loved Women* ersatz Sacha Guitry — mediocre as they both were, they are still preferable to an ersatz Truffaut like *Love on the Run*.)

Not that *The Last Metro* is such a terrible picture from an erstwhile *enfant terrible*. It's just that some wonderful opportunities have been wasted, as if Truffaut had decided to skirt everything that was truly dramatic.

Such bet-hedging pays off poorly in terms of drama, irony and fresh insight into the period and its theater (which was remarkably rich, incidentally). Truffaut's notion of irony is a little watery — a cabaret singer delivers "Bei Mir Bist du Schoen" without a word of Yiddish in the lyrics, the Jewish director is played by Heinz Bennent, a German actor who, funny, doesn't look Jewish. On the other hand, its calculations have paid off handsomely at the box office. Last week it took 10 French Oscars and it's the year's biggest grosser in France. At least one Oscar is amply deserved: Catherine Deneuve's performance, her best since *Tristana* more than a decade ago, reflects Truffaut's intelligence: no other French actress can suggest as many conflicting emotions with a simple furtive glance or an awareness of sexual tension without loss of composure.

Truffaut's title *The Last Metro* suggests urgency, yet the film has almost none

Such a phenomenal success forces one to make the obvious pop-sociological connection. The German Occupation of France is probably the most traumatic experience that country has lived through in modern history, the period when French national character was put to its severest test. After the war, Celine remarked (with typical hyperbole) that 30 million Frenchmen had lived four years under Nazi rule, and 20 million of them had made a profit. It was truly France's tackiest hour and it continues to haunt the French. In the last decade there have been unflattering films about those morally bankrupt years. Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* spiked fiction with a few bitter truths; *The Sorrow and the Pity* went deeper, so deep in fact that it came up with no easy answers. Neither film let the French off the hook the way Truffaut's does.

At its darkest, *The Last Metro* suggests that it must have been tough to be a Jew in France in 1940-44: it still is, and the recent synagogue bombings may have improved the film's chances simply by reopening the Jewish question. But *The Last Metro* is the last thing a film about the Occupation should be: it averts its eyes from the big issues, and plays it cozy about some quite uncomfortable situations. •