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Author(s)	Mark Shivas Jean-André Fieschi
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INTERVIEW WITH CLAUDE CHABROL

What do you think of your first film, Le Beau Serge, *these days?*
I still quite like the opening, and I quite like the village, La Creuse, where I stayed during the war. I hate the film's ending.
It was symbolic, though, wasn't it?
But it didn't come out very honest. In my mind it corresponded to something quite precise, something one often comes across in the world, but . . .
What were the things that mainly interested you in the making of the film?
First of all, there was the village which I knew well, and I liked the people there very much. That part of it I enjoyed doing a lot. But at the same time I was learning the technical side, and that lost us lots of time!
Haven't a lot of documentary things about the village been cut out during the montage?
At the outset, the film was at least two and a half hours long. Luckily I showed it to some people and they said "Aië, aië!" so I cut three quarters of an hour. And in comparison with the original scenario I'd *already* cut half an hour. So it *could* have lasted three hours. It was cut mainly in the transitions, and then there were two things which took up a hell of a lot of time. The cutting was done so that the film could be more successful commercially, but I took care to make sure that the topography of the village was respected. So in order to get from one place to another, even if it meant going right across the village, one went right across following the guy or whoever it might be. That took plenty of time!

Then there were things like the baking of bread and scenes in the bistro with people talking among themselves that had nothing to do with the subject of the film but seemed to me to be indispensable at the time. You see, even the tables of the bistro were of very old wood, and so much wine had been spilt on them that they had a unique colour. Henri (Decaë) had rendered this colour so well that I would have liked to have it in the film. But then everything would have been interminable.
Had you ever worked with actors before? Rivette began, for instance, with actors in a short film.
No, I hadn't done anything interesting. Short films aren't really the same. But for *Le Beau Serge* I mainly chose friends and old hams. In using these people, I realised that I liked barnstormers and actors who exaggerated a little. I always encourage them to grimace. If you are afraid you go (*makes expression of horror by shrinking back with eyes popping*), if you are happy you go (*throws up hands in glee*)! It's because of this taste of mine that from time to time the actors grimace. The ones I used in *Le Beau Serge* were good, but not good at that.
Do you prefer to use their natural mannerisms?
Yes, there was the way in which Jean-Claude (Brialy) runs. That was very useful to me. It was when I saw him run like that I made him wear the scarf, because it suited him. That was nowhere in the script. Gerard Blain rolls his shoulders like this . . . when he walks, so I told him to walk faster to accentuate the fact. Little guys with complexes about their size often do things like this to make them look bigger. Hawks must have noticed this too in *Hatari*! On top of all this rolling motion, he was often supposed to be drunk as well, seeming to lean on one leg first and then on the other.
Did you have more technical than acting problems?
I had my main problems with that infernal device they call the camera-blimp! That was dreadful. All the same, there are one or two things I like. In the camera movements there are some that don't serve any purpose: when a man walks across the main square, I put down all the tracking rails I had, maybe four hundred, five hundred metres of rail! I had already intended to do lots of camera movement—travellings which started here and ended there, crossing the main square, ending by going through a door into a house! Fantastic! As the camera followed the actor through the door, he was obliged to walk on the rails—clack, clack, and you could see them too! Then we had to go through little doors inside which there was no room for anything much more than the camera. Poor Rabier, he had a hell of a time working on the framing.

Les Cousins

What was it about the subject of Les Cousins *that interested you particularly?*
I had both *Les Cousins* and *Le Beau Serge* prepared at the same time, in fact, I had the idea for *Les Cousins* but I couldn't do it because it would have been too expensive. Construction-wise *Le Beau Serge* was at once too long and without enough incident for its length. The pieces about the father-in-law were added later. *Les Cousins* was just three pages long when written down. The situations were more compact. It has more construction. *Le Beau Serge* was economical and it was good on the village, but the story was rather tricked up. The people in *Les Cousins* are real.
What do you like especially in Les Cousins?
I'm very fond of the tomates à la Provencale, and I quite like the second surprise-party. The man who breaks the chains—things like that. The background to the party . . . nothing quite like it on the screen for twenty years . . . I think I broke all records there! Madness. There's everything there—Wagner, girls with bare feet, the lot!
Weren't there repercussions from that film?
Not particularly. There was a little. People didn't think there were any Fascists in France then: they were that stupid. Now they can see that it was true.
The characters?

I like the character played by Brialy, and Carolus (Blain), quite well. It's sad that a chap as frank as he ends up a victim of his own foolishness.

Is Gegauff's part in it mainly concerned with the characters or with the construction of the script?

It's not the construction which is Paul's part, but the dialogue, which is real Gegauff dialogue. It succeeds in saying in two pages what would have taken me four to say. That's very useful because it allows you to do a lot more in the same amount of time. And also by Gegauff are one or two little things such as the scene where they talk about the erotic quality of their skin. The whole story depends on this, he would say: it's a story about skin texture. He wrote that scene in about half an hour.

Didn't he have any ideas as a scenarist?

No, no, no ideas of construction.

So the symmetrical construction of the film is your work?

Yes, I like symmetry. I like it when everything comes together at the end, but one mustn't strive for symmetry. It annoys me to strive for "rhymes". It's good working with Gegauff because he takes a delight in destroying casuistry. I like what Paul does.

A Double Tour

What was it that appealed in the subject of A Double Tour?

I read Stanley Ellin's book when I was doing my military service and there was one thing which I found very remarkable then: a chap who's very conformist and then suddenly takes off rejoicing into nature. The subject was impossible. There was one thing in it about a key which locks a granary. I have *never* understood whether the important thing was that it was locked or that it was unlocked! So I cut that out. And I amused myself with the mythological aspects of the story: Leda, and there were swan references in the house! Then there was the scene of the row between the man, Dacqumine, and his wife, the first version of which was refused by the Hakims who were producing the film: it was much more horrible than the scene we eventually shot. It was entirely physical with the bloke saying to his wife "You look a mess, your armpits smell bad", and other nasty things. Finally there was the character of the Hungarian, Laszlo (Jean-Paul Belmondo). He interested me. But at the same time, this was a mistake because the film would have done better at the box-office without him. It didn't do badly, but without this bizarre guy, spectators would have been less upset by the film. He was a worrying element, spending his time saying and doing outrageous things to offend people.

In A Double Tour *André Jocelyn plays the role of a person who excludes or destroys beauty, a person who seems to crop up quite a lot in your films*—L'Oeil du Malin *and* Ophelia *as well.*

Jocelyn represents a certain type in French society—the son of a good family, rather degenerate, a bit queer. Jocelyn is good at portraying that kind of character.

But let's imagine a young chap who's intelligent, sensitive, kind, handsome, who lives in a milieu which is unintelligent, insensitive, ugly, hard and yet he cannot abandon the milieu because his roots, his family are in it. When he comes face to face with something that contradicts what he has been brought up to, it's inevitable and normal that he will try to destroy it. In *L'Oeil du Malin* it's a bit different: the wish for destruction comes more from the man's mediocrity than from anything else. The reaction is to turn their destruction outwards, preferring to fire on others. One finds the same sort of thing in present day politics—the young people who have become *plastiqueurs.* I'm sure their origins aren't so different from those of the Jocelyn character in *A Double Tour:* they're people who have problems inside themselves, inside their families. That sort of character interests me a great deal. *It's the opposite in* Ophelia *isn't it, a bit like* Vertigo, *where the character wants to make his dream concrete and thus destroys the real thing?*

It's very much like *Vertigo*, and that's a film which I admire very much. I saw it again when I was making *Ophelia* and I found it totally unbearable. I found ridiculous arguments so that I could say to myself "What is all this drivelling nonsense?"! But the arguments that I used to myself when I was making *Ophelia* were ridiculous.

Vertigo *certainly had its influence, because there were things in* L'Oeil du Malin *there were very similar shots.*

Oh yes.

And the colour in A Double Tour . . *the field of poppies. You said the main problems were Decaë's.*

There's one thing which I hate about colour films . . . people who use up a lot of their despairing producer's money by working on the colour in the laboratory to bring out the dominant hues, or to make colour films where there isn't any colour. The hell with that! I like to have the screen full of colour, twenty colours on the screen at once, fifty colours. There are no dominants despite what people have said.

It must have been awful for Decaë . . .

Yes, but the result was very faithful . . . and it was horribly complicated. I mean the golds and the interiors, with the

Still. Les Cousins. *Clovis (Claude Cerval) helps in the seduction of Florence (Juliette Mayniel).*

windows with the coloured glass giving the faces three colours at once. The relationship between the interiors and the Provence exteriors was very important, and co-ordinating the ideas of the decorator and costumier, the cameraman and director, are specially important in colour movies, and much more difficult than for a black and white film. I like making black and white films in natural surroundings, but I much prefer shooting a colour film inside a studio where the colours are easier to control. Some colours are very difficult to render, and you must compensate to get the colour you want on the screen. It's pretty complicated, but not so much for me as for the cameraman. I say to him, "You see this, you see that. I want that exactly rendered as it is. Is that possible?" In the studio there are no troubles about the sun going in!

A Double Tour *is very exact on the colourings of the south of France.*

It was also very important to get the decors right for the South. There were family photos in the house we used, and the paternal grandfather of the house looked exactly like Dacqumine.

Were you happy with the actors there?

That was rather complicated. Everything was prepared, the locations were chosen and all that. My first choice for Leda was Suzy Parker but she didn't fit in with the decor at all. So Antonella Lualdi was chosen. The plot had to be modified a bit . . . she became an Italian who had known a Hungarian in Japan. Rather remarkable! I also wanted Charles Boyer for the Dacqumine part. On the other hand Madeleine (Robinson) was just what I had wanted.

Jean-Paul Bemondo's gastronomic orgy was quite something. . .

Yes, I've often noticed that in films people don't really stuff themselves full when they're eating. So now I work on the principle of having at least one meal in all my films. After all one must eat. And after all, again, it's very scenic. It's difficult to put across on film, to get everyone in the shot without cutting to and fro. I've often thought of having a table made with a hole in the middle for the camera to film meal scenes!

Les Bonnes Femmes

Les Bonnes Femmes *is perhaps your most "symmetrical" film.*

Symmetrical? From the symmetrical point of view it's symmetrical!

In the montage or what?

In my last version there was a final quarter of an hour of flashes of people in the street leaving their work between six and seven. That was cut. At the outset it was more symmetrical. The whole thing came full circle.

Most people either think that Les Bonnes Femmes *is a masterpiece or they're violently against it.*

I wanted to make a film about stupid people that was very vulgar and deeply stupid. From that moment on I can hardly be reproached for making a film that is about stupid people. I don't think that it's a pessimistic film. I'm not pessimistic about people in general, but only about the way they live. When we wrote the film the people were, for Gegauff, fools. It was a film about fools. But at the same time we could see little by little that if they were foolish, it was mainly because they were

unable to express themselves, establish contact with each other. The result of naïvety, or a too great vulgarity.

People have said that I didn't like the people I was showing, because they believe that you have to ennoble them to like them. That's not true. Quite the opposite: only the types who don't like their fellows have to ennoble them.

But the cinema is an art of identification and that makes it annoying for the spectator. And that is perhaps the reason for the film's failure commercially.

As the film shows vulgar people, who explain themselves instinctively without any kind of mask, so spectators and critics talk about "excess". But the girls aren't shown as idiots. They're just brutalized by the way they live. They're simple girls who are impressed *savoir faire*, by people who *do* things, tricks and conjurors for example. Maids and shop girls love this sort of thing. The poetical side doesn't really interest them. You see much more grotesque things going on every day than you do in *Les Bonnes Femmes*. Actually it wasn't a *group* of girls in the film. In effect it was one.

Les Bonnes Femmes is the one I like best of all my films. I like *Ophelia* too, but I prefer *Les Bonnes Femmes*.

Ophelia was not quite what we wanted. I think it was shot too late. It should have been made sooner and nearer the time when I had the idea. And then it wasn't shot just *where* I would have liked: the chateau I had wanted had been sold and that was annoying. And we had changed the scenario around too much by the time the film was made. But I like *Ophelia* very much.

Les Godelureaux

I have the impression that you aren't very fond of Les Godelureaux.

It's a failure. From the start it was of an unfathomable idiocy. It was about uselessness, and its lack of success came from the fact that it too was useless. It should never have been started. Gegauff wrote a scenario of extraordinary uselessness! There are things in it I like quite well . . . the charity party. The film would only have made any sort of sense if it had lasted five hours and people had walked out all the way through so that there was no one left at the end. If the film had been a complete success there would have been three hundred people in the cinema at the beginning and only three at the end. But you can't make films on that principle, so it should never have been made at all.

The film is very close to absurdity, and what I really wanted can best be seen in a scene which was cut of Ambroisine and the bottle of cognac. Ambroisine (Bernadette Lafont) takes a bottle of cognac and hides it behind a curtain. Then she says, "I'd like a glass of cognac. I can't find it. Go and get it." Her idea is to mess Brialy about. They go off to the kitchen for it, but a third man, who's reading some kind of latin at the same time, follows them and finds them kissing in the kitchen. So they pretend to be looking for the cognac. They

Stills. A Double Tour. *Left: after Richard has confessed. Jeanne Valerie, Madeleine Robinson, André Jocelyn, Jean-Paul Belmondo. Right: milkman (Mario David) asks maid (Bernadette Lafont) to fetch the empties from Leda's house.*

are unable to find it, and continue their useless game all over the house, in all the rooms. In the end they give up and go back to the first room. Of course, nobody liked that scene, and there was no reason why they should have been happy with it. But then the whole film was about uselessness, about nothingness.

L'Oeil du Malin was a bit the same. It was about a pitiful man and the story was seen from his point of view. And so the film was, in a way, also pitiful, mean.

Did the film cost a lot to make?

No, very little, but it lost a lot!

Did you enjoy shooting the scenes of the beer festival?

I had to shoot it very quickly in one day only. And then I had 200,000 people on the screen all at once. More than *Ben Hur*!

What did you think of the character played by Charrier? Are you against him?

Charrier knew he was playing an unsympathetic character and did his best to make him sympathetic. Charrier is very usable as an actor.

L'Avarice—*the sketch from* The Seven Deadly Sins?

Ah yes, that meant a fortnight in St. Tropez for me. The producers liked the sketch and the public liked it too. Making it helped me a lot. But I made it too quickly in six days and nights and got very tired doing it. I'm very happy about the girl who played the young prostitute. She's very gifted, very true, very gentle. She was a virgin then. Still is, I hope.

Ophelia & Landru

What is the difference between the projected version of Ophelia *and the present one when finally made?*

I pushed it more towards having fun. And then the original version was more serious. I had the film *Hamlet* interposed in it. I put the guards back in and a bit where they chase Jocelyn, who puts on a cap and scarf to make them think he's breaking into the grounds of the chateau. I was obliged to change some of the scenes between Ivan (Jocelyn) and the girl (Mayniel). I'm very fond of Juliette, but she wasn't quite what I had in mind at the outset for the part. I wanted a girl with a sort of angelic quality, more ethereal, so that one should understand the impossibility of any erotic quality there. I like the little film within the film and the reception that goes with it because it's more normal than the rest of the film. The hero is normal in comparison with the rest of them. He's not at all mad. In the context of all the other monstrous people around, the relationship of Jocelyn and Mayniel is not at all strange.

Landru! That's something else again! . . . The women? There are two sorts of women in *Landru*: victims and non-victims! I must be careful but . . . there are sixteen victims I think . . . one, two, three, four, five important ones. Some one sees rapidly, their heads, then the smoking chimney. The last one he brings back. He doesn't kill her because the circumstances are unfavourable.

I didn't realise that Landru's first words would be so surprising. You see him going about his business, looking for furniture, as is his job, trying to make some money to take home to his family; he goes home, takes the paper from his wife, everything is quiet and then he roars "I would like a small cup of chocolate" and I tell you that is very frightening! He says it in a very savage voice.

He's very fastidious about his work. He's very sweet from time to time. Landru is a good father, though. He doesn't let his family go wanting.

The colours and the decors are pastel, but from time to time there are colours which are acid—worrying colours. Everything is pretty, pastel and then suddenly there's a colour which has nothing to do with the rest, expressing anguish. When he goes for the replies to his advertisement for lonely women, there's a little set which is an entresol so that you only see the women's hats and heads as they walk along the pavement outside. And those you see through a red window. On a screen of 25 or 20 square metres there are 16 square metres of red. The red shocks because it is out of place there.

I don't like stories which attempt to demythify a myth. But Landru . . . is he a myth or is he a man? A man transformed into myth. So when one makes a film about Landru, does one transform the myth into a man, or must one transform the man into myth? That's the question! So there are both in this film. For the first time in World Cinema, we see Before Our Very Eyes the metamorphosis from man into myth!

After *Landru* I have a sketch in *Les Plus Belles Escroqueries du Monde*, a farce about a guy who sells the Eiffel Tower in Germany to scrap merchants for the value of the iron. He has a small Eiffel Tower in his garden. Very beautiful. First shot is the Eiffel Tower covered in snow. Then an enormous nose of a watering can appears and pours water over it. And you see that it's not snow but soap and the man is washing down his Eiffel Tower. After that he puts a cover over it! He sells it at a false price because the iron has a sort of myth attached to it, even though the myth is not saleable to a scrap-merchant. I have to make it in CinemaScope. The Eiffel Tower fits into that shape of screen so beautifully.

Jean-André Fieschi
Mark Shivas

translated by Garry Broughton and Mark Shivas.

Stills. Les Bonnes Femmes. *Left: Mario David and Clothilde Joano. Right: Bernadette Lafont.*