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# SOHO ARTS



Allen Tannenbaum

Isabelle Huppert with Chabrol: perplexed and intrigued by *Violette*

## Claude Chabrol

# 'A Little Bit Puritanical'

Diane Jacobs

Claude Chabrol has a beak of a nose, gray hair, a not-at-all comely but very appealing demeanor. George Orwell once speculated that a man wears the face he deserves at 40. At 48, Chabrol — the director of the first French New Wave film, *Le Beau Serge*, and of such classic psychological thrillers as *La Femme Infidele* and *Le Boucher* and now of *Violette* — has an ironical and distinguished face with a pinched, wry, friendly grin. It is a face that contorts into grotesque parody at a moment's notice and just as quickly become quizzical and a little sad.

When I arrive at his Mayflower Hotel suite, on the afternoon before *Violette* is scheduled to close the New York Film Festival, his jacket and trousers are rumpled from sitting, and he's visibly exhausted from a day of interviews. Chabrol protests that he has not objected to the questioning at all — his only regret is that it's Sunday so *The Price Is Right* is not being aired on American television.

"Did I tell you the story about the man who came

forward?" he greets me, in perfect English. I hear about an old man who won at *The Price Is Right* and when instructed to "come forward" to claim his prize, did precisely that — flat on his face. "And the camera followed him," marvels Chabrol. It sounds a decidedly Chabrolean affair to me, but the story ends happily with the man surviving to enjoy his presents.

*Violette*, the true story of 18-year-old Violette Noziere who in 1933 murdered her train-mechanic father, also ends with the protagonist surviving; but it is not a very happy ending. Chabrol agrees. While his fictional murderers in such earlier films as *La Femme Infidele*, *This Man Must Die*, and *Just Before Nightfall* all find redemption of a sort in a better world while this world condemns them to death or prison, *Violette* is ultimately pardoned in France and never redeemed.

"It's a social redemption to be pardoned, of course," muses Chabrol, "but for me she is no better or more interesting after she repents for the crime than before. It's an ironical situation really: *Violette* poisons her father because he has them all crowded together in a little apartment that is too small for her spirit. So what happens? She

ends up in a prison cell, which is smaller still, but she doesn't feel imprisoned there. I did a lot of research, and I know for a fact that *Violette* was happy in prison. She liked it. And later she married, had five children, lived in a small provincial town where she ran a restaurant (which was very courageous — for the clients, I mean — don't you think?) and led exactly the *petit bourgeois* life she had killed. And yet I think she had to kill." Why? Chabrol is still uncertain. In his film, *Violette* tells a cellmate that she loves her mother because she doesn't understand her. Chabrol and actress Isabelle Huppert — who plays *Violette* — are similarly perplexed and intrigued by the murderess. "Usually when I finish a film, it is over for me," says Chabrol, who has made 31 features to date. "But with *Violette* that has not been the case. Sometimes Isabelle and I speak about *Violette* like you might speak about an aunt from Chicago."

The story of an adolescent who prowls the Latin Quarter in black and turns up girlish and well-scrubbed for supper at home, *Violette* is the film Chabrol is proudest of, at least for the moment. "Of course, when I

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"began, I was sure I would come to understand Violette because I am a very smart man," he says, grinning. He did discover information the police had never unearthed, "but what does this add up to in the end?" he wonders.

During the Noziere trial there was much talk of a certain Monsieur Emil who may have been Violette's real father and who was probably paying blackmail money, for one reason or another, to her mother. During his extensive research Chabrol came across a newspaper article reporting the suicide of a certain prominent Monsieur Emil in Normandy on the very day Violette was condemned to the guillotine. More interesting, his sleuthing convinced Chabrol that Violette lied to the authorities on at least two occasions during her trial: first when she said she had tried to poison her parents earlier that year, and again when she claimed her father had raped her when she was 13.

**Violette, the Best Liar**

"Violette is the best liar I've ever encountered," says Chabrol. "She knew the great truth for all liars: that the perfect lie is precisely what people want to hear. The rape is a very interesting point, though, and I think I know now what really happened. I personally know a girl of 12 and one day I was at the home of friends and that girl was there. She is beginning to have little breasts now, and one of the men looked at her strangely. I saw this, and I saw her feel it — although she wouldn't have put a name to it — and she hated the guy. I think something like this happened between Violette and Noziere when she was 13. One day her father had something in his eye that frightened her." But, I point out, the father in Chabrol's film is a pleasant, if self-deluding, fellow, a man pathetically in need of his daughter's affection and companionship.

"Yes, that too," explains Chabrol. "He is both — he's the man who wants to be loved and the lecherous man. He says, 'Kiss me, kiss me, my little girl,' but at the same time he sneaks a hand under her bottom. He is a pathetic character, yes, and I do feel sorry for him the way you feel sorry for people who are not bad and who are destroyed.

"It's a bit the same with the bourgeois husband in *La Femme Infidele* who kills his wife's young lover. I know why he kills because I invented him. He kills for two specific reasons. When he walks into the lover's apartment he finds the big silver lighter he gave his wife for a wedding anniversary and which she in turn has given the lover. And then he sees a statue that looks exactly like his wife, and that's too much for him. He kills the man with the little statue. I'm not against that husband. I'm against the killing, of course, but I understand him."

A man who is himself fond of worldly pleasures — notably good food — Chabrol has been hailed as anti-bourgeois because his films often decry the emptiness of comfortable living. What many have failed to note, however, is that Chabrol has tremendous compassion for all yearnings — material or otherwise — and this is particularly evident in *Violette*, where not only the parents, but the young heroine herself are incapable of lofty desires. She dreams of a ride in a car, a trip to a nice hotel by the seashore.

"Violette is no Shakespeare," says Chabrol. "She feels hemmed in by her life and wants to open a window. That is all. She's no rebel. If she were alive in '68, I don't imagine her fighting in the streets, but home watching television. She sought to bring color into her life through love and then through murder. But she had very bad judgment in love. The man she fell in love with, Jean Dabin, was not interesting in the least. The newspaper reporter whose book we based much of the film on claimed that Violette loved Dabin because she had been frigid before she met him, and he awakened her to sexual pleasures. But we know this is not the case at all. Dabin said as much at the trial. He said she was very placid when they made love. So it was a romantic, not a sexual infatuation with Dabin."

**Romance and Sex**

While want of sexuality has often signified emotional and spiritual sterility in his films, Chabrol has never championed sexuality for its own sake but rather as a manifestation of love or romance. In *Les Bonnes Femmes*, for instance, the attraction of a young shop girl for a man on a motorcycle is most compelling before they actually meet. And in *Violette* the young girl's romantic fervor is no less powerful because she cannot appreciate physical love.

"You know, you are the first person to have the intuition that I am a little puritanical!" exclaims Chabrol. "I am not very puritanical, but a little. The romantic part of love is more fun than pure sex. The fun in love is when you meet the girl and begin to feel attracted to her. The worst is when you think, 'Oh, I have to sleep with her tonight.' Sex is a very small part of married love. The only time sex is enjoyable purely for its own sake is when you're about 30 years old and very drunk on a Friday night.

"Dabin did look romantic in real life, and the story I tell in the film of Violette dreaming that he came from the sea

is true. In fact, the way she phrased it was psychologically very revealing. She says, 'Il est sorti de la mer,' which could mean he came from the mother — mere — as well as from the sea."

A relatively spare film stylistically, and thematically more concerned with fact than with psychological conjectures, *Violette* is certainly a departure for Chabrol. "After making *Violette* I am sure that it is a big lie to invent psychological reasons why a character does something," says Chabrol. "When you have a character doing real things, you cannot understand why. As for my style, it is changing too. I am tired of the trickiness of my early films, of my sweet, following dolly shots. I think I am getting less tricky. When you begin you always like tricks, and as you develop you come to appreciate simplicity.

"I remember one day in 1966 when John Ford came on my set of *The Champagne Murders*. It was 9:30 in the morning, and he was completely drunk. I think he came because of the film's title — because of the 'champagne.' And he saw I had planned a dolly shot, and he roared with laughter." Chabrol rolls himself into a ball and obligingly roars: "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha." Then I asked him why he was laughing, and when he could get control of himself he told me he hated dollies. "You should just put the camera in front of the character and cut," he told me. Then he shouted to the cameraman, 'Jump!' He was so drunk, but I begin to understand what he meant."

# Liviu Ciulei The Inspector General: Something New or Something Borrowed

Michael Nash

With the opening of Liviu Ciulei's version of *The Inspector General* by Nikolai Gogol (at Circle in the Square through November), New York audiences have their first real chance to see what all the fuss is about. Since last spring, the word concerning Ciulei — for years artistic director of the Lucia Sturdza Bulandra Theatre in Bucharest (the company is due at La Mama this fall) and one of the major figures in Rumania's post-war theatrical renaissance — has been nothing less than euphoric. A directorial savior, it would appear, has descended upon us.

After seeing Ciulei's *Hamlet* at the Arena Stage in Washington, Richard Eder and Clive Barnes vied for the honor of canonizing a Rumanian saint: "The best *Hamlet* of the decade"; "genius." The adulation only grew with *Spring Awakening* by Frank Wedekind, a student-acted project of Julliard's Theatre Program invited to the Public Theatre for a brief run. Eder lauded Ciulei as "a truly civilized man of the theatre," one of "the great contemporary directors," whose depth and vision make him a major candidate to head a "national theatre company at Lincoln Center." (Whose nation, the skeptic had to wonder? But rumors persist that Ciulei is being seriously considered.) And Henry Popkin, the *New York Times* peripatetic cultural reporter to the Communist Bloc, chimed in with fresh praise — terming Ciulei "another Rumanian theatrical master," and further linking him to an already established transplanted Rumanian by suggesting (falsely) that he was one of Andrei Serban's major teachers.

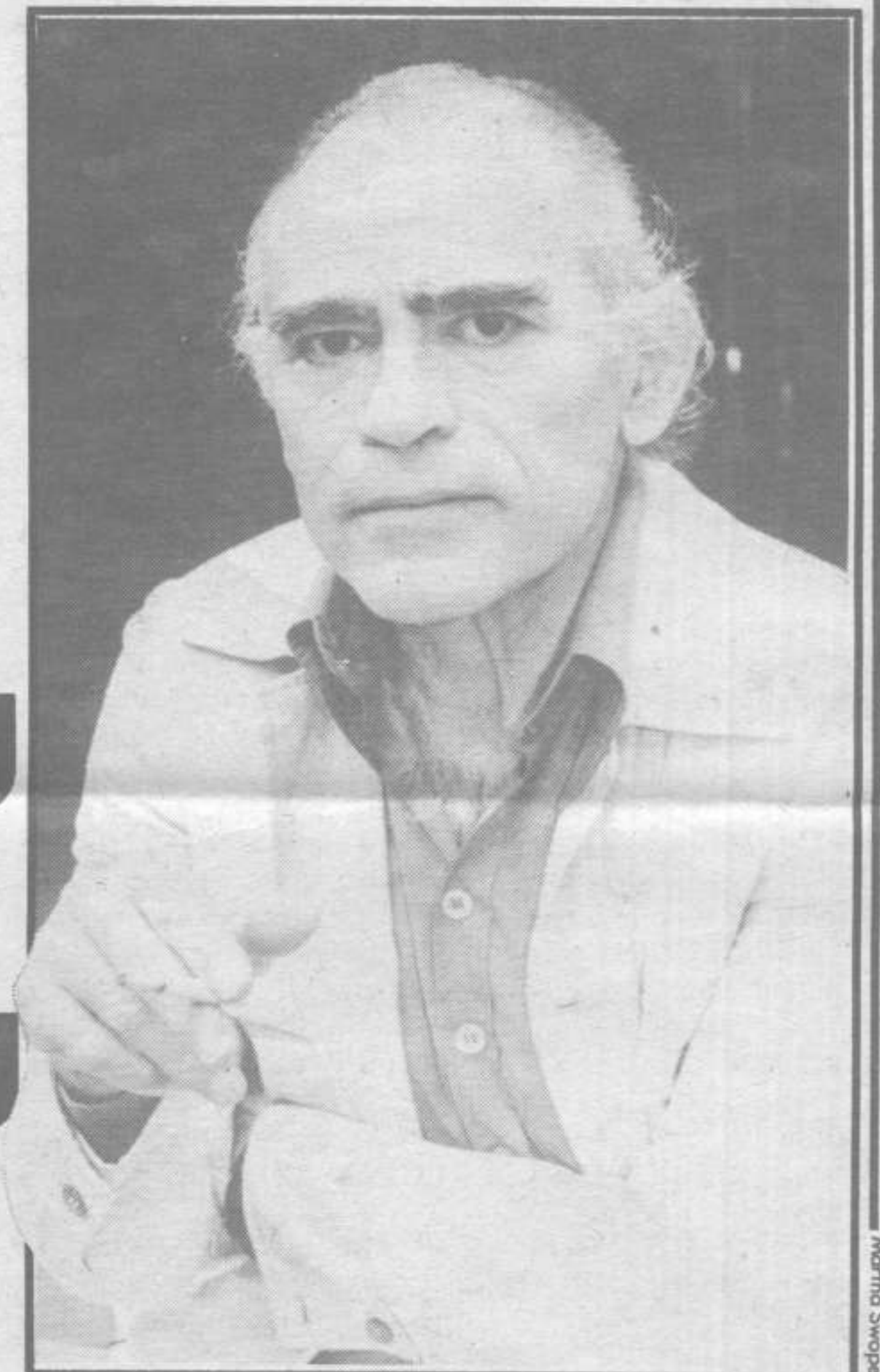
Clearly, Liviu Ciulei has taken the American theatre by storm. In the four years since Alan Schneider invited him to work at Arena Stage — to mount new versions of two

**'Violette Had No Imagination'**

*Violette* itself is both a simplification and an obfuscation of earlier theories on the notorious murderess. "The surrealists hoped that Violette was a surrealist character," says Chabrol. "Magritte, for instance, drew a few sketches of her, and in one he shows Violette on a bar stool, and to the left of her on a little chair sits a train engine. The train engine, of course, represents the train-mechanic father she killed, and Violette is raising herself above him to the bar. The surrealists had the idea that Violette killed the things that squelched her imagination, but the truth is that Violette had no imagination.

"You know what amuses me," adds Chabrol as I prepare to leave. "When I made *Les Bonnes Femmes*, the story of a poor, not very intelligent working girl who is murdered, everyone in Paris called me a misogynist. I was appalled — I couldn't understand it, because I thought the men in the film were the same, were even less sensitive than the women. Now, when I show a not very intelligent girl who murders, they say I am a feminist."

Chabrol, who is not very interested in polemics and very curious about humanity, shrugs. "You know, it's like racism in the United States. We'll know there is no more racism when television dares to show us five beautiful, intelligent, charming white people and one very awful black. And we'll know women are liberated when they dare to fail."



Liviu Ciulei, director of *The Inspector General*

Bucharest productions, Buchner's *Leonce and Lena* and *The Lower Depths* by Maxim Gorki — Ciulei has emerged as a major force. One can almost predict the pleasant windfall for Amtrak as New York theatre people make the pilgrimage to Washington to see his version of Moliere's *Don Juan* in the spring. But thanks to Circle in the Square, it is not too early for a balanced assessment. For *The Inspector General* is an intriguing if disappointing production which provides an occasion to put Liviu Ciulei's work into proper perspective — and perhaps to discover the scope, and thus the limits, of what he offers our theatre.

**Gogol with Political Intent**

Curiously, while Ciulei has never directed *The Inspector General* before, Gogol's comedy has played a pivotal role in his career. In 1972, while artistic director at the Bulandra, he "supervised" as Lucian Pintilie created a controversial production of the play. Pintilie broke with Eastern European tradition in seeing the Mayor, a stupid, arrogant, provincial tyrant, as the play's central figure rather than the unwitting con man Khlestakov. The political metaphor was obvious in the Rumanian context: Rumania herself is but a distant "province" of Russia; her "mayor," Nicolae Ceaucescu, the President of Rumania, became the satiric reference point of the production. Performed by two major Rumanian artists (Toma Caragiu as the Mayor, Virgil Oganescu as Khlestakov), Pintilie's *Inspector General* was by all accounts a vital, contemporary work. Ceaucescu's government closed it down after three performances.

Ciulei himself was not involved artistically in the pro-