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Alain Delon as the crook who gleans his robbery ruse from a prison warder in Jean-Pierre Melville's 'Red Circle'

ance of electric warning rays in Ronald Neame's *Gambit*. Comparisons, in fact, seem likely to be unavoidable as a haul of riches is made from a jewellery store in the Place Vendôme, with all manner of details cleverly noted in the steadily increasing current of tension. Melville is among the best directors of thrillers. One can still say that. Indeed one must say it, before suggesting that perhaps this time he is just a little short of his own mark. For the top of his form we must remember *Le samourai*, where, apart from the way everything in the film worked so beautifully to its purpose, there was the heightened suspense that gestates when the central figure is a loner. In *Le Cercle Rouge*, as in *Le deuxième souffle*, the major sequence is carried by a group: the tension has to be spread among several individuals, and this inevitably makes it thinner.

The group in this case is a trio, nicely assorted. The first is Alain Delon, released from prison where he has gleaned his robbery ruse from a warder, no less. The second is Gian-Maria Volonté as a man on the run. And the third is Yves Montand as a former member of the police who has taken to crooked ways and to heavy drinking. In one slightly too quaint little fragment we see him suffering from delirium tremens and being visited in his bed by a number of spiders and rats and reptiles: all filmed too 'straight' somehow. I thought, and with poor Montand trying his darndest not to ham the hysterics (seen *The Lost Weekend* lately?—far better).

Out of the three-way partnership there emerges but a trace of the criminal ivory tower which Melville has conjured up for our perusal before. This time he seems rather more concerned with the action than with the psychology, unless there has been some cutting. Nevertheless, Delon and Volonté have opportunities to imply a certain love among thieves, gingerly broached but creditably treated all the same.

Melville has managed, too, to keep things on the boil after the robbery, a feat which is always tricky in films of this shape. The stolen jewels are recognisable and therefore hot, of course; and conflict is taut between robbers and lawmen, with a strong emphasis upon the theory held by a policeman of high rank to the effect that 'Man is guilty—he is born innocent but it doesn't last'. Given this harsh line of thought, we sense an ivory tower establishing itself around the police as well. So wits are poised on either side for a tremendous shooting climax. Melville builds towards this ending quite superbly, from a subjective travelling shot that moves along a driveway bordered by stark branches, approaching a gracious house where lights glow warmly in the windows and the lawns spread themselves serenely to the night air. Here, in a little while, all

man buddies. The rest of the acting is for the most part neither here nor there, but again it's serviceable enough in the context of a background to the foreground, which, in this case, is totally Joel Grey. As the MC, the seeing eye, the seer, prophet and provider, he's totally magnificent. It's a plum part, and Mr Grey is the most spectacular plum to be picked from Broadway since Mae West.

Equally magnificent is the *look* of *Cabaret*. Seldom has colour and design been used to such great effect in re-creating a period feel—perhaps in a few Continental films, especially Italian ones, but never before in any American/English period films—and photographed with such directness and precision. Again insidious subtlety creeps in as a coverall summation. While *Cabaret* may not be a major masterpiece, it is a major landmark in the musical cinema, and while it may not be perfect, it's as close as we're likely to come in a long, long time.

RED CIRCLE

Directed by Jean-Pierre Melville. Produced by Robert Dorfmann. Screenplay by Melville. Director of photography, Henri Decaë. Music, Eric de Marsan. Art director, Theo Meurisse. Distributed by Columbia-Warner. French. English subtitles. Original title *Le Cercle Rouge*. Colour. Cert. A. 102 mins.

Corey, ALAIN DELON: Vogel. GIAN-MARIA VOLONTE: Jansen, YVES MONTAND: Mattei. ANDRE BOURVIL: Santi, FRANCOIS PERIER.

A ROBBERY SEQUENCE forms the core of *Le Cercle Rouge*. And it's a good one. It gives rise to comparisons with Dassin's 'silent' half-hour in *Du rififi chez les hommes* and also with a memorable passage to do with the hi-jacking of platinum in *Le deuxième souffle*, a crime film by the director at present under consideration. Jean-Pierre Melville. You could even compare a part of this caper with the more comic avoid-

well breaks loose.

As often before, Melville has had the enormous advantage of Henri Decaë's camerawork; mostly it is as fine as you would expect, despite an indifferent print and a couple of gauche spots of back projection with car interiors which tend to make things in the streets beyond the windows almost monochrome. There is quite a lot of low-key colour, though, and most of the time it comes across effectively. And the whole film, while not as breathtaking as Melville usually provides, is undoubtedly superior to the majority of thrillers that come our way.

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