

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *Les Diaboliques*

France, 1955. 114 min

Cast: Simone Signoret, Véra Clouzot, Paul Meurisse, Charles Vanel; **Writers:** Adapted from the novel by Pierre Boileau; **Music:** JGeorges Van Parys; **Cinematographer:** Armand Thirard; **Producer:** Henri-Georges Clouzot; **Director:** Henri-Georges Clouzot

than Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* (1955). It is such a perfectly built film, in fact, that according to legend Alfred Hitchcock undertook *Psycho* (1960), with its infamous shower carnage, in direct response to the 1955 masterpiece, which features a bathtub in several scenes, including its terrifying finale. It is difficult now to imagine the great Hitchcock, whose name is so synonymous with suspense, threatened by anyone. But some maintain that he saw Clouzot as the greatest challenge to his place in cinema. And after watching *Les Diaboliques*, it's easy to see why.



The film is set in a shabby boy's boarding school presided over by the sadistic, arrogant headmaster, Michel (Meurisse). But the students are not the targets of his wrath. Michel is a cad and a bully, but above all he is a misogynist; his real cruelty is reserved for the women in his life, namely his jaded mistress, Nicole (Signoret), and his demure wife, Christina (Clouzot, the director's wife). Far from hiding his affair (both women are faculty members at the school), Michel flaunts it, never missing an opportunity to remind Christina (a strict Catholic who refuses to grant a divorce) of his infidelity. Nicole is no better off, abused not just mental-

ly, but physically. The two women could have been enemies, but the world-weary Nicole, better designed to sustain Michel's abuse, takes to the suffering Christina, and soon they hatch a plan to kill Michel. An intricate plan is concocted, and Michel is lured to a distant city, where the two women drug him and drown him in the bathtub (few film villains have deserved it more completely). They take the body back to the school, where they dump it in the murky, stagnant swimming pool, planning to engineer what will look like the incidental discovery of the body. Everything goes exactly according to plan - that is, until the pool is drained, and both women are horrified to find that the body has vanished. What exactly has happened? Is someone onto the women, and planning to turn them in? Will they be blackmailed? Was Michel really dead when they dumped him in the pool? Is this a supernatural thriller, after all? The less said of the plot after this point, the better.

Clouzot builds the suspense with painstaking precision, and a maddening attention to detail. Like Hitchcock, he takes his time, never stooping to cheap thrills or rushing the release of tension. The audience is perhaps even more tortured than Nicole and Christina, who endure strange, cryptic clues and numerous alleged sightings of Michel. Unlike Hitchcock, Clouzot never lightens the film with any moments of humor, or romantic diversion. The audience is led, step-by-step, inch-by-excruciating-inch, through the building dread of the plot, to its final, sinister conclusion.

- Written by Lawrence Fahey

If you simplify French film history, the New Wave directors who emerged in the late-1950s look something like cinema's equivalent of punk rockers. Through their influential journal *Cahiers du Cinema* - and later, of course, through their films - such critics-turned-filmmakers as Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, and Francois Truffaut denounced the conventions of the moribund "Cinema of Quality" prevalent in Europe at that time. Where mainstream French film was, by the end of that decade, largely trapped in the stifled drawing rooms and cold banquet halls of costume melodramas and literary adaptations, New Wave filmmakers took their stories to the street, eschewing production values in favor of feeling and vitality. Drawing much of their inspiration from the gritty thrillers and crime dramas of such B-movie masters as Ray, Welles, and Mann, the young French filmmakers brought the experimentation, unpredictability and bravura back to film, rejuvenating French cinema in the process.

But while much is made of the New Wave directors' love of Hollywood's auteurs, it's important to remember that many of the filmmakers they most admired were not from Hollywood at all, but from France. Although French commercial cinema in the 1950s indeed had an overwhelming tendency toward stale predictability, some of the best French directors were making the most challenging suspense films of the time. And there is no better example of the 1950s French thriller