

CLASSE TOUS RISQUES

- RIALTO PICTURES -

CLAUDE SAUTET ON “CLASSE TOUS RISQUES”¹

Did you feel ready to become a director?

Yes, but I didn't quite realize the difficulty involved. I thought I was stronger than I was. Encouraged by Lino [Ventura] and Jacques Becker, I thought that I could avoid the traps. However, after four or five months of enthusiastic work with José Giovanni, with whom I got along perfectly, I realized that the direction we had taken ran counter to the producers' vision, and the conflicts began. They maintained you couldn't have as a hero someone who roughs up bank couriers and kills customs officers; we had to drop this and that, in fact abandon everything that had motivated me about the project. At a certain point the producers wanted nothing more to do with Giovanni and rejected our screenplay. I felt like giving up. Lino supported me up to a point. He had faith in me, but he was worried I no longer had enough faith in myself. And he wasn't necessarily wrong. In a panic, the producers asked me to talk to Morris Ergaz, the Italian co-producer who, in return for my casting his girlfriend Sandra Milo, defended the story as it was.

What had interested you in the story?

It was seeing two men on the run, lost in a city, Milan. Former mobsters, big bank robbers reduced to committing some pathetic crime: in other words, the theme of downfall. With Lino Ventura down and out, in his only suit, who has nowhere left to go, and who is ashamed of himself. It wasn't only a gangster film, but a film about the end of the traditional underworld and its flamboyant ways. The producers would have liked it to end guns blazing. But a spectacular ending was impossible, given the psychological state of the Abel/Lino character. Nevertheless, I couldn't find the ending. It was only while editing that Ghislain Cloquet, the cameraman, pointed out that since we had started in the street, we could also end in the street. With Abel, alone in the crowd, on the Boulevard des Italiens. And that's what we shot. With Giovanni's help, we found this simple line of commentary, "Several days later, Abel Davos was arrested. He was tried, found guilty, and executed."

It was a way of picking up from the voice-over of the beginning...

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Yes. For the beginning, we started by trying to show the life of the two characters in Milan without any commentary. But it was much too long, and I was looking for a contraction -- hence the voice-over that begins by referring to Abel's wife² and children. It provided the necessary information while adding a certain lyricism. When I first began working on the project, I wanted most of the film to take place in Milan, in an almost neo-realist context, and to end when Stark/Belmondo comes to help Abel. But the producers had bought the rights to the novel about a cross-country crime spree. And Lino insisted on that as well. All that was left was for me to treat a noir-ish love story through harsh violence, a willfully impoverished and anti-literary language. I saw it as an opportunity to make a French film with all that I'd learned from the American B movies.

What was Pascal Jardin's contribution to your script?

When we had our falling out with the producers, we had to find an intermediary to rework the screenplay. Pascal Jardin, who was just starting out, humbly limited himself to rewriting a simpler screenplay in a more flattering language. Without changing anything of the structure or the dialogue or the visual intentions.

What were your intentions in the directing?

I wanted something that would develop from the description of physical behavior. The situation in itself is so strong that the desperation of Abel's character suffices as an inner dimension. My method consisted of laying out the strategy of a scene as a whole, though leaving room for creativity, and very precise reference points. Then I filmed a number of takes of a wide shot of the scene. The advantage is that the action becomes authentic, with all the hesitations of reality, like something you're truly witnessing, and that dictated my blocking. All that was left was to reconstitute the event in its entirety from different angles. That's what I did for the roadblock outside Milan. I had to create a strategy for the whole that forces the character to see the roadblock as an insurmountable obstacle, which it isn't really. I racked my brains to come up with the objective situation of a Western, into which the characters introduced their own subjectivity. The idea was to make something sudden and unexpected happen; for example, the moment when the motorcyclist swerves sharply off the highway. It's while shooting that the phenomenon arises of the encounter of a location and the actors, provoking inspiration. The best parts of *Classe Tous Risques* came from that...

Do you remember the first day of shooting in the streets of Milan in October 1959?

² played by José Giovanni's sister, Simone France.

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I was in a frenzy of course. We started with the scene where the two unfortunate bank couriers are roughed up on Via Orefici, which was crowded with people. The Italian crew had a lot of experience with shooting in the street, which made my work a lot easier. We had rehearsed the action at midnight, the previous night, with the main actors and six or seven extras. The next morning, in the midst of the throngs invading the streets, everything went as planned. Except that passers-by began to run after the actors, thinking it was a real hold-up! It took an army of assistants to stop the people from beating them up.

Are you more comfortable on location or in the studio?

At the time I didn't feel comfortable in the studio. When much of a film takes place on location, it's very difficult to make the studio sequences match the rest. It's a problem of atmosphere and lighting. That's what I learned making this film. On location, you're almost always forced to use short focal lengths, because you can't pull back, whereas in the studio you can use longer lenses. But the big problem remained lighting, and how to maintain a unity between the light on location and the light in the Francoeur³ studios.

What do you remember about shooting in the street, among the crowds?

The light was very low. After each shot Cloquet told me, "I think it's okay. But I can't guarantee that we'll be able to tell if it's Lino or Marilyn [Monroe] on the screen!" I got along well with Cloquet, who was a bit of a dour young man, but who liked and understood the film. The Italian extras were extremely conscientious. One of them, who was playing a *carabiniere*⁴, was knocked unconscious off-camera and remained lying on the sidewalk after we cut. An ambulance pulled up without our realizing. Inside, he kept playing his part until he reached the hospital, thinking he was still being filmed.

And how did the Italian co-producer behave?

He was absolutely perfect. Two-thirds of the way through filming, having been paid the strict minimum, I had no money left. I was shooting outdoors in freezing weather in summer shoes. Sandra Milo couldn't believe it. So I explained that they were the only shoes I had. She told Ergaz, who made me an offer: "I'll take you on contract as a screenwriter for so much per month. If you also direct, the sum will be doubled." I accepted. He wrote his agreement on a banknote, tore it in half, and gave me one of the pieces. "Tomorrow, with your half of the note, you

³ In Paris on Montmartre hill. The FEMIS film school occupies the premises now.

⁴ Italian policeman

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can collect two million [old francs] at the bar of the Raphaël Hotel." I didn't really take him seriously, and I forgot to go. He called me on the phone, furious. I went, I saw the barman, I handed him my half of the note and pocketed the two million, which covered my expenses until the end of shooting.

Lino Ventura chose you, but you had to choose the other actors...

I'd seen Belmondo in [Marcel Carné's] *Les Tricheurs*, but couldn't remember his name. I tried describing him to people and learned that his name was Belmondo. Giovanni phoned him and asked if he could come to my apartment. An hour later he arrived, thin, silent, with the wonderful smile he had at the time. I outlined the plot. He said to me, "Alright!" Next I presented him to Lino, who found him terrific. He saw him as his son, something that often happens between actors. I never had any problems with Jean-Paul, who was always extremely relaxed, available, with the youthful casualness that he kept until *Pierrot le fou*. But Bob Amon did not want him at any price. He had produced Chabrol's film *Un Double tour*, and found Belmondo awful in it. He wanted a star. He had me meet Alain Delon, Laurent Terzieff, Gérard Blain, but none of them would accept unless we expanded the role. But the best was the day Bob Amon took me by the arm and told me, with an inspired look, "I just had a brainstorm: Dario Moreno!" I was speechless. Dario Moreno, a famous crooner, very well-padded, simply because he'd just been a huge hit in [Clouzot's] *The Wages of Fear*. I was finally able to get out of that with the support of the Italian co-producer. At the time, Belmondo hadn't appeared in anything but the film by Chabrol.

The care you took in casting supporting roles is evident.

The fact of having been an assistant director taught me their importance. The meeting with [actor Marcel] Dalio was magnificent. He was a consummate craftsman who understood everything. He could sink his teeth into playing a tragic-comic bastard. Blavette had been in Renoir's *Toni*. It was an honor for me that he accepted a small role. At that time, I was uncomfortable with Claude Cerval's slightly precious diction, but now I find him very good. Then there were Bernard Dhéran, René Génin, Jacques Dacqmine, Michel Ardan, who went on to become a producer, Michèle Meritz, a future agent with Artmédia. To play Naldi, Abel's companion on the lam, I chose Stan Krol, a kid Giovanni knew from prison, who occasionally dropped by to visit us while we were writing. He had the physicality of Lino and of American actors. Sandra Milo wasn't bad, but she had to be dubbed because of her accent. To be honest, I wasn't that concerned with the female character, I wasn't mature enough! So I didn't pay too much attention to her hairdo and makeup. I just went along...

How did Lino behave on set?

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As the shooting proceeded, Lino realized that his character, a loser, was in a more critical situation than he'd thought. And that demoralized him somewhat.

Did you know, while making the film, the identity of the person who had served as Giovanni's model for Abel's character?

If I had known, I might not have made the film. I was not aware that Abel Danos - Davos in the film - had belonged to the Bony-Lafont gang during the Occupation⁵. It was only after the film was released that one day in a bistro some underworld types tipped me off, "It's great that you made a film about Abel!"

While preparing the film, were you familiar with the underworld?

"Familiar with" is saying a lot. I had a minimum of contact with it, which helped me to straighten out the inevitably picturesque vision you have of gangsters. They liked to drink champagne. Aside from their sinister activities, they seemed polite, friendly.

At the time, what is your take on the film? The result of a compromise...

...that I'm not ashamed of. Today, first and foremost, I think of those who are no longer with us. Aside from Belmondo and myself, everyone is dead, cast as well as crew. I remember the moments of euphoria while working. The thought is almost unbearable. I also have to say that the audience did not show up! The film was a failure. Bob Amon used the opportunity to tell me, "You see, we needed to find a different ending. And you should have listened to me about the title!" At the beginning of shooting he had suggested, quite seriously, calling the film simply, *Pray For Me!* or *Pray For Them!* The reviews were good, but filmmakers have a compulsion for poring over the bad articles. I remember the one in *Combat*, my old newspaper, "As for the directing, there's no point in naming the author, because it's lousy." And I thought to myself, "Two years of my life for this!"

Do you remember your first interview for Classe Tous Risques?

Yes, with a very young Bertrand Tavernier⁶. I believe he was then in law school. He was enthusiastic, and not just for my film. He had an enthusiastic nature. Later, he asked me to see his father to explain that the movies were a profession

⁵ Two criminals, former inspector Bony and Henry Chamberlain, known as Lafont, "helped" the Gestapo.

⁶ Tavernier's article, "I Hate Compromises," appeared in *Cinéma 60* magazine. See page 5 for Tavernier's reminiscence about the article, Sautet and *Classe Tous Risques*.

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like any other, and that he needn't worry if his son chose that field. I think I managed to reassure him. Bertrand enjoyed a little more elbow room after that.

Did you show the film to any friends before it was released?

To Jacques Becker. I showed him the work print. He complimented me, while regretting that the Italian part was not more developed, which was my feeling too. [Director Henri-Georges] Clouzot arranged a screening without me. He spoke about it with me at length, wanting to know how I'd shot this and that, which he always loved to do. Later, there was [director Georges] Franju, and especially [director Jean-Pierre] Melville, who defended me very strongly⁷.

Melville was even, I believe, a strong supporter of the film.

First I got a phone call from him; he was incredibly warm. And then, one night, at a "ciné-club" in a suburb -- Sarcelles, I believe -- where they were showing *Classe Tous Risques*, I was surprised to spot him wearing his big Stetson. After the screening, when people started asking me questions, he got up and answered for me, far better than I could have done! He began to analyze each scene, each shot, with such enthusiasm that I could just sit back in my seat. I was delighted at what he said, also because he spared me the chore of having to answer. The situation repeated itself in another suburb, with Jean-Pierre on his feet, haranguing the audience. It was as comical as it was moving. We saw each other often after that. He screened his films for me before they came out, in an empty theater.

All through the film we have the impression of viewing something very free and at the same time very thought out.

It always comes back to problems of construction, a construction that was very much centered on the physical movements of the main characters. At 34, you are tireless when it comes to difficult scenes. With age, there's a tendency to save your energies.

When Classe Tous Risques was re-released in Paris in 1971, the film was a hit...

Yes, a group of cinephiles, the "MacMahoniens"⁸, re-released it on a double bill with King Vidor's *Man Without A Star*.⁹ I was worried about the comparison, but

⁷ See Jean-Pierre Melville's tribute to Sautet, page 6.

⁸ particularly zealous film fanatics, a nickname derived from the devotees of the Paris repertory cinema The MacMahon, on Avenue MacMahon (off the Etoile).

⁹ The 1955 Western starred Kirk Douglas, Jeanne Crain, Claire Trevor and Melville favorite Richard Boone.

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my little film held up.

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