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Claude Chabrol Is a Master of the Thriller (Hold the Thrills)

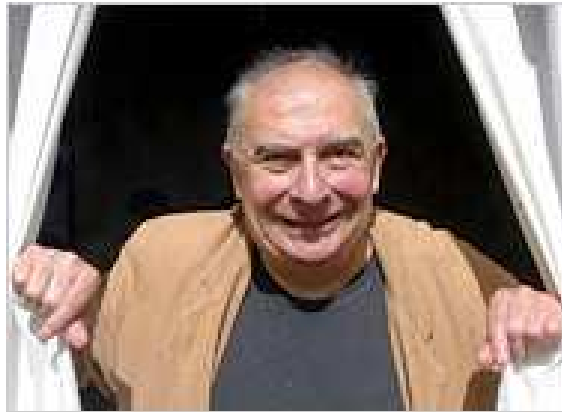
By **TERRENCE RAFFERTY**

FOR nearly 50 years Claude Chabrol has been getting away with murder. In several senses. “The Bridesmaid,” which opens in the United States on Friday, is his 54th feature film, and a 55th, “L’Ivresse de Pouvoir” (literally, “The Intoxication of Power”), had its premiere in February at the Berlin International Film Festival. It’s fair to say that any director who has managed to guide that many movies to the world’s screens has pulled off a wickedly improbable feat, because in filmmaking, as in crime, the best-laid plans so often come to grief. And murder happens to be Mr. Chabrol’s métier: the most frequent subject of his exceptionally frequent movies, a decisive majority of which could be described, at least loosely, as thrillers. “The Bridesmaid,” based on a book by the English crime novelist Ruth Rendell and graced with three instances of unnatural death, pretty clearly belongs to that violent majority.

But “The Bridesmaid” (“La Demoiselle de L’Honneur”) is also a perfect illustration of another sense in which Claude Chabrol, at 76, continues to get away with murder: it is, like so many of his pictures, a thriller that — calmly, deliberately and with exquisite perversity — refuses to thrill. He prefers on the whole to unsettle, to disorient, to unnerve and to create the sort of apprehension that cannot finally be resolved. Although he has sometimes been thought of as a kind of Gallic Hitchcock, Mr. Chabrol isn’t exactly a master of suspense: the stimulation of unbearable, gut-clutching fear has never been a significant part of his repertory. He’s more like a master of free-floating anxiety.

On the rare occasions when he does try to generate conventional suspense, it is conspicuous by its presence. As it is, for example, in the 1987 “Masques” — one of several Chabrols that failed to find a United States distributor but have surfaced in the past couple of years on DVD — which has as its climax a race-against-time sequence of the (extremely) old-fashioned heroine-tied-to-the-tracks variety. (In this case she’s locked in the trunk of a pink Cadillac about to be crushed by a compactor.) Although the suspense is skillfully engineered, you can’t help feeling Mr. Chabrol’s boredom with it, and his yet more intense ennui at the happy

ending that follows: girl saved, villain thwarted, cue music, roll credits, we’re outta here.



The French director Claude Chabrol, above, has made 55 films.

“Masques” is something practically unheard of in the vast Chabrol filmography: a thriller that satisfies the audience’s expectations of a thriller, even including the childlike hope that good will be rewarded and evil punished. More typically Mr. Chabrol gets his effects by frustrating those expectations, by telling his sanguinary tales in such a way that viewers are uncertain, scene by scene, just how they are meant to respond to this situation and these characters.

In this respect “The Bridesmaid” is entirely representative of his method. And the relationship between its hero, Philippe (Benoît Magimel), and its heroine, Senta (Laura Smet), is an almost comically pure metaphor for the relationship between Mr. Chabrol’s audience and his films. Philippe is attracted to Senta, then fascinated by her, then virtually obsessed with her, all without quite knowing why and without fully understanding who she is; she’s ardent yet at times strangely affectless, opaque, and that opacity

somehow both disturbs and excites him. That’s what watching a Claude Chabrol movie is like.

Trying to see Mr. Chabrol’s career whole can be a bewildering experience too. He began as a critic for Cahiers du Cinéma in the 50’s and became one of the young directors (a group that also included his Cahiers colleague Eric Rohmer, with whom he had written a fine book on Hitchcock) who once upon a time made the revolution called the French New Wave. He may even be said to have fired the first shots: his films “Le Beau Serge” and “The Cousins” were already in Paris theaters when Truffaut’s “400 Blows” had its famous premiere at the 1959 Cannes festival.

“Le Beau Serge” is a moving, contemplative coming-of-age drama set, as many of Mr. Chabrol’s best movies would be, in the provinces. (Here it’s the Auvergne village in which he grew up.) “The Cousins,” a bracingly cynical depiction of student life in Paris, is a bit more characteristic of his later style. It’s not a thriller by any meaningful standard, but it’s constructed in a way that he eventually used in many of his genre pictures: nothing happens, and nothing happens, and more nothing happens, and then something awful does. (Perhaps appropriately, the supreme example of that slow-build-to-horror structure took its time arriving: it came in 1995, in the domestic apocalypse of “La Cérémonie,” which was, like “The Bridesmaid,” based on a novel by Ruth Rendell.)

But after this auspicious beginning (“The Cousins” sold a lot of tickets in Paris) the Chabrol story starts getting weird. His next six pictures flopped, and by the mid-60’s this New Wave pioneer was working as the hired-gun director of quickie spy movies with titles like “The Tiger Likes Fresh Blood.” And then, just as unexpectedly, he began to turn out elegant, imperiously assured studies in sex, mendacity and murder in the French middle class, among them “La Femme Infidèle” (1969), “Le Boucher” (1970) and “La Rupture” (1970), all classics. He became, that is to say, a specialist. He became “Claude Chabrol,” the brand name of a certain kind of cinematic delicacy: a mordant, precisely detailed

essay in bourgeois bad behavior, with a death or two tossed in to raise the stakes.

His movies of that period resemble one another much less closely than they appear to. "La Femme Infidèle" is about a mutually suspicious married couple; "Le Boucher," about the odd friendship of a single woman and a single man (who might be a serial killer); "La Rupture," about a baroquely bitter custody battle. What links them is no more — and no less — than Mr. Chabrol's sometimes scarily detached tone, his level-eyed acceptance of the most venial follies and the most mortal sins. (They also, not incidentally, share a leading actress: the director's wife at the time, the cool, slim, sharp featured Stéphane Audran, who's terrific in all of them.)



His 54th, "The Bridesmaid," with Laura Smet and Benoît Magimel, opens in the United States this week.

The icy, bemused manner he perfected in those years enabled him to generate tension in ways that didn't depend so heavily on satisfying the audience's desire for the resolution of a plot; the suspense was in the excruciating

restraint of his direction, the scrupulous withholding of the artist's judgment on his often very, very naughty characters. In the best Chabrol movies, like "Le Boucher," the thriller mechanics are almost irrelevant; what keeps you on the edge of your seat isn't wondering whodunit, but wondering how you're supposed to feel when you find out. Because Mr. Chabrol won't tell you.

But this is a tricky game for a filmmaker to play with his viewers. And in the years since his glory days of the late 60's and early 70's, Mr. Chabrol has lost as many times as he has won. Even a method as distinctively counterintuitive as his can turn predictable. (Especially if you're as compulsively prolific as he is). And when he isn't in top form, his calculated opacity is alienating rather than fascinating; the sly correctness of his style can make him seem as dangerously repressed as his most poisonous bourgeois characters.

Mr. Chabrol has suffered, in a sense, from the sort of anxiety of identity that he has so often visited on the nervous middle-class people in his films. He has a reputation, a position: the world knows who he is, and what a movie with the Claude Chabrol brand should be. He isn't always so sure.

The clearest evidence that Mr. Chabrol has had that dark night of the creative soul is not to be found in any of the several movies he has made outside his self-invented genre — not in his reverent adaptation of "Madame Bovary" (1991), or even in his devastating 1993 documentary about the German occupation of France, "The Eye of Vichy"—but, less predictably and altogether more aptly, in a thriller.

René (Jacques Gamblin), the hero of "The Color of Lies" (1999), is a young artist who no longer knows what he should be painting. He once did portraits, until he lost his faith in humanity and his interest in individual faces. He tried landscapes, until the variable light of the Brittany coast, where he lives, came to seem too unreliable. Now he occupies himself, sporadically, by painting trompe l'oeils, which is fitting, because René is in the sort of depression that makes everyday existence feel like an illusion, a trick, a joke he doesn't quite get.

The joke turns sinister when the body of a little girl, raped and murdered, is discovered in the woods, and René is the prime suspect. She was on her way from a drawing lesson at his house when she was killed. The movie unfolds (as "Le Boucher" did three decades earlier) as a nightmare of doubt, and self-doubt. René's wife, Viviane (Sandrine Bonnaire), supports him as best she can, but it's a chore: his personality seems to be dispersing in the coastal mist, losing clarity like a landscape in that treacherous Breton light. "When you're

not here," he tells her after she's spent one night away, "I don't know who I am."



"The Color of Lies" (1999).

In probing this tortured artist's soul, though, Mr. Chabrol (who wrote the original screenplay with Odile Barski) appears to reaffirm his sense of who he is: a filmmaker who can thrill without thrilling, who can solve a murder mystery without implying that he's solved the mystery of life and who can, at his best, use the predictable to illuminate the unpredictable. "The Color of Lies," which never opened here but was issued on DVD this year, has the resonance of a masterpiece. And like all masterpieces — especially those of Claude Chabrol — it also has the audacity of a perfect crime.