The Spirit of Resistance:
An Interview with Bertrand Tavernier

by Richard Porton and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis

Photo by Robin Holland

Most films that ponder the agony and ecstasy of making films are either nostalgic evocations of the past (Singin' in the Rain), *sardonic commentaries on crass commercialism* (Sunset Boulevard, Contempt), *or faux-autobiographical explorations of the fusion of art and life* (Day for Night, 8 1/2). *Bertrand Tavernier's most recent film,* Laissez-passer *(English title:* Safe Conduct), *touches upon all of these themes, but also takes the rare step of making links between these relatively parochial, solipsistic concerns and larger questions of historical memory and personal responsibility.*

Tavernier's epic saga of filmmaking in wartime France tackles the still-controversial period of the German Occupation with great narrative aplomb. A lively fresco featuring both the illustrious and unsung members of the French film industry circa 1942-1943, the primary focus is on the intertwined destinies of two equally courageous men with antithetical personalities—the effervescent screenwriter Jean Aurenche (Denis Podalydès) and the more reserved assistant director Jean Devaivre (Jacques Gamblin). Since Devaivre works at the German-controlled production company, Continental Films, and the wily Aurenche does everything he can to avoid working there after enduring entreaties by its intimidating chief, Alfred Greven, the film implicitly interrogates clichéd assumptions concerning the nature of Resistance and collaboration.

While the French Resistance became fodder for films as early as René Clément's 1946 La bataille du rail, *only in recent years has the French cinema tackled the thornier questions of anti-Semitism and collaborationist fervor that were deflected by the deluded postwar assumption that the entire French nation rose up unilaterally against fascism. An assault on what the historian Stanley Hoffmann termed "the myth of the Resistance" was arguably launched by Marcel Ophuls's seminal documentary,* The Sorrow and the Pity *(1971) and, to a certain extent,* Safe Conduct *synthesizes the heroics of Clément's film with Ophuls's more critical stance. Devaivre's underground activities as a counterintelligence operative make him, his work at Continental notwithstanding, a nearly unblemished positive hero; his fellow Parisians occasionally collaborate with the Germans although they, for the most part, merely muddle through adversity.*

Tavernier conveys the turbulence of this era by alternating pathos and humor. Occupied Paris is depicted as a tragicomic landscape through a number of interrelated vignettes: a steamy tryst between Aurenche and the glamorous actress Suzanne Raymond (Charlotte Kady) is rudely interrupted by allied bombing; Aurenche's future girlfriend, Reine Sorignal (Maria Pirarres) catches a brief glimpse of a Paris bus crammed with Jews who represent many of thousands deported to Nazi camps.[1] *After being debriefed by English officers, Devaivre is confronted by interlocutors who seem inordinately interested in the filmmaker's knowledge of Harry Baur and the Maigret series. His wife (Marie Desgranges), in every way an equal partner, types antifascist tracts in her spare time.*

If Safe Conduct *seems to overflow with intricate, overlapping subplots, it can be ascribed to Tavernier's belief that only a sprawling, multicharacter film can accurately convey the rampant horror—and small triumphs— of this much-misunderstood era. Words like 'contradiction' and 'complexity' frequently occur in historical accounts of this period, and* Safe Conduct*'s refusal to issue Manichean judgments reflects an awareness of the difficulty in ferreting out the contradictions of the Occupation from the vastly different perspective of the early twenty-first century.*

One of the most intriguing aspects of Tavernier's bittersweet tribute to the wartime film industry is how an attempt at mainstream entertainment mirrors many of the conclusions reached by recent scholarly work on the French film industry during the Occupation. Evelyn Ehrlich's authoritative 1985 study, Cinema of Paradox: French Filmmaking Under the German Occupation, *for example, devotes considerable attention to the contradictory nature of Continental Films. While Alfred Greven "ruled Continental like an autocrat" and was appointed by the financier Max Winkler—"who, in turn, reported directly to Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels"—the actual films produced by the studio were almost completely untainted by propaganda. Some of Continental's output amounted to little more than mere froth, but as Ehrlich and many academic historians have discovered, certain key films were subtly subversive challenges to the values of both the German occupiers and the Vichy government. Ehrlich drives home the point that Christian-Jaque's* L'Assassinat du Père Noel, *a seemingly innocuous "poetic fantasy," concludes with a yearning for liberation from tyranny—"a rarely expressed sentiment in 1941." Henri-Georges Clouzot's better-known* Le Corbeau *is a much more controversial example of a Continental production that, although damned by both the right and the left at the time of its release, now appears remarkably daring and prescient. During the liberation period, the Comité de libération du cinéma français condemned* Le Corbeau *as an "anti-French" movie, little more than the work of an unrepentant collaborationist. Yet contemporary critics, less vulnerable to the passions of that historical juncture, maintain that Clouzot's thriller, with its complex female characters, daring sexual content, and celebration of Vichy's 'others' is in fact a barbed indictment of Pétain's regime.*

American audiences may be surprised to learn that a few French critics were much more exercised by Tavernier's tribute to Aurenche, his friend and the man who cowrote several of his best early films, than by the film's depiction of the Occupation. With a polemical zeal that can be traced back to Francois Truffaut's famous 1954 essay, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," the editors of Cahiers du cinéma, *rather myopically, apprised* Laissez-passer *as an attack on the legacy of the New Wave. (Although Tavernier wrote for* Cahiers *as a young man, most of his major critical pieces appeared in* Positif *and he is often associated with* Positif *in the same way that Godard and Truffaut are considered* Cahiers *directors) Despite having gone through myriad phases—from unfettered* auteurism *to turgid Maoism to the difficult-to-classify postmodern cinephilia of its current incarnation—*Cahiers *still seems wedded to the young Truffaut's evisceration of what he sardonically labeled "the tradition of quality." Aurenche (and his longtime partner, Pierre Bost) were the special targets of Truffaut's wrath. While the young journalist pilloried 'papa's cinema' for making staid literary adaptations, his political stance (or perhaps pose) was defiantly conservative. In an article that has been assigned to generations of film students, Truffaut faulted Aurenche and Bost (as well as the director Claude Autant-Lara) for the supposed sins of "anti-clericalism" and "anti-bourgeois" sentiments. Tavernier, on the other hand, feels that Aurenche, Bost, and Autant-Lara have been unfairly stigmatized by Truffaut's tirade and pays tribute to one of their key films,* Douce, *in* Safe Conduct. *In the following interview, Tavernier also cites Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier's influential book,* La drôle de guerre des sexes du cinéma français (The Funny War of the Sexes in French Cinema)[2]*—a work in which* Douce *is lauded for its nuanced critique of "sexual and class oppression."*

Cineaste *interviewed Tavernier at the 2002 New York Film Festival. An expansive and generous interviewee, he discussed his film's historical context, the controversy it engendered in France, his passion for both French and Hollywood films, and his enduring commitment to social justice.*—**Sandy Flitterman-Lewis and Richard Porton**

Alfred Greven (Christian Berkel, left), head of the German-owned production company Continental Films, extends a job offer to French director Jean Devaivre (Jacques Gamblin, middle foreground) in this scene from Bertrand Tavernier's *Safe Conduct*.

Cineaste: *Life during the German Occupation is still not fully understood in France—not to mention the United States. Is this why you thought it was important to clarify these matters in* Safe Conduct?

Bertrand Tavernier: Partially, yes, although there have been, especially in the last twenty years, a number of films on the subject. There haven't been many films, however, on the impact of the Occupation on the French film industry. In recent years, there have been two films that touched upon these matters—Bernard Cohn's *Natalia* (1989) and *Le plus beau pays du monde* (1998), written by the well-known dramatist Jean-Claude Grumberg. The latter film had a very interesting subject—it dealt with a very shocking episode involving an actor who, while he was playing the lead in a film, was sent to a camp because he was homosexual. In order to finish the film, they had to record his voice while he was in the camp.

But that dealt with only one episode and I wanted to have a wider scope in my film. What interested me was the question: "What would I have done in the same situation?" Of course, it's always a matter of ego for directors to find a subject that hasn't been touched upon by other filmmakers. And there really have only been these two—and they both dealt with very special instances of persecution and less with the daily work of people in the film business. I was interested in people who were not protected by their status as stars—that's why I didn't deal with the special plight of actors. I wanted to deal with the foot soldiers of filmmaking. And, in my recent films, I've been particularly interested in various types of foot soldiers.

Cineaste: *Such as the teacher in* It All Starts Today?

Tavernier: Yes, the teacher or the cop in *L.627*, the people in *Life and Nothing But*, even the characters in *Capitaine Conan*. These people are never the generals. I've never told a story from the point of view of the generals, but always from the perspective of people in the trenches. That's an intellectual explanation, but I'd also reacted quite strongly, and instinctively, to some of the stories Jean Aurenche and Jean Devaivre told me. Sometimes you just want to make a film because you react very strongly on an emotional level to something you've read or heard. For example, I wanted to re-create this scene with the bombs dropping and the babies being saved from the nursery. That was something I've never seen in a film. The nurses and doctors have left their posts. It's somewhat symbolic of the state of France at that time—when everyone in charge had left his or her posts. Even though I didn't shoot it that way. People at first go there for selfish reasons to protect their own children. When they discover other children, they change and become altruistic. I found this evolution both fascinating and meaningful.

Cineaste: *Did Aurenche tell you stories about life at Continental Films?*

Tavernier: Yes. Some of these stories are told in Aurenche's memoirs, *La suite à l'ecran*, which was published by the Lumière Institute. It's a superb book and very funny. A few of the scenes which turn up in my film, like the lunch with Greven in the restaurant where he's asked if he knows any Jewish screenwriters, are included in this book. Aurenche also told me that this was very frightening—one of the worst moments of his life.

Cineaste: *Did Aurenche find temporary refuge in a brothel as is depicted in the film?*

Tavernier: Yes, he told me about that as well as stories about the poor man who hunts cats and was then beaten to death. By the way, the man who plays that part is not an actor. I interviewed him for my documentary, *The Other Side of the Tracks*. Since he was jobless, I gave him a small part. What I love about the film are the very quick shifts in tone from comedy to something truly horrible. The character of the gangster was Jean Cosmos's idea. It was based on his cousin who was with the French Gestapo and made Jean's life miserable. Every time he met Jean, he asked him, "Why aren't you in Germany?" And Jean said that this man boasted of beating up, and killing, the famous actor Harry Baur. I think this is the first film which makes allusions to the fact that Harry Baur was killed by the French Gestapo. It's a bizarre, and tragic, coincidence, that two of

the actors who died during the war—Harry Baur and Robert Lynen (he was in the Resistance and tortured by the Germans)—were the stars of the sound version of Duvivier's *Poil de carotte.*

It was a crazy period. This was a time when a man named Pierre Caron, who directed a film called *Pension Jonas* in 1942, had his director's card revoked on the grounds of "imbecility." *[laughs]* The man was trafficking with the Germans. He sold them railway tracks that couldn't be fitted together. So they complained after he sold them a lot of useless railway tracks. *[laughs]* In fact, he was a crook! He finally found refuge in Spain. *Pension Jonas* developed a cult reputation because of this.

Cineaste: *You mentioned in another interview that no one took the effort to interview Greven before his death.*

Tavernier: That's true. This is something that both puzzles and exasperates me because the man was the head of UFA before the war in 1936 or 1937 and then was appointed head of Continental by Goebbels. He went on working within the German cinema until 1972 and no one ever bothered to research his role in these events or interview him. There are a lot of questions left unanswered—like how he could employ someone like Jean-Paul le Chanois, who was known as Jew and a Communist—and who was wanted under his real name, Jean-Paul Dreyfuss? Everyone knew that Dreyfuss was le Chanois. A man who was wanted by the Germans worked for a year and a half in a German production company!

Cineaste: *Didn't he brag that he had a Jew working for him?*

Tavernier: Yes, all the time! It's in my film. And many people said that he called le Chanois Dreyfuss openly in front of other people. How could a German production company make films that didn't have a hint of Nazi or pro-German propaganda? And how could they produce a film based on a book by Emile Zola, a writer hated by the Nazis? There are many mysteries. The purpose of the film was not to solve them. That would have been untrue. But I try to show that you can never accept anything said by a character as gospel. When Greven says to Aurenche that he wants to work with Jewish screenwriters, you've previously witnessed a scene with a composer forced to resign from the studio because he's Jewish. This is the opposite of what he says during his conversation with Aurenche.

Screenwriter Jean Aurenche (Denis Podalydès) shares his work with his mistress, Suzanne Raymond (Charlotte Kady), in Bertrand Tavernier's *Safe Conduct.*

Cineaste: *It's linked to the paradoxical nature of the French film industry during this period.*

Tavernier: It's part of the paradox of the times, which I wanted to capture. I wanted the camera to observe the events—the feelings and the emotions—of those times, as if it wasn't burdened with the knowledge we have today. Most of the characters have only a fragmentary knowledge of what's going on. One of the best compliments I received came from a young woman, who in a Q and A after a screening remarked, "Mr. Tavernier, I feel that I've been parachuted into that period." Usually, when I do a period film, it's as if I was looking at the inside of a house from the outside. In this film, I was inside the house.

Cineaste: *How did you achieve this degree of realism?*

Tavernier: That was my obsession—to make sure that the camera was always in the middle of events, never observing from an exterior or detached point of view. I never wanted the camera to be a witness who knew more than the characters. When I directed a scene, I had to forget my knowledge of events in order to preserve the characters' own uncertainty.

Cineaste: *The ability to capture fleeting moments is especially striking in the sequence when Aurenche's future girlfriend witnesses a bus packed with Jews speeding down the street.*

Tavernier: Yes, this is something my coscreenwriter, Jean Cosmos, witnessed. He was walking in the street one day and suddenly he saw a bus. I wanted this to come as a surprise. You've just seen people queuing for food and no one reacts or is angry. Just one young woman sees this, and she's totally puzzled by what she's seen. I wanted to include horrifying details that almost seemed to happen accidentally. Life was proceeding with all of its little problems and suddenly you were confronted with something terrifying. Since people are used to seeing horrifying images on screen, I had to be very economical and avoid being preachy. My problem was that Devaivre never saw this, so I couldn't link this incident with his character. I invented certain things, but this would be too serious an invention. So I used a trick, transmitting this information through a young woman played by Maria Pirarres who's connected to his character.

Cineaste: *How did you cast the two leads—an important decision given the fact that they are playing actual historical figures—one of whom is still alive?*

Tavernier: I never use a casting director and do all the casting myself. I find it a pleasure. I go to the theater frequently and spend a great deal of time meeting actors. In this film, I'm using many actors I've never worked with. For a long time, I wanted to work with Jacques Gamblin, who plays Devaivre. I've seen Denis Podalydès on the stage of the Comédie Française about twenty times and always admired him. I'm very proud of the casting, since there are about 119 roles in the film and I don't think there is one mistake. Some of the actors, such as the man who plays Charles Spaak, I've worked with before. He played a totally opposite sort of character in *Capitaine Conan.*

I wanted to show that some of these actors, who don't get many chances to work in films, are very good and have a very wide range. Among the actresses, Marie Desgranges was brilliant as Portia in a production of *The Merchant of Venice* and I discovered that she could sing very well. So I added the moment where she sings a Kurt Weill song. Marie Gillain had played in *Fresh Bait* and I think she's wonderful. It's very much an ensemble film; it's not uncommon to have ten or fifteen actors in the same shot. I often thought of Robert Altman's *Nashville* when shooting the film. When I had a problem, I always thought, "What would Altman do?" You always have the feeling that Altman is in the middle of the action; he avoids looking at life from a distant, exteriorized point of view and captures the incredible energy of living in specific moments.

Cineaste: *And you also use overlapping conversations that are reminiscent of Altman.*

Tavernier: Yes, I love that. I wanted actors who were able to speak quickly and move quickly.

Cineaste: *You've moved from the very intimate, contemporary narrative of* It All Starts Today *to the epic, historical scope of* Safe

Conduct. *Do you like to alternate the scale of your projects?*

Tavernier: Yes, but there is one link. I had a desire to bring the audience as close to the people of the Forties as they were to the children of the previous film. I wanted the audience to view the characters of *Safe Conduct* as contemporaries. But I love to alternate. Even when I was shooting *Capitaine Conan*, I was working on a documentary about immigration with my son Nils that's never been shown in the United States. I went from working with a very elaborate set and an enormous crew, special effects that I'd never had before, to Lyon where it was only me and my son operating the camera. I love this sort of contrast.

Cineaste: *Although you had been familiar with Aurenche's stories for years, I understand that the structure of the film came together once you heard Devaivre's anecdotes.*

Tavernier: Yes, all of the stories Aurenche told me—since he was a screenwriter—pertained to events that occurred before films were shot. Screenwriters never came to the set, or at least very rarely. Something was missing, and Aurenche couldn't tell me about relationships between the people making the film. He had a working relationship with Autant-Lara, and perhaps I could have explored that. But I don't think I could have gained much from pursuing that angle. When I met Devaivre, he immediately filled in the blanks and provided all that was missing in that story—how the films were made and the frenetic atmosphere of the studio. I wanted to convey both the bleakness and colorlessness of the oppression, as well as the incredible energy and craziness, that prevailed during that period. People weren't alone and frightened in a room; it was completely the opposite.

Screenwriter and urban nomad Jean Aurenche (Denis Podalydès) lugs his suitcases around Occupied Paris in Bertrand Tavernier's *Safe Conduct*.

Cineaste: *Alain Resnais's* Night and Fog *deals with the contrast between the bleakness of the period and daily life.*

Tavernier: Yes, but Resnais's film is difficult to compare with my film because it deals with the Holocaust. No one in my film is really connected with the Holocaust, because the cinema world was more protected. But I agree that Resnais deals with these oppositions. That film is a total masterpiece.

Cineaste: *You're a great cinephile and I'd imagine that you were attracted to this project because of your fondness for certain directors who play a role in the script. Are you, to take one example, a fan of Maurice Tourneur's films?*

Tavernier: Yes, I like some of his films, especially his silents, and some historians like William Everson think he's as important as Griffith—citing, for example, *The Last of the Mohicans*, which he codirected with Clarence Brown. His best film from the wartime period is *La Main du Diable*—it's quite a remarkable film. Devaivre liked him a lot and worked with him several times.

Cineaste: *Although Clouzot is not a character in your film, the subversive nature of* Le Corbeau *is alluded to. Recent scholarship has made much of the fact that, despite being produced by Continental, it's very critical, albeit allegorically, of Vichy.*

Tavernier: It's very critical of the status quo, especially of informers. It's incredibly adult, strong, and ambitious for its time. At the time of Vichy, it features an atheist character. It refers to abortion and the emphasis on the sex lives of the characters is incredible. After the liberation, the film was unfairly attacked by some critics, especially Georges Sadoul who said that it reminded him of *Mein Kampf*.

Cineaste: *That seems like a serious misreading.*

Tavernier: The puritanical attitude of some elements of the left, especially the Communist Party, was absurd. They were trapped by the myth of the positive hero. They assumed it was conveying a degrading image of France. I don't think that was true; although the film is critical, it's also quite compassionate. So they invented this notion that it was a German conception of a typical French town. This was a total lie; the film was never released in Germany because it was considered too pessimistic. In many respects, it could be considered a film of the Resistance.

Cineaste: *It's noteworthy that the characters who triumph in* Le Corbeau, *such as the abortionist, are all outsiders.*

Tavernier: Yes, it's quite remarkable. Many of the films released by Continental had strong satirical elements; they're anti-Church and antibourgeois.

Cineaste: *Of course, after the war Clouzot was attacked as a collaborationist.*

Tavernier: Some of the directors at Continental were forced to sign contracts because Greven had taken control of French productions. If directors didn't sign, thousands of people would have been out of work. For Clouzot, the situation was different. He agreed to be the executive in charge of screenplays—he was not signing a contract for one or two films but for a job. That being said, everyone agrees that, once Clouzot had signed on, he behaved extraordinarily well. He protected Jews and you can't reproach him for anything. You can only criticize him for having accepted the job.

Cineaste: *This goes back to the question you posed earlier. How do you think you would have behaved under such circumstances?*

Tavernier: Maybe I would have behaved like Aurenche, who refused to work for Continental. Like Aurenche, like Prévert, like Pierre Bost and some other screenwriters. On the other hand, some of the screenwriters who accepted, like Charles Spaak, behaved very bravely and decently. You can't find any political mistakes in their screenplays.

Cineaste: *Your film makes clear that, in the midst of the war, people accepted work at Continental for all kinds of reasons.*

Tavernier: Yes, for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes you have to question historians who have a scholarly approach to history that is merely based on documents instead of life. There has been a tendency to attach the label "collaborator" to everyone who worked at Continental and this is not true. Something very interesting happened after the film was released in France. I received a phone call from a woman named Rosine Delamare, who is one of the greatest costume designers in France. She said that she had seen the film and loved it. She told me that she worked at Continental on six films including *Le Corbeau* and *Au Bonheur des Dames* and remarked, "You totally captured the atmosphere of those sets." We started talking and I asked her, "Did you feel that you were a collaborator?" She replied, "No, we had to work. After 1942, if you found any work it was German. I was working with directors I had known before the war on films with very decent, interesting screenplays. And I was active in the Resistance. Like Devaivre, I rode

A rare *tête-à-tête* on the street between Jean Devaivre (Jacques Gamblin, left) and Jean Aurenche (Denis Podalydès) in Tavernier's *Safe Conduct*.

100 miles on a bicycle to report to my superior. When I started my first film, it was only at the end of the shoot that I discovered that I was in a German production company."

That means the reality was much more complex than people realize. The Germans and Greven were smart. Another reaction from a viewer I liked was from someone who said she never realized how difficult and complex every daily choice became during this period. At least half of the people involved just wanted to survive. Most of them acted very decently, a few were genuine collaborators, and a few were trying to resist.

Cineaste: *While most of the reviews of* Safe Conduct *in France were quite favorable, it seems that some critics, particularly those at* Cahiers du cinéma *viewed the film, not from a historical perspective, but through the lens of old debates between the New Wave and the "tradition of quality." From all appearances, they wanted to reduce the film to a debate between* Cahiers *and* Positif.

Tavernier: They saw it *only* through that lens and that, for me, was totally disappointing. They said it was an attack on the New Wave. The last line of the editorial commenting on *Laissez-passer* was, "The New Wave is the great 'absence' in the film." This is like saying, "The New Iranian Cinema is not a strong presence in *Paths of Glory*." Or "*Salt of the Earth* should have made reference to the Coen Brothers!" These people are a million miles away from the realities of the creative act. No one is going to spend three years of their life making a film about two styles of criticism.

Truffaut said that no one makes a film merely to attack another artist. It would be easier to write a pamphlet. And I admire the New Wave. I worked as a press agent for Godard, Chabrol, Varda, Demy, and Rozier and I fought for them. *Cahiers* can't conceive that you can be interested in both Truffaut and Autant-Lara.

Cineaste: *I wonder if Truffaut pulled a number on us. Many of us became interested in film through his essays and took his denunciations of Bost and Aurenche for granted.*

Tavernier: Yes, but even with Truffaut you have to go deeper. It's much more complex. First of all, Truffaut never attacked the films made during the Forties. He attacked the films of the Fifties. And in the Fifties he wrote a very good review of Autant-Lara's *La Traversée de Paris*. In 1976, he wrote an incredible foreword to one of André Bazin's books in which he said that you can speak of a New Wave—even though the phrase hadn't been coined yet—when discussing the French cinema of 1940-1944. He claimed that more than eighty important films, or masterpieces, were made during that time. At a time when the Italian cinema was almost totally fascist, he maintained that the French cinema almost totally avoided being Pétainist. The people editing *Cahiers* now don't seem to be aware of this. I found this horrendous. There's something degrading about it. It's as if there was a *fatwa* issued against some filmmakers that you weren't allowed to defend.

Truffaut was right about some things and wrong about others. I think he was wrong in choosing Aurenche as a target. As the director Paul Vecchiali said, Aurenche was the figure during that period who comes closest to the spirit of the New Wave. He was right in that many films made during the Fifties were quite stiff and academic. For example, the films Marcel Carné made during the Fifties were incredibly bad and dull. But Truffaut was unfair to some people, and even he changed his mind later on. So his disciples, *Cahiers* among them, are being totally fundamentalist.

Cineaste: *But,* Cahiers *notwithstanding, the cinema of the Occupation is being rediscovered in France.*

Tavernier: Yes, *Cahiers* never devoted any articles to the French cinema of this period and it reveals a great ignorance. They never studied the directors and all of the contradictions. Jacques Siclier, on the other hand, wrote a tremendous book on the cinema of Vichy. Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier have written an excellent book in

which they totally rehabilitate Autant-Lara and observe that some of the films written by Aurenche were strongly feminist, and some, such as *Douce*, are about class struggle. And they are! It's a shame that people don't know them here. They should be shown in this country and available on DVD, along with the films of Jacques Becker and Robert Bresson.

Cineaste: *Although it's not as ambitious as your film, a recent movie such as* La Guerre à Paris *also attempts to deal with this period.*

Tavernier: Yes, and of course there's Costa-Gavras's film, *Amen.*. But already, even in the Forties there were films such as the overlooked *Retour à la vie* (1949). That's an episodic film, and there's one section by Clouzot, which deals with the return of a prisoner that's extraordinary. And a film like *La Traversée de Paris* makes a strong statement while being very funny. As you can see in my film, it was a revenge of Aurenche against suitcases. He made that film about two people who were forced to carry enormous suitcases around Paris, just as he did during the Occupation.

Cineaste: *How did you come to work with Aurenche on your first film,* The Clockmaker*?*

Tavernier: Since *The Clockmaker* dealt with conflicts between the generations, I wanted to work with a screenwriter who was older than myself. I needed someone who could invest a lot of time in the project and who wasn't so fashionable that he'd take off after eight weeks and wouldn't be around for rewriting. I looked at a lot of films made by older screenwriters. I found Maurice Aubergé, who had worked on several films with Jacques Becker, and whose work was incredibly modern and sharp—not at all old-fashioned. And I also discovered the team of Aurenche and Bost through *Douce*. I was impressed that they included a line encouraging "impatience and revolt" in a film made in 1942.

Cineaste: *Wasn't that line cut by the censors?*

Tavernier: It was cut after a month. The complete version played for about three or four weeks and that line inspired a lot of applause. Then the scene was cut. The censors were very smart; they were smarter than many of the critics. The scene was restored after the liberation. It's a very strong scene. My diary in the journal *Projections*—published in English—includes my meeting with Devaivre, an article on *Douce*, and reflections on the death of Aurenche.

Cineaste: *In certain respects, you're functioning as a film historian, as well as a filmmaker, in* Safe Conduct.

Tavernier: I never wanted to make a film that was just about the cinema. It's possible to appreciate this film and get caught up in the emotions of the characters without knowing anything about le Chanois or Aurenche. You can understand the spirit of resistance, even if you don't know who is who. Some young kids in France just saw it as an adventure film, although it gave them a desire to learn more about the period and the films. Part of my job is to pass on to an audience the discoveries I made while making the film—as well as the passion and curiosity I experienced while making those discoveries. When I was making *The Other Side of the Tracks*, I filmed a very old worker who talked about his experiences in factories and his life as a Communist. The man was incredibly moving. When I filmed him for the last time, he said to me, "Continue and transmit." It was one of the most incredibly moving moments in my life. The pleasure of making a film involves communicating a little bit of that spirit to the audience.

Cineaste: *Historical Memory?*

Tavernier: Yes, if you succeed in making an historical film it won't be merely historical. The spirit of the Resistance did not die in 1945. You can adapt it very easily to today's concerns.

Cineaste: *Of course, along with your passion for French cinema, you also have a long-standing interest in Hollywood cinema. This is even apparent in your recent statement on the refusal of the State Department to grant a visa to Kiarostami, in which you invoke Billy Wilder, among others.*

Tavernier: I was horrified by what happened to Kiarostami. And I adore Billy Wilder and always view his films with pleasure. It was wonderful how he was able to retain his integrity over all those projects. I'm particularly fond of one of his less-known films, *Ace in the Hole*. That's a masterpiece—and so contemporary ! We met several times; he was a great admirer of *The Clockmaker* and *The Judge and the Assassin*.

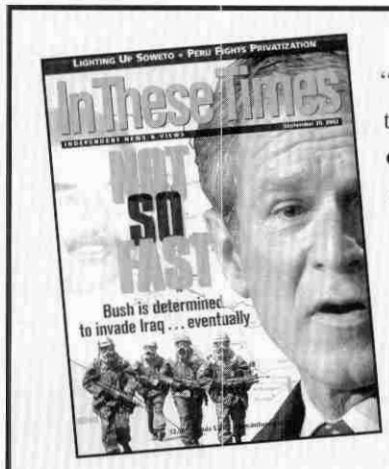
There are several films that look even better now than when they were made. Not only *Ace in the Hole*. There's also *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Salt of the Earth*. And there are several extremely strong Frankenheimer films—*Seven Days in May* and *The Manchurian Candidate*. These films seem brand new. Frankenheimer's last film on LBJ, *The Path to War*, is a masterpiece. Outside of the documentaries of Michael Moore, this is the best American political film of the last ten years. This last film is incredibly moving, because you have the feeling that, despite certain mistakes in his career, he retained the political commitment of the Sixties—the commitment you find in *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Seven Days in May* is in every frame of *The Path to War*. So many other directors capitulated; it's not that they made bad films, but you feel that they're washed up. But you get the same comfort watching Frankenheimer's work as you do watching the films of Ken Loach—the comfort that some directors have not sold out. ■

Safe Conduct is distributed by Empire Pictures, 350 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10118, phone (212) 629-3097, e-mail info@empirepicturesusa.com.

End Notes:

[1] These Jews were undoubtedly victims of the Vel d'Hiv raid—a two-day roundup on July 16 and 17, 1942, which netted about 13,000 Jews, most of whom were women and children. All but 300 died, most of them in Auschwitz. In a fascinating diary, published in *Projections 2* in 1992, Tavernier chides François Mitterrand for refusing to make the "symbolic gesture of recognizing France 's responsibility for the deportation of Jews, notably during the Vel d'Hiv raid which was decided by the French government of the time and carried out by the French police."

[2] The title is a punning reference to the term *"Drôle de Guerre,"* which is how the French referred to their swift defeat by the Nazis. An excerpt, in English, is included in Alan Williams, ed., *Film and Nationalism*, Rutgers University Press, 2002.



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