

La Cérémonie

Claude Chabrol FR/GER 1995m



Of course, murder always heightens the interest in a film," Chabrol told me in 1971, at the New York Film Festival. "Even a banal situation takes on importance when there's a murder involved. I suppose that's why I choose to work with murder so often. That's the area of human activity where the choices are most crucial and have the greatest consequences. On the other hand, I'm not at all interested in who-done-its. If you conceal a character's guilt, you imply that his guilt is the most important thing about him. I want the audience to know who the murderer is, so that we can consider his personality."

That leads to the question: Does he let us know who will commit murder(s) in "La Ceremonie?" I think he does, although there will be some in the audience who are surprised that anyone in the film is killed. Assuming that some must die (this is a film by Chabrol, after all), it is obvious who they must be. That's why I won't issue a spoiler warning: This isn't a who-done-it. It's more about how the two murderers do something together that neither would be capable of doing by themselves.

So "La Ceremonie" is about murder. It is also about faces, two in particular. They belong to Isabelle Huppert, as Jeanne, the rude postmistress in a small French town, and Sandrine Bonnaire, as Sophie, a young women who comes to the town seeking work as a maid. In these roles they share a facial quality both often display: They have an almost maddening secrecy. There is also a difference: Jeanne seems all-knowing, cocky, dominant. Sophie, submissive, grateful for attention, doesn't seem very bright. When she's told something, she has a way of turning her head slowly and letting it sink in before reacting. The film consistently plants hints of a secret Sophie conceals -- a handicap I will not reveal -- that indicates that her ability to hold a job indicates she has a gift for deception.

Huppert, the busiest major actress of her generation, wears so well in so many different roles because she only reluctantly reveals a character's feelings. She leaves it up to us to figure them out; there may be some play-acting involved, but we sense that most is hidden. Above all she's ideal for characters with an enormous stubborn determination that she holds very much inside. Chabrol has used her seven times, most inevitably in the title role of "Madame Bovary."

Bonnaire's face can be equally concealing, but she is better at seeming vulnerable. Her great early role was in Agnes Varda's "Vagabond" (1985), the story of a young office worker who walks away from her job and sets off optimistically to backpack around French. When he's found dead in a ditch some months later, we wonder why she continued to fall, and fall, when she had many opportunities to save herself. She will never tell us.

The film opens with a job interview. She meets with a wealthy bourgeois wife named Catherine Lelievre (the bilingual Jacqueline Bisset) in a cafe. They have tea. Catherine explains that she lives in an isolated house in the country, with her husband Georges (Jean-Pierre Cassel) and their son Gilles (Valentin Merlet). Melinda (Virginie Ledoyen), his daughter by an earlier marriage, sometimes comes to visit. They require a live-in maid and cook. All very well with Sophie, who takes command of the interview with almost imperious self-confidence. She has her papers, her letter of reference, her salary requirement. An isolated house is no problem. At the end of their conversation, it's almost as if Sophie dismisses Catherine.

We see the large, luxurious country estate. Its stone walls contain a service wing, so that family and servants live privately. Everyone gets along at first. In contrast to her manner in the cafe, Sophie seems quiet and submissive here, performing her tasks and then going to her room. There she seems a different person, a naive adolescent, sitting on the floor, leaning against the bed, hypnotized by whatever happens to be on TV.

One day she accompanies Georges into the village, where she meets the postmistress, Jeanne. Huppert seems instinctively to sniff out some quality in Sophie that puts her on alert. She contrives opportunities for them to meet, She is hungry for gossip about the Lelievre family. She has class-conscious scorn for their comfortable lifestyle. She especially believes Madame Lelievre is stuck up and insufferable.

We are watching a seduction. Despite our expectations that lesbianism is possible, it isn't sexual, but has to do with power. Jeanne senses a weakness in Sophie, a secret, and perhaps believes she can make the other young woman her instrument -- to do what, remains to be seen. With nothing in particular in mind, Jeanne knows she will be able to control Sophie in a mutual action. Jeanne drives out to the house frequently, and they meet in Sophie's room, sneaking up the back stairs, devouring TV programs; when the Lelievres discover her in the house, Georges explodes. Earlier, he accused her of opening his mail. Now he forbids them to see one another. Jeanne's eyes narrow. Georges has taken a fatal step.

Earlier in the film, Georges discovered alarming background details about both women. Earlier, in other towns, they were touched by two deaths -- Sophie's father, and Jeanne's young daughter. There is no particular reason to believe either woman was responsible for these deaths, but Georges' research into provincial newspapers indicates there was a certain amount of suspicion. Well, are they murderers? Chabrol never declares himself, and that sets up one of the most disturbing scenes in the movie. Giggling like schoolgirls with a crush, the two tease each other that they know the other's secret, and the secret is murder. Neither denies it. We suspect one, maybe both, are innocent. By passively

allowing such things to be said about them, they create a titillating tension in the relationship. We begin to understand that regardless of whether either has committed murder, together they are certainly capable of it.

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THE MAKERS of "La Ceremonie" request that members of the press do "not divulge the surprise ending of the film." Until reading the request, I was unaware that "La Ceremonie" had a surprise ending.

In spite of the fact that I am obviously not operating on French director Claude Chabrol's wavelength, I enjoyed the film nevertheless.

Not that I think for one moment that Chabrol wants his viewers to do anything as bourgeois or mundane as simply enjoy one of his movies. I think he wants us to marvel at the levels of meanings he manages to separate from the banality that is the story. I think he wants us to quiver in empathy over the sexual undercurrents that preoccupy the minds of his characters. I think he wants us to believe a lot more is going on than actually is.

Here, then, is what is going on. Sophie (Sandrine Bonnaire) is interviewed for the position as cleaning woman at the large and beautiful home of art dealer Catherine (Jacqueline Bisset) and her charming husband, Georges (Jean-Pierre Cassel). Sophie comes well recommended and although she seems a bit off, Catherine hires her.

Catherine's lovely children Melinda (Virginie Ledoyen) and Gilles (Valentin Merlet) sympathize with the plight of the downtrodden worker among them, Sophie, but even they begin to see that the woman is seriously strange.

Seemingly, Sophie's main problem is that she is illiterate. Because she keeps it secret, no one can figure out why she suddenly hangs up when Georges calls from the office and asks her to find a file he forgot. They have no idea that leaving poor Sophie a shopping list is cause for a panic attack. They don't understand why she won't take a drivers license test even though they have offered to pay for the lessons.

Chabrol takes pains to indicate that Catherine and Georges are nice people who would go out of their way to help Sophie cope with her difficulty.

But their niceness goes only so far. When Sophie is befriended by the local postal clerk, Jeanne (Isabelle Huppert), Georges lays down the law. Jeanne, it turns out, was accused of killing her small daughter and got off on a technicality. "They couldn't prove anything," she tells Sophie gleefully. But what really bugs Georges is that Jeanne keeps opening and resealing his mail. He bars Jeanne from visiting Sophie in their home.

For some reason, Jeanne is clever enough to figure out what Catherine and Georges never bother to learn, and that is that Sophie has had her little dust-up with the law, too. When Georges has enough of Sophie and her friend Jeanne, tempers flare and the ending that surprises no one (but the filmmakers) follows quite predictably.

Huppert plays this devilish role with giddy enjoyment. Bonnaire, whose face has been whittled down to an unpleasant hunk of bone, scarcely uses a facial muscle through the entire movie. Cassel, a veteran of French stage and screen, works well with Bisset, who looks and acts like a woman enjoying her life. Their Catherine and Georges have a strong marriage, and I think as far as social commentary is concerned, this is Chabrol's greatest achievement in this movie.

Barbara Schulgasser *San Francisco chronicle*