

LOUIS MALLE ON “ELEVATOR TO THE GALLOWS”

In the spring of 1957 my friend Alain Cavalier bought a book called *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* [literally, “Elevator to the Scaffold” – see page 3] from a station newsstand. He read it and said to me, “You know, the plot is really interesting. It could be the starting point for a film noir.” The *policier* [thriller] was a genre that had always been popular in France. I went to see Jean Thuillier, who produced Bresson’s *A Man Escaped*, and said, “Read this book. Maybe I could adapt it.” There was something exciting about it, it was a good thriller. And he said, “Yes, if we can come up with a cast and sell it to a distributor.” I chose to collaborate with a writer whom I admired, Roger Nimier, a young novelist...when he read *Elevator* he said, “This book is stupid”. “Yes, but the plot is good.” He said “All right, but let’s start from scratch.”

From the beginning we literally invented what people remember of the film today – the character of Jeanne Moreau. It hardly existed in the book. When you think of it, she is not really necessary to the plot. She just floats around trying to find her lover in Paris. But we made her part of the plot at the end. Once we started working on the adaptation things went very fast, and we signed Jeanne Moreau...

Now people often say, “You discovered Jeanne Moreau.” I didn’t - she was already a star then, a B movie star⁵. Also, she was recognized as the prime stage actress of her generation. She had been at the Comédie Française; she had worked with Gérard Philippe. But in films she had never come true, except in those B movie thrillers with Jean Gabin⁶, where her roles were not terribly interesting. But she was a commercial plus. In fact, the distributor insisted that we cast Jeanne Moreau...suddenly they discovered that she was potentially a big film star. Up until then people used to say that although she was a great actress, and very sexy, she was simply not photogenic.

I had this great cameraman, Henri Decaë, whom I knew from the early Melville films. I, as well as those in the New Wave, admired Decaë tremendously. He started me, he started Chabrol, and then Truffaut⁷, and then a number of others. When we started shooting, the first scenes we did with Jeanne Moreau were in the streets, on the Champs-Élysées. We had the camera in a baby carriage, and she had no light – it was black and white of course; we were using this new fast film, the Tri-X, which serious film makers thought too grainy. We did several long tracking shots of Jeanne Moreau...she was lit only by the windows of the Champs-Élysées. That had never been done. Cameramen would have forced her to wear a lot of make-up and they would put a lot of light on her because, supposedly, her face was not photogenic.

⁵ Not quite true – she’d already been featured in several A films.

⁶ As Gabin was a major star, none of his movies would be considered B pictures, in the American sense. Moreau appeared with him only twice: as one of the molls of Jacques Becker’s film noir masterwork *Touchez-pas au grisbi* (1953) and as his co-star in the forgotten *Gas-Oil* (1955).

⁷ See Decaë’s biography on page 15.

That first week there was a rebellion of the technicians at the lab after they had seen the dailies. They went to the producer and said, “You must not let Malle and Decaë destroy Jeanne Moreau.” They were horrified. But when *Elevator* was released, suddenly something of Jeanne Moreau’s essential qualities came out: she could be almost ugly and then ten seconds later she would turn her face and would be incredibly attractive. But she would be herself. And, of course, it was confirmed by *The Lovers*, which I did almost right after. So I contributed to making her into a star, but she had already made something like seven or eight films⁸.

The book – and the film - is about a man who commits the perfect murder, stupidly gets stuck in the elevator of the building, and two kids steal his car, go to a motel outside Paris and commit a murder – all the evidence is that he committed that second murder when actually he...well, that was the trick, the gimmick of the book. In the screenplay we extended the plot to his love affair. We didn’t want it just to be about the two crimes... we thought it would be much more interesting if he was supposed to meet a woman immediately after he commits the first murder, she looks for him all over the place, but they never meet...we hesitated a lot, I remember, while we were working on the screenplay, wondering if we should have them meet at some point. We decided not to, except that at the very end there’s the scene, one of the best in the film, when she’s finally arrested. The photographer is developing the photos and she sees the two of them in love, in the big enlargements in the water, and so they are reunited. But they are never together. For us, that seemed very romantic.

When I did *Elevator* I consciously chose to start from this book, which was a thriller, aware that I would have to make something that could be sold to people in the industry as a B movie. Of course, I was very ambitious, and the fact that I worked with Roger Nimier instead of with the screenwriters that were recommended to me, the fact that I took somebody who was a very respected writer at the time, indicated that I had great ambitions for the project. But if I had had my way, I would have preferred – and if I had made my first feature three years later I would probably have been able to do so – to have done something more autobiographical. I realize now when I look at *Elevator* that I managed to inject – because we had the plot but the plot was like a skeleton – a number of themes that were, probably unconsciously, close enough to me that they would re-appear in my work. But I also wanted to make a good thriller. The irony is, I was really split between my tremendous admiration for Bresson and the temptation to make a Hitchcock-like film. So there’s something about *Elevator* that goes from one to the other. In a lot of scenes, especially inside the elevator, I was trying to emulate Bresson...At the same time I was emulating Hitchcock in trying to do, even if slightly ironically, a thriller that works. The suspense, the surprises. And of course, stylistically, apart from the fact that it was my first film and as such full of clumsy things, I was closer to Bresson. So I was split.

⁸ In fact, by this time she had already appeared in 20 films. She began her movie career in 1949.

On top of that I was trying to portray a new generation through the characters of the teenagers (in those days they were called *blousons noir* because they all wore black leather, those kids from the suburbs) – a description of the new Paris. Traditionally, it was always the René Clair Paris that French films presented, and I took care to show one of the first modern buildings in Paris. I invented a motel – there was only one motel in France and it was not near Paris, so we had to shoot it in Normandy. I showed a Paris, not of the future, but at least a modern city, a world already somewhat dehumanized. I was not aware, making *Elevator*, that I was doing something personal. I saw it almost like an exercise.

When I started *Elevator*, I felt I was pretty much prepared technically but I had this huge hole in my apprenticeship – dealing with actors. I'd no experience of that: I'd been filming fish for four years!⁹

I didn't feel I should take any risks, so the cast of *Elevator* was – with the exception of the young girl – entirely professional...I was scared to death of actors, just because I had no experience of dealing with them...From my very first film I realized I was probably, of all the directors of my generation – apart from Alain Resnais – the one who was technically the best prepared, but at the same time I had to learn everything else, which in a way was more important, especially the human element. It took me several films to learn.

-- excerpted from *Malle on Malle*, edited by Philip French, 1993

⁹ He had co-directed the underwater documentary *The Silent World* with Jacques Cousteau