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Le Combat dans l'île

(Zeitgeist Films, 6.22.2010)

Alain Cavalier has directed only a handful of films over five decades and is rarely mentioned in any histories of French cinema, but *Le Combat dans l'île*, his first feature, is terrific. I had never heard of this 1962 film until it was revived at Manhattan's Film Forum in June 2009, receiving a rave review from A. O. Scott in *The New York Times*. Its quality leaves me wondering how many other excellent but obscure titles from this period are lurking out there.

Le Combat dans l'île succeeds as both a political thriller and a drama about a romantic triangle. Clément (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and Anne (Romy Schneider) are a seemingly happy bourgeois couple, though he has made her abandon her acting career and has issues with his manufacturer father (Jacques Berlioz). Clément is also a member of a violent right-wing political group that carries out assassinations. Clément's best friend in the group, Serge (Pierre Asso), has committed several political murders around the world since 1927. Helpful Serge accompanies Clément, armed with a bazooka, on his young friend's first hit.

Serge advises him to go into hiding, so Clément and Anne, who has already had problems with her cold, distracted, and violent husband, visit the country cottage of Paul (Henri Serre), a printer and Clément's boyhood best friend. Through news accounts Clément learns that the intended victim is alive, having been tipped off, and that the betrayer is none other than Serge. All the while Anne notices that Paul, a widower, is everything Clément is not: tender, thoughtful, artistic. The boulibase soon hits the fan.

Cavalier is best known for the quite different *Thérèse* (1986), about a nun who becomes a saint, winner of six Cesars, including best film and director. Although he is never mentioned as belonging to the nouvelle vague, the style of *Le Combat dans l'île* fits in with what Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut were doing at the same time. For example, Cavalier cuts off scenes long before they end, as when jealous Clément starts a brawl with a friend of Anne.

Several scenes are masterful. Cavalier jumps from a newspaper photo of the destruction leveled by Clément's bazooka to a patriotic war painting in his dining room, as Anne natters on about changing curtains and wallpapers. The best moment in *Le Combat dans l'île* comes with a slow pan from Paul's kitchen, where his housekeeper (Diane Lévrier) is listening to news on the radio, to the dining room. Tension builds because of the revelations in the news, including a recording of a telephone conversation with the traitor, ending at the dinner table with Clément trying to hide his nervousness, Paul oblivious, and Anne shocked when she recognizes Serge's voice on the recording. Numerous other clever touches include the subtle way Cavalier reveals the inevitable Anne-Paul liaison.

As a combination of political thriller and sexually charged melodrama, *Le Combat dans l'île* resembles a merging of the themes of Louis Malle, who produced the film for his former assistant, and Jean-Pierre Melville, who supposedly appears somewhere in the film, though I can't spot him. Zeitgeist Films's perfect transfer calls attention to the atmospheric cinematography of Pierre Lhomme, who would later use this same combination of natural light and shadows for Melville's *Army of Shadows*.

Serre plays Paul with even more understated nonchalance than he displays this same year in Truffaut's *Jules and Jim*. Trintignant offers the patented mixture of cool surface with neurotic insecurities bubbling underneath that he would refine as the sixties progressed, culminating in his great performance in Bernardo Bertolucci's quite similar [The Conformist](#). Trintignant demonstrates several variations on sulkiness after Clément discovers the personal is more important than the political. Even better is the luminous Schneider (*The Trial*), who has little dialogue but conveys Anne's confusion and uncertainties mainly through glances at her husband and lover. *Le Combat dans l'île* is notably untalky for a French film, with Cavalier aiming his camera at his actors and trusting them to convey the appropriate emotions.

The main extra is the 13-minute "France 1961," in which an unseen Cavalier looks at stills from the film and behind-the-scenes photos and reflects upon his first feature. He remembers not being able to hear the actors because of inadequate equipment. Cavalier offered the part of Paul to Trintignant, but the actor preferred playing the villain. The director discusses the political background, extremists opposed to Charles de Gaulle's Algerian policy, and mentions the influence of Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, and American film noir without going into any detail. Another extra presents nine behind-the-scenes photos, most already seen in "France 1961."

A pamphlet offers two essays: "On the Nouvelle Vague and Working with Alain Cavalier" by Lhomme and "The Traditional and the Transitional" by critic Elliott Stein. Lhomme, who supervised the transfer of *Le Combat dans l'île* from the original negative, argues that Cavalier was one of two dozen directors as important to the early sixties as Godard and Truffaut. The cinematographer writes about how black and white is more artistic than color and how he used diffused lighting. Stein reflects upon the careers of Cavalier, Trintignant, Schneider, and Lhomme.—Michael Adams