A Matter of Life and Death (1946), *The Red Shoes*, *The Small Back Room* (1949), or Powell's solo effort *The Edge of the World* (1937). The diversity of their work makes comparison a tricky business, of course, but I'll add that even a few other opera films surpass *The Tales of Hoffmann* in my eyes and ears, most notably Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Moses und Aron* (1975), Ingmar Bergman's *The Magic Flute* (1975), and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Parsifal* (1982). Broadly speaking, though, *The Tales of Hoffmann* is as resourceful, innovative, and adroit as almost any movie of its day, and my reservations are basically just quirks. Criterion's superbly rendered 4K digital restoration restores footage that has been missing throughout most of the film's history and supplements the feature with eye-filling stills of Heckroth's artwork and a short West German film of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* that Heckroth hired Powell to direct in 1955. Opera connoisseurs and opera neophytes should make a beeline for this splendid disc.—**David Sterritt**

Le Corbeau

Directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot; screenplay by Louis Chavance and Henri-Georges Clouzot; cinematography by Nicolas Hayer; edited by Marguerite Beaugé (uncredited); production design by André Andrejew; music by Tony Aubin; starring Pierre Fresnay, Ginette Leclerc, Héléna Manson, Micheline Francey, and Pierre Larquey. Blu-ray, B&W, French dialogue with English subtitles, 91 min, 1943. A Criterion Collection release, www.criterion.com.

"What did you do in the war, Daddy?" was, in the decades following World War II, a relatively gentle and even wistfully nostalgic question in the Anglo-American world. The title of an irreverent 1966 Blake Edwards comedy, the query—if commonly met with dignified silences from those less eager to discuss what had to be done—conjured images of heroic acts, such as future president John F. Kennedy saving the life of a crewmate by swimming two miles, towing his wounded comrade by clenching the strand of a life preserver between his teeth.

But that same question would have been a taboo subject in France. America's last great war was its last unambiguously good war—France, in contrast, hasn't had a good war in over 150 years. Its long, dirty, colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria are best remembered for their anachronistic futility and unspeakable barbarism. Victory in World War I was pyrrhic, with battlefields little more than the grinding slaughterhouses that devastated a generation and shattered French society. Yet none of these catastrophes, or countless others, approaches the country's shameful humiliation of World War II. The utter collapse of its enormous military machine—there simply was no willingness to fight, even in self-defense—was followed by an occupation that was worse than compliant, characterized by a willful and at times even enthusiastic collaboration with their Nazi conquerors.

What did filmmaker Henri-Georges Clouzot do during the war? He worked for Continental Films, the Nazi-run, Paris-based film studio whose charge was to make light divertissements to occupy the docile minds of a subservient public. Did that make him a collaborator? The short answer is yes. Indeed, Clouzot initially signed on to be the head of Continental's screenplay division, where he worked closely with Alfred Greven, who had been appointed by Goebbels to serve as the managing director of the production company.

Not surprisingly, after the liberation Clouzot was banned from filmmaking—for life. That sentence was soon informally commuted to two years, and the writer/director would go on to enjoy a celebrated if roller-coaster career, highlighted by *Quai des Orfèvres* (1947), a marvelous noir policier, and the two films for which he is best known, the left-leaning adventure *The Wages of Fear* (1953) with Yves Montand and Charles Vanel, and the wildly influential *Diabolique* (1955) a Hitchcockian thriller featuring Simone Signoret and Paul Meurisse.

The longer answer to the question of Clouzot's collaboration is, inevitably, more complicated. Of the two movies he directed for Continental, Clouzot's greatest film, *Le Corbeau* (1943)—an enduring and timeless masterpiece now available in a new Blu-ray edition from The Criterion Collection—is, especially in retrospect, an audacious and subversive work. One could argue that it was an important and even daring act of resistance against the Occupation. (Of course, one could also argue that if Germany won the war, an all-too-plausible counterfactual, Clouzot would have made a comfortable career in Nazified France.) In any event, it remains astonishing that *Le Corbeau* (*The Raven*) was produced and distributed in occupied France. Because as J. Hoberman observed, "Seen today, *The Raven* seems less an apology for, than an exposé of, occupied France."

For that reason, among others, the film was enormously controversial in its time (and well beyond, technically banned in France until 1969, the year of Ophuls's *The Sorrow and the Pity* and Melville's *Army of Shadows*). The production would never have passed muster with France's own censors, but Continental Films, if by all accounts quite wary of the dark, disturbing project, played by its own rules and gave the green light—only to see the film condemned by the Catholic Church, the Vichy government, *and* the communists and the underground resistance press. Surely, then, Clouzot's film touched some very raw nerves.

Le Corbeau opens, shockingly, by diving into a then white-hot issue in French politics—and one that is suddenly again all too relevant today—as Dr. Rémy Germain (Pierre Fresnay, who starred in Clouzot's previous film for Continental, *The Murderer Lives at Number 21* [1942], as well in as Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* [1939]) emerges from a modest provincial dwelling to wash his bloodstained hands. He explains to anxious relatives that the mother's life has been saved. "My god, doctor, you didn't," comes the immediate, shaken reply. But he did, and "all in good conscience." When forced to choose, Dr. Germain places priority on the life of the mother.

In *Le Corbeau*, the psychiatrist Dr. Vorzet (Pierre Larquey, left) cautions his colleague Dr. Germain (Pierre Fresnay) that the author of the poison pen letters could be anyone in town.

Clouzot is already playing with fire here—and so is our protagonist, the good doctor. Indeed, two months before *Le Corbeau* was released, Marie-Louise Giraud was sent to the guillotine by the Vichy government for performing abortions. She became one of the last women to be executed in France, when the eighty-seven-year-old head of (faux) state Marshal Pétain refused to commute her sentence for committing a "crime against state security"—events well dramatized in Claude Chabrol's *Story of Women* (1988), featuring Isabelle Huppert.

As its plot quickly develops, however, it is clear that *Le Corbeau* has its sights on an even more taboo subject. "The Raven" is the nom de plume of the author of poison pen letters—whose first and principal target is Dr. Germain, but whose anonymous scandal-mongering manages to rattle the entire town, leaving few secrets or lies untouched. Germain is accused of two transgressions, neither true, but both widely believed: that he is an abortionist, and that he is having an affair with Laura Vorzet (Micheline Francey), the wife of his senior colleague, an esteemed psychiatrist, played by Pierre Larquey in a performance that steals every scene in which he appears. As the letters proliferate, the social fabric of the town—rather pointedly identified in the introduction as "a small town, here or anywhere" (that is, all of France)—swiftly unravels.

If *Le Corbeau* has a message—and it is hard to argue that it doesn't—it is that the practice of informing on the crimes of one's neighbors, real and imagined, springs from a deranged mind, is socially ruinous, and is to be categorically condemned. That is quite something to say in occupied France, where informing on one's neighbors was virtually the national pastime. As Bertrand Tavernier had one policeman explain in *The Clockmaker* (1974), "France is a nation of fifty million people and twenty million informers." (Tavernier, France's most historically sensitive commercial filmmaker, took on these questions in his somewhat generous but nevertheless brilliant 2002 Occupation drama *Safe Conduct*.)

This did not go unnoticed by the authorities. Frederic Spotts reports in *The Shameful Peace: How French Artists and Intellectuals Survived the Nazi Occupation* that not only did Clouzot's overseers at Continental Films grow increasingly nervous about the production, but "even the Gestapo got involved," because "denunciatory letters were an invaluable source of information in tracking down Jews, resisters, and others they wanted. Nothing should dissuade the public from sending them." It would be the director's last film for the studio.

In *Le Corbeau*, Mme. Vorzet (Micheline Francey) and Dr. Germain (Pierre Fresnay) are widely rumored to be having an affair.

Moreover, it is hard to read *Le Corbeau* as anything short of a summary condemnation of French society. Certainly, if you squint, you can see gentle hints of anti-German sentiment. The lovely Madame Vorzet—proper, proud, attractive, and platinum blonde—would appear to embody the Aryan ideal of womanhood, whereas her implicit rival Denise (Ginette Leclerc), Dr. Germain's on-again off-again romantic interest, is swarthy, promiscuous, and, notably, imperfect (she was disfigured in a car accident). Yet, and contrary to would-be German ideals (and standard Hollywood convention), it is the fallen woman who proves to have the purer heart.

Nevertheless, the villain of this picture is France itself—which is surely what unnerved both the Vichy government and the Resistance movement. Scene by scene, moment by moment, *Le Corbeau* shows a society that is not obviously worthy of redemption. Corruption runs rampant through every institution. The hospital, with its missing morphine, philandering doctors, and embezzling administrators, does not instill much hope. The director of the post office insists (if hypocritically) that the rules must be followed regardless of consequence—his credo approaches "just follow your orders." The Church is openly mocked—and despite serving as the site of several crucial scenes, it is, at best, an irrelevancy. (This did not go unnoticed at the time.) As for the town's compromised public figures, they can imagine no calamity greater than the prospect that they might lose their privileged perks.

Nor do the townsfolk inspire. As anxieties spiral, an ugly crowd chases down one suspect and vandalizes her home—the camera lingers on her desperate flight—and she is soon arrested on little more than the wild accusations hurled. After a respite, the poison pen letters resume (gently drifting down from the Church gallery), proving that the mob had hounded an innocent. But there are no real innocents in *Le Corbeau*. In something of an easy shot, even children are routinely shown to be duplicitous—in particular the young teen who lives in Dr. Germain's boarding house, who passes most of her time spying on the tenants. More subtly, and perhaps the narrative's central theme (as well as an effective device for keeping the movie's central mystery alive until the very end), the rogues' gallery of locals suggests that any one of a dozen characters could plausibly be The Raven.

With the passage of eighty years since its production, perhaps the most remarkable achievement of *Le Corbeau* is that, despite the considerable freight of its distinct historical context, it remains a film of timeless relevance and enduring quality—and one that boasts impeccable dialogue, direction, performances, and, not to be overlooked, cinematography. Shot by Nicolas Hayer—then already with ten years and two dozen credits under his belt—the director of photography would go on to shoot *Panique* (1946) for Duvivier, *Orpheus* (1950) for Cocteau, and Jean-Pierre Melville's brilliant noir *Le Doulos* (1962).

All these qualities are embodied in the film's late bravura scene, in which the esteemed Dr. Vorzet swings a lightbulb to give our boy scout of a protagonist a life lesson. "You're amazing. You think people are all good or all bad." But they are not, he (or is that Clouzot?) insists. Instead, everyone contains both darkness and light—"but where does each begin?" A query the psychiatrist underscores by admitting a shocking human failing of his own. He invites Rémy to take a harder look at himself—"the result may surprise you."

What makes for the difference between a good movie and a transcendent one remains endlessly mysterious. But it is no small thing. Consider that in 1951, Otto Preminger, at the height of his powers (closing a ten-film run that began in 1945 with *Laura*), and well-stocked with a strong cast and top-shelf collaborators, set out to remake *Le Corbeau* with *The 13th Letter*. It is a satisfactory effort, but in comparison with the original, it is toothless, undistinguished, and appropriately obscure. Whereas with the original, as André Bazin wrote in 1943, Clouzot demonstrated "that he was capable of raising [a] genre of mechanical intrigue to a high level of human expression."

The Criterion Collection's new 4K restoration of *Le Corbeau* reflects its usual high standards; the extras, however, are relatively thin: a characteristically irresistible interview with Tavernier; an excerpt from a documentary about French cinema featuring Clouzot; and a short booklet essay by film scholar Alan Williams. But, ultimately, this film speaks for itself—and it has a lot to say.—**Jonathan Kirshner**

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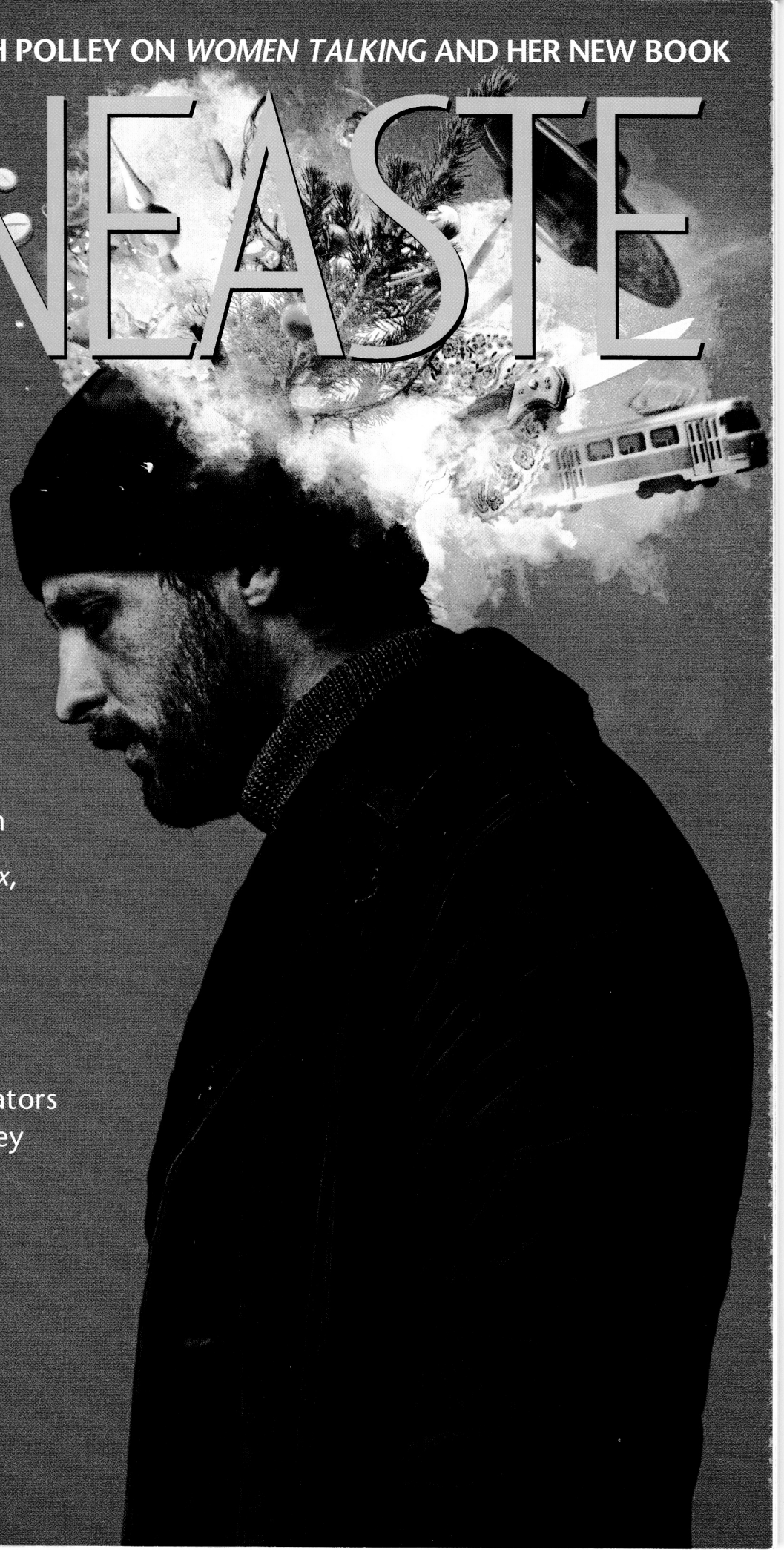

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