



**OF SIN AND SALVATION:
THE CINEMA OF ROBERT BRESSON**

Les Anges du péché

Les Affaires publiques

Please note: The film author asks you to excuse the fact that he agreed to cut certain scenes from this film. It was his first film. Three songs were judged to be too extravagant and their elimination brought about the mutilation of the film. He requests your understanding.

Of all the lost films in cinema history's phantom filmography, the 'lostest', so to speak, at least *ex aequo* with the complete *Greed*, has always been Robert Bresson's *Les Affaires publiques*. All one knew was its title (which has turned out to be inaccurate), its date of registration (1934), its running time (approximately twenty minutes) and – most startlingly in view of the director's subsequent reputation – the fact that it was a comedy. Indeed, Bresson himself referred to it, with perhaps more than a *souçon* of poker-faced malice, as 'like Buster Keaton, only much, much worse.'

Well, *Les Affaires publiques* has been found – a real achievement considering that the title on the can of film was *Le Chancelier (The Chancellor)* while that on the print itself was *Beby inauguré (Beby Inaugurates)*. The can was chanced on by a group of film historians rummaging through the chaotically stacked archives of the Cinémathèque Française.

What, one asks, does a burlesque comedy by Robert Bresson actually look like? The answer: A circus with a plot; a piece of filmic doggerel; a cartoon with live actors – and like a cartoon activated exclusively by energy. For all that there is frankly nothing in *Beby inauguré* quite as memorable as the fact and the circumstances of its belated rediscovery, it is not just a curiosity, to be savoured solely for its rarity; and if scarcely the revelation that might have been hoped, it is very much better, *funnier* than Bresson's self-contradictory description had led one to fear.

As for the plot, if that is the correct word, it is indescribable, being nothing more than a sequence of gags centred on two adjacent republics, Crogandia and Miremia (shades of *Duck Soup*), a Miremian aviatrix whose monoplane crashes on Crogandian soil, the solemn inauguration of a statue by the frock-coated Crogandian Chancellor (Beby), and the no less solemn and no less snag-infested launching of a ship. Actually, despite glimmerings of *Duck Soup*, *The Navigator* (in the semi-choreographed animation of inanimate objects) and *Million Dollar Legs* (in the quaint surreality of the situation), Bresson's maybe insufficiently anarchic sense of humour comes closest to the human puppetry of Clair's *Le Dernier Milliardaire*. That said, there are, amid some stillborn bubbles of wit, a small cluster of absolute knockout jokes.

Gilbert Adair, *Sight & Sound*, Summer 1987

Les Anges du péché

Les Anges du péché must be one of the most extraordinary first feature films in the history of the cinema, combining virtuosity with a compelling treatment of what, on the face of it, is an unpromising subject. It is true that in the 1940s, when the Church had been attempting to move out into the real world and to become more demotic, the convent setting was perhaps less remarkable, and such concerns are glancingly referred to in the lightly sketched class differences between Anne-Marie and the ex-prisoners Thérèse and Agnès – or, indeed, in the fact that Anne-Marie should have experienced

a vocation at all. Even so, the moral and psychological concerns are rehearsed in this film with unusual seriousness, although they were to become characteristic of Bresson.

The closed religious community is an ideal setting for a psychological thriller and a detective enquiry. On the other hand, nuns can be comic or erotic figures, somewhere between *Carry On* and Buñuel, and Bresson is certainly aware of the surrealist tradition exemplified by Bataille. The relationship between Anne-Marie and Thérèse is erotically charged, as are their respective affiliations with the prioress and assistant prioress. The convent hierarchy demanding that the nuns prostrate themselves on the chapel floor distinctly implies masochism and, indeed, a sub-text concerns the way in which the religious vocation redirects traditional femininity. When Anne-Marie first dons her habit, there is a discussion of how her hair is to be masked. She searches for a mirror only to find that another nun, recently arrived from prison, has stolen it because she has not 'looked at herself for five years'. But if narcissism is denied in prison, it is exploited in the convent where, as Anne-Marie discovers to her cost when she visits the cells, each nun, as it were, holds up a mirror to her sisters, giving back in her criticism a reflection of the image perceived.

These are aspects of the film's richness, but they are not systematically explored. Instead we are invited to consider, in the case of both Anne-Marie and Thérèse, the nature of their vocation. Can someone as pretty and frivolous as Anne-Marie seriously renounce the world? Doesn't her exuberance indicate that she is unsuited to religious life? Is she not too wealthy, materially and perhaps psychologically, to accept material and spiritual poverty? Conversely, Thérèse is a criminal. Is she beyond redemption because she is a murderess? The nuns, of course, do not think so, but the viewer has doubts. The lover she shoots is never seen and we only have her word for it that she was framed. In worldly terms, she is not an immediately attractive character (made less attractive by the contrast with Anne-Marie) and our own worldliness immediately accords her fewer privileges. Moreover, her guilt seems to be confirmed by the spiritual transformation she undergoes, absorbing herself in Anne-Marie's concerns and taking the latter's vows for her before submitting to secular justice. Even someone entirely unsympathetic to the Bressonian dilemma could not help but admire the rigour with which it is set out.

None of this would command our attention, however, were it not for the aestheticism of Bresson's *mise en scène*. The film is a spatial poem: the nuns' figures, triangles of light and shade, are disposed like chess pieces, but instead of the flatness of the chequered board, they are given a luminosity which may well point to spirituality but which bespeaks sensuousness. It is an acute irony that the filmmaker whose style has been called Jansenist, who is renowned for his austerity should, precisely by means of restraint and absence, achieve a kind of ecstasy of aestheticism. The film is deliberately Manichean, contrasting black and white, good and evil, the flagstones, the black cat, the nuns' black shadows on white walls, all striving towards a starkness and purity of motive and resolution denied by the ambiguity and mixed feelings characteristic of secular life. Some of the same formal procedures can be found in Bresson's following film, *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* or, indeed, in his disciple, Joseph Losey, whose investigations of secular evil in *Eve* and *Don Giovanni* show how influential *Les Anges du péché* has been. Yet all these examples tend to confirm that the convent setting is crucial in the film, not just morally but aesthetically, and that it is the fusion of painterly and spiritual preoccupations which gives *Les Anges du péché* its edge.

Jill Forbes, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1987

LES AFFAIRES PUBLIQUES (BEBY INAUGURÉ)

Director: Robert Bresson

Production Company: Arc-Films

Administration: Geissmann

Dialogue: Robert Bresson, André Josset, Paul Weill

Director of Photography: Nicolas Toporkoff

Editor: Robert Bresson

Art Director: Pierre Charbonnier

Make-up: Boris de Fast

Music: Jean Wiener

[Music] Collaborator: Roger Desormière

Sound Recording: Marcel Petiot

Sound Engineer: Georges Gérardot

Technical Adviser: André Cerf

Cast:

Beby (*the chancellor*)

Andrée Servilanges (*the princess*)

Marcel Dalio (*sculptor/fireman/radio voice/admiral*)

Gilles Margaritis (*chauffeur*)

Simone Cressier (*Christiane*)

Jane Pierson (*attendant*)

Frank Maurice (*sailor*)

André Numès (*gawper*)

Jacques Beauvais

Eugène Stuber

clowns of the Hiver Circus

girls of the Folies Bergères

girls of the Pigalle Theatre

France 1934

23 mins

LES ANGES DU PÉCHÉ

Director: Robert Bresson

Production Company: Productions Synops

Producers: Roger Richebé, Roland Tual *

Production Manager: Dominique Drouin

Unit Production Manager: André Guillot

Assistant Director: Frédéric Liotier

Script Supervisor: Madeleine Lefèvre

Screenplay: R.L. Bruckberger "Dominicain", Robert Bresson,

Jean Giraudoux

Dialogue: Jean Giraudoux

Director of Photography: Philippe Agostini

Camera Operator: Maurice Pecqueux

Stills: Rémy Duval

Editor: Yvonne Martin

Art Director: René Renoux

Assistant Art Director: Roger Claude

Music: Jean Jacques Grünenwald

'Salve Regina' Sung by: Irène Joachim

Sound Engineer: René Louge

Studio: Studios Radio-Cinéma

Cast

Renée Faure (*Anne-Marie Lamaury*)

Jany Holt (*Thérèse*)

Sylvie (*the prioress*)

Mila Parély (*Madeleine*)

Marie-Hélène Dasté (*Mother Saint-Joan*)

Yolande Laffon (*Madame Lamaury, Anne-Marie's mother*)

Paula Dehelly (*Mother Dominique*)

Silvia Monfort (*Agnès*)

Gilberte Terbois (*Sister Marie-Joseph*)

Louis Seigner (*prison director*)

Georges Colin (*chief of police*)

Jean Morel (*inspector*) *

Christiane Barry (*Sister Blaise*) *

Geneviève Morel, Elisabeth Hardy, Andrée Clément,

Madeleine Rousset, Claire Oliver, Jacqueline Marbaux (*sisters*) *

France 1943

96 mins

* Uncredited

OF SIN AND SALVATION: THE CINEMA OF ROBERT BRESSON

Diary of a Country Priest (Journal d'un curé de campagne)

Thu 2 Jun 20:10; Sat 4 Jun 12:40; Mon 20 Jun 18:10

Les Anges du péché (Angels of Sin)

Fri 3 Jun 14:20; Sun 12 Jun 12:30

Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne

Fri 3 Jun 18:30; Mon 13 Jun 20:40

Mouchette

Fri 3 Jun 20:30; Fri 10 Jun 18:30; Wed 15 Jun 18:20; Wed 22 Jun 20:45

A Man Escaped (Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé)

Sat 4 Jun 15:40; Sat 18 Jun 18:10 (+ intro by independent filmmaker and critic Alex Barrett); Thu 23 Jun 20:45

Au hasard Balthazar

Sat 4 Jun 18:20; Tue 7 Jun 20:45; Fri 17 Jun 18:30

L'Argent (Money)

Sun 5 Jun 16:00; Thu 16 Jun 20:30

The Trial of Joan of Arc (Procès de Jeanne d'Arc)

Sun 5 Jun 18:40; Wed 29 Jun 20:50

Style, Anti-style and Influence: Robert Bresson Re-assessed

Tue 7 Jun 18:20

Une Femme douce (A Gentle Creature)

Thu 9 Jun 20:40; Sat 18 Jun 13:30

Lancelot du Lac (Lancelot of the Lake)

Thu 16 Jun 18:30; Mon 20 Jun 20:45

The Devil, Probably (Le Diable probablement)

Sun 19 Jun 18:10; Mon 27 Jun 20:30

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