

1999 Sydney Film Festival

An interview with Bertrand Tavernier

"My job is to dream and invent, and out of this produce something that will change the world"

Richard Phillips
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Bertrand Tavernier, veteran French film director, screenwriter and producer is a warm and gregarious man with an encyclopaedic knowledge of American and international film. In a cultural environment dominated by cynicism and the promotion of historical ignorance, Tavernier is a rare figure, someone genuinely concerned about what is happening to working people, deeply hostile to anti-immigrant racism and like-minded legislation, and determined to help create the artistic and intellectual environment that will produce progressive social change. Tavernier spoke with World Socialist Web Site reporter, Richard Phillips during the Sydney Film Festival.

Richard Phillips: Before discussing *It All Starts Today*, your latest film, could you briefly describe how you became involved in the film industry and the directors that had the greatest impact on you in the earlier part of your career?

Bertrand Tavernier: I always wanted to be a director, ever since I was about 13 or 14 years old. I think perhaps it was John Ford's *Fort Apache* and *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* that suddenly made me realise that the director wrote with images. I had read a lot of Jules Verne and Jack London when I was young and learnt that they painted with words. When I saw Ford's films I realised the director painted with moving images.

Many directors influenced me. I had a notebook in which I kept photos from films by directors that I liked. This included John Ford, William Wellman and others, so it was not a bad beginning. Then I discovered the French cinema—Jean Renoir, Jean Vigo and Jacques Becker—and later Italian movies.

I grew up as a big fan of American films. I loved Samuel Fuller, Delmer Daves and many other American directors. Later I wrote two books about the American cinema. One of them has had several editions, first *Twenty*, then later *Thirty* and now *Fifty Years of American Cinema*. It is a 1,250-page book—a dictionary of nearly 600 filmmakers with many essays on directors and screenwriters. It also includes a study of censorship in Hollywood. It was co-written with Jean-Pierre Coursodon and I think it is a good book.

The other book is called *American Friends*. This has interviews with many American directors from John Ford to Robert Altman, to Robert Parish and Roger Corman, and many others who had not been interviewed

before. It also includes people like Sidney Buchman, the writer of *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, and Herbert Biberman, director of *Salt of the Earth*. There is a big section on the blacklist. I got to know practically everybody who was blacklisted and interviewed many people—John Berry, Joe Losey, Abe Polonsky and others. In two years I will do a sequel called *European Friends*, which will have interviews as well as essays on Michael Powell, Godard, Truffaut, Jean-Pierre Melville and many others.

The first director I worked with was Jean-Pierre Melville. I was studying at the Sorbonne and I interviewed him. After that I quit my studies and became a 3rd or 4th assistant director. Unfortunately I was a very bad assistant director. I was awful.

RP: Why do you say that?

BT: Because I was bad, there is no question about that. Melville terrified me. He behaved like a tyrant on the set and I was miserable during those weeks. In the end he told me, you will never succeed as an assistant director. I think he was right but he presented me to the film producer and suggested I become a press agent for the company that produced Melville's films, which I did.

After that I became an independent press agent with my friend and this was very satisfying because it meant that we could work on the films that we liked. We worked more like film buffs than normal press agents, not concentrating on the stars but on the directors and writers and the meaning of the film and its place in the history of cinema. We also provided detailed information and extensive interviews with the directors.

We worked with many, many directors this way—French, Italian and American, including some old-timers like Raoul Walsh, Howard Hawks and John Ford. We also publicised new films that we discovered; films that we reissued, like *Gentleman Jim* and *Make Way for Tomorrow*; the films of Ida Lupino and many others. And so I learnt about film.

Then I did my first film, *The Clockmaker*, which took me 14 months to get the finance for. This was shot very quickly and with a lot of passion. The film was released in 1973 and won the Prix Louis Delluc and the Silver Bear award at the Berlin Film Festival. It was a success.

Since then I have made more than 20 films. Mostly it has been very difficult to get money for their production. Every time it was the story of *The Clockmaker*—the stories were rejected; noone wanted to finance the films I wanted to do. Two of my biggest successes, *Round Midnight* and *Life and Nothing But*, had been turned down by everybody.

Although *Round Midnight* was not turned down by the producer he could not find a studio. They did not want to do a story about jazz, about a black guy and particularly about an old black guy. They just didn't want it and yet the film got two nominations for an Oscar and one of the nominations won. *Life and Nothing But* won the Best Foreign Language

Film in England, the Special Jury Award by the European Film Academy and Cesar awards for Philippe Noiret as best actor. It also won the Best Foreign Film by the West Coast critics. But nobody had wanted to put the money up for this movie. The same thing happened with *L.627* and almost all of my films.

RP: You mentioned that you interviewed blacklisted Hollywood directors and screenwriters. Can you comment on the Academy's award to Elia Kazan?

BT: I knew Kazan very well. He was someone I did a long interview with and I worked as his press agent on *The Arrangement*. I accepted that work on the condition that he would speak to me about the blacklist, which he did.

I admire him as a director, or at least I admire some of his films tremendously. I think that *Splendour in the Grass*, *Baby Doll*, *Face in the Crowd* and *Panic in the Streets* are marvellous films, but I think that his political behaviour was shameful.

When I interviewed him he only gave some partial explanations for his actions but he didn't tell me everything. Contrary to what the many people said at that time, I don't think he did it for money. It was more complex than that. It was as if he wanted to become more American than the Americans and this is how he could do it.

I don't buy his claim that he did it in order to be anti-Stalinist. This is nonsense, as Martin Ritt put it, how could informing to the government about a small group of theatre and film actors, and writers really hurt Stalin? This is something that I cannot accept, nor what he wrote in the *New York Times* about his actions. At the same time I cannot condemn all his work. I think *America, America* is a masterpiece and I think that out of his guilt he made some of the best American films.

Secondly, I don't think it is right to blame Kazan for everything. What about the people above him—people like Louis B. Mayer and other studio moguls who introduced this blacklist, and the agents who accepted and enforced it? These people are rarely quoted or written about. They are not attacked.

Kazan behaved very, very badly, there is no doubt about this, but the blacklist could not have succeeded without Jack Warner and others. I think it is important to reveal all the others responsible for the blacklist.

At the time, when I was doing the interviews for my book, I tended to concentrate on the people who behaved well, who are sometimes forgotten, people like Fred Zineman, Robert Wise, and Otto Preminger, who has not been given due credit.

When I was promoting *Round Midnight* I met a press agent who had been a communist and he told me that for many years Preminger had worked with him. He said that when the FBI came to Preminger's office he refused to cooperate and drove them away. Dalton Trumbo always said that Preminger was the first to break the blacklist.

The Academy never acknowledged the blacklist, they never said they were sorry about it and they never paid a tribute to the people whose careers were destroyed. They should have made a kind of global honor to the people whose careers were broken in the US—John Berry, Jo Losey, Abe Polonsky, Jules Dassin and others.

RP: Could you explain what it was like working with Dirk Bogarde on *Daddy Nostalgie* and Dexter Gordon in *Round Midnight*, both films now regarded as memorials to these great artists?

BT: Dirk Bogarde's contribution to *Daddy Nostalgie* was enormous. He was very literate, biting, but warm and funny and we got along very well during the shooting.

I'd admired Dirk's work for many years and he mine. In fact, he had been part of the jury in Cannes that gave me the director's award for *A Sunday in the Country* but we had never actually met even though I had worked as a press agent on several Joe Losey films. I loved Bogarde in Losey's films—*Accident*, *The Servant* and *King and Country*—but I also liked him in earlier films like *Hunted* where he is terrific.

Bogarde was a very brave actor who wanted to experiment and worked to break his matinee star image. He fought to appear in *The Servant* and immediately agreed to work with someone who had been blacklisted.

One of the many important contributions he made to *Daddy Nostalgie* was the scene where he was in the car at the gas station talking to his daughter. We had just finished shooting the film but I felt that something else was needed and I remembered a conversation with him where he talked about pain. I called and asked him to write a scene about what it means to be in pain. Colo Tavernier, my ex-wife, had written the screenplay and it was brilliant with moments of great delicacy, but the scene Bogarde wrote is wonderful. I think I only changed one line and we shot it. It was marvellous.

In a way he was like Michael Powell, someone who had no frontiers and was ready to work with anybody in the world. He disagreed with the attitude that sometimes prevailed in Britain, that British cinema should be an island onto itself. He always looked for serious and challenging work.

Dexter Gordon was tremendous but in a different way. He was very literate with a sharp sense of humour, a great knowledge of film, and incredible admiration for actors like George Sanders, Richard Burton and James Mason. Dexter said Mason sounded like tenor saxophone. He contributed 30 or 40 lines to the film. The discussion "Do you like basketball?" was his.

It was difficult though because we had to prevent him from drinking and many times the line between the screenplay and life was not clear. When he was drunk we could not work with him, we just stopped filming. Despite these problems he had an incredible relationship with the camera. It was as if he felt the thing and we never did more than three takes for the dramatic scenes. He was always right and had a quality that sometimes takes some actors 20 years to achieve. When the film was released in America Marlon Brando sent a letter to Dexter in which he said that for the first time in 15 years he learnt something about acting. Dexter read me the letter over the phone and said, "After that who needs an Oscar?"

RP: Most of your earlier films, or at least those before *L.627*, are introspective. They are about death or people coming to the end of their lives. *It All Starts Today* is about the beginning of life, about teachers and very young children, with the main characters determined to change the situation they face.

BT: This is true. My first films were concerned about death and generally involved older people, they were never about people my own age. Probably this was a John Ford influence. He is perhaps the only American director who did lots of films about old people. It is only now that I have produced films about young people.

I suppose there was a moment that produced a change for me and I had to find another relationship with the audience. I was now dealing with a new audience who was watching mainly American films, an audience that was much more ignorant and not interested in history. This of course is a very, very bad situation. I didn't like it, but the change in the social and political situation in my country demanded that I produce films that were a bit different, less lyrical, less contemplative, more urgent, more based on the notion of freedom, energy and drive. I had to put myself in danger, even make my own internal revolution. My films now have the same kind of energy as the main characters—Daniel in my last film—but also in *L.627* and *Capitaine Conan*. The films travel at the same speed as the main character.

In *L.627* we get the same feeling of instability. One of the greatest compliments on my later films came from Alain Resnais who said these were films where you did not know what the next shot would be. This is because I am dealing with characters that do not know themselves what is going to happen next. My direction has to follow and create this atmosphere.

In fact, I rarely produce movies that go from shot, to reverse shot, etc. I always try to avoid that. Either I do a long take, a complex camera

movement, or I will break the scene with an unexpected closeup. I try to work that way, to get away from the rules and be free from formal conventions. Often as a director gets older the films became more crafted and softer. As I get older, my films have become more violent, more biting, faster than before.

I am very proud of the films I've made and there is not one that I would say that I don't agree with or would change. Ken Loach and Bob Altman would also probably say the same thing about their films. This is rare. Many directors look at their earlier films and say that were forced to do this or that, and if they produced the film again they would change part or all of it. I don't feel this at all.

RP: You said that there was a turning point in France that produced a change in your films. Could you elaborate?

BT: It was the coming of the extreme right, the betrayal of Mitterrand, and the feeling that people had lost their grip on reality and did not want to find it, that produced this change in my work.

Today most French politicians try to ignore reality, they act as if they are totally autistic. This makes me very, very angry. For me there are things that you just cannot remain silent about. If we were making films in the way they work we would be out of business very quickly.

I learn so much from making films. Perhaps it is best to use what Michael Powell said in his memoirs, that he made films in order to learn. This is my approach. I knew nothing about pre-schools before making *It All Starts Today* but what I discovered made me very respectful of teachers and all those people who are fighting for the future.

Daniel, the head teacher at the school, is a hero but he is a hero who also makes mistakes. He is not some sort of Rambo of the school. He doesn't behave well with his girlfriend's son. He slaps him; he doesn't understand him. He makes a mistake with Mrs. Henri, which has dramatic consequences after he throws her out of the school. So he is not always right, but he is one of the unsung heroes of our time, ignored by political power, ignored by the people above him in the institutions, ignored by the media.

The media refuse to speak about such people and even when they produce a TV series about teachers it is so untrue it is ridiculous. There is nothing real about it. In fact, there is a series on French television about a teacher but the classes only have about 10 kids in them and he is in a different city every episode. It is totally mad and there are never any consequences, yet people are dying as a result of government decisions. This is the reality. The misery facing many workers, and especially in the area where the film was made, is not abstract—it kills people every day.

Of course it is much more fashionable to be cynical and not be involved in the social fight—one doesn't talk about teachers and the problems they confront. But these teachers, social workers and many others are preserving little islands of civilisation, of life and happiness, in our society.

For years when teachers and principals were fighting against the government they were told "this is not your job, you have to teach the children how to read and write". But how can you teach children who have not eaten, or are beaten up? Does the action of a teacher simply stop at the blackboard?

I have a great admiration for these foot soldiers, those that are fighting and suffering. As Kipling said, tell me the story of the foot soldier and I will tell you the story of every war. And these are the people who play the most crucial role in society, the key economic role. I am sure that there are people like Daniel in Australia and every country. The film tries to show this.

RP: The film portrays clashes between Daniel and local government officials and a mayor who claims to be a communist. What are your feelings about the generation of 1968 who have become part of the establishment and are imposing cuts to social programs?

BT: It is true that we have a lot of people who have betrayed,

compromised, or accepted power. Some of those who were Maoists in 1968 now own advertising agencies or others that said they were Trotskyists are running unions or have positions in the government. A lot of French intellectuals who were right wing before 1968, then became communists, then Maoist, and now they say we have to be non-political without ever acknowledging that they were wrong in the past.

RP: It is almost as if your film is a reaction against this.

BT: Absolutely. The film is saying that these politicians are not taking any notice of ordinary people. It tries to listen and respect what ordinary people are doing everyday of their lives.

RP: What has been the response to the film in France?

BT: The reaction was incredible, a huge and unexpected success, and very well received from the communities, teachers, social workers and educators. We have received thousands of letters and messages saying that the film is right and totally authentic. I even got a letter from a woman working for the electricity department. She told us the department did cut the power off to many houses in the fall and did not reconnect them during winter. In fact, since this film there is going to be a law passed making it illegal to cut-off the electricity to people who cannot pay their bills.

Some teachers even told me that they had wanted to quit but have decided to continue. One said the film gave them another three years of courage to fight. I even received a letter from a psychiatrist who deals with teachers suffering from depression and he is using the film a lot and with great results. There have also been reports that some teachers who have seen the film have driven away the government inspectors from their schools. This is a great victory.

RP: And what was the reaction from the government and the Education Minister?

BT: I showed the film to the Education Minister but there was no dialogue. He told me after the screening that he thought the scene between the teacher and the inspector was very accurate. He said he loved the scene with the truck and then he went away to eat some sandwiches. I wanted him to meet the teachers from the area or somebody connected with the school but there was absolutely no dialogue with him. Nothing happened. The Social Welfare minister said the film was totally right and that she was working to change things. This has yet to be proven.

RP: Finally, can you provide some background on *The Other Side of the Tracks*, the film you made with your son in 1997 in response to the government's anti-immigration laws?

BT: At that time 66 film directors signed a statement declaring that they would disobey the Debre Act, a law proposed by the right-wing government against immigrants. The law said that if anyone knew immigrants that did not have legal papers to stay in France, they were obliged to tell the police. I did not start the protest but I immediately signed the statement of protest.

We all received a letter from the Paris housing minister saying we knew nothing about the problem of integration, that we were spoilt children and should live in these areas of high immigration for one month. The minister said we would see how terrible it was in these areas and change our minds. Each of us were assigned an area and so I decided to go with my son and meet the people from this area—Grand Pechers, in Montreuil just outside central Paris.

We found many people outraged by this letter and so we met. We discussed things and I asked what could I do. I said I am not a politician, the only thing I could do is make a film about it and so they agreed.

This film was a tremendous experience and I spent six months living in Montreuil. I met some incredible people and go back very often to meet and have dinner with them. In fact, one of the reasons why I cannot stay longer in Australia is because I have to return for a baptism on June 26 of a little baby from this area. I am the godfather of the child, which was named after the film's editor.

There are many things that I will never forget. One man I interviewed is Senegalese and he made some fantastic comments on integration. At one point he said integration should mean the right to live where you want, the way you want. "Do I ask Chirac," he said, "if he is integrated, and who integrated him?" It was such a wonderful way of throwing the ball back to the people who keep talking about integration.

The film had an important impact and the government allocated more money to the area because of the film. They now have proper basketball courts and other facilities. Although I know that a lot of my films have played an important part in creating a discussion on many subjects, it is difficult to know the exact effect of my films because the results are not always so easily seen and I don't always keep track. But all the people concerned say that my films are true and are real and accurate. I am very proud to have achieved this—to have the imagination to make such films. Of course as the director this is my job, to invent and to dream. As Michael Powell said, we have to dream and invent, and out of this process produce something that will change the world.

RP: And your next project?

BT: I am working on a documentary about people condemned by what is called the double penalty. This is a law that prosecutes people who have broken the law, many of them for minor offenses, but who are doubly prosecuted because they are immigrants. I have been with them for a year, interviewing and collecting material. I also want to work on a screenplay; a kind of black comedy about the people who were doing films for German companies during the Nazi occupation of France. I don't know whether I can get the screenplay; it is something that I will work on.



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