

Some Thoughts on Acting in *La Bande des Quatre*

Douglas Morrey

La Bande des quatre (1989), like most of Jacques Rivette's films, is a film about acting. The eponymous gang of four women are all enrolled in the acting masterclass of Constance Dumas (Bulle Ogier). Here, as in countless other works by Rivette, it is the preparatory work of these acting classes that is the real centre of the film. The lengthy rehearsals of scenes from eighteenth-century plays and Constance's patient, detailed critique of her students' performance occupy a significant portion of screen time—or at least, give the impression of dominating the screen time—while Cécile's (Nathalie Richard) involvement with a criminal on the run and the enquiries of a suspicious and duplicitous investigator (Benoît Régent) are, to an extent, relegated to the background, with key plot details hurriedly conveyed in rapid dialogue exchanges or on media broadcasts. As elsewhere, Rivette upends, or at least re-balances, the traditional hierarchy of narrative cinema, placing creative work at the centre such that criminal intrigue is pushed somewhat to the margins. It is significant, after all, that Cécile is *not* one of the gang of four—she is, so to speak, the fifth member of the gang—since she moves out of the house they share at the beginning of the film, to be replaced by Anna (Fejria Deliba). Henceforth, she will be a rather ghostly presence in the film, discussed more than she is seen, turning up unannounced at the house, distraught but unable to explain what is happening in her life. Meanwhile, her boyfriend, the key figure of Antoine Lucas, is only ever glimpsed on television screens. But it is on the stage in Constance's acting class that we see Cécile's private drama played out; the different qualities of her performance reflect her developing personal distress. Initially, Cécile is histrionic and teary, overplaying her part so much that Constance has to remind her they are rehearsing a comedy and not a tragedy.



Figure 1. Cécile's histrionic performance overseen by Constance

On a subsequent occasion, her near-catatonic performance shows how far her mind has strayed from the role. It is only at the end of the film, after Antoine escapes from captivity, that Cécile's performance achieves something of the depth, nuance and conviction of reality.

This demonstrates one of the key concerns of *La Bande des quatre*: the paradoxical relationship between life and acting. Repeatedly, Constance instructs her students that they must avoid bringing too much of their own life to a role. An actor must not perform her own anger, but that of the character she is playing. Yet, at the same time, a performance must have conviction if it is to be believable, which implies that a character's emotions have to be felt in order to be expressed by the performer. "If we can't *feel* the situation, we won't see anything," Constance states in the first scene in the theatre. In an untranslatable line, she goes on: "Il faut éprouver: le théâtre est une série d'épreuves." *Éprouver* means "to feel" – "We must feel..."—but the related noun *épreuve* implies a difficult, almost traumatic ordeal, a trial: "...the theatre is a series of trials." Each aspiring actress is as though on trial before the judgmental gaze of Constance and, later, the gang of four will act out a mock trial at home in an attempt to understand what is happening to Cécile and her lover. Hélène Frappat uses the same language: "grâce à l'épreuve du faux, un personnage éprouve ce qu'il *sent être vrai*" (through the trial of the fake, a character experiences what she feels to be true).¹ The paradox—and the judgmental gaze—are too much for one student, Corinne (Pascale Salkin), who walks out of Constance's class, complaining that she doesn't understand what the teacher wants. It is at this point that Constance tells her class that, as actors, they will have to deal constantly in "demolition and doubt:" that is what they must work with, create with, live with.

Another expression of this life/theatre, false/true nexus that structures *La Bande des quatre* (and, arguably, almost all of Rivette's work) can be found in the scene of breakfast at the four women's house that provides a good example of the ensemble performance in this film. The scene provides some—limited and enigmatic—insight into the backstory of the characters since we learn that Lucia (Inês de Medeiros) came to Paris to study theatre after “causing a scandal” in her Portuguese home town by choosing not to marry her childhood-sweetheart fiancé. She additionally reveals that her parents believe her to be studying science. When Claude (Laurence Côte) learns of this, she declares it “disgusting,” stating that “There is nothing worse than lies.” Anna suggests that this is rich coming from an aspiring actress, but Claude objects: “Acting is not lying, it's seeking the truth.” She goes on: “At any rate, there'll be no lies here [i.e. in their house] because I've suffered enough from that.”

If this is an important scene in establishing character, however, the useful information comes as much from the different performance styles of the actors as from the dialogue. Laurence Côte, as Claude, is dressed in shorts even though it is late autumn and the others are bundled up in sweaters and coats. This would seem to imply something about her nervy, hyperactive disposition, a suspicion confirmed by Claude's tendency to fidget and show off. While the acting of all four women is naturalistic, here, Claude/Côte has a habit of emphasizing her gestures as though self-consciously performing her moods for her housemates. She drags her feet and slouches as she walks to the breakfast table, tilts her head to the side when listening to Lucia, and runs her hands through her hair when she laughs. Her insistence that there be no lies in the house is delivered as a melodramatic injunction with chest puffed, and when Joyce (Bernadette Giraud) teases her by responding “There's no reason for us to lie to each other... Or to tell the truth,” Claude looks back at her with a pantomime glare.



Figure 2. Claude's pantomime glare

Claude comes across, in this scene, as the most childish of the four women, and, as such, it is appropriate that she should be the most taken in by the mysterious investigator, known to her as Thomas, who becomes her lover. It is revealing, too, that she should most flagrantly infringe her self-imposed rule about lies in the house by keeping this lover a secret from the other women.

Where Laurence Côte/Claude gives the most emotive show and thereby reveals herself as the most vulnerable, it is Inês de Medeiros as Lucia who gives the quietest performance and, as such, suggests that she may be the strongest of the four women. Dressed in a sober black polo neck, Lucia/de Medeiros remains calm and still for most of this scene, declining to react to Claude's provocations. While the other women are busy slicing, spreading and munching their bread and croissants, Lucia is content to nurse her bowl of coffee for the majority of the scene. When she tells the story of her "scandal," she laughs, but the laughter is as though inwardly-directed, as if at a private joke, and a single dismissive hand gesture accompanies her observation that, in her homeland, her actions were considered "worse than a crime." While Lucia speaks the most about herself in this scene, she gives little away, her private drama remaining private, offering her housemates, and the spectator, little access to her emotional experience. Lucia then comes across as a character with hidden depths and remarkable self-possession; it is she who is seemingly able to communicate with the never fully explained ghost inhabiting Anna's room and who, in the process, finds the key left behind by Cécile. It is Lucia, too, who confronts and tries to poison Thomas, at greatest risk to her own safety.

Under the circumstances, it is curious that it should be Joyce who ends up murdering Thomas with two unexpected blows from a blunt instrument. Joyce, with the open face (screenwriter Christine Laurent describes her as a more "generous" woman than the others²), has, at times, an almost maternal role in the group: it is she who sweeps up the autumn leaves before breakfast, she who pours the coffee, and she who injects the first note of theatrical fun into the conversation with her gesticulated reference to Cécile's "great love." The murder, whose motives and consequences remain imperfectly explained (it is implied that Joyce is imprisoned when Claude, at the end of the film, tells Anna she will "go and visit" their friend), can, in this light, perhaps be seen as Joyce's desperate last attempt to protect the unity of the group from the insidious, destructive influence of this outsider.

It is, of course, no accident that the intruder is a man, effectively the *only* man in the film (aside from a few extras and the almost-virtual figure of Antoine). *La Bande des quatre* mostly takes place in all-female spaces—the house in the suburbs and Constance's class, where male students are not admitted—such that when men appear, it can only be as a threat to their precarious equilibrium. By the same token, the first and only time that we

see men in Constance's theatre space, they have come to arrest and take her away. It is also striking that, where all of the women in the film, actresses though they may be, seem to struggle to step outside their self, or betray their true nature in some way, "Thomas" is always different, appearing to each of the four women with a different name and a different story—here a forger, there an arms dealer, now an art thief, now a cop—such that his real identity remains a mystery to us even in death. It is somewhat as though Rivette, overturning the generic traditions of his beloved Fritz Lang, had created an *homme fatal*, a slippery, dangerous character whose only role is to sew discord through seduction, whereas each of the principal, female characters is grounded in real-world flaws that provide the bedrock of reality out of which the intrigue develops and back into which it ultimately collapses. It is the intimate reality of women's domestic lives that finally interests Jacques Rivette the most and that allows *La Bande des quatre*, like his other films, to explore those areas of experience that, as the Bechdel Test helpfully reminds us, remain largely absent from film history. *La Bande des quatre*, in the many scenes in Constance's acting class, but also in scenes like the one at the breakfast table, in its own, quietly revolutionary way, is also a film about the engrossing spectacle of women listening to each other.

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Notes

1. Hélène Frappat, *Jacques Rivette, secret compris* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2001), 31. The French verbs *éprouver* and *sentir* are both regularly translated as "to feel" but *sentir* is more instinctive, more immediate, and more pointed (as in the five physical senses) while *éprouver* is perhaps more diffuse and operates in duration: a feeling is built up on the basis of experience.

2. Christine Laurent, interviewed with Pascal Bonitzer on the DVD extras of *Jacques Rivette: 6 Films* (Arte Video, 8 discs, 2002).