



# Ace in the Hole

## Noir's Jose Giovanni

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Jose Giovanni has been a convict, a novelist, a screenwriter and a film director, specializing in the French policier and crime genres since 1958. But he's been a movie actor only once, when a producer decided that the performers in a certain picture didn't look "noir" enough. "Put Jose in the opening scene," he said, "then everyone will know what kind of film this is."

It's easy to see what that producer had in mind. Short, tan and fit-looking at 75, his hands buried in the pockets of a belted trenchcoat, Giovanni certainly looks the part. On June 13, when he took the stage at Raleigh Studios, where four pictures he wrote are featured in the American Cinematheque's series "Jean-Pierre Melville and the French Crime Film," the only missing flourish was a smoldering Gauloise. "Film noir is not a matter of guns," said Giovanni, in a hushed, authoritative voice. "It is a matter of feelings." An appreciative murmur rippled through the crowd. Here, we couldn't help thinking, was the Thing Itself, the living, breathing essence of roman noir.

"Jose is those guys," said Giovanni's friend and business partner Ed Myerson. "He is Lino Ventura and Jean-Paul Belmondo. He is a mountain climber and a successful businessman. He is a man."

Giovanni was little more than a boy when he was locked away in La Sante prison in Paris in 1947 at the age of 24. He and some copains had ripped off some post-war exploiteurs who were peddling water as penicillin. In a subsequent police chase, three cops and three crooks (including Giovanni's brother) were shot dead. The young jailbird's first book, *Le Trou* (The Hole, 1957), was a mostly factual account of his incarceration and of a prodigious tunneling-escape attempt, big news in postwar Paris. The book sounds a theme that echoes through his later work: "the everlasting search for men who could be trusted."

When Giovanni (speaking through a translator) relates incidents from his past, he looks away over your shoulder and his eyes narrow. He seems to be first evoking images, then describing them. He says he decided to turn away from crime after clobbering the cellmate who had betrayed him during the escape attempt: "He fell into my arms. I was covered in blood that was not my own. The other prisoners were shouting, 'Kill him, kill him!' Then the guards pulled us apart. Later, in the isolation cell, I realized that if I kept on this way, I would be lost."

To hear him tell it, Giovanni never set out to become a writer, or embrace the craft as a vocation. He wrote *Le Trou*, he says, with only one reader in mind: his lawyer, Stephen Hecquet, to whom the work is dedicated. It was Hecquet who dispatched the manuscript to a publisher in 1957. Its almost immediate sale to the cinema was a shock to the system for an ex-con still awkwardly coming to terms with civilian life. Director Jacques Becker had saved a newspaper clipping about the Sante prison

break. When the book appeared, he summoned Giovanni to a meeting at the home of iconic film stars Yves Montand and Simone Signoret. "I had no way to react to any of this," he recalls. "It was all too fantastic."

Becker's film version of *Le Trou* was stringently faithful to the hyperrealistic spirit of the book: All the performers were unknowns, and Giovanni's cellmate, Jean Keraudy, the mastermind of the actual escape, portrayed himself. Three more fact-based books appeared in 1958. The protagonist of *Classe Tout Risque* (Lino Ventura in Claude Sautet's 1959 film) was a prisoner in an adjoining cell at La Sante. ("We never met," Giovanni says. "I only heard his voice, telling stories through the wall.") And the central character of *Le Deuxieme Souffle* was a real-life convict who became a celebrity when the book appeared.

Giovanni has since had 20 novels published, 15 of which have been filmed, in several cases by the novelist himself. He began directing in the 1960s, but not, he says, because he was unhappy with the way his work had been handled by others. ("I was very lucky that the honesty of my books attracted so many great directors.") Rather, he always had trouble thinking of writing as "real work," in part because it came so easily. "When I started directing movies, I felt that I finally had a true profession."

In the film world, he says, he was successful only twice in his "everlasting search," with Lino Ventura and Alain Delon: "They were the only ones I really trusted." He endorses a remark attributed to the American ex-con crime novelist Edward Bunker, to the effect that the politics of the prison yard are good training for survival among the thugs of Hollywood. "When you are in jail," says Giovanni, "and a new person comes into your cell, whether it is a guard or a prisoner, you have to learn how to size them up with a single glance. This is a skill that is very useful later on when dealing with producers."

The American Cinematheque series "Jean-Pierre Melville and the French Crime Film" continues on Fridays and Saturdays through July 11 at Raleigh Studios. Jacques Deray's *Rififi in Tokyo*, co-written by Giovanni, screens Saturday, June 27.

