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Terror's Advocate

By Lisa Nesselson

PTL'Avocat de la terreur (Documentary -- France)

A Les Films du Losange release of a Rita Dagher presentation of a Yalla Films, Wild Bunch production with the participation of CanalPlus, CNC, in association with Sofica Uni Etoile 3. (International sales: Wild Bunch, Paris) Produced by Rita Dagher. Co-producer, Brahim Chioua, Vincent Maraval. Directed by Barbet Schroeder;

Charismatic and devious-until-proven-innocent French lawyer Jacques Verges is the go-to guy for the category of accused criminals George W. Bush -- and nearly anybody else -- would call evildoers. As well known in France as Melvin Belli or William Kunstler in their heydays, slickly unsavory Verges is the title figure in Barbet Schroeder's dense and unsettling docu "Terror's Advocate." Sure to inspire debate in France and Germany and of obvious interest to anyone who follows the roots of modern international terrorism, doc probes gray areas in the colorful life of its controversial, limelight-courting subject.

Perhaps best known for having defended Klaus Barbie, bottomlessly enigmatic Verges met Pol Pot when both were students at the Sorbonne, married the heroine of the Algerian War of Independence, dropped off the map from 1970-78 and was probably an instrumental go-between in a number of affairs of state involving what some would dub freedom-fighting and others would define as terrorism.

Like helmer's most famous doc subject, General Idi Amin, Verges is blood-chillingly unrepentant and self-assured.

Doc's other talking heads are consistently well-spoken and engaging, but, except for the Battle of Algiers, the slaughter of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics, and perhaps the botched 1975 assault on an OPEC meeting in Vienna, many of the incidents touched upon will blend together into a diffuse lump of horror and carnage to viewers not up to speed on the bombings and hijackings that litter the semi-recent history of Western Europe.

Born in Thailand in 1924 or 1925 to a Vietnamese mother and a father from Reunion Island, Verges harbors an anti-colonial streak a mile wide. He and his twin brother enlisted in Gen. De Gaulle's infantry during WWII at age 17 because Verges found the idea of France falling to Germany intolerable.

Forty years later, he would defend high-ranking Nazi Klaus Barbie, the so-called Butcher of Lyon.

Algerian political activist Yacef Saadi, whose memoir "The Battle of Algiers" became the Gilles de Pontecorvo film classic, offers wise commentary about Verges' sympathy for the Algerian War for Independence. Saadi recruited lovely young Djamila Bouhired to plant explosives in the notorious "Milk Bar" bombing in Algiers. She was arrested by the French authorities and tortured for 17 days, making her a figure as famed and admired in Algeria as resistance hero Jean Moulin is in France.

Bouhired was sentenced to death for terrorism but Verges ingeniously saved her life. They were married when she was released from prison.

Verges simply vanished for eight years (1970-78) that have never been accounted for. Most who knew him speculated that he was in Cambodia with old school chum Pot, but authoritative Cambodian witnesses nix that idea.

When in Paris incognito during this period, Verges was spotted by the widow of a former associate. His improvised technique for undermining her credibility should she report the sighting is a comic highlight, as well as a glimpse into Verges' steel-trap mind.

His rationale for taking the Barbie case: Yeah, sure, Nazi tactics were indefensible crimes against humanity, but how, exactly, did they differ from the French use of torture and extermination against Algerians both on French soil and in Algeria?

Verges' links to pioneering freelance terrorist Carlos the Jackal -- reinforced by tantalizing Stasi documents -- are just one component of a life that would seem to have flirted with both sides of the law.

Rolande Girard-Arnaud, who co-authored a book with Verges about Djamila, insists that Verges is "deeply sentimental." Belgrade-born Neda Vidakovic, who was close to Verges in the years right after he reappeared in Paris, offers compelling insights into Verges' passionate platonic friendship with German revolutionary Magdalena Kopp who was married to Carlos the Jackal and apprehended in Paris with explosives.

When asked if he'd defend Hitler, Verges replies, "I'd even defend Bush!" Under what conditions? "Provided he pleaded guilty."

Camera (color), Caroline Champetier, Jean-Luc Perreard; editor, Nelly Quettier; music, Jorge Arriagada; sound (Dolby), Yves Comelieu, Beatrice

Wick, Dominique Hennequin; assistant director, Eugenie Grandval. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Un Certain Regard), May 18, 2007. Running time: 138 MIN.

With Jacques Verges, Bachir Boumaza, Yacef Saadi, Sine, Magdalena Kopp, Anis Naccache, Lionel Duroy, Maher Souleiman, Hans Joachim Klein, Carlos, Neda Vidakovic, Louis Caprioli, Jean-Paul Dolle, Claude Faure, David Fechheimer, Horst Franz, Claude Moniquet, Olivier Schrom, Patricia Tourancheau, Tobias Wunschik, Milous Brahim, Nuon Chea, Isabelle Coutant-Peyre, Zohra Drif, Rolande Girard-Arnaud, Gilles Menage, Alain Marsaud, Martine Tigrane

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