



# Les Polarophiles Tranquilles

**SIMENON :  
Zone  
d'ombre**

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## SIMENON AND THE THEATRE

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With the hundredth anniversary of « Maigret »'s father's birth, the « Simenon year » is in full swing and events are proliferating.

The complete Simenon works (Belgian, 1903-1989) are available in bookstores and are subject to comments and critics. The complete works? Not really...The manager of a theatre company asked me to dig out a play that he could stage for the occasion.

He knew, like me, that Simenon had put a finger in the theatre, at least twice with « *La Neige Etait Sale* » (translated in English as *Dirty Snow*) and « *Liberty Bar* ». I expected to find other less known plays than these but I could not find anything else.

As my curiosity was stimulated, I said to myself; why not write an article on Simenon and the theatre? I did not have a play but at least, I had a subject.

I buried myself in Simenon's biographies. Only a few lines devoted to the success of « *Dirty Snow* » were available and nothing more.

As a last resort, I took the prodigious « *Simenon* » biography by Pierre Assouline (Juillard Editor, 1992). Some extracts will be cited hereafter.

As many authors developing a considerable stature, Simenon thought about a theatrical career in the 30's because play writing could establish his reputation and be a source of large revenues. However, this interest was short-lived for cinema was going to bring him, far beyond his expectations, all possible satisfactions.

During the Second World War, movie-going became the preferred distraction of the French population.

Popular melodramas without any political involvement, Simenon's novels had all the required qualities to satisfy both the public and the «Continental » (French movie company created in 1940). Simenon seized this opportunity, but this is a different story.

Simenon's flirt with the theatre was brief and punctuated with incidents that we are going to examine with the inquisitive « Polarophiles ».

Pierre Assouline (French, born 1953) writes for the year 1931:

*« Slightly exhilarated by his newly international glory (mainly due to his editorial success in the U.S.A.), Simenon, short of time, affords the luxury of refusing his Italian editor Arnoldo Montadori, the possibility to stage a play adapted from one of his novels. »*

In 1936, at the Théâtre Royal Des Galeries Saint Hubert in Brussels, he put his first play on show. Simenon had no doubt and certainly no feeling of self-doubt: he wanted to reform the theatre, to be off the beaten tracks, conventional characters and situations.

The three-act play « *Quartier Nègre* » (Black District) was performed by Jean-Pierre Aumont (French 1911-2001) and fifteen coloured people. Simenon organized a pure hype around the première but without success.

A few weeks later, he did it again with the adaptation of his novel « *Les Pitard* » (a family name) which was broadcast on French radio as « *A Bord Du Tonnerre De Dieu* » (On Board of Hellfire).

In 1938, he abandoned the theatre temporarily.

His reluctance was the same as for the cinema: when he wrote a book, he was in sole command. When a movie was adapted from one of his books, his role shaded off little by little until its shooting started. At the end, he became superfluous. Such situations could only appear aberrant to a man used to being the centre of his world and of his production system, situation that he would be confronted with for the first time just as his young but promising success flattered his sensibilities: vanity, pride, egocentricity.

Simenon remained a hopeless author, rebellious to having his personality dissolved in a shared project.

After having contributed to two scenarios, he still did not understand that the director would build with images what the writer would build with words.

He hardly admitted the liberties that the adapters were forced to take with his stories, sources of the movies.

Now, Simenon was a well-advised if not crafty businessman. Checking even the smallest details, he turned out to be a frightening, clever and nit-picking administrator of his name, an inflexible defender of his rights.

And yet, he met a journalist who showed him admiration without limit to which he was not insensitive during his 1937 conference on « *l'Aventure* » (The Adventure) held at the Theatre Des Celestins in Lyons.

Hence, when Simenon was contacted by a young man, author of a book just crowned with a regional award, who wished to write an essay on his works, he encouraged him. One never knows...

The dazzled young journalist of Lyons had attended one of his conferences. They had exchanged some words after which, he became one of his most dedicated and avid readers. Without listening to the seniors of the Parisian press who advised him not to lose his time with such second-rate literature, the young man embarked on the enterprise after having requested Simenon's agreement, which was gladly granted to him, and Simenon even proposed to read his manuscript to point out the possible mistakes.

This young man was called Frédéric Dard. He was 22 years old.

Dard, who became an editor at 25, tried to obtain the possibility of publishing a book signed by Simenon.

He published the text for a conference held before the Second World War in « Les Etincelles » (The Sparks), a literary magazine.

But let us examine their relations as related by Pierre Assouline:

« Just before André Gide's death (French, 1869-1951), Simenon held a position of master vis-à-vis a younger fellow author. Since the immediate after-war, his exchange of correspondence was constant with Frédéric Dard who, like Gide but for different reasons, abandoned the idea of an essay on Simenon. The latter did say that, since the beginning, convinced of his talent, he would like to help and encourage this young writer. »

Gide (1869), Simenon (1903) Dard (1921). Three generations of novelists. Gide's advice was still sought-after by Simenon who bestowed counsel on Dard. Many subjects had been covered by the two oldest writers except money, given the fact that Gide had private means which were substantially increased by the royalties he received when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1947. On the contrary, Simenon did not hesitate to touch the subject with Dard who, like him at the same age, planned with anxiety to live from his writings. » I am following the various steps of your career with friendly attention [...] I had not a single doubt about you [...] we are not, you and I, playful authors and consequently, we keep our equilibrium and our optimism in daily life [...] If I can put you in touch with anybody, believe me, I will do it with great pleasure [...]. »

With the idea of continuing to remain a novelist, Dard having expressed the wish to work for the cinema in order to ensure the financial side of his life, Simenon offered to introduce him to a circle he knew well and to

write some letters of recommendation. It was not like him to do so. But it was rare that a young writer called him « master », the same way he did with Gide. It was therefore obvious, that they would end up working together. They found the first opportunity when Dard proposed to adapt « *Dirty Snow* » to the theatre. He was all the more fascinated by this story that he himself had written an account inspired from an episode of the after war purge in France, a perfunctory execution that he had witnessed. « *La Crève* » (The Hell With Them) published in Lyons in 1946 was sent to Simenon who was enthusiastic about it.

«Your little, very great book .... I have read it with passion. It contains four or five pages that I would have loved to have written myself. This does not mean that the others are not first rate. I was very confident in you for quite a long time but I could not have imagined that you would go to such a high level so fast. To the next, old chap...But beware of the dialogues; you are a little bit too literary (it would be frightening if you had written this text at your age without some kind of weakness). But well done, with all my heart ». Sometime later, although he generally disliked it, Simenon accepted to let him have a preface to be part of his next book « *Au Massacre Mondain* » (A Society Massacre).

[...] But it was in writing the adaptation of « *Dirty Snow* » with four hands that the first conflicts appeared between them. The misunderstandings were favoured by distance and multiple intermediaries.

Simenon had vowed to never write a play again. He hardly liked the theatrical world, too much confined to his taste. It was another profession. He could not prevent himself opening a parenthesis to describe the settings, explain the qualms of the characters and state their biographies.

And yet, after having read his young colleague's first version, he forced himself to judge it globally satisfactory although he preferred to set the action in an imaginary country and not, as wished by Dard, under German occupation.

He gave an explanation on some of the modifications; he added: I have attached little importance to the rape; at least I made it less spectacular, because I believe that the play would have been prohibited or at least, we would have been accused of offending moral sensibilities. I have mainly emphasized Frank's personal misery. We will talk about Holst later. As far as Lotte is concerned, I can assure you that her character is the same in the play as in the novel. I must confess that, personally, I dislike sparing an easing of tension in a play

After all, it was his book. He was the author and Dard did only collaborate as he often said without specifying that the adaptation would have to be jointly signed, on the same line.

The play premiered on December 12, 1950 at the « Théâtre de l'Oeuvre » in Paris. Daniel Gélin (French, 1921-2002) and Lucienne Bogart (French, 1892-1983) in the main roles were a great success.

The echo of this success even crossed the Atlantic Ocean up to Connecticut. But Simenon was not less furious. When reading the critic, he discovered that the director Raymond Rouleau (Belgian, 1904-1981) had taken the liberty to adapt the adaptation. Considering that the play was sometimes obscure, he had decided to replace the old man of the novel by a narrator that he performed himself. Simenon was outraged by these skulduggeries. It was not so much a question of alteration as a question of principle: « no change can be made to my text without my consent » he wrote with rage.

Without his knowing, the play had been modified by the director who just considered him as a supplier. He found himself in a situation among others that he loathed: because of his signature, he gave his support and took as his own a text he did not approve of.

Unforgivable, essentially when we know that he was one of the writers who did not authorize their editors to even suppress the lesser coma from their manuscripts.

Simenon ensured Dard that he would keep their friendship alive but he did not believe a single word of it and between them, it would never be the same.

19<sup>th</sup> March, 1952. A cocktail party was given by Sven Nielsen (Danish, editor in France) at the Claridge Hotel in Paris to honour Simenon's return from the U.S.A. « They are all in line to greet the man of the moment. In the throng, we can recognize all Parisian prominent actors, screen-writers, directors, journalists, writers and editors. »

The writer Francis Carco (French, 1886-1958) seized Simenon's arm and took him to face Frédéric Dard who did not dare to make the first move.

- You know our common adapter, don't you?

- I do not have an adapter!

Is Simenon's cold reply who turns his back to join the crowd of his admirers.

Dard who was delighted to meet his master, spent the night in tears (according to Dard's account collected by Pierre Assouline).

Here is now the version given by François Rivière (French, born 1949) in « *Frédéric Dard ou la Vie Privée de San Antonio* », Edition Fleuve Noir, 1999 (Frédéric Dard or the Private Life of San Antonio). Although the facts are the same, this version gives some additional details and fills in the gaps of the previous one:

Simenon had just published « *Dirty Snow* » Frédéric Dard thought that a brilliant radio drama could be based on it. He then wrote to Simenon to solicit the authorization to start the job.

The 15<sup>th</sup> of October, from Tumacacori (Arizona), Simenon answered that he had already given the rights for a radio broadcast in the U.S.A. « If you prefer, choose another novel. You have carte blanche but keep me informed. You know the trust I have placed in you ». As a postscript, he added: « Of course, « *Dirty...* » remains free for the stage and I continue to believe that from all my novels, this one is the most adaptable to the theatre. But, I do not want to force your hand ».

These last words opened a heaven-sent new horizon for Dard: yes! Why not create a real play based on a

superb text he would have loved to write. And he got down to work.

In the first days of 1949, Frédéric sent the text of his adaptation to Simenon who, the 19<sup>th</sup> of January, answered: «Dear Dard. You take the full responsibility of this real adventure. I had sworn myself that I would never write a play again. When I received your manuscript, I went to my typewriter with the idea of bringing some changes and, above all, to suggest a certain number of new approaches. This happened exactly nine days ago. The prologue has produced a special feeling in me and the first day, after some five or six hours of typing, the prologue and the first act were entirely re-written. The second day, I wrote the second act, the next day, the third. And now, I am mailing you the fruit of my almost unpremeditated work ».

Simenon then wrote to his correspondent that he had negotiated the play rights in English with his New York agent. Remained the French version that they would have to perfect together. He also proposed to include: Based on the novel by Georges Simenon, at the beginning of the manuscript. Adapted for the theatre by Georges Simenon and Frédéric Dard.

The 25<sup>th</sup> of February, new letter. Simenon told him that the play was in the hands of his « old friend » Blanche Montel (French, 1902-1998) who managed a renowned theatrical agency. He also mentioned to his collaborator that he had added some modifications, but he would not take into account those recently suggested by Dard.

The 30<sup>th</sup> of September, Simenon wrote from Tucson (Arizona): « believe me; I am more annoyed than you to see only my name on the play-bill. If you wish, I am ready to veto it. Do you think that if I was writing an article on our collaboration to appear in all programs, things would go better? Besides, as the play will be published by «Les Oeuvres Libres » (Free Works), the text will be signed G. Simenon and F. Dard. I did not wait for your authorization to accept « Les Oeuvres Libres »'s proposal. It has been for a long time that I expected to give something to Fayard (Les Oeuvres Libres's Editor) which allows wide circulation. Tell me frankly, my dear Dard, what you think about all this. I am not one of these seniors who turn the situation to their own advantage »

Intransigent, often patently insincere, the great man's law prevailed and Dard accepted without grumbling for his goal was to get out of his financial stagnation. It came to his mind to ask Simenon the authorization to adapt «*Dirty Snow* » for the radio which would bring him some royalties. Simenon accepted but as far as the premiere of the play was concerned, nothing had been entirely agreed.

The 5<sup>th</sup> of November, Frédéric Dard received from Lakeville (Connecticut) a note from Simenon « the play is rehearsed at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris with Raymond Rouleau as director. Blanche Montel is supposed to send me a long letter but I have received nothing. Hence I am not kept aware of what is going on. I give you a free hand and, since you are on the spot, as my collaborator, you are entitled to get an account on what is happening. Please, let me know. I will always support you. »

The 27<sup>th</sup> of November, « *Dirty Snow* » was broadcasted on a Paris radio. The play was premiered the 11<sup>th</sup> of December and was a great success. It was a breath of fresh air for Dard who was not yet a successful young adaptor. He worked all over the place to make ends meet. Amongst others, he adapted « *Jesus La Caille* » (translation word for word: Jesus the Quail) which won praiseworthy acclaims.

It was together with Francis Carco that on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 1952, he went to the Claridge Hotel where the

editor Sven Nielsen was giving a cocktail party to honour Simenon's return from the U.S.A. The latter gave back the devastating answer « I have no adapter »

The game was over. F. Dard went away in tears but after a terrible night, he decided not to let the matter rest there. The following day, he returned to the Claridge and by chance, met Simenon, smiling and who seemed to have forgotten the painful incident of the previous day. Simenon took him to his suite where he said:  
« Come on, my little Dard, is something wrong? Yes, it is true, you and Rouleau did not take me seriously but don't make a scene about it... »

For Simenon who brotherly embraced Dard, the matter was closed. But this kiss would leave a wound in his soul; who now knew what to make of the suddenly destroyed object of his admiration.

The wound never closed up and Dard bore a grudge against him all his life.

There exists another adaptation of a Simenon novel which is signed Frédéric Valmain: « *Liberty Bar* », a three act play based on G. Simenon's novel. Copyright by F. Valmain, 1955. All rights reserved including Russia.

What a distortion vis-à-vis Simenon's rules! Because he used to flatter himself to be the first author to have kept all copyrights in his name whilst his fellow-writers generally let editors manage the additional rights (cinema, theatre and television).

Frederic Valmain declared the following in 1981 :

*As F. Valmain was only known by the Saint Germain Des Prés' regulars (the intellectual district in Paris), this name on the poster had no chance of mobilising numerous spectators. Aware of the handicap, I had the idea of adapting some novels by famous writers for the stage, able to pull in a crowd. The obvious first one was the most illustrious G. Simenon. I asked him for an appointment. He accepted to meet me right away and in front of him, I mumbled my request. My youth probably took him aback but with the courteous placidity which is characteristic of him, he agreed to put me to the test: to adapt as it pleased me his novel « Liberty Bar » and if the transformation was convincing, I would obtain an official agreement. One of his last letters started with: « you have done good work... » and was accompanied with the so expected contract. Besides my admiration for him, like all my associates in literature, he holds a very high position in my heart! He allowed me to start out as a very young writer in the best possible conditions.*

This text gives Simenon a dose of his own medicine and has the flavour of a score settling which can only be between our two authors.

Until now, nobody has compared the above text to the preface of « *Les Pires Extrémités* » (could be translated as Close To Death), a novel by F. Valmain published in 1966. It reads as follows:

*Frédéric Valmain's book is a great police story. But which is the most surprising, the main character or the author? For F. Valmain is the Frégoli (Italian, quick change artist, 1867-1936) of the French literary world.*

*Author of appreciated police novels, father of the hilarious Bérurier of the San -Antonio series, historian with an approximate « Histoire De France », successful dramatist, sometimes Valmain, sometimes Dard, some other times San-Antonio but most of the time Frédéric, he is the most picturesque of his characters.*

An old journalist confided in me that during a private conversation, Simenon had explained the incident which occurred at the Sven Nielsen's party: the sentence « I have no adaptor » did escape him because he was bothered by Raymond Rouleau's nearby presence with whom he had some frictions about the adaptation of « *Dirty Snow* ». In any case, Dard received a large financial compensation.

This account is in line with my interpretation:

Between the release of « *Dirty Snow* » end 1950 and Simenon's nasty remark in 1952, the adaptation of « *Liberty Bar* » had probably been completed by Dard who certainly had selected the theatre and the comedians (among them, a certain F. Valmain) but could no longer stage the play with his name next to Simenon's which could explain the Dard/Valmain arrangement.

I am convinced that the adaptation of « *Liberty Bar* » represents the settlement from Simenon to Dard, at least from a financial point of view for human damage was considerable.

The duo Dard/Valmain lasted up to 1984 without interruption. A serious event in his private life encouraged Dard to sort out his life as well as his editorial policy. Henceforth, he did not use any pseudonym.

Note this series of titles « *Ma Cavale Au Canada* » (On the run in Canada) in 1971, signed Valmain/Carter. Then, « *Ma Canaille Au Canada* » (My Rascal in Canada) in 1983 and another « *Ma Cavale Au Canada* » signed San-Antonio in 1989. (Puns based on a French song « *Ma Cabane Au Canada* » (My shed in Canada). Many clues which show Dard's tenacious rancour.

As far as Simenon is concerned, we will quote Pierre Assouline again:

Later on, one of his sons hears him rage against his poor reading. It was a San Antonio story....

The confrontation between the author and his adaptor had turned to the advantage of Dard who proved that he was able to write alone for the theatre and cinema, thus confirming his status of master.

It is a pity that Simenon will no longer be adapted for the theatre.

The theatrical life of Maigret (Simenon's recurrent police superintendent character) ends with the third act of « *Liberty Bar* »