

The Buffalo Film Seminars

Market Arcade Film and Arts Centre 8/30/00

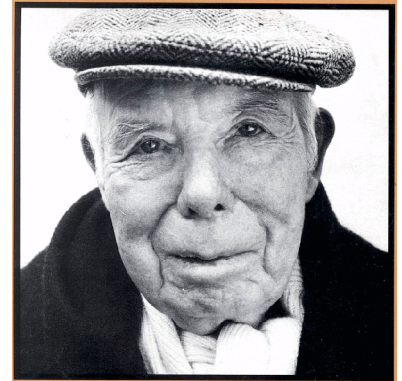
LA GRANDE ILLUSION

(1937)

Director Jean Renoir
Script Jean Renoir (also story) Charles Spaak
Cinematography Christian Matras
Editor Marguerite Renoir
Score Joseph Kosma
Art direction/set design Eugène Lourié

Jean Gabin Lieutenant Maréchal
Dita Parlo Else
Pierre Fresnay Captain de Boieldieu
Erich von Stroheim Captain von Rauffenstein
Julien Carette The Showoff
Georges Péclet An Officer

Werner Florian Sergeant Arthur
Jean Dasté The Teacher
Gaston Modot The engineer
Sylvain Itkine Lieutenant Demolder
Marcel Dalio Lieutenant Rosenthal



Jean Renoir at 77, Richard Avedon, 1972

JEAN RENOIR (15 September 1894, Paris–12 February 1979, Beverly Hills) directed about 40 films and wrote or co-wrote the scripts for the best of them. He funded his earliest films—undertaken as a showcase for his actress wife—by selling some of his father’s paintings. He moved to the United States when the Nazis occupied France. Some of his films are *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* 1959, *Éléna et les hommes* 1956 (aka *Paris Does Strange Things*), *French Cancan* 1955, *Le Carrosse d’or* 1952, *The River* 1951, *The Woman on the Beach* 1947, *The Diary of a Chambermaid* 1946, *The Southerner* 1945, *This Land Is Mine* 1943, *Swamp Water* 1941, *La Règle du jeu* 1939 (aka *The Rules of the Game*), *La Bête Humaine* 1938 (aka *The Human Beast*, *Judas Was a Woman*), *La Marseillaise* 1938, *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* 1936, *Une partie de campagne* 1936, *Madame Bovary* 1933, *La Chienne* 1931 (aka *The Bitch*, *Isn’t Life a Bitch?*), *Le Bled* 1929, *Nana* 1926, and *Une vie sans joie* 1924 (aka *Backbiters*, *Catherine*). He occasionally stepped in front of the camera. Some of his roles were: Octave in *La Règle du jeu*, Cabuche in *La Bête humaine*, and Père Poulain in *Une partie de campagne*. In 1975, Renoir received an honorary Academy Award as “A genius who, with grace, responsibility and enviable devotion through silent film, sound film, feature, documentary and television has won the world’s admiration.” *La Grande Illusion* won a special award as Best Overall Artistic Contribution from the Venice Film Festival in 1937; the following year, the film was banned in Italy, and remained so until 1945. There’s a great web site on Renoir, in French, “Je m’appelle Jean Renoir,” at www.univ-nancy2.fr/re noir/.



Jean Renoir à 6 ans, par son père, 1900

ERICH VON STROHEIM (Erich Oswald Stroheim, 22 September 1885, Vienna, Austria—12 May 1957, Paris) was the son of a Jewish hatter in Vienna and didn’t pick up the “von” until shortly after he left Europe in his early 20’s. He directed 12 films, including the most famous film no one ever saw, the 7-hour-long *Greed* 1925, based on Frank Norris’s novel *McTeague*. Under great pressure from Irving Thalberg, he cut it down to 4 hours; the studio cut another hour before the film was released. For years it was available only in a 2:20 version, but there’s a 4 hour videotape available now. In the original black and white release prints, everything yellow was tinted by hand: gold coins, a brass bed, tooth fillings, even the canary. Von Stroheim took his directing very seriously, which is probably why they didn’t let him do it very often. He acted in more than 70 films, beginning with an uncredited role as a man shot from the roof in *Birth of a Nation* 1915 (a stunt in which he broke two ribs), and including his superb performance as Max von Mayerling, a former director turned Norma Desmond’s driver in Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* 1950. The Nazis hated *La Grande Illusion* because one of the central characters was a non-caricatured Jew played by a Jewish actor—Rosenthal played by Marcel Dalio—and because the primary vision of the German military was as jailors. They probably would have gone orbital if they’d known that the senior German officer in the film was also played by a Jew, albeit one who made his career mimicking monocled Prussians.

JEAN GABIN (Jean-Alexis Moncorgé, 17 May 1904, Paris—15 November 1976, Paris) appeared in nearly 100 films, from *Ohe! Les Valises* in 1928 to *L’Année sainte* in 1976. Some of the others were *Les Misérables* 1957, *French Cancan* 1955, *Napoléon* 1955, *La Bête humaine* 1938, *Pépé le Moko* 1937, *La Belle équipe* 1936, *Du haut en bas* 1933. He was sometimes called “the French Spencer Tracy”—an ordinary Joe who was interesting, sexy and intelligent. No



French actor except perhaps Belmondo came close to Gabin's trademark ironic smile. Gabin didn't just play ordinary guys who did heroic things in movies: he did it for real. He took part in the Normandy invasion and won the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille Militaire. (A good page on Gabin, in French, is members.aol.com/CCYM/gabin/gabin.htm)

PIERRE FRESNAY (Pierre Jules Laudenbach, 4 April 1897, Paris—9 January 1975, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Hauts-de-Seine, France), a leading man in French films for three decades, was also associated with the Comédie Française through most of his career. Fresnay played Marius in all three parts of Marcel Pagnol's "Marseilles Trilogy": *Marius* 1931, *Fanny* 1932, and *César* 1936.



Orson Welles wanted **DITA PARLO** (Grethe Gerda Kornstadt, 4 September 1906, Stettin, Germany—13 December 1971, Paris, France) to play Kurtz's mistress in *Heart of Darkness*, one of the great films he never got to make. At least two of her 23 films are classics: *La Grande illusion* and Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* 1934.

MARCEL DALIO (Israel Blauschild, 17 July 1900, Paris—20 November 1983, Paris) got out of Paris just before the German occupation in 1940. He appeared in 120 films, beginning with *Turandot* and ending with *Brigade mondaine* in 1980. Along the way he appeared in *Le Golem* 1936, *Pépé le Moko* 1937, *La Règle du jeu* 1939, *Casablanca* 1942 (an uncredited role as Emil, the Croupier), *To Have and Have Not* 1944, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* 1952, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* 1953, *Sabrina* 1954, *The Sun Also Rises* 1957, *Catch-22* 1970 (a great performance as the philosophical centenarian in the whorehouse), and *The Great White Hope* 1970.

"In *La Grande Illusion* I was still very much concerned with realism—to the point, indeed, that I asked Gabin to wear my old pilot's tunic, which I had kept after being demobilized. At the same time I did not hesitate to add fanciful touches to certain details in order to heighten the effect—for example in von Stroheim's uniform. His part, which at first was a very minor one, had been greatly enlarged because I was afraid that, confronted by the weighty personalities of Gabin and Fresnay, he would look like a lightweight. In art, as in life, it is all a question of balance; and the problem is to keep both sides of the scales level. That is why I took liberties with von Stroheim's uniform, which was quite out of keeping with my realistic principles at that time. His uniform is authentic, but with a flamboyance quite unsuited to the commander of a POW camp in the First War. I needed this theatrical façade to counterbalance the impressive simplicity of the Frenchmen. There are instances of stylization in *La Grande Illusion*, despite its strictly realistic appearance, which take us into the realm of fantasy, and these breaks into illusion I owe largely to Stroheim. I am profoundly grateful to him. I am incapable of doing good work unless it contains an element of the fairy-tale." (Jean Renoir, *My Life and My Films*, trans. Norman Denny, NY: Atheneum 1974, 160-161.)

"My story was a banal one of escape. I maintain that the more banal the subject of a film, the greater are the possibilities it offers to the film-maker. I do not use the word 'banal' in the sense in which it is understood by producers. To them it simply means 'nothing that shocks'. To me it means a simple canvas affording scope for the producers." (Ibid, p.145)

"If one is to put a label on them I would say that the fighting troops in the First World War were complete anarchists. They didn't give a damn for anything, least of all for noble sentiments. The destruction of cathedrals left them cold, and they did not believe they were fighting a war for liberty. They cared nothing for death either, thinking that their present life was not worth living. They had touched the lees of existence. What is strange is that, despite this complete skepticism, they fought magnificently. They were caught in the machinery and had no way of getting out.

"For *La Grande Illusion* I chose an exceptional case. The airmen slept in beds and ate at a table; they were remote from the mud of the trenches and meals spattered by shell-bursts. They were fortunate and privileged men, and they knew it. They also knew that there was nothing they could do about it.

"Then I took my characters into a POW camp, and this, too, was a special kind of life—a life of luxury compared with that of the infantryman in the trenches. I had no wish to depict the latter's sufferings. That was not the intention of the film. My chief aim was the one which I have been pursuing ever since I started to make films—to express common humanity of men." (Ibid., p. 147-148.)

—Long live the senses.

—Down with the intellect.

(Jean Renoir in a letter to François Truffaut, 19 May 1974)

For a long time I believed that subjects did not matter. Well, I was wrong. The best-told tales may run into difficulties if they are not supported by a larger theme. (Renoir in a letter to Truffaut, 26 May 1978)

"He was a very warm man, very cultured, but he loathed pretentious intellectuals. You simply had to be cultured to work with him, by which I mean a fundamental culture, like his father, of whom he spoke a lot. Jean had an intelligence about everything, in the way that an animal is intelligent, and not cerebral. He was not a specialist of anything except generosity, and life for him always came first. I owe him a great deal." (Henri Cartier-Bresson, who worked as assistant to Renoir on several films, including *La Règle du Jeu*.)

Renoir's working title during filming was "The Escapes of Captain Marechal." By the close of shooting, the captain was a lieutenant and Renoir settled on *La Grande Illusion* for a title, the correct translation of which would have been "The Great Illusion." Too late for correction now: the mistranslation went on the American version of the film in 1938 and has been there ever since. Some scholars consider Renoir's title an echo of Norman Angell's 1909 book *Europe's Optical Illusion*, which argued that the common economic interests of nations made war futile. The book was reissued in 1910 with the title *The Great Illusion*, was translated into 25 languages and sold 2 million copies. It was popular well into the thirties in France.

..for cast and crew info on almost any film: imdb.com/search.html or allmovie.com...—for information on major American films, including detailed plot summaries: www.filmsite.org...email Bruce Jackson: bjackson@buffalo.edu...email Diane Christian: engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu...for the series schedule, links and updates: www.buffalofilmseminars.com...to get on the list for the weekly informational notes, send an email to either of us.