

every
film
society

the notes

january
2015

latest news

Happy New Year to all our members and supporters. We're just about on the third anniversary of our founding meeting - so many good films shown since then, and we hope many more to come.

We're drawing up our lists of choices for next season's programme of films. Any suggestions you'd like considered, tell one of the Committee before 30 Jan.

La Grande Illusion

Jean Renoir,
France 1937

Written by Charles Spaak & Jean Renoir
Produced by Albert Pinkovitch and Frank Rollmer
Music by Joseph Kosma
Cinematography by Christian Matras

Jean Gabin Le lieutenant Maréchal
Dita Parlo Elsa
Pierre Fresnay
Le capitaine de Boeldieu
Erich von Stroheim
Le capitaine von Rauffenstein
Julien Carette Cartier
Georges Péclet Le serrurier
Werner Florian Le sergent Arthur
Jean Dasté L'instituteur
Sylvain Itkine
Le lieutenant Demolder
Gaston Modot L'ingénieur
Marcel Dalio
Le lieutenant Rosenthal

Jean Renoir's 1937 *La Grande Illusion*, has been described as one of the most admired — and one of the most feared — films ever made.

The first foreign language movie ever nominated for the best picture Oscar, this most celebrated of anti-war films had a host of admirers, including Orson Welles, who once said, "If I had



only one film in the world to save, it would be *La Grande Illusion*".

Definitely not among the enthusiasts was Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Propaganda in Nazi Germany, who called the film "Cinema Enemy No. 1." Backing up his words with action, Goebbels had numerous prints of the film seized when the Germans occupied France during World War II. That original camera negative travelled back and forth across Europe and was lost for

decades before being rediscovered in the 1990s at the Cinémathèque of Toulouse.

Though it is set during World War I and inspired by stories Renoir heard from fellow veterans, calling *La Grande Illusion* an anti-war film runs the risk of making it sound strident and dogmatic. In fact, this film is a model of simplicity and grace, with emotional effects that move you when you least expect it, the kind of great film that only a master can pull off. Especially

when that master is Jean Renoir.

The son of painter Auguste Renoir, Jean Renoir had a gift for easy access to humanity, for films that celebrated the human spirit without resorting to sentimentality. In fact, this film is most accurately looked at as a paean to shared humanity across several different divides.

Definitely an ensemble film, with five characters sharing the focus of attention, for American audiences the two who are most familiar are top-billed Jean Gabin, the great French star of his age, and last-minute addition Erich von Stroheim. When changes in his fortunes brought Von Stroheim to France from Hollywood, Renoir seized the chance, combining two roles that were originally going to be given to two different actors and offering them both to him.

Von Stroheim's Capt. Von

Rauffenstein is introduced in 1916 as a German air ace who has shot down a French plane carrying Capt. De Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay) and Lt. Maréchal (Gabin).

Because they are fellow officers, Von Rauffenstein invites them to lunch, where he noticeably has more in common with fellow aristocrat De Boeldieu than man-of-the-people Gabin. The two Frenchmen are sent to a prisoner-of-war camp, where they share a room with several countrymen, including the actor Cartier (Julien Carette), an incorrigible jokester, and Rosenthal (Marcel Dalio), the scion of a wealthy Jewish banking family, whose generosity with his food parcels from home keeps everyone well-fed.

Transferred some time later to another camp, the Frenchmen are surprised to find that the commandant

is none other than Von Rauffenstein, seriously wounded in a plane crash and now in charge of a facility that he insists is escape-proof, a sentiment the French feel duty bound to prove wrong.

Though escape attempts are the film's skeleton, what gives it its strength are its character dynamics. Renoir is interested in what draws men together, whether it be the class consciousness that unites German Von Rauffenstein and the French De Boeldieu, or other, deeper bonds.

The director, who co-wrote the film with Charles Spaak, excelled at small moments whose emotional impact on-screen is hard to convey in words. The silence that envelops the POWs when a delicate-featured fellow prisoner dresses up in drag in preparation for a theatrical show is memorable way beyond words.

“ Apart from its other achievements, Jean Renoir's **La Grande Illusion**

influenced two famous later movie sequences. The digging of the escape tunnel in **The Great Escape** and the singing of the Marseillaise to enrage the Germans in **Casablanca** can first be observed in Renoir's 1937 masterpiece. Even the details of the tunnel dig are the same--the way the prisoners hide the excavated dirt in their pants and shake it out on the parade ground during exercise.

But if **La Grande Illusion** had been merely a source of later inspiration, it wouldn't be on so many lists of great films. It's not a movie about a prison escape, nor is it jingoistic in its politics; it's a meditation on the collapse of the old order of European civilization. Perhaps that was always a sentimental upper-class illusion, the notion that gentlemen on both sides of the lines subscribed to the same code of behavior. Whatever it was, it died in the trenches of World War I.

"Neither you nor I can stop the march of time," the captured French aristocrat Capt. de Boeldieu tells the German prison camp commandant, Von Rauffenstein. A little later, distracting the guards during an escape of others from the high-security German fortress, the Frenchman forces the German to shoot him, reluctantly, and they have a final



deathbed exchange. "I didn't know a bullet in the stomach hurt so much," he tells the German. "I aimed at your legs," says the German, near tears. And a little later he says: "For a commoner, dying in a war is a tragedy. But for you and I - it's a good way out."

What the Frenchman knows and the German won't admit is that the new world belongs to commoners. It changed hands when the gentlemen of Europe declared war. And the "grand illusion" of Renoir's title is the notion that the upper classes somehow stand above war. The German cannot believe that his prisoners, whom he treats almost as guests, would try to escape. After all, they have given their word not to.

(.....) Jean Renoir, born in 1894, is on any list of the half-dozen greatest

filmmakers, and his **The Rules of the Game** (1939) is even more highly considered than **La Grande Illusion**. He fought in World War I, then quickly returned to Paris and entered the movie business. In his best films observation and sympathy for the characters define every shot; there is hardly a camera decision made for pure effect, without thinking first of where best to stand to see the characters.

Renoir moved to America in 1940, and made several Hollywood films, notably **The Southerner**, with a screenplay by Faulkner, before going independent in the 1950s with **The River**, based on Rumer Godden's Calcutta story. In a long retirement he was sought out by younger filmmakers and critics, who found him as sunny as a grandfather in one of his father's impressionist paintings. He died in 1979. He would have been much cheered to know that even then the pristine negative of **La Grande Illusion** was waiting in Toulouse to be discovered.

Roger Ebert 1999

NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
BLANCANIEVES
(Pablo Berger, Spain 2012)
Monday 16 February

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