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Renoir at Home Interview with Jean Renoir

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Source: *Film Quarterly*, Autumn, 1996, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Autumn, 1996), pp. 2-8

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1213322>

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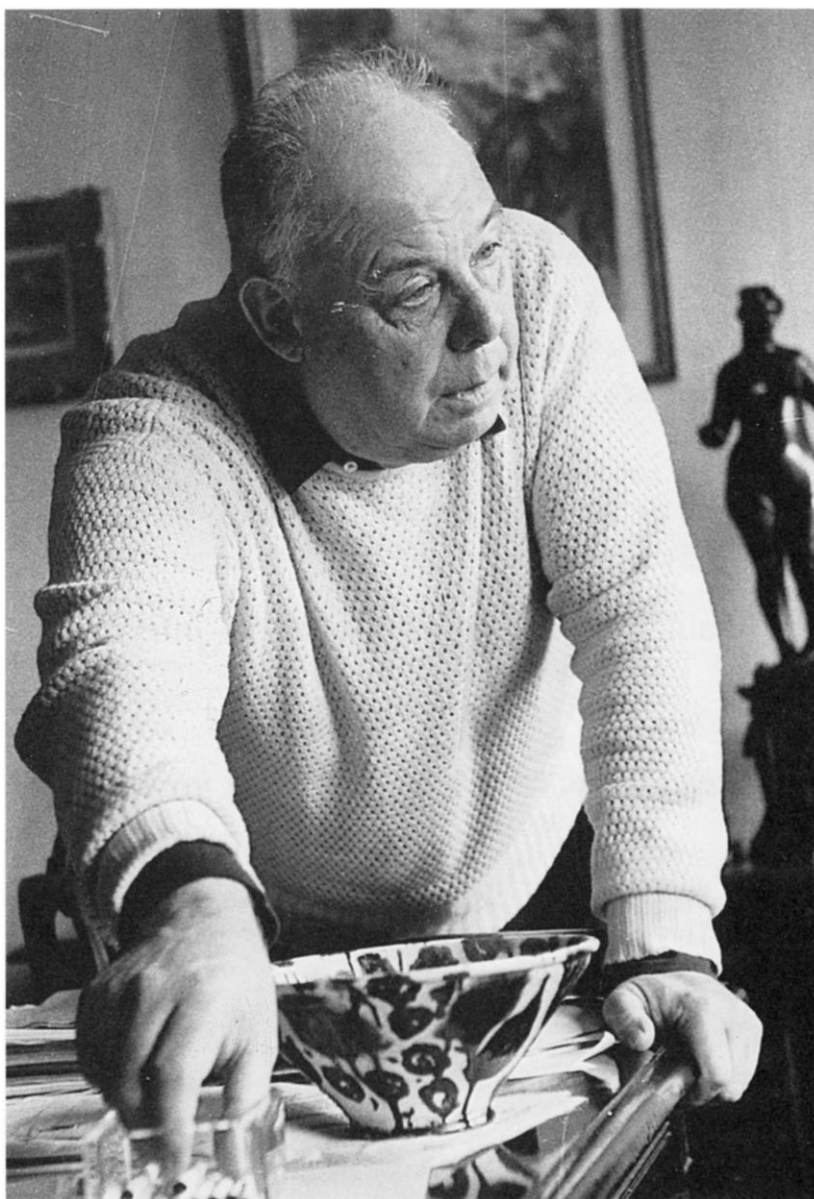
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Film Quarterly
Vol. 50, No. 1 [pp. 2-8]
Renoir at Home: Interview with Jean Renoir

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Leo Braudy

In September of 1970, after I had finished a first draft of Jean Renoir: The World of His Films and felt completely steeped in his work, I went to Beverly Hills to interview the man himself. Beyond the pleasure of meeting him after having spent so much time with his films, I wanted to track down some of the more elusive facts about his life and career, and try to get his own sense of the continuity of his films and preoccupations. He and his wife Dido lived near the top of one of those twisty roads that snake up the hills behind Beverly Hills and Bel Air, no names on the mailboxes. Whatever question I might have had about the great French director living in Los Angeles vanished when I saw the house.

There was a beautiful view from the back terrace, even a laurel tree, and the whole atmosphere

was like a California version of the Provence around Les Collettes, the farmhouse where, along with Paris, he had grown up. Basically bare wood floors with Oriental rugs on them. White painted brick walls. Even the modern comfortable furniture seemed to fit in with the portrait of the young Jean in hunting outfit painted by his father, the large bust of his mother, and some of his ceramics from his pre-film years. The interview lasted a few hours and ranged widely over whatever subject took our fancy. I did manage to collect some new facts, as well as a few pithy aphorisms to quote in the book. But the interview itself has never been printed. I've put together some intriguing chunks of it here both as an homage to Renoir in the 102nd anniversary of his birth and as a testament to the continuing vitality of his work.

Renoir at Home

Interview with Jean Renoir

Renoir is wearing green khaki pants, the crotch very low, a long beige cloth coat slung around him, a whitish shirt buttoned at the neck, powder-blue socks, and yellowish-brown moccasins. Dido seems perhaps in her early fifties, lithe and active, brown complexion, wearing beige ski pants and a white sheer cotton blouse. She is very solicitous about him, and gently satiric as well. When he is about to autograph my copy of *Renoir mon père*, for which he puts on dark-rimmed glasses, she jokes, “Now, Jean, where is your pen? Do you remember how to spell Mr. Brandy’s name?”

Renoir still seems very vital and quick, although he does forget things, or so it seems. It’s a strange feeling, to meet someone in whose work you’ve been immersed and that you know so well. When his memory slips, it’s as if he’s forgotten his lines. But why should he remember details, all equally immediate to me, many distant to him?

In terms of ideas and wit, he is fine. A lot of his pauses seem due to his imperfect English, a search for the appropriate word. He looks somewhat shrunken from the bear-like presence of his prime (when

Jean Gabin called him “Le Gros”), as if he now has a wooden hanger inside his coat. His nose is veined, and dark on one side, perhaps from a recently broken blood vessel. One of his eyes is more closed than the other—the result of a minor stroke? He doesn’t talk especially slowly, except in pausing to formulate ideas he wants to get across. I can see how in more robust days his pauses would have been taken as a kind of solidity, not the vagueness one might now—because of his age—assume they were.

Anna Magnani in
Le Carrosse d’or



He says he is sorry he had asked me ahead of time not to use the tape recorder, but whenever he heard himself speaking English, he blushed. He is very solicitous to make sure he isn't talking too fast, looking down at my pen to see if I have come to a stop. He always has something more to say, and I often find myself asking another question that turns out to be an interruption, because he is about to elaborate on his previous response. And he doesn't really repeat himself very much, unlike Hitchcock, for instance, whose interviews always feature the same handful of anecdotes and formulations.

Despite some apparent disability from his WWI leg wound and his present age, he shuffles and shambles around the house with a jaunty air, not seeming to take much deliberate control over his movements. When he wants to stand up just before I leave, he asks me to hold the small pewter cup that contains his sherry, because he can't get out of the chair while holding it.

As we're talking, he points to where I have rested my drink on a magazine and asks me if I'm married. "It's the act of a married man, whenever he has a drink in his hand, to worry if there are any coasters around." The kind of detail he's so good at. He asks me what I am going to do afterward, and I say I'm going to San Francisco to see my sister and her new baby. And he visibly brightens up, gives a big smile, almost a Renoir cliché. Later Dido asks the same thing, and I mention visiting my sister and my aunts. She says, "So this is a family trip and to your family you're added Jean Renoir." Not to be outdone in compliments, I say, "No, I have Jean Renoir and to him I've added my family." They both smile, although I'm not sure of the difference in meaning and perhaps it just appeals to their sense of humane symmetry.

When I leave, he shakes hands many times, says to send along any questions I've missed and also to tell him next time that it would take so long, that it was such an important interview. He keeps saying I have a whole book there.

Eléna et les hommes:
Ingrid Bergman and Jean Marais

LEO BRAUDY: *Did you use the canvasses left to you by your father as a cushion against financial problems, so that you could be more free in your film-making?*

JEAN RENOIR: When I did use them, I used them unwillingly. When I made movies, my only idea was to be successful, to deliver the goods. In spite of myself I was attracted to certain subjects and ways of treating them. I was never entirely successful with business. Since I had the paintings, practically I was more free than the actors, who had no money at all. But I didn't think of it.

When you sit here among the paintings by your father that you still keep, do you ever think of the contrast between your young painted self in the blue hunter's suit and your older self sitting in front of the painting?

I don't like to mix emotions with plastic arts. I'm trying to enjoy them without any sentimental feeling.

One touch that I like very much in La Chienne is the Renoir that the two clochards are admiring in the gallery window toward the end of the film.

It happened that it was there and I used it. . . . You know, I must not exaggerate commercial problems. Outside of the fight over *La Chienne* and some trouble with my early talking pictures, I always managed to shoot what I wanted.

Your own work begins with a more epic canvas and then later in your career you become more interested in pastoral. It's the reverse of what the Renaissance thought was the normal progression for artists: from pastoral beginnings to epic maturity.

If I didn't try to produce epic films after a certain





La Chienne: Michel Simon and Janie Mareze

period, it's mainly because I wasn't confronted with subjects of an epic value. In a way, both of my war films, *La grande illusion* in 1937 and *Le Caporal épinglé* in 1962, are about war prisoners. I started telling the story the same way. Then in the process of making the film not only the subject changed but my mind changed as well.

The 1939 war was not an epic war. It was a war of jails, a war of propaganda, a war of cruelty. It was a war for people who weren't the size of the people in the First World War. The people in that war were like knights during a crusade of the 12th century or characters from an episode in Virgil. The 1939 period gives us characters who are more petit-bourgeois. They have greatness of their own, of course, but a different style of greatness. The war of 1939 was not a war of epic personages. I tried to convey its special quality by a scene in *Le Caporal épinglé* in which the character

Ballochet, played by Claude Rich, sits on a toilet and, while fulfilling his natural processes, tells the corporal, Jean-Pierre Cassel, of his dreams to be a hero, and how they have failed.

You wrote in Renoir My Father that your father would have been horrified if any of his sons grew up to be a hero.

He would have believed he was horrified. My father believed firmly that you never act as you plan. Without being an existentialist, he believed, and I believe—perhaps by imitation—that action always precedes the plan. People are always heroes by accident. There is an unconscious force that makes a certain individual born a hero. In our blueprint civilization, essence is always supposed to precede existence. But I think it was a very intelligent move of Sartre's to insist on the opposite, that existence precedes essence.



A country scene from *Le petit théâtre de Jean Renoir*

Do we need these accidental heroes today?

Today it would be a good thing to have more heroes. We need them. And they would probably be very ordinary people. I knew a few people close to being heroes in the First World War, when I was in the Air Force. Guynemer [the French flying ace of World War I], he was one. He was possessed by a kind of strength he didn't really understand. He went off shooting down innumerable planes in a kind of frenzy, perhaps forgetting that there were human beings inside the planes. There's always a kind of inhumanity about heroism. The Garden of Eden had a population of non-heroes.

What about those people who assume the exterior of heroes, but don't have the insides, who use the panoply of heroism just to impose on others?

Most real heroes don't look like heroes. The heroic look is a cliché. Gabin [in *La grande illusion*] does not have the appearance of a hero. He's just a man who

does his job, without following any theory. Heroes act in a certain way because it's their function, it's their job, to act that way.

The real reason for any picture is to explain a character who is following out his destiny. Boeildieu, the character played by Pierre Fresnay in *La grande illusion*, isn't a hero in that sense. He is a man who thinks in terms of his caste, his cavalry upbringing. When he puts on white gloves before he is to distract Stroheim so that Gabin and Dalio can escape, Gabin doesn't understand. Why the ceremony?, he wonders. My father would have been with Gabin.

So Boeildieu needs the proper gloves in order to feel he's doing something heroic?

Yes, and clothing is an important proposition to remember in writing for the screen. We have a saying in French, *l'habit fait le moine*—"the garment makes the man." It's a true saying, but only in a superficial way. If a man becomes a hero wearing the outfit of a

hero, it proves that he had something inside he didn't guess was there. His action and the surrounding circumstances make it authentic.

In pictures and real life I hate what we call psychology. I believe so much that we are influenced by our surroundings. The study of the soul of someone living on such and such a street means nothing to me. Every bit in a human being is produced by heredity and surroundings.

The best director in our days—someone who amazed me with his feeling for picturesque locations and strange characters—that's Orson Welles. He's a great creator. The idea of a tycoon is not the same, can't be the same, after *Citizen Kane*. *Citizen Kane* is not what we read before about such people. It is a work that is really due to the observation of the real world and on the other hand it is the complete creation of Orson Welles.

But with all his troubles, Welles has not managed to make as many films as you.

But he keeps up the fight against the cliché. That's why he has so much financial trouble. Chaplin has the same ability, only in a different style. The fact that Orson Welles and Chaplin didn't work in Hollywood for a long time was very bad for Hollywood. It was a terrible mistake. Orson Welles represents a case of pure Americanism, but influenced by some Europeans. He brought to Hollywood the idea of a particular world.

I have always especially liked the way in your films when you're in danger of becoming too solemn, you do something funny or ironic, and when you're in danger of becoming too comic and frivolous, you interject something serious.

I try to be clever about that. In each film, you discover it slowly: the proper balance. Usually I start on my pictures with the possibility of contrast or of telling a story that is absolutely real but unbelievable in some aspect. I'm terribly attracted by what seems unusual but difficult to understand, not difficult because of the plot but because of the complexity of characters. I try to work close to nature—but nature is millions of things and there are millions of ways of understanding its propositions.

Perhaps one of the things that pushed me to make a film like *La Marseillaise* was to

destroy the cliché that people who are possessed by a great idea are necessarily very serious people who speak with a certain dignity and present a certain figure to their followers. Instead I tried to be a witness of the daily life of the participants of a great tragedy. It's hard for an English-speaking audience to get, but I purposely made all the characters speak in very common language. For instance, at the end of the career and almost the life of Louis XVI, he discovers that tomatoes are a very nice vegetable, and he's sorry he hasn't known them before.

What is interesting about the cliché is that you can use it willingly as a frame. Inside, the characters don't follow the cliché. Outside, then, it doesn't matter. But it sets them up.

That remark reminds me of the way La Chienne, Le Carrosse d'or, and Le petit théâtre de Jean Renoir all begin with the frame of a proscenium arch or theatre curtains.

The first episode in *Le petit théâtre* is deliberately a cliché. I was very careful to have a set that looked like a set. It was necessary to have a lot of cardboard and make-up in this story of a beggar and his dreams.

So the frame is like the clothes on a hero, the habit on a monk?

Let me give you an example. Suppose a director or producer is casting the part of a sailor. A normal bad actor would work hard in order to have the real costume, the real walk, the real language of a sailor. Perhaps he will even take a trip on a boat to be burned by the real wind of the sea. Perhaps he will buy a real sailor coat from a real sailor. As a result, he will look like a real ham. Let's now try Chaplin as a sailor. He will arrive with derby, little cane, big shoes. But inside he'll be so much a real sailor that he'll be convincing despite the fact that his costume isn't right.

Le Caporal épinglé:
Jean-Pierre Cassel





La grande illusion

Doesn't this qualify your long admiration for Stroheim? He was so crazy about clothing detail that he spent enormous amounts to get his actors the right period underwear.

Even Stroheim's mistakes are interesting. The big problem for a film-maker is the part you must give to the outside truth and the part to the inside truth. The inside should be the only important one.

What then do you think of General Rolland, the character played by Jean Marais in Eléna et les hommes?

He's a very weak man. He is the selfish, rich man who likes any kind of adventure under one condition: that it can't harm him. He's too careful to get into anything serious. The real hero of *Eléna* is Elena herself. The kind of hero I admire, who is basically good, is La Chesnaye in *Rules of the Game*. And that whole movie is a result of my belief that we are living in a century of compromises.

Norman Mailer once described the film director as a kind of general deploying his forces. . . .

Too many directors think of themselves that way. They are generals who tell the trees to go over there, the

people over there, the sets over there. But a director must absorb things, not keep them at a distance.

In Le Caporal épinglé, what does épinglé signify?

It's "pinned"—an allusion to butterflies pinned through the stomach onto a board.

That's what I thought. But that seems the opposite of the English title.

It is unfortunately opposite. We couldn't get a good translation for "the pinned-up corporal." "The pin-up corporal" didn't work. So *The Elusive Corporal* was the only one anyone came up with.

The English title makes it seem as if the film is about escapes and freedom, when it's actually about boundaries and limits.

Aren't they the great themes, the great facts, of our time?

- Leo Braudy is a member of the *FQ* editorial board. He and Marshall Cohen are preparing a 5th edition of *Film Theory and Criticism*.