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## Theatricals in Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* and *Grand Illusion*



Critics frequently comment on Jean Renoir's use of theater in his films. In her review of *The Golden Coach*, a film made in 1953, Pauline Kael says of Renoir, "As a man of the theatre . . . he has become involved in the ambiguities of illusion and 'reality,' theatre and 'life'—the confusions of identity in the role of man as a role player."<sup>1</sup> Joel Finler observes that in *The Rules of the Game*, Renoir uses "archetypal figures from the classical French theatre: the adulterous nobleman and his mistress, his unhappy wife and her chambermaid-confidante,"<sup>2</sup> and Leo Braudy finds that several of Renoir's films are "framed by a red-and-gold-draped puppet-show stage."<sup>3</sup>

In *The Rules of the Game*, made in 1939, Renoir uses amateur theatricals to suggest the breakdown of the aristocracy and in *Grand Illusion*, finished in 1937, the theatricals in which soldiers dress in drag reflect the imbalances in society during wartime. An in-depth examination of how purposefully Renoir incorporates theatricals into these two films suggests the scope of Renoir's genius as a cinematographer.

It is Robert de la Chesnaye in *The Rules of the Game* who suggests a celebration to honor the aviator Andre Jurieu, the hero of the moment: "Well, I think we should have a celebration, a grand celebration, in honour of Jurieu . . ."<sup>4</sup> He says, "*gesticulating wildly*: . . . We'll put on a comedy, wear fancy dress" (75). When the others agree, he adds, "In fact, we'll try to have as much fun as possible!" (75) Having "fun" is a duty which he takes seriously.

Theatricality is a very important part of la Chesnaye's life. His attempt to preserve his way of life is closely linked with the theater. Braudy writes,

“Robert de la Chesnaye’s theatricals in *La Règle du Jeu*, however ineffectual, are a momentary attempt to absorb and possibly to transcend the malevolent forces of society and politics.”<sup>5</sup> La Chesnaye protects himself from changes in the outside world by involving himself in theatrical amusements, long regarded as a suitable pastime for members of the aristocracy. La Chesnaye’s theatrical soiree is very important to him; he greatly enjoys dressing up and he welcomes the task of directing or controlling an evening’s entertainment.

Reviewing a cut version of the film in *The New York Times*, April 10, 1950, Howard Thompson says of the theatricals in *The Rules of the Game*:

And there’s nothing particularly sizzling in this account of some addle-headed lounge lizards tangling up their amours on a week-end house party in the country.

One minute they’re making sleek Noel Coward talk about art and free love, the next they’re behaving like a Li’l Abner family reunion, chasing each other from pantry to boudoir to the din of wrecked furniture, yelling and random gunfire.<sup>6</sup>

Thompson adds that the finale “in which everybody down to the cook joins in a hysterical race, would shame the Keystone cops.”<sup>7</sup>

Most critics, however, do not see the party sequence in this light. Eugene Archer in *The New York Times*, January 19, 1961, may see the finale as containing “a wildly comic chase in the midst of a costume ball,”<sup>8</sup> but he does not view the party theatricals as a senseless or gratuitous look into the lives of the very rich. He sees the masquerade “in which guests dressed as skeletons perform a grotesque dance of death” as a foreshadowing of the death at the end.<sup>9</sup> This could be the death of Jurieu as well as the death or near death of the old order.

The theatrical party la Chesnaye organizes is one of the key events in the film. Everything comes to a head: the intrigues of the masters, as well as the intrigues of the servants who imitate their masters. The party sequence is not extraneous to the lives of the participants. The theatrical ball is clearly intended to represent the life style of the aristocracy, and the sequence makes its comment from within. Joel Finler says Renoir “draws attention to the weaknesses of the French upper classes in 1939 as revealed from within. His critique of French society rings true because it avoids the easy satirising of two-dimensional characters.”<sup>10</sup> The party sequence is successful because it is in keeping with the life style and personalities of the participants and because it allows for the resolution of the events that have been developing throughout the film.

Pauline Kael suggests that the party sequence in *The Rules of the Game* is a possible source or model for the parties in Antonioni’s *La Notte*, Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*, and Resnais’ *Last Year at Marienbad*, but she says that these movies do not go anywhere. She feels, however, that the events in *The Rules of the Game* build toward the climax which occurs during the party.<sup>11</sup>

The success of *La Dolce Vita* and other party films seems to have propagated a large number of works which include an obligatory party scene. The party sequences function primarily as time fillers. They titillate the viewer by giving him an inside look at the ways of the decadent rich, as in Schlesinger’s *Darling*. But that is all they do. For example, the party sequence in Schlesinger’s *Midnight Cowboy* is an accepted part of the formula story revolving around the pilgrimage of the small town boy to the city, but it adds nothing to the film apart from providing the camera man with the opportuni-

ty to film clichéd visual effects. It is a totally superimposed sequence. The manner in which Joe Buck receives the invitation to the party in the luncheonette is contrived. The Mac Albertsons, who are giving the party, are supposed to be outrageous, but their eccentricities do not disguise the fact that they function simply as a device to get Joe to attend a New York party. In contrast, the theatrical party in *The Rules of the Game* is not superimposed; it is a natural outcome of the developments within the movie. La Chesnaye's life is symbolized by the mechanical toys he avidly collects—his Romantic Negress, his motheaten warbler, his calliope—and by his consuming passion for theatricals. It is definitively in keeping with his character for him to organize the theatricals which serve as a culmination for the events in the film.

All of la Chesnaye's guests are caught up in the festivities. The acting bug is contagious, and everyone participates in the excitement. La Chesnaye keeps his guests at fever pitch. During the festivities reality and play acting blend, making it difficult to distinguish one from the other. The servants imitate the intrigues of their masters. Roles are reversed. Schumacher searches for Lisette, just as Jurieu and the others search for Christine. La Chesnaye behaves like "a real peasant" (148) toward Jurieu when he finds him with Christine. Christine wears Lisette's cloak. The triangle of la Chesnaye, Christine, and Jurieu parallels that of Schumacher, Lisette and Marceau. Jurieu is an outsider who intrudes on the old order, just as Marceau, the poacher, intrudes on the precarious way of life maintained by Lisette and her husband.

All order is reversed as a result of the frenzy caused by the festivities. Everything comes out into the open. The theatricals provide Genevieve with the opportunity to grab Robert in public during a curtain call. Christine takes the *comédie* away from the realm of her husband's theater when she decides that she is tired of play acting and that she is not interested in seeing her husband and Genevieve, his mistress, perform an encore. She says to Saint-Aubin, "I don't want to see that. Come with me!" (116) Jurieu follows them, and the off-stage comedy begins. Before Christine's actions, only the servants had played their comedy off-stage. Befitting their class, la Chesnaye, Genevieve and the others ostensibly performed *on* stage. Now concurrent comedies are taking place throughout La Colinière. The comedies—off-stage and on—get so involved that when la Chesnaye says to Corneille, his majordomo, "Get this comedy stopped!" he answers, "Which one, Monsieur le Marquis?" (142)

Christine is the one most confused by the developments caused by the theatricals. She leaves the little theatre, but like la Chesnaye and the others, she is unable to make distinctions between life and art or life and illusion. She is play acting off-stage with Saint-Aubin, although she may not recognize it. Everyone around her is performing and in her confusion all of the roles become unclear. Who is her lover? Saint-Aubin? Jurieu? Octave? Her husband? When Christine tells Octave she has told Jurieu she loves him, Octave asks, "Do you really love him?" She answers, "I don't know, I don't know any more!" (137) Later she tells Octave that it's him she loves. (159) Like the guests who think that the indoor chase and shooting are a part of the festivities, Christine does not know what is an act and what is reality.

The costumes the principals wear for the theatrical evening, which are removed from their roles in life, help contribute to the loss of self which Christine and the others experience during the festivities. As a Tyrolean girl, Christine is completely out of step with Parisian society. In costume, she asks for passion and immediate action, not rules. Genevieve is a gypsy, Octave a

bear. Their costumes directly relate to the loss of self each one of them undergoes. In costume, Christine finds it difficult to maintain her role as the wife of Robert de la Chesnaye. Genevieve can cease to be la Chesnaye's well-mannered mistress; as a gypsy she can get as drunk as she wants.

For Schumacher, Christine *becomes* his wife because she is wearing the cloak he bought his wife. Mistaken identity because of dress here produces tragedy, not farce. That Christine wears Lisette's coat is not a superimposed device which allows Renoir to bring his story to a head; rather, it is an outgrowth of the role reversals which permeate the entire film. Christine and Lisette exchange confidences. Lisette lives through Christine. Lisette's life revolves around her service to Christine. As Marceau tells Schumacher, ". . . it's not you she's married to, no! . . . It's Madame!" (156). Christine is dressed as a Tyrolean peasant girl. Why not wear her servant's cloak?

Throughout the chaos of the evening la Chesnaye attempts to keep the appearance of order. He unveils his calliope, and he reassures his guests that everything is perfectly all right. This same need to maintain order subsequently causes him to announce that Jurieu's death was an accident.

Although la Chesnaye gets caught up in the festivities and momentarily loses control with Jurieu, he is able to regain control when it looks as if complete chaos is about to break loose. Like the moth-eaten warbler he collects, he is still able to perform. His exuberance over the performance within the house itself is one thing, but he cannot allow the chaos to flow over into a hostile world in the form of a scandal. His sense of self comes to the rescue. Christine, on the other hand, loses all sense of self because of the blurred distinctions which exist in her society between on-stage acting, off-stage comedies, ritualized intrigues, and reality. She does not know who she is.

Renoir reinforces his use of theatricals to comment on society by frequently having one of the characters discuss the cultural climate or the state of the world. For example, when Lisette complains to Christine that the shade of lipstick she wishes to wear is not natural, Christine replies, "Oh well, what is natural nowadays?" (31) When the homosexual and Saint-Aubin discuss la Chesnaye's having heard Jurieu's denunciation of Christine at the airport, the homosexual says, "It's his own fault. Why does he have a radio?" Saint-Aubin replies, "That's progress!" (37) "Progress," here associated with trans-atlantic flights and radios, is a part of the modern world which intrudes into the lives of the old aristocracy.

When Christine complains to Octave that her life with la Chesnaye is a lie, Octave replies, "Listen, Christine, that's a sign of the times too. We're in a period when everyone tells lies: pharmacists' handbills, Governments, the radio, the cinema, the newspapers . . . So how could you expect us poor individuals not to lie as well?" (155) Renoir's use of microcosm and macrocosm is at work here. Just as "society" is represented by its entertainments, specifically those of la Chesnaye, the society which exists on lies is represented by the single individual whose existence is based on a lie.

The theatricals which represent la Chesnaye's way of life precipitate chaos. The amusements of his own society betray him. They propagate the decay of the society from within. The theatricals, the wearing of costumes, and the adoption of roles appropriate to members of the lower classes lead to an outbreak of violence which almost destroys the aristocratic society. In spite of the internal decay, la Chesnaye is able to survive, at least temporarily, by acting to preserve the facade of the old order in the face of a hostile, changing

world.

As in *The Rules of the Game*, costumes in *Grand Illusion* serve to establish the kind of role confusion which can lead to an upheaval in the normal social order. Private entertainments which include men in drag conventionally precede a reversal of events which closely parallels the sexual turnabout. This is precisely the kind of reversal Renoir alludes to in *Grand Illusion* when the Allied prisoners stage an entertainment in which five Englishmen dress in drag. As in *The Rules of the Game*, everyone is involved in the preparations for the skit, everyone, that is, except de Boeldieu who claims to be too much of a realist for such activities. When the arrival of the crates containing the costumes is announced, Rosenthal, a wealthy Frenchman, is "delighted"<sup>12</sup> He is anxious to examine the crates and says, "Let's go there, boys. There must be one crate full of women's clothes . . . real ones!" (37)

Unpacking the crates of dresses, stockings, and feminine garments, the men think about women. The prisoners comment on the short skirts and short hair the women are wearing during the war. A man identified as "the Actor" reacts to the news about women's styles by saying, "You don't say . . . . It must be like going to bed with a boy!" (38 - 39) The sexes are reversed. Men at war prepare to dress like women, while women back home look like men. The crates of women's clothing affect both the German guards and the Allied prisoners: A German sentry who has been examining the women's clothes says good-night in French, while the French "Actor" says good-night in German—a small reversal, but one which suggests the larger reversal of roles taking place because of war.

When the Allied prisoner Maisonneuve, with his "angel face" (38), appears dressed like a woman, "All the men turn to look at him and fall silent, curiously disturbed" (39). Marechal comments that he looks "like a real girl" (39). In costume, Maisonneuve "cannot help making a few feminine gestures" (39), because the costume change causes him to take on the new role along with the new clothes.

De Boeldieu comments on the reversals he observes in the prison camp. While young German soldiers drill outside and the Allied prisoners work on making women's costumes for the skit inside, he remarks, "On one side, children playing at soldiers. On the other, soldiers playing at children." (40) The Allied prisoners are denied the game of war, and so they play at dressing up. Von Rauffenstein, de Boeldieu's counterpart in rank and breeding, says that his men "are amused when they play at soldiers" (60). In a sense, de Boeldieu's self-sacrifice so that his fellow prisoners, Marechal and Rosenthal, can escape is itself a grandiose piece of play-acting. De Boeldieu may see himself as too realistic to engage in theatricals, but his performance as a decoy is very much in the grand style.

When it is announced that Douaumont, a city near Verdun, has been taken by the German forces, the Allies decide to perform their skit anyway in order to keep up the morale of the Allied forces. During one of the skits, Marechal, "dressed normally" (49), interrupts to announce that Douaumont is recaptured. The "girls" in the skit remove their wigs and sing the "Marseillaise." This action symbolizes a temporary return to normalcy for the Allies. Douaumont is later recaptured, and the reversals of order which Renoir associates in this film with war, prison camps, and drag continue. When von Rauffenstein subsequently interviews de Boeldieu and Marechal, he finds it extremely amusing that Marechal attempted one escape from a German prison camp dressed as a woman. Marechal replies, "Yes, but what was much



less amusing, sir, was that an N.C.O. really took me for a woman . . . and I didn't fancy that at all!" (59) The man who is denied his freedom in prison seeks to escape disguised as a woman, and, like *Maisonneuve*, he finds that his costume is too convincing.

Critics who discuss the amateur theatricals in *Grand Illusion* may stress the feeling of camaraderie which they produce. For example, Braudy writes, "The theatrical in *La Grande Illusion* defines an isolated but self-sufficient community, which attempts to preserve some standard of value in a valueless world."<sup>13</sup> It is true that the amateur theatricals, like the war itself, brings different classes of people together, old aristocrats, new aristocrats, actors, teachers, working men, etc. Nevertheless the bond which is formed in *Grand Illusion* through theatricals and the confines of the prison camp is the result of war and the unnatural cloistering of conquered men in prison. It is a bond formed in desperation. The prisoners themselves may see their theatrical presentation as an attempt to preserve the "value" Braudy refers to, but in actuality the theatrical serves as Renoir's means to indicate the complete reversal of values during war time which makes the prisoners, who are without women, sew women's clothes and dance on stage in drag.

Moreover, the bonds which are formed in the film are all short lasting. Von Rauffenstein and de Boeldieu come together in the prison camp, but their respect for one another is doomed to end in the prison. Pauline Kael sees the film as "an elegy for the death of the old European aristocracy,"<sup>14</sup> and von Rauffenstein tells de Boeldieu, "I do not know who is going to win this war, but I know one thing: the end of it, whatever it may be, will be the end of the Rauffensteins and the Boeldieus" (71). Marechal, the common man, can never get close to de Boeldieu. Rosenthal, the new aristocrat, and Marechal come together at a point in time which is the war, but I feel Renoir makes it clear that these two men who escape together will not see one another afterwards. They separate in the snow and they will not come together again. Similarly, Marechal may feel that he should return after the war to fetch Elsa, the German woman who took them in during their escape, but who knows if he ever will. The bonds formed during wartime, Renoir seems to be saying, are artificial ones, and believing that it might be otherwise is part of the illusion of war. The so-called camaraderie formed during the theatricals is temporary at best.

In both *The Rules of the Game* and *Grand Illusion*, the theatrical interludes serve an integral function in developing each film's theme. The theatricals are not superimposed onto the films to allow the filmmaker to draw facile associations. Nor do the theatrical interludes exist in isolation within the confines of "the cinema." The theatricals do not appear out of place, as if somebody had temporarily forgotten what medium was being employed. Rather, the use of established theatrical conventions becomes an intimate part of two fully realized works of art.

Phillipe R. Perebinossoff

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Pauline Kael, *I Lost It at the Movies* (New York: Bantam, 1966), pp. 90 - 91.

2 Joel W. Finler, "An Intimate Chamber Piece," in Jean Renoir, *Rules of the Game*, translated by John McGrath and Maureen Teitelbaum (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 16.

3 Leo Braudy, *Jean Renoir: The World of His Films* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), p. 69.

4 Jean Renoir, *Rules of the Game*, translated by John McGrath and Maureen Teitelbaum (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 75 of pp. 26 - 168. Subsequent citations in the text by page number refer to this edition.

5 Braudy, p. 168.

6 Howard Thompson, "The Rules of the Game," in *The New York Times Film Reviews 1913 - 1970*, ed. George Amberg (New York: Arno Press, 1970), p. 256.

7 Thompson, p. 256.

8 Eugene Archer, "Renoir Classic" in *The New York Times Film Reviews 1913 - 1970*, ed. George Amberg (New York: Arno Press, 1970), p. 344.

9 Archer, p. 344.

10 Finler, p. 16.

11 Kael, p. 174.

12 Jean Renoir, *Grand Illusion*, translated by Marianne Alexandre and Andrew Sinclair (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 37 of pp. 13 - 104. Subsequent citations in the text by page number refer to this edition.

13 Braudy, p. 88.

14 Kael, p. 97.

