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45 years late, a Renoir film still exquisite

By Walter V. Addiego

The act of liberation is a blind gamble for some; few are prepared for the pitiless disillusionment which may follow. Yet there may be something to salvage after the catastrophe, says Jean Renoir in his superb, remarkably witty dark comedy, "La Chienne."

The 1931 film opens today at the Surf in its first American commercial release. It is mandatory viewing for followers of Renoir (who will want to know it is his first sound feature), and for anyone who cares to see a rich and masterfully realized work.

"La Chienne" ("The Bitch") has rightly been compared to Von Sternberg's "The Blue Angel," for it shares the theme of a straitlaced man deceived and humiliated by a beautiful woman. Renoir makes his points as tellingly as Von Sternberg, but without the claustrophobia of "The Blue Angel" and with a pleasing sense of wonder at life.

Renoir opens his film with a puppet show to announce that the story has no moral or meaning. It is just another tale of He, She and the Other Guy. What follows is in fact a stock tale with stock characters, an ironic Punch and Judy farce.

Legrand, the central character, appears with his destiny written on his face. A tall, bland, oafish-looking

man wearing a pince-nez, he is the archetypal clerk and a natural target for abuse. He is a victim of both his fellow workers and his horrendously shrewish wife.

An opportunity for release is afforded when he runs across Dede, a slick pimp, beating up on his pretty but dull-witted trollop, Lulu (La Chienne). Taken in by the pair, Legrand sets Lulu up in an apartment.

The acting of all three major roles is first-rate, but Michel Simon is astounding as Legrand, using every nuance of appearance, body and speech to good effect. Janie Mareze brings the right hint of naivete to Lulu, while Georges Flamant perfectly embodies the cheap vanity and cockiness of Dede.

Legrand is happy with the situation. He even looks the other way when he learns that Lulu has been selling his paintings (he paints as a hobby, unaware of the value of his works). For her part, Lulu only keeps up the charade to please Dede.

Renoir (who also co-wrote the script) works this material for some supreme comedy, particularly when Legrand arranges a confrontation between his wife and her supposedly dead first husband, and when Dede passes Lulu off as a painter at an artistic gathering.

But we soon realize that Legrand has allowed his

fantasy to blind him. He throws in the towel on his old life, and suitcase in hand, runs to Lulu's to find her in bed with Dede. Legrand has been oblivious to the truth that his move to liberation will strip away all his illusions. He reacts like a child who learns that the wedding cake in the bakery window is made of plaster.

Legrand stabs Lulu to death, and allows the pimp to be executed for the crime. At the end, Legrand is a rumpled, bearded bum, picking up cigarette butts and living on tips from the rich.

In an abundantly ironic epilogue, we learn that Legrand, although he is degraded and he "wouldn't mind being dead," has attained some strange kind of peace. As a feisty, street-wise old man, he finds that the prospect of a good meal, and a fellow tramp to share it with, makes him happy enough.

The richness of the story is enormously enhanced by Renoir's technical work, which is better seen than read about. The cinematographic effects, the use of the soundtrack, even the lovingly designed interiors, are all exquisite.



JANIE MAREZE
A naive Lulu