

Document Citation

Title	Made-up memories
Author(s)	Charles Michener
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	1974 May 13
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Le petit théâtre de Jean Renoir (The little theatre of Jean Renoir), Renoir, Jean, 1969

Made-up Memories

Sophistication—as it connotes disillusionment and an unnecessarily complex view of things—has always been anathema to Jean Renoir, and in his most recent film to reach America, LE PETIT THEATRE DE JEAN RENOIR, the great French humanist offers an especially beguiling cure for that affliction. “Made-up memories are the best kind,” says one of his characters, a luminously aged tramp who has never lost the ability of self-transport into a more lavish existence. Renoir’s “Little Theater” is a testament to that wisdom: a collection of three short films that is not only an unabashed exercise in film artifice at its most masterly but a retrospective in miniature of one of the most perceptive, expansive careers in world cinema.

Introduced with simple flourish by the master himself, each film raises the issue of self-absorption and its consequences in radically different styles. Inspired by the Hans Christian Andersen story from which Renoir made “The Little Match Girl” in 1928, the first episode uses a Disney-like set of pure confection to tell how two tramps, who are lifelong lovers, respond to a fortuitous Christmas feast of caviar, champagne and pâté de foie gras. The second episode, a contemporary tale of a French matron’s passion for her electric floor polisher, is a little opera, complete with chorus of office workers, done—wryly—in an arch, hard-edge style. A mysterious interlude of Jeanne Moreau singing a song from the Gay ’90s follows, and then, in the third short film, Renoir settles comfortably into his best-loved mode: a village tale about the cuckolding of a very retired, food-loving landowner, married to a young, glamorous wife, all of which he observes with rich, naturalistic detail and photographs with painterly lyricism.

Grand: Film buffs will spot a cavalcade of veteran Renoir players in the various roles. Children of whatever exposure will delight in the inimitable Renoir wit; adultery is made understandable by the wisdom of dogs in gardens and the concupiscence of a young housemaid bursting with grand illusions. But there is nothing self-indulgent or gratuitous about Renoir’s theater. Not surprisingly, his grand summing-up is “little,” his view of the world without complacency. “What of convention?” asks the guilty lover in a fit of self-punishment before the man he has cuckolded. “Blast convention!” says the husband. “Life is supportable only through little revolutions, revolutions in eating habits, in the bedroom, in the public squares, all storms in teacups . . .” At 79, Renoir resolutely knows nothing—and everything.

—CHARLES MICHENER

Newsweek, May 13, 1974