

## Document Citation

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Speaking of generation and regeneration in the French cinema, a neglected gem from the mellow, reflective moods of Jean Renoir plays the Pacific Film Archive next Thursday: *French Cancan*, from 1954. It evokes the belle époque through the fictionalized story of one Monsieur Danglard (Jean Gabin), who builds the Moulin Rouge as a showcase for his musical revue, attempting to revive the cancan for Paris audiences.

The obvious similarities of subject and even coloring aside, Jean Renoir's work fits into the oeuvre of his father Auguste Renoir in a succession of memorable scenes with a fantastic cast of quickly sketched and yet unforgettable Paris characters: Nini the ingenue (Françoise Arnoul), the voluptuous presence of la Belle Abesse (Maria Felix), Paulo the hoodlum, and an array of dancing starlets, all of whose purpose in the film is to burst forth in the extended finale of opening night at the Moulin Rouge, a feverish swirl of flying legs and tossed top hats. Also present, along with Patachou and the young Michel Piccoli, is a musical cameo of Edith Piaf.

As in all Renoir films, love is at the still center of all this mad action, as the aging Danglard romances young Nini into the lead role of his production, drops her at an inopportune moment, then talks her out of her disappointment and into her tights with the quintessential showbiz sendoff speech delivered backstage while a full house clamors for entertainment. Rather than taking the oblique approach toward the unification of desire and expediency, as in his masterpieces, *The Rules of the Game* and *Grand Illusion*, Renoir here tosses off his philosophy in the words of the well-traveled boulevardier Danglard, who has no time, nor words, to waste. The show must go on.

The film is surprisingly sexy for 1954, providing yet another example of what the world regarded as "French" in those pre-global, pre-multinational times. Arnoul is particularly moist as the laundress-turned-dancer Nini, exhibiting a sexuality which such Americanized French actresses as Leslie Caron were never allowed to exploit in '50s Hollywood. And it's easy to understand the French fascination with Jerry Lewis if Philippe Clay's portrayal of the rubber-legged Casimir is any indication of popularity. Casimir looks and mugs just like Lewis in his numbers. Renoir makes his points about art and human endeavor with a maximum of entertainment, illustrating that there was only one Jean Renoir, and signaling to his artistic constituents that there is such an animal as an entertainment which thinks on its feet.