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# A 23-year-old film masterpiece

By Michele Lomax

There is no such thing as a pure masterpiece, anymore than there is such a thing as a pure life. A masterpiece is something that, despite all its faults, you love still.

The late French film critic Andre Bazin, in his book on Jean Renoir, calls Renoir's film "The River" a "pure masterpiece" and while I might quarrel with the term, I think its meaning is right-on.

"The River" has been put of circulation nearly 20 years, but in honor of the 80th birthday of Renoir (an occasion the director is alive to celebrate), the San Francisco Museum of Art will show the film tonight at 7 at Veterans Auditorium, continuing the presentation tomorrow night — in conjunction with the Pacific Film Archive — at 8:45 and 10:30 at the University Art Museum in Berkeley.

The film remains one of the remembrances of things past that stands the light or whatever of maturity. Made in India in 1951, it is regarded as the last major work of the great French filmmaker, son of the great impressionist painter. To continue the line, the photography is by Claude Renoir, Jean's nephew.

The basis of the work is Rumer Godden's novel and



**ADRIENNE CORRI**  
The power of loveliness

etical snakes and snails and puppy dog tails, laced liberally with honey.

For more mature masculine presence, there is the loving and well-providing father.

Played by Arthur Shields, he's an abstracted figure for whom the practical world is just a rumor. He is a Britisher gone Indian, in the sense of going native, whose sole tangible earthly concern is his beautiful half-Hindu daughter, Melanie (Radha).

the framework is akin to those memories of an Anglo-Indian childhood that the New Yorker has often featured.

A girl in budding adolescence, played by Patricia Walters, is the author's voice.

She lives in a compound that is one of those outposts the English created in whatever dominion they happened to be ruling.

There are three younger loving and well-providing sisters, providing a chorus proceedings, along with a little brother made of the po-

There's another beauty in the piece, the spoiled, nearly-grown only child (Adrienne Corri) of a rich colonial, a girl who loves her friends in the compound, but cannot resist using the cruel power of the loveliness she's beginning to realize.

So many girls, so much beauty, but not an eligible man to appreciate. That is, until a young, war-wounded American comes to visit. Thomas E. Breen plays him, a Jack Nicholson prototype with easy, wisecracking charm and a smile that

atones for any signs, but a secret sorrow.

His is a wooden leg, which for him is a metaphor for the struggle of pride against pity. The ladies one and all are enchanted. Here is a hero who also needs sympathy, though the many warns of the bad omen of the appearance of a third redhead with two others already present.

But the ladies are too drunk with love to take any folk wisdom to heart, even the little girls' recreational painting turns to figures of handsome young redheaded Americans. A Hindu festival is being celebrated at the time of these fer-

vent flutterings of feminine hearts

Renoir uses the same device of a death followed by a birth that he used in his "Rules of the Game" (1939) to illustrate a tale about the acceptance of and affection for life as it is.

It is a story that has greater currency for Western audiences now than when it was first released, what with the contemporary familiarity with an Eastern frame of reference. Hindu legend and beliefs are woven into a Western struggle against fate in a way that is visually gorgeous and guided by an all-embracing love and sympathy for our poor, mortal lives.