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*Faustine Kael 5001 Nights at
the movies*

Lovers and Thieves *Assassins et voleurs* (1957) — In the year he died, Sacha Guitry, who was 72, made a couple of films. This sly detective comedy, which he wrote and then directed from a wheelchair, is one of them. The old master of casual, ironic wit had intended to play the leading role himself, but old age had at last caught up with him, and he appeared only in a bit part. In 1936, in Guitry's *The Story of a Cheat*, the narrator provided a cynical and witty counterpoint to the action. (The technique was to become familiar to a later generation through the English comedy *Kind Hearts and Coronets*.) This approach, to which Guitry returned in *Lovers and Thieves*, permitted him to treat the film medium with nonchalant intimacy—there are freakish interruptions, changes of subject and pace. He teases the classic unities as well as the classic virtues: in his offhand way, he seems to say, "Look how easy it is to make a movie—one just begins and then improvises." He directed an extended romantic sequence that is one of the most impudent ever filmed: Magali Noel, the enchanting, stylish murder victim, loathes her husband so much that she and her lover make love all over Paris, so that everyone will know the husband is a cuckold. The lover, who is also the narrator (Jean Poiret), inadvertently commits a murder for which an innocent thief (Michel Serrault) is sent to prison. Conscience-stricken, the lover takes over the occupation of the thief. But all this is only the loose framework; Guitry makes a sortie into a great loony bin, provides an audacious painting theft, and stops everything while a mad beatnik (Darry Cowl) addresses a courtroom. It's a fresh, lovely movie. Clément Duhour helped on the directing. (Jean Poiret later wrote the play *La Cage aux folles* and Michel Serrault appeared in it as the female impersonator, on the stage and in the movie.) In French. b & w