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## *La Petite Marchande d'Allumettes* (1928)

ORIGINAL TITLE: "La Petite Fille aux Allumettes," designed to avoid confusion with an American film starring Mary Carr which was released in Paris in 1926 under the title *La Petite Marchande d'Allumettes*

DIRECTORS: Jean Renoir and Jean Tédesco

SCREENPLAY: Jean Renoir, from the story by Hans Christian Andersen ("The Little Match Girl")

ASSISTANT DIRECTORS: Claude Heymann and Simone Hamiguet

SETS: Eric Aes

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: Jean Bachelet

MUSIC: (added in 1930): a potpourri of Mendelssohn, Strauss, Wagner, etc.

ARRANGEMENTS: Manuel Rosenthal

SHOOTING: August 1927 to January 1928 at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier and on the sands of Marly

PRODUCERS: Jean Renoir and Jean Tédesco

DISTRIBUTOR: S.O.F.A.R.

LENGTH: 29 minutes (considerably cut from its original length)

FIRST SHOWING: March 31, 1928, at the Alhambra in Geneva and June 1928 at the Vieux-Colombier in Paris. (The original Paris

run was interrupted and the film seized when Edmond Rostand's widow brought suit against the film makers for plagiarism. The second release, with a sound track added, took place in February (1930.)

ACTORS: Catherine Hessling (Karen, the little match girl); Manuel Raabi (the policeman and the Hussar of Death); Jean Storm (the rich young man and the cavalier); Anny Xells (Amy Wells?; the mechanical doll)

It is a cold winter's night in a distant northern city. A little girl dressed in rags and tatters tries in vain to sell her matches to passers-by hastening to the warmth of their homes. Knocked about, ignored, and a bit frightened by the watchful eye of a nearby policeman, she had sold nothing and dares not return to her squalid shanty. She falls asleep on the snow-covered ground beside a fence, and begins to dream . . .

She enters a toy store, where she recognizes one of the men from the street as the lieutenant commanding a platoon of wooden soldiers. The policeman is a jack-in-the-box dressed to look like the "Hussar of Death." Chased by the hussar, the little match girl and the lieutenant flee into the clouds. But Death has the last word. Karen comes slowly back to reality, but not to wake up. Passers-by gather around her frozen, lifeless body.

CLAUDE BEYLIE

*La Petite Marchande d'Allumettes* stands apart from the rest of Renoir's silent work. Its tragic fairy-tale subject and its fantastic technical effects place it, superficially at least, in the French avant-garde at the end of the silent era. It blatantly contradicts the fallacious notion of Renoir as essentially a realist. Still, his choice of subject seems to have been determined much less by the influence of an "avant-garde" expressionism than by his admiration for Andersen and his taste for rigging up special effects (cf. the metro scene in *Marquitta*).

*La Petite Marchande* gave Renoir his first opportunity to make a film indoors with panchromatic film. In order to do

this, after consultation with the Philips Company, Renoir and Jean Bachelet decided to use supercharged lamps backed by metal reflectors. This technique—the forerunner of the modern floodlight—was to have an important future.

The film required the use of several special technical effects. Along with *Nana* it is probably the most interesting and instructive of Renoir's silent films. In spite of the avant-garde technique, however, *La Petite Marchande* has none of the expressionist dreaminess of some of the cinema of its day. Its technique is expressionist, but its style is impressionist. More precisely, it amused Renoir to superimpose impressionism on expressionism. The special effects were not created for the sake of fantasy but as ends in themselves, as games to amuse their inventor.

As for the style of acting and its general sensibility, they clearly derive directly from Chaplin. His influence is particularly noticeable in Catherine Hessling's acting and in the street scenes preceding Karen's dream.

ANDRÉ BAZIN

*The "silly lawsuit" resulted in an order enjoining the showing of the film, but Renoir remained in the good graces of the producers by agreeing to make the kinds of military comedy and pseudo-historical film which were popular at the time (Tire au Flanc and Le Bled).*

### *Tire au Flanc* (1929)

DIRECTOR: Jean Renoir

SCREENPLAY: adapted by Jean Renoir, Claude Heymann, and André

Cerf from the comedy by A. Mouézy-Eon and A. Sylvane

TITLES AND DRAWINGS: André Rigaud

ASSISTANT DIRECTORS: André Cerf and Lola Markovitch





Catherine Hessling in *Une Vie sans Joie*  
*Nana*



actors. "I was beginning to realize," he said, "that the movement of a scrubwoman, of a vegetable vendor or of a girl combing her hair before a mirror frequently had superb plastic value. I decided to make a study of French gesture as reflected in my father's paintings."

Renoir's silent work is dominated by his principal actress, Catherine Hessling. It was to set off her extraordinary personality that he made *Une Fille sans Joie* (produced and written by Renoir, directed by Albert Dieudonné), *La Fille de l'Eau*, *Nana*, *Charleston*, and *La Petite Marchande d'Allumettes*.

One cannot help but wonder how much of the credit for Jean Renoir's work belongs to this woman, who was both his wife and his favorite actress. It is true that this remarkable doll-faced girl with the charcoal circles under her great bright eyes, and the imperfect but strangely articulated body reminiscent of the figures in certain Impressionist paintings, was an extraordinary incarnation of femininity. She was a curious creature, at once mechanical and living, ethereal and sensuous. But it seems to me that Renoir saw her less as a director than as a painter. Enchanted by the unique beauty of her body and her face, he worried less about directing the *actress* in her dramatic role than he did about photographing the *woman* from every possible angle. This more or less conscious aim is clearly discernible, for example, in *Charleston*, whose thin and whimsical scenario is little more than a pretext for an incoherent but charming exhibition of Catherine Hessling.

It is possible, then, that this actress helped Jean Renoir to the self-discovery which is essential to his art at the same time that she slowed his passage from the simple photographing of actors to true movie making. In any case, it is with good reason that in the same article in *Le Point* Renoir set three films apart from the rest of his silent work: *Nana*, *La Petite Marchande d'Allumettes*, and *Tire au Flanc*.

It is common to consider *La Petite Marchande d'Allumettes* as a fairy tale and to classify it as a work of the French avant-garde. But if this judgment is correct historically, it is hardly so from an aesthetic point of view. More precisely, *La Petite*





Catherine Hessling in *La Petite Marchande d'Allumettes*

*Marchande d'Allumettes* represents an intrusion of Renoir's realism into the themes and techniques of the avant-garde. The source of the still radiant charm of this little film is apparent today: it is the very realism of Renoir's fantasy. It is not Andersen's tale but Renoir's fascination with technical effects—the almost sensual pleasure he derives from the originality of his fantastic images—which is the basis for the film's poetry. While normally one goes to great lengths to hide technical effects, to camouflage photographically the imperfection of sets and makeup, Renoir does not hesitate to reveal in close-up and sharp focus the actor beneath the wooden soldier's mask or the actress playing the porcelain doll. He goes so far as to emphasize the tricks of perspective and the differences in scale between the actors and the miniatures to draw on these incongruities as material for his imagery.

And the protagonists of the tale—Karen, the handsome officer, and the Hussar of Death—are not simply caricatures meant to terrify or reassure us. They assert themselves with an intimate clarity which endows them with a poignant human appeal. From this Scandinavian fairy tale, Renoir has made a tender and sensual, bittersweet poetic fantasy in which even Death becomes a friend and acquaintance.