

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Myth conceptions</b>
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Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1986 Jun 17
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Éléna et les hommes (Elena and her men), Renoir, Jean, 1956



# Myth Conceptions

BY J. HOBERMAN

**MONA LISA.** Directed by Neil Jordan. Written by Jordan and David Leland. Produced by Stephan Woolley and Patrick Cassavetti. Released by Island Pictures. At the Cinema I, opening June 13.

**ELENA AND HER MEN.** Directed and written by Jean Renoir. Produced by Louis Wipf. Released by Nicole Jouve Interama. At the Public Theater, through June 19.

**W**atching Bob Hoskins is waiting for the explosion. Short, squat, and scowling, he's the champagne of hot

Speaking of supernatural beings (and performers transcending their roles), the spell cast by an unfailingly gracious and sensual Ingrid Bergman keeps Jean Renoir's 1956 *Elena and Her Men*, currently at the Public Theater, from ever seeming an arid contrivance. Originally released here, mangled and dubbed, as *Paris Does Strange Things*, Renoir's set-bound, candy-colored vision of fin-de-siècle Paris is as overdetermined as a music box; Bergman carries the entire burden of animal spontaneity on her creamy shoulders.

When *Elena* opens, its eponymous heroine (Bergman), an impoverished Polish princess, is set to marry an elderly, somewhat ridiculous industrialist. But creature of impulse that she is, she

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plunges into the Bastille Day street celebrations honoring the popular General Rollan. Swept up by the delirious crowd, Elena meets the debonaire Count Henri (Mel Ferrer), who introduces her to Rollan (Jean Marais, with a cast-iron pompadour). Both men are smitten, as well they might be. Rollan, however, is diverted by his mistress, and so it's Henri (angular, spry, and a bit too cute) who takes Elena on a tour of Paris, or rather, Renoir's set—a veritable Coney Island, festooned with banners, strewn with confetti, bedecked with paper lanterns, and crammed with saucy street singers.

*Elena* is highly artificial; even the exteriors look like tinted postcards. The second act, set mainly at the industrialist's chalet, is like a cartoon remake of *Rules of the Game*, with servants and masters dodging sight gags in amorous hot pur-

suit. Here, Elena is recruited to persuade Rollan—who is roughly based on General Georges Boulanger, a would-be Bonaparte of the 1880s—to seize power. But Henri has his own plan, and this complex ruse, which, among other things, involves much orchestrated pandemonium and a handy gypsy camp (artistically arranged with Juliette Greco uncomfortably in the middle), ultimately gets Elena into his arms.

Renoir's credits announce *Elena* as “une fantaisie musicale” and the film is as full of vaudeville turns as its action is predicated on impromptu choruses. It looks like an operetta (and it jollies you along like one), but there's hardly any singing. Instead, the mood is set by the fanfares and flourishes of military brass, until, flanked by a stiff harlequin and a child angel, Greco thaws everyone out with a sexy dirge to *la nuit*. This most Apollonian treatment of human passion has the frou-frou stringency of Picasso's contemporaneous nymphs and minotaurs. *Elena* is so blithely old-fashioned it becomes avant-garde—its falseness is at once magisterial and disingenuous. “I do not think the modern world is ready to hold intimate conversation with Venus,” Renoir said of the film's initial failure.

But released during the Algerian War, *Elena* protests its antipolitics too much. Although the ostensive message is love conquering all, there's an often boisterous nationalism to the battle (as well as a definite foreshadowing of Charles De Gaulle). “If *Elena et les hommes* is ‘the’ French film par excellence,” Jean-Luc Godard wrote not long after the movie's release, “it is because it is the most intelligent of films.” L'amour, too, is given a particularly Gallic pedigree. Romantic Pole that Elena is, she's still the foreigner introduced to the superior culture, and this implied provincialism undermines Renoir's mythological pretensions. Since when does Venus need another judgment of Paris? ■