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JEAN RENOIR'S
"GRAND ILLUSION"
(La Grande Illusion)

Starring

JEAN GABIN

PIERRE FRESNAY

DITA PARLO

and ERICH VON STROHEIM

A RIALTO PICTURES RELEASE

PRESSBOOK

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NEW RESTORATION OF JEAN RENOIR'S
"GRAND ILLUSION"

STARRING JEAN GABIN & ERICH VON STROHEIM
OPENS THIS SUMMER AT NEW YORK'S LINCOLN PLAZA CINEMAS
A RIALTO PICTURES RELEASE

A restored version of *GRAND ILLUSION* ("La Grande Illusion"), Jean Renoir's 1937 anti-war masterpiece starring Jean Gabin, Pierre Fresnay, and Erich von Stroheim, will be released this summer by Rialto Pictures, opening in late July in New York, followed by other cities.

Acknowledged to be one of the greatest film classics of all time, and the first foreign film ever to be nominated for the Best Picture Academy Award, *GRAND ILLUSION* has been completely restored from its original camera negative, thought lost even by Renoir himself. A powerful indictment of war (set during WWI and based partly on the director's own experiences), it was declared "cinema enemy number one" by Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. The negative was confiscated by the Germans soon after they occupied France in 1940 and sent to Berlin's Reichsfilmarchiv, which in turn was seized by the Red Army in 1945. Although the *GRAND ILLUSION* negative was completely intact and safely stored, even Renoir didn't know of its existence: he had to assemble a new dupe negative of the film for its 1958 reissue.

In the mid-60s, the Cinematheque of Toulouse, France, reached a detente with its Soviet counterpart. The *GRAND ILLUSION* negative was part of a film exchange, but it sat on a shelf in Toulouse for decades before anyone noticed. The material was recently transferred to the French State Film Archive in Bois d'Arcy for inventory and new restoration work. After thirty years, the proper restoration work has now been undertaken by Canal+ Image in Paris, under the direction of Michel Rocher and Brigitte Dutray. The result is the most pictorially and aurally stunning version of the film ever seen in this country. Says Rialto's Bruce Goldstein, "It's very rare to be able to use an original camera negative in restoration work -- but for a film of this vintage and of such magnitude, it's nothing short of a miracle."

The new version also features new subtitles by Paris-based translator and film historian Lenny Borger. For the first time, American audiences will be able to fully savor the nuances of the film's language, including puns and songs.

GRAND ILLUSION is Rialto's third consecutive summer classic release, following Godard's *CONTEMPT* in 1997 and Fellini's *NIGHTS OF CABIRIA* last year. Other Rialto releases have included Michael Powell's *PEEPING TOM*, Maysles Films' *GREY GARDENS*, and Carol Reed's *THE THIRD MAN*, currently in theaters nationally for its 50th anniversary.

“GRAND ILLUSION”

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Director.....Jean Renoir
Screenplay.....Jean Renoir & Charles Spaak
Producers.....Albert Pinkevitch
& Frank Rollmer
Assistant director.....Jacques Becker
Technical advisor.....Carl Koch
Director of photography.....Christian Matras
Cameraman.....Claude Renoir
Art director.....Eugène Lourié
Sound.....Joseph de Bretagne
Costumes.....René Decrais
Editor.....Marguerite Houllé
Music.....Joseph Kosma

Shooting: February-April 1937

French premiere: June 8, 1937

U.S. premiere: September 12, 1938

Running time: 117 min.

35mm, b&w

aspect ratio: 1.33:1 (see pg. 5)

A RIALTO PICTURES RELEASE,

in association with The Criterion Collection & Janus Films

“GRAND ILLUSION”

CAST

Lieutenant Maréchal.....Jean Gabin
Captain de Boeldieu.....Pierre Fresnay
Captain Von Rauffenstein.....Erich von Stroheim
Rosenthal.....Marcel Dalio
Cartier, the actor.....Julien Carette
The engineer.....Gaston Modot
The schoolmaster.....Jean Dasté
Elsa.....Dita Parlo
Lotte, her daughter.....Miss Peters
Demolder, the Greek teacher.....Sylvain Itkine
Charpentier.....Georges Peclet
Arthur Krantz.....Karl Heil
British officer with the watch.....Jacques Becker
German M.P.Carl Koch

RESTORATION CREDITS

Restoration Supervision.....Michel Rocher
& Brigitte Dutray, Canal+ Image
Laboratory.....Cinarchives (Paris)
Translation & Subtitles (1999).....Lenny Borger
Pressbook written by.....Lenny Borger
Pressbook editor.....Bruce Goldstein

"GRAND ILLUSION"

LETTER FROM JEAN RENOIR TO THE PROJECTIONIST

The following letter was inserted into the cans of Grand Illusion during its 1958 reissue. Widescreen had been introduced earlier in the decade and older films were often projected in that format, without any regard for their actual ratio.

Dear Sir,

This is an appeal from one technician to another. You're going to project my *Grand Illusion*. The film still wears well, despite its advanced age: it is 22 years old. But it has retained a few features that were the norm at the time it was made in 1936. One of them is that it was conceived for a screen with an aspect ratio of 1.33:1. I composed each frame to fill this space and to leave nothing blank. At times there is a great deal of detail at the top or bottom of the frame. By projecting my film on a screen with wider dimensions, you risk eliminating these details which I feel are important and at the same time partially cutting off the characters' heads which strikes me as unsightly.

I am asking you to help me present my work in the best possible conditions, by which I mean: in the correct format.

Thanking you in advance,

With best regards,

JEAN RENOIR

“GRAND ILLUSION”

AWARDS & CITATIONS

- ☐ **Best Artistic Ensemble, Venice Film Festival, 1937***
- ☐ **Best Foreign Film, National Board of Review Awards, 1938**
- ☐ **Best Foreign Film, New York Film Critics Awards, 1938**
- ☐ **Academy Award Nominee, Best Picture, 1938**
(first foreign film to receive “Best Picture” nomination)
- ☐ **Ten Best Films of All Time, Directors' Choice, World Film and Fine Arts Festival of Belgium, 1952**
- 4th place (tied with *City Lights* and *Le Million*)
- ☐ **Twelve Best Films of All Time, Brussels World Fair, 1958**
- 5th place
- ☐ **100 Best Films of All Time**
(centenary referendum organized by the Cinémathèque Québécoise, 1995)
- 13th place
- ☐ **2nd Best French Film of All Time***
(industry referendum organized by the French Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1978)
*after *Les Enfants du Paradis*
- ☐ **Selected by the British Film Institute as one of the 350 greatest film classics of all time, 1998**

*German pressure kept *La Grande Illusion* from being awarded the Grand Prize at Venice (despite being a favorite film of Mussolini's); this is thought to be one of the major reasons the French began their own film festival -- in Cannes.

"GRAND ILLUSION"

RAIDERS OF THE LOST CAMERA NEGATIVE

Unlike *The Rules of the Game*, Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion* was never considered a lost or mutilated film. But the extraordinary odyssey of its original camera negative*, and its resuscitation more than fifty years after it was believed lost forever, spotlights a fascinating sidebar of film history: the fate of films in occupied Europe during and after World War II.

Grand Illusion was one of countless films confiscated by German occupying forces in France during World War II. Ironically, in seizing this and other prints and negatives from distributors and laboratories in and around Paris, the Germans saved many of them from certain destruction. In 1942, an Allied raid destroyed one of the leading Paris laboratories outside Paris -- where, it was long believed, the master negative for Renoir's film had been stored. Its presumed loss was the first of many illusions about the fate of *La Grande Illusion*.

Doubtless, *Grand Illusion* was one of the first films seized by the Germans shortly after they entered Paris. The Propaganda-Abteilung had banned it as early as October 1, 1940. A month later, they began ordering film companies to submit itemized lists of their holdings, apparently intending to destroy particular titles that had outraged Nazi sensibilities. *Grand Illusion* was at the top of the list; Goebbels had condemned it as "Cinematic Public Enemy No. 1".

Film archive pioneer Henri Langlois is usually cited as the man who saved thousands of films from the grasp of the Nazis, stashing them away in hideouts around the country and thus enriching the collection of the young Cinémathèque Française. Ironically, Langlois's invaluable salvage mission was made possible by a Nazi -- Dr Frank Hensel, co-founder (and first president) of the International Film Archive Federation, created in 1938. Four years earlier, in 1934, he had been personally appointed by Goebbels to head the powerful German Reichsfilmarchiv (making it the world's second film archive, after the Svenska Filmsamfundet in Stockholm).

A member of the Nazi Party and a major in the occupying army, Hensel, as much a film buff as Goebbels, had maintained a good relationship with Langlois. He undoubtedly risked his neck by requisitioning the cellars of the Palais de Chaillot (the future home of the Cinémathèque Française) so that Langlois and his colleagues could safeguard whatever films they could round up. Hensel is also said to have tipped off Langlois about impending film confiscations so that he could get there first. In their biography of Langlois, Georges Langlois (the subject's younger brother) and Glenn Myrent write: "Hensel's assistance, which sometimes flirted along the edges of outright complicity, constitutes a rare phenomenon in the annals of collaboration, since in this case the occupier was collaborating for the benefit of the occupied."

**camera negative*: the negative that actually goes through the camera as a film is being shot. As this is the first generation of a film, prints made from it are of the highest possible quality. In the old days, prints were struck directly from the camera negative, often wearing them out. The existence of a camera negative for a great classic like *Grand Illusion* is very rare.

Hensel was no doubt instrumental in insuring that those films confiscated by German authorities were not destroyed but instead were shipped back to Berlin to sit out the remainder of the war in the Reichsfilmarchiv vaults. But the odyssey of *La Grande Illusion* -- like that of its POW heroes, shuttled from camp to camp -- was to continue when the Allies arrived in Berlin in 1945 and partitioned the city. The Reichsfilmarchiv happened to be in what was designated the Russian zone, and soon truckload upon truckload of film cans -- which included a major chunk of the German film heritage -- were rolling back to Moscow. This military plunder was to form the basis of the Soviet Gosfilmofond, reputed to this day to be the world's richest film archive. No wonder!

The loss of the master negative, however, didn't stop *La Grande Illusion* from being re-released in France in August 1946 -- with a number of cuts imposed by the censors, concerned about reactions from audiences who were just emerging from four bitter years under the German boot. What materials were used for the reissue prints? This has never been disclosed.

In the meantime, a duplicate negative -- presumably a generation or two removed from the camera negative -- mysteriously turned up in Munich, discovered by a captain in the American Army Film Service. Blocked because of a dispute over the rights to the film, the material was finally released to French authorities -- who promptly lost it!

In 1952, Renoir, then shooting *The Golden Coach* in Italy, learned of the bankruptcy of *Grand Illusion*'s original production company and embarked on long negotiations to retrieve the rights. With the Munich negative apparently lost for good, Renoir had no choice but to finance the making of a new master collated from French, German and American dupes, none of them complete. Renoir assigned the task to a young editor, Renée Lichtig, who had recently assisted Erich Von Stroheim in reconstituting a sound version of his 1928 silent classic, *The Wedding March*. Lichtig spent several long, painstaking months working on the reconstitution when the Cinémathèque Française suddenly announced a momentous discovery: a fine grain positive (an unprojectable, but high quality print from which a dupe negative can be made). Where did it come from? In a trailer shot specially for the film's 1958 re-issue, Renoir cited the source as... the Munich negative lost by the French authorities 12 years earlier! But how did material once described as a negative become a fine grain? And how did it make its way to the Cinémathèque? These questions will remain some of the many unsolved enigmas of that strange, marvelous and troubled Aladdin's cave of celluloid.

As for the original camera negative, it was repatriated in the mid-60s as part of a film exchange between the Gosfilmofond and the young Cinémathèque of Toulouse. Once again, the nitrate negative survived destruction -- something of a miracle, since the Soviet archives, wary of retaining highly unstable nitrate film in its vaults, almost always destroyed their nitrate originals after copying them onto safety stock.

The *Grand Illusion* negative was part of a film shipment from Moscow that included new prints of classic films collected over the decades by the Soviets -- Russian silent films as well as American avant-garde films and even Hollywood musicals. Since *La Grande Illusion* was no longer considered a lost or mutilated film, it's not surprising that no one at the under-financed Toulouse cinémathèque took the trouble to examine the material more closely. It wasn't until the early 90s, when the archive's nitrate collection was gradually transferred to the state-of-the-art French Film Archives at Bois d'Arcy for inventory and preservation that the 50 nondescript cans of picture and sound negative were certified as being the real thing: the original camera negative of Jean Renoir's most beloved film.

"GRAND ILLUSION"

PRODUCTION HISTORY

The seeds of what was to become *Grand Illusion* were planted late in 1934, while Renoir was shooting *Toni* in Provence under the auspices of Marcel Pagnol. Renoir, who had been a reconnaissance pilot during the first World War, chanced upon an old comrade, Armand Pinsard, a flying ace who had once saved his life. Pinsard, now a general commanding the nearby Istres military base, regaled Renoir with tales of his many escapes from German POW camps. "The story of his escapes struck me as a good springboard for an adventure film," Renoir would later write. "I noted down the details that I found most typical and filed them away with the intention of making a film."

Pinsard no doubt rehashed for Renoir what he had related 17 years earlier for an aviation magazine in 1917: his reconnaissance mission with an aristocratic officer, during which they were forced down and captured by the Germans; his attempts to escape, his 35 days in solitary confinement, his transfers from camp to camp in Germany, his successful escape from a fortress with a fellow officer, and how they walked 200 miles to the Swiss border armed only with supplies and a map. "It is clear," writes Renoir scholar Olivier Curchod, "how Pinsard's adventures provided both the stimulus and the framework for *La Grande Illusion*."

(Renoir's interest in doing a war film may also have been piqued by the fact that director Anatole Litvak was also in Istres about this time shooting scenes for *L'Equipage*, the first sound version of Joseph Kessel's bestselling novel about fighter pilots in the Great War, previously filmed as a silent by Maurice Tourneur in 1928. The mid-30s in France saw a brief vogue for aviation films.)

When Renoir finally returned to his "notes" -- probably in the fall of 1935 -- he enlisted the talents of the Belgian-born scriptwriter Charles Spaak. Spaak helped him elaborate the story and flesh out characterizations, each enriching the material with memories of his own: Renoir provided such touches as the discussion of changing women's fashions and Pierre Fresnay's white gloves; Spaak injected an incident involving his politician brother, Paul-Henri Spaak, who as a POW had caused an uproar by singing the Belgian national anthem during a camp theatrical. They also conducted research with war veteran associations to ensure maximum authenticity.

Renoir and Spaak did the usual rounds of production companies with a treatment, initially entitled "Captain Maréchal's Escapes." Though in retrospect Renoir would claim he knocked on doors for three years, to no avail, in fact he got an affirmative response during the winter of 1935-36 from Russian émigré producer Alexandre Kamenka, whose Films Albatros had been a leading hub of independent production in the 20s. But there were no takers among distributors for a war film devoid of romantic interest (in the original treatment, the two escaped POWs' contact with the German peasant woman was limited to a brief sexual liaison). Unable to find financing, Renoir and Spaak went on to fulfill their contract to Kamenka by making *The Lower Depths*, a stylistically uneasy transposition of Maxim Gorky's seminal play. Despairing of finding a producer for *La Grande Illusion*, Renoir even offered to swap scripts with Julien Duvivier, with whom Spaak had just written *La Belle Equipe*, a populist drama that would have perfectly suited Renoir, then close

to the Communist Party. (Years later, Renoir would deny this, though Spaak would continue to recall the anecdote and Duvivier's blunt reply.)

But it was Jean Gabin's unswerving commitment that finally brought *Grand Illusion* to the starting block. Gabin, co-starring with Louis Juvet in *The Lower Depths*, had been on the rise since the success of Duvivier's *Marie Chapdeleine* and *La Bandera* -- and the same director's *Pépé le Moko* (shot after *Lower Depths*) was about to clinch his popularity. A young production and distribution company, R.A.C., which had recently produced *Jenny*, Marcel Carné's debut feature, finally retrieved the project and succeeded in obtaining the necessary backing.

Right up to the start of principal photography, the screenplay, and the casting with it, continued to evolve. The role of the haughty, aristocratic staff officer de Boeldieu was offered in turn to Louis Juvet (who had another commitment) and Pierre-Richard Willm (who turned it down), before finding its perfect embodiment in Pierre Fresnay -- it proved to be one of his supreme screen performances. In terms of wardrobe, Fresnay didn't really have to change, since he had just worn the same captain's uniform in G. W. Pabst's *Mademoiselle Docteur*. The title role of that same wartime spy melodrama was played by the diminutive German actress Dita Parlo, whom Renoir -- surely remembering her radiant performance as the bargeman's bride in Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* -- cast as the German widow. And speaking of costumes, Renoir took his own French Flying Corps uniform out of mothballs for Gabin to wear. (The trailer for Renoir's 1958 "re-constructon" consisted partly of Renoir sitting at a desk, showing pictures of his young self in that uniform.)

Another major role transformation was that of the fellow POW with whom Maréchal escapes from the fortress. Originally an intellectual, he became the Jewish officer, Rosenthal; it remains one of the most daring characterizations in the French cinema of the 30s, a decade fraught with anti-Semitism and xenophobia (which reached into the movie industry). Renoir's casting of Marcel Dalio (né Marcel Blauschild), then typecast in roles of informers and other sleazy types of dubious nationality, was a brilliant choice. The part was to lead directly to Dalio's role in *Rules of the Game*, as the weak-willed aristocrat La Chesnaye (whose foreign grandfather is a certain "Rosenthal!"); *Grand Illusion* also was no doubt responsible for Dalio later being cast as the croupier in *Casablanca* (which also stole *Grand Illusion*'s defiant singing of *La Marseillaise* as a key dramatic moment).

The film's legendary eleventh-hour modification was the casting of Erich Von Stroheim as the German officer, Von Rauffenstein. Von Stroheim had just been imported from Hollywood (where he had been reduced to writing treatments for programmers) by producers Raymond and Robert Hakim to play a Prussian spy master opposite Edwige Feuillère's patriotic French double agent in yet another Great War espionage thriller, *Marthe Richard, au Service de la France*. In their now-completed shooting script, Renoir and Spaak had only sketched the German airfield officer of the opening scenes and fortress commandant as two separate, incidental roles (with Renoir's brother, Pierre, playing the latter). When Renoir was offered the chance of using Von Stroheim, one of his longtime personal gods, he jumped at the opportunity: with shooting only days away, he feverishly overhauled the script with Spaak, his assistant Jacques Becker and German technical advisor Carl Koch. Von Stroheim contributed largely to the characterization of Von Rauffenstein: notably the neck brace (which he had used for various characters in his own films) and assorted props -- and, some think, even the geranium (a tribute to Von Stroheim's mentor, D. W. Griffith, who placed a "hopeful geranium" in Mae Marsh's room in *Intolerance*).

Shooting began with a month of exteriors in Alsace in February 1937, notably in the barracks at Colmar at the castle at Haut-Koenigsbourg, where the snow and bitter cold led to further script revisions. Though Renoir's penchant for improvisation is largely a myth invented by his New Wave admirers -- and exploded by the recent unearthing of five hours of dailies of *Une Partie de Campagne* (*A Day in the Country*), where we find Renoir time and again insisting that the actors speak his dialogue as written -- his openness to suggestions by his entourage and adaptability in making the most of happy accidents is nowhere more evident than in *La Grande Illusion*. The famous scene in the mountains when Maréchal and Rosenthal quarrel bitterly was the result of revisions made during the shooting: the sequence as originally written -- the two fugitives engaging in effusions of comradely sentiment, in the end failing to muster the courage to separate -- was thought psychologically unconvincing.

Interestingly, in their respective memoirs years later, Renoir, Dalio and even script-girl Françoise Giroud all claimed authorship of the famous rewrite. So much for the "politique des auteurs."

La Grande Illusion opened in Paris on June 9, 1937 (a mere two months after the end of principal photography) and was an immediate critical and commercial success, both at home and abroad (especially in the U.S., despite *twenty-two* minutes of cuts). It was the only time in Renoir's career when he enjoyed such unanimous acclaim, winning praise from both the political left and right (though of course it outraged such rabid fascists as Ferdinand-Louis Céline and Joseph Goebbels). No doubt its unflagging popularity also irked later Renoir enthusiasts who tended to downgrade it in favor of *The Rules of the Game*, that most magnificent of *films maudits*.

This 1999 revival is dedicated to the notion that, 62 years later, *Grand Illusion* still ranks among the supreme achievements of the art of film.

"GRAND ILLUSION"

THE TITLE

Like a number of other classic European film titles (*Ladri di Bicicletta*, *Les Enfants du Paradis*, *Les 400 Coups*, etc.*), *La Grande Illusion* has long been known in the United States under an inaccurate English-language title (in England, it has always been known by its French title). Ideally, *Grand Illusion* should be *The Great Illusion*. As critics pointed out at the time of film's 1937 release, the title was apparently inspired by a famous essay called "The Great Illusion," by British internationalist and economist Norman Angell. First published in 1909 as "Europe's Optical Illusion" and expanded the following year under its more famous title, Angell's book, which argued that the common economic interests of nations made war futile, was translated into 25 languages and sold some two million copies. Its popularity endured well into the 1930s in France.

But to Americans, at least, *Grand Illusion* as a film title is now part of 20th century cultural history. After much soul searching -- and despite a completely new translation for its 1999 restoration -- it has been decided to retain the title by which Renoir's grand humanist classic has been hailed here for the past 60 years. With apologies to the French Academy....

*Anyone who has seen de Sica's *Ladri di Bicicletta* knows that its literal translation (and British title), *Bicycle Thieves*, is more accurate than its famous American title, *The Bicycle Thief*.

For British audiences anyway, *Les Enfants du Paradis* should have been translated as *Children of the Gods* -- the "Gods" being the British equivalent of the French "paradis" -- i.e., the gallery in a theater with the cheapest seats.

Truffaut's *Les 400 Coups* should be translated as *Wild Oats* -- the title that appeared on the original American release prints subtitled by Noelle Gilmore, an ace subtitler and dubber. The film's original distributor didn't think much of her title and stuck to *The 400 Blows* -- leading the public and some critics to believe it had something to do with corporal punishment.

“GRAND ILLUSION”

MY FIRST MEETING WITH RENOIR

by Erich Von Stroheim

Of all the film directors I have met in the course of my checkered career, I have admired a few and worshipped one. I worshipped D. W. Griffith the way that someone can worship the man who has taught him everything, who has lavished the treasures of genius on him without holding back. He was the greatest of his day. This is not a personal opinion; all those who ever worked for him agree with me. But there was another man for whom I felt, from the very first moment on, an irresistible sympathy, and that was Jean Renoir.

I must admit that before meeting him, I was on my guard; I had just had several unfortunate experiences with American colleagues and had had to leave that country as well as give up my job.

There had already been a lot of repercussions, the result of petty jealousies or even full-scale hatreds. So I was very nervous at the prospect of meeting my future director. I waited for him in the partly-furnished office, where the company backing *La Grande Illusion* had arranged for us to meet. I heard footsteps in the corridor, the door opened. A heavily-built man in baggy clothing was standing in the doorway. I could not describe his face; I will only say that I was struck by his eyes. Not that they were beautiful, but that they were incredibly blue and sharp with intelligence. Before I knew it, he had walked up to me and had kissed me firmly on my cheeks. As a rule I am not overfond of such demonstrations of affection. In fact, I loathe even a handshake with a member of my own sex. Yet I returned this unexpected show of friendliness without the least hesitation.

Then, Renoir caught me by the shoulder and held me at arm's length to take a better look at me. Finally, never taking his eyes off me, he told me in German how much he liked my past work and how glad he was that I was going to work with him -- he said “with” not “for” him. There was no need to beat about the bush; I understood that all would go well. The only thing that upset me was that I could not return his compliment, for, alas, I had not seen any of his films. But I warmly expressed my delight at working for him.

We began chatting and I noticed with pleasure that he was very familiar with my films; he even remembered some of them much more clearly than I did, recalling things in them that I had completely forgotten. But we were there mainly to talk about *La Grande Illusion* and the part I was going to play. I had been sent a first, hasty draft of the script which I had read, and -- being incorrigible -- I began making a few hesitant suggestions. Now that I knew what sort of man Jean Renoir was, I could speak up without fear. That man was incapable of taking offense at what more narrow-minded souls would have considered

crimes of impertinence. I could talk as openly as to a brother, without hedging. And he was not stalling for time, waiting for a future opportunity to say more or less a veiled "no" to my overtures. He examined the subject we were discussing with an enthusiasm that brought tears to my eyes. He had given me a pleasure which I had forgotten for some years.

All the work I did with Renoir turned out to be as friendly as that first meeting. I have never met a man with greater self-control. I saw him at Upper Koenigsburg while he was shooting the most important scenes of *La Grande Illusion*. Everything seemed to be against him, even God, for it began to snow in the middle of a scene – it snowed for so long that Renoir had to change the film script in order to justify this untimely snowfall.

For five days and five nights, Renoir worked without a break. On the sixth day, the sun came out and, in less than an hour, the snow melted. An impressive amount of film was thus suddenly rendered useless. Renoir did not bat an eyelash. He calmly went about arranging for some plaster, naphthaline and boric acid to be sent over, then settled down to wait for its arrival.

He is incredibly patient. Without ever raising his voice, he asks over and over again until he gets what he wants. His politeness towards everyone he works with was a source of endless amazement to me, especially as I personally cannot say three words in succession without swearing in whatever language I am using.

Jean Renoir could have been an excellent diplomat as well, for he has more finesse and ability in his little finger than any professional has in what he calls his brains.

"GRAND ILLUSION"

BIOGRAPHIES

JEAN GABIN (Captain Maréchal)

Born in 1904, Gabin was the child of music hall artists. At age 18 he followed in their footsteps, becoming a music hall and operetta star, and played leading man to the legendary Mistinguett. He continued to sing into his early film career, even when cast as the young Parisian street tough (as in Anatole Litvak's neglected 1932 minor masterpiece, *Coeur de Lilas*). Julien Duvivier was the first to recognize his full dramatic potential and cast him in *La Bandera* (1935), *La Belle Equipe* (1935) and *Pépé Le Moko* (1936), three films that laid the foundation for the Gabin myth of the tragic working-class (or déclassé) hero. Gabin's talents were magnified by several other great French directors of the time: Renoir, Jean Grémillon and Marcel Carné, whose pre-war masterpieces *Quai des Brumes* and *Le Jour se lève* owe as much to Gabin's performances as they do to Jacques Prévert's screenplays for their lasting power and poignancy. With the war and the Occupation, Gabin went into exile in the United States where he made two undistinguished Hollywood films (*Moontide* and *The Imposter*) before returning home with the Free French forces. His post-war career got off to a rocky start when he and his then-companion Marlene Dietrich abandoned Marcel Carné's *Les Portes de la Nuit*, but he successfully negotiated his eventual screen gentrification, moving away from doomed working class heroes to embody middle-class patriarchs and gentlemen gangsters. Though increasingly less selective about his roles and directors, Gabin racked up some distinguished credits in the 50s that included Max Ophüls' *Le Plaisir* (1952), Jacques Becker's *Touchez Pas au Grisbi* (1954), Duvivier's *Voici les Temps des Assassins* (1955) and Claude Autant-Lara's *La Traversée de Paris* (1956) and *En Cas de Malheur* (1959). He continued to make films right up to his death in 1976.

PIERRE FRESNAY (Captain de Boeldieu)

Born Pierre Laudenbach in Paris in 1897, Fresnay went from the Conservatoire to the Comédie Française at the age of 17 (about which time he also made his screen debut in a propaganda film). He slammed the door on the Comédie in 1927 and soon became one of the leading actors of the Paris commercial stage, his perfect command of English allowing him to appear periodically abroad (he replaced Noel Coward in *Conversation Piece* and played a small role in Hitchcock's first version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*). Though he acted in a handful of silent serials and melodramas, he only came into his own as a film presence with the talkies. His breakthrough film was Paramount's skillfully canned version of Marcel Pagnol's hit play *Marius* (1931) in which he recreated the title role he had acted on the stage -- he repeated the part in *Fanny* (1932) and *César* (1936). Though his chief passions remained the theatre and his second wife, singer-actress Yvonne Printemps, Fresnay gave the French cinema a number of other masterly, burnished performances: most famously the provincial doctor-abortionist in H. G. Clouzot's dark Occupation masterpiece, *Le Corbeau* (1943). His post-war screen career, freighted with films of increasing mediocrity, was briefly illuminated by his portrayal of French ecclesiastic Vincent de Paul in Maurice Cloche's *Monsieur Vincent*, for which he was honored at the 1947 Venice Film Festival. Some of his finest

stage work has been captured in French TV productions of the 60s, notably his production of Diderot's Rameau's *Nephew* (which thrilled Alec Guinness, who referred to him as "my favourite actor"). He died in 1975.

ERICH VON STROHEIM (Captain Von Rauffenstein)

Though Von Stroheim's directing work has long been the stuff of legend and needs no recapping here, his second career, as an actor in French movies, remains little known and sadly undervalued. Called to Paris late in 1936 to play the hateful Hun role in Raymond Bernard's spy thriller, *Marthe Richard*, Von Stroheim found himself in demand after the success of *La Grande Illusion*, remaining in France until the war and racking up no less than 16 films in less than four years. His first film after Renoir's was Pierre Chenal's thriller, *L'Alibi*, remembered for its sardonic cat-and-mouse repartee between Von Stroheim's wily murderer and Louis Jouvet's no less cagey detective. After a brief stint in London to appear in Edmond Greville's near-instant remake of G. W. Pabst's thriller, *Mademoiselle Docteur*, Von Stroheim continued to embody an array of sinister foreigners in films that increasingly reflected the anxious tenor of the times. But there were some light-hearted asides, such as Christian Jaque's charming boarding school comedy-mystery, *Les Disparus de Saint-Agil* (1938), in which he played a taciturn teacher with a (well-hidden) heart of gold. Among Stroheim's last pre-war films was Jean Delannoy's exotic melodrama, *Macao, l'Enfer du Jeu* -- during the Occupation, all of his scenes were re-shot with Pierre Renoir (whom Stroheim had replaced in *La Grande Illusion*!) so that the film could be exhibited. After the war, Stroheim returned to France to appear in Pierre Chenal's thriller *La Foire aux chimères*, a critical and commercial failure that has been favorably reevaluated in recent years, especially because of Stroheim's performance. Stroheim appeared in some 10 other French films of little distinction before his death near Paris in 1957.

(biographies continued next page)

MARCEL DALIO (Rosenthal)

Born Marcel Blauschild in Paris in 1899, Dalio, the son of Romanian Jewish immigrants, enjoyed a busy career in the theater, cabaret and music hall before making a modest film debut in the early 30s, notably in Robert Bresson's recently rediscovered debut comedy (!), *Les Affaires Publiques*. Apart from his two rightly famous roles in Renoir's *Grand Illusion* and *Rules of the Game*, he was usually typecast as sinister Semites and foreigners, as in Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* and Robert Siodmak's *Mollenard*. Heeding Renoir's lesson, Pierre Chenal gave him one of his rare starring roles in *La Maison du Maltais*, in which he played an Arab vagabond and storyteller who falls in love with a prostitute. Emigrating to the U.S. in 1940, Dalio began a second career silhouetting stereotypical foreigners in dozens of Hollywood films, among them *Shanghai Gesture*, *The Song of Bernadette*, *To Have and Have Not* -- and, most famously, as the croupier in *Casablanca* (he was so associated with the film, in fact, that he was promoted to Claude Rains' role of Captain Renault in the short-lived tv series of the 1950s). After the war he shuttled between Hollywood and Paris without ever finding a role to match the depth and humanity of those Renoir gave him. He made his last film in 1980 and died in 1983.

JULIEN CARETTE (Cartier, the actor)

One of the most popular comic feature players of the French cinema, Carette (born in 1897) came to the cinema from the stage. Like Dalio, he enjoyed his best roles under Renoir's direction: after *Grand Illusion*, Renoir gave him a small role in *La Marseillaise*, then two pivotal parts in *La Bête Humaine* and *Rules of the Game*. Though he entertained ambitions of being a classical stage actor, Carette only found his niche when he adopted the cocky Parisian drawl that would become his signature, lighting up the most mediocre of commercial film comedies. After Renoir, it was Claude Autant-Lara who gave him some of his best roles in *Lettres d'Amour*, *Sylvie et le Fantôme*, *Occupe-toi d'Amélie* and *L'Auberge Rouge*.

DITA PARLO (Elsa)

Born Grethe Kornstaedt in Stettin, Germany, in 1906, Parlo began her career as a contract player at UFA and quickly rose to prominence in such late silent superproductions as Viacheslav Tourjansky's *Manolescu* and Julien Duvivier's *Au bonheur des dames*. After an abortive attempt to start a Hollywood career, Parlo returned to Europe where she was chosen by Jean Vigo to play opposite Michel Simon and Jean Dasté in *L'Atalante*. She remained in France until the war, appearing in a dozen other films, including G. W. Pabst's *Mademoiselle Docteur*, in which she co-starred with Pierre Fresnay. Arrested as an alien and deported to Germany in 1940, Parlo never recovered her erstwhile popularity and made only a handful of films after the war. In all, a sad career, but thanks to Vigo and Renoir, her face and presence are poignant, iconic fixtures of the classical cinema.

CHARLES SPAAK (co-screenwriter)

With Jacques Prévert, Henri Jeanson, and Bernard Zimmer, Spaak was one of the great French screenwriters. Born in Brussels in 1903, Spaak came to Paris in the late 20s and found work as secretary to his compatriot, Jacques Feyder, under whose aegis he began writing scripts. His filmography reads like a Who's Who of French cinema: he was associated with some of Feyder's best films (*Le Grand Jeu* and *La Kermesse Héroïque*), Duvivier (*La Bandera*, *La Belle Equipe* and *La Fin du Jour*), Jean Grémillon (*Remorques* and *Le Ciel à Vous*), Robert Siodmak (*Mollenard*), etc. His other films with Renoir included *The Lower Depths* and *Le Caporal épinglé*. In the postwar period, Spaak worked prominently with André Cayatte. The New Wave critics singled Spaak out as one of the chief purveyors of the "Qualité française" they so noisily denigrated. Truffaut attempted to play down Spaak's contribution to *La Grande Illusion*, although a new generation of Renoir scholars has proven his central role in that film's gestation.

CHRISTIAN MATRAS (director of photography)

Trained as a newsreel cameraman in the late 20s, Matras (born in 1903) evolved into one of France's most stylish lighting cameramen. A prolific professional, Matras was a masterly portraitist who was often requested by the top stars in the industry. Matras did his finest work for Max Ophuls, demonstrating an extraordinary palette of blacks and whites in such classics as *La Ronde*, *Le Plaisir*, *Madame De...* and *Lola Montes*. Other directors whom Matras worked regularly with include Pierre Chenal, Julien Duvivier, Jean Delannoy, Jean Cocteau, and Christian-Jaque, with whom Matras shot several of the earliest French color films. His magnificent work on *La Grande Illusion*, his only collaboration with Renoir, is splendidly showcased in this new print made directly from the original camera negative.

EUGENE LOURIE (production designer)

Trained as a painter, Eugène Lourié belonged to a generation of brilliant Russian émigré artists who revolutionized set and costume design in French films of the 20s and 30s. Born in 1905, he began working as a full-fledged art director in France in 1934. His long collaboration with Renoir (eight films, from *The Lower Depths* to *The River*) remains his chief claim to fame: in each film, Lourié responded to Renoir's esthetic needs with keen understanding, vigor and imagination, as can be seen in his superb professional memoir, *My Work in Films*. His pre-war credits also include films for Max Ophuls, Pierre Chenal and Marcel L'Herbier. He emigrated to the U.S. in 1940, where he continued to work as a production designer and direct such now-classic monster movies as *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and *Gorgo*.

"GRAND ILLUSION"

SYNOPSIS

In the early weeks of 1916 a French fighter plane is shot down during a reconnaissance mission over German territory. Aboard are Lieutenant Maréchal (Jean Gabin), a mechanic in civilian life, and Captain de Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay), an aristocratic career officer. While waiting for them to be picked up by military police, Captain von Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim), the Junker who shot them down, invites them to lunch in the officer's mess.

Transferred to the POW officers' camp at Hallbach, Boeldieu and Maréchal are assigned to room with four fellow officers: Cartier (Julien Carette), a music hall performer, Rosenthal (Marcel Dalio), a wealthy, Jewish couturier, a land surveyance engineer (Gaston Modot), and a provincial schoolteacher (Jean Dasté). Despite the wide difference in their backgrounds, the men get along well, united by a common desire to escape and return to the fray and sustained by the food parcels Rosenthal receives from his parents. Their nighttime activities are devoted to digging a tunnel; during the day they prepare the upcoming camp theatrical which Cartier will host -- this despite the news of a major German victory at Verdun which has sapped the POWs' morale. During the show, Maréchal stops the performance to announce that the French have retaken the Douaumont fortress at Verdun and the prisoners rise to sing *La Marseillaise*. Maréchal is punished with solitary confinement. When he returns to the barracks weeks later, it is to find his colleagues preparing to escape through the now-finished tunnel. But before they can make their move, the officers are transferred to a new camp.

After a series of transfers and string of escape attempts, Maréchal and Boeldieu are sent to the "escape-proof" fortress at Wintersborn, where they are reunited with Rosenthal. The commandant is none other than Rauffenstein, who, wounded in action -- his head now in a neck brace and white gloves hiding his scarred hands -- has been assigned to a behind-the-lines desk job running the fortress. Embittered and bored, Rauffenstein attempts to strike up a friendship with de Boeldieu by appealing to their class affinities. But it is Boeldieu who organizes an elaborate diversion to cover an escape attempt by the working-class Maréchal and the Jew Rosenthal, whose friendship has deepened with time. Playing the decoy, Boeldieu commits the ultimate sacrifice for his comrades when he is fatally shot down by the reluctant Rauffenstein.

Fighting exhaustion, cold and hunger, Maréchal and Rosenthal painfully make their way through the mountains toward the Swiss border. Slowed down by Rosenthal's sprained ankle, the two men argue and make to separate, but the strength of their friendship keeps them together. They find temporary refuge at the farm of a German peasant, Elsa (Dita Parlo), whose husband and brothers have all died at the front. Maréchal and the lonely Elsa becomes lovers. But when Rosenthal's ankle heals, it is time for the two men to pursue their road. Maréchal promises Elsa he will come back for her after the war. They finally reach the frontier, just missing being captured by a German patrol, they cross the border into Switzerland, freedom... and a return to the war.