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french cancan

by Jean Renoir

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FRENCH CAN CAN

CREDITS

Directed by Jean Renoir
Written by Jean Renoir/Andre Paul Antoine
Photographed by Boris Lewin
Music Georges Van Parys
Set Design Max Douy
Costumes Rosine Delamore
Director of Production Louis Wipf
Originally filmed in Technicolor / Running time 105 mins.

Jean Gabin: Danglard
Francoise Arnoul: Nini
Maria Felix: La Belle Abbess
Jean Roger Caussimon: Baron Walter
Max Dalban: patron de la Reine Blanche
Dora Doll: La Genisse
Gaston Modot: servant of Danglard
Jean Paredes: Coudrier
Also:
France Roche
Annik Morice
Jacques Jouaneau
Michele Nadal
Sylvine Delannoy
Anne-Marie Mersen

Jean-Marc Tennberg: Bidon
Valentine Tessier: Olympe
Franco Pastorino: Paulo
Lydia Johnson: Guibole
Gianni Esposito: le Prince
Anna Amendola: Arlette Vibert
Philippe Clay: Casimir
Michele Philippe: Eleanore

Albert Remy
Michel Piccoli
Patachou
Andre Claveau
Edith Piaf
Jean Raymond

FRENCH CANCAN

(1954) by Jean RENOIR

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This greatest of Renoir's late masterpieces deals in reconciliation, reunion, recreation, and recycling - the last being the most important of all. An old dance, the CANCAN, is revived at an old Montmartre night-club being rebuilt as the Moulin Rouge. In this enterprise nothing will be lost. The impresario Danglard will find his fortunes restored. La Génisse, the ancient dance coach, will have a new career - and her legs will be relimbered. Danglard's lively protégé Nini will discover a better job in Cancan dancing than in her mother's laundry. But his previous protégé, the tempestuous belle Abbessse will gain by marrying Danglard's backer, Baron Walter, who happily stands to make many times Danglard's profit from the Moulin Rouge. Nini's moody jilted boyfriend, Paulo, will find comfort in the arms of Nini's best friend. And only the pensive, gentle, young Prince Alexandre, having failed in the suicide he attempted for the love of Nini, will be left with nothing but fond memories and regrets. For Alexandre is the giver - the most obliging deus ex machina, when things look darkest, he simply buys the Moulin Rouge and gives it to Nini - and in FRENCH CANCAN the takers prosper. When Danglard, sick and flat broke, borrows something from a creditor to give alms to the homeless old beggar women, Prunelle, she cackles and calls him a Prince. She understands the economy, and the real Royalty, of their world.

Prunelle is the end toward which we all are heading. When Paulo warns Nini that if she leaves him, his bakery, and his dream of petit bourgeois domestic bliss for Danglard and Cancan dancing, Prunelle will be her fate, he is of course correct. Nini knows it, too. But she must also know that caution won't save her; that it is better to dance to your destiny than simply to suffer it, and that the stream of life flowing through you admits no pious sentimentality even about your own approaching decrepit old age. Like the few other truly happy Renoir comedies, FRENCH CANCAN is drenched with sex. Everybody, including Paulo (but not Prince Alexandre) makes love, whether for love or money seems hardly to matter. Nini seduces Paulo to prepare herself for Danglard, who has had the belle Abbessse and will have after Nini, the lovely street singer Esther Georges, in which there is a moral for Nini; don't waste your time on jealousy. The great lesson of acceptance that enters Renoir's cinema with *The River* (1950) finds its most exuberant Western expression in FRENCH CANCAN. The feeling for an eternal present in the lovely Anglo-Indian film here translates into a continual revitalization, a reclamation of the never - too - distant past - where you may learn your tragic sense of life and learn how to forget it, too.

The image for all this is the great climactic Cancan dance that breaks through the scenery with its waves of dancers, its open invitation to

sex, its intermingling of audience and performers, its refusal to care where "theater ends and life begins". It comes closer to realizing shared joy than anything else I know in film. But it remains before everything an expression of the movie that contains it, a movie that explains the secret rhythms of the universe in terms that anyone who loves the life he is losing may understand. Renoir's movies are sometimes mystical but never rarefied. FRENCH CANCAN least of all. A film of the arts that is as much about sex and money as about art, it proposes no aesthetic absolutes. Nini dances because the "cancan is better than the washtub." Danglard has her dance because, having lost his lease on the Chinese Screen, he doesn't know what else to do next, and because a renovated nightclub looks to be a good business bet in Montmartre. It's from such impure beginnings that the best work emerges, so long as there's a mind to seize the chances.

The mind belongs to Danglard. Heir to Lange and Legrand, and Dédé and Batala, with something of Camilla and Don Antonio thrown in, he is entrepreneur and artist, exploiter and exploited, sense and sensibility altogether. Like Lange, he dreams. Like Batala, he connives. In creating, he wears himself out. Then, like some Eastern deity, he rests and takes energy from the pleasure of contemplating his own creations. His own creation thrusts him back into the world at large because that is where he takes his ideas and his talent, and so in the circle of his life, he is the only one of our artist heroes who does not disappear into theater, or myth.

His "escape," like everything else about him, is wholly pragmatic. Just before the finale, Nini discovers that Danglard already has a new mistress, and so she locks herself in her dressing room, refusing to dance. All arguments fail to move her until her mother—who had more or less sold her daughter's services months before and who knows the importance of keeping a bargain—orders her out. Then Danglard, in a wonderful harangue, confronts her with his side of the story. In part it's a version—one of the best—of THE SHOW MUST GO ON. In part it's an assertion that he must go on, that a caged and domesticated Danglard is no Danglard at all. No great romance; he must have his freedom to continue loving.

In the context of FRENCH CANCAN it makes profound sense. Only a fool—Paulo, Prince Alexandre—desires permanence. Life merely requires continuation. The film, like life, builds on a succession of endings that are also seen as new beginnings. The loss promotes the gain. "Nothing" is a mystery. But the greater mystery is "everything." In Renoir's art t h e y are a mirror image, two sides of the same coin.



French CanCan, 1955, Jean Renoir

On Filmmaking Jean Renoir to Tay Garnett

Jean Renoir, like René Clair, replied to a questionnaire from Tay Garnett concerning the director's approach to filmmaking and the collaborative process involved. It was published in French by Thierry de Navacelle in *L'in Siècle de Cinéma* (see page 83). Renoir's reply, written in English in 1975 or '76, was edited for this publication.

BACKGROUND I was born in a milieu of artists. My father was the painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir. My background certainly helped me to understand the basic visual problems of the film medium. My first trade was ceramics.

FIRST FILM WORK I started all at once as producer, director, and, alas, as money man. My first pictures were merely a demonstration of my technical preoccupations!

OBJECTIVE AS FILMMAKER I don't believe that I had any secret purpose in shooting my pictures. I was trying to provide good entertainment. I discovered the "deep" meaning of the film while shooting it, and even more *after* shooting it.

PREFERRED GENRE I tried to make films beyond categorization. My ambition was, and still is, to succeed with a mixture of comedy and drama.

MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENT Everything, everyone, is important.

COLLABORATION WITH PRODUCER The author of a film is the equivalent of the author of a book. The book should reflect his personality. A work of art is nothing but a conversation with the author. The function of the producer is to maintain the artistic and technical unity around the author. It is also to provide the money—and that is certainly not the least of his functions. The producer must also fight savagely for a good release with a good publicity campaign.

SOURCE MATERIAL I have no preference as to source material. The ideal combination, obviously, is to have the author tell his own story. Chaplin is the most brilliant example of this. But it costs time. A story or a stage play or a murder related in the papers may be an excellent springboard, but this springboard must remain a springboard and nothing more. The real creation must be found in the work of the director.

COLLABORATION WITH SCREENWRITER I believe that the author should tell his own story; he must not only prepare the dialogue but also the shooting script. Let's not forget that my ideas concerning the shooting of a picture are based on my belief that the author is center of the operation. I prefer to work closely with the writer.

IMPROVISATION I do prefer to improvise.

DIALOGUE DIRECTOR In my opinion, the work of a dialogue director is a menace against the personality of the author-director, let us call him a "filmmaker."

COLLABORATION AND IMPROVISATION ON THE SET I like to play an active part in all the technical phases. I like to be in close touch with the technicians way before the first day of shooting. I like to have discussed each setup of

the camera, I like to rehearse with the actors. I like to check each prop with the property man, to check the makeup of every actor. But I also like to improvise on the set. The best shots in a picture were often conceived and executed at the last minute. A good preparation is indispensable, but when you are caught in the spell of shooting, you discover things you had not seen before.

CASTING Nothing is unimportant in filmmaking. During the shooting, you must dedicate as much attention to the bit actor during the one minute you have with him as to the star of the picture during the shooting of one of her close-ups.

Bad makeup, even for a character who will last a few seconds on the screen, may ruin the scene. Let's not forget that in many productions, it is the actor who chooses the director, and not vice versa.

Personally, without the actor, I would have done very few pictures. Many actors liked my work, and demanded of the producer that I should direct them.

ACTORS The trouble with some professional actors is that they repeat themselves during their whole life. In the beginning of their career, they had been successful with a certain skeptical smile, and so they will repeat that same expression their whole life long. The public is delighted, so are the producer and the director. I am not . . .

CONCEPTION OF ROLES I prefer to discuss my conception of the part with the actor long before the shooting.

REHEARSALS I am not a partisan of too many rehearsals. It is essential to keep as much freshness as possible. The actors should give the impression that they see the lines for the first time in their lives. I believe firmly in rehearsals in the Italian style—that means to sit down around the director, who forbids the actors to give any expression (to what they read); the reading of the lines must be as monotonous as would be the reading of a telephone directory. After several sessions of this exercise, there are good chances that one of the actors will give a little sparkle which is the hope for a great performance. The danger in allowing the actors to give expression before getting acquainted with the physical part of the role is to fall into cliché. Innocence is an important part of genius.

ACTORS' CHANGES I accept gladly the suggestions of actors. My job is to maintain those suggestions within the frame of my own conception of the subject.

EDITING I consider the cutting of a picture as a powerful tool given to the director to express himself. The director must have discussed the cutting with the cutter almost frame by frame. The ideas I am expressing here were supposed to be strange when I was producing actively. Today, these ideas are considered common sense. Even the word "director" is slowly but surely being replaced by the term "filmmaker," which seems more appropriate.

Jean Renoir

MUSICAL SCORE To me, a musical score underlining the acting suggests that those actors are incapable of playing their parts with talent alone and must be helped by the musical score, the lighting of the cameraman, the setting, and by all the technical means with which they are surrounded. A real actor must have the power to express himself, as well as the character he is portraying. Good actors do not need too many props, they do not need a musical score, either.

I remain in close touch with the composer. A big part of the music is the result of friendly discussions around the piano.

I believe that in case we cannot do without a musical score, it is preferable to base it on the "counterpoint" system.

SOUND EFFECTS Sound effects are of primary importance and should be treated very realistically. Clumsy sound effects may ruin a good sequence.



French CanCan, 1955, Jean Renoir

... an art of living, a poetical art, tightly intertwined, under various guises which are the intimate theater, the supreme comedy which RENOIR is playing to himself... a lesson which teaches us not to separate the sensual and the spiritual...