

Document Citation

Title	Souvenirs of the Hollywood Renoir
Author(s)	Kevin Thomas
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Renoir, Jean (1894-1979), Paris, France
Film Subjects	The woman on the beach, Renoir, Jean, 1946 This land is mine, Renoir, Jean, 1943

MOVIE REVIEWS

Souvenirs of the Hollywood Renoir

BY KEVIN THOMAS

Times Staff Writer

Tonight the County Museum of Art's ongoing RKO retrospective (at 8 in Bing Theater) provides an opportunity to see two of Jean Renoir's five American films, "This Land Is Mine" (1943) and "The Woman on the Beach" (1946).

Obviously, Hollywood was not as congenial a place to work as France for the great director of "Grand Illusion" and "The Rules of the Game." Yet "This Land Is Mine," written and produced in collaboration with Dudley Nichols, is a revelation, a powerful, timeless work that achieves the kind of impact of Renoir's finest work, despite its vagueness of nationality and limitations of budget.

Set "somewhere in Europe," but clearly shot mainly in the studio (despite the admirable efforts of Renoir's long-time associate, production designer Eugene Lourie), "This Land Is Mine" tells of the fate of a small town when it falls under German occupation. As it depicts the progressively corrosive effects of Nazi oppression on the community it becomes an impassioned call for the struggle for freedom.

Renoir focuses on Charles Laughton, a timid schoolteacher with a feisty, overprotective widowed mother (Una O'Connor, the veteran Irish character actress). Next door lives Maureen O'Hara, a fellow schoolteacher and fiery patriot, whom Laughton has long adored from a distance. Miss O'Hara's brother Kent Smith, a railroad worker, fraternizes with the Nazis but is actually a brave member of the Resistance. Smith's suave superior George Sanders, who is also Miss O'Hara's fiance, believes collaboration with the enemy is essential for survival—and besides, the Germans are so efficient. Sanders, therefore, works well with shrewd German commandant Walter Slezak. (In their relationship there are distinct echoes of the friendship between Pierre Fresnay and Erich Von Stroheim in "Grand Illusion"—but Sanders and Slezak, far from being humane aristocrats, are stuffy bourgeois types.)

Only toward the end of the film does Laughton move to the fore in what proves to be one of the triumphant moments in his remarkable career as his coward gradually and quietly turns into a hero.

What distinguishes "This Land Is Mine" from the vast majority of World War II movies is Renoir's refusal to judge his people even while attacking Nazism fervently. That Slezak's character possesses intelligence and even humanity makes him no less menacing. "This Land Is Mine" takes a tragic view of war and its victims; Renoir has written that the heroic utterances of French emigres during the war struck him as bad taste. "It is not hard to be a hero when the enemy is 10,000 kilometers away," he observed.

★

In the making of "The Woman on the Beach," Renoir has revealed, there were unforeseen problems in adapting to the screen Mitchell Wilson's novel "None Too Blind" that he felt he could resolve during shooting. But what he ended up with was a confusing script. Actually, this low-budget eternal triangle melodrama shows what a master director can do with familiar, even trite material.

Robert Ryan is a Coast Guard lieutenant who suffers from terrifying nightmares after having been on a torpedoed sub during the war. He comes upon Joan Bennett on a lonely stretch of beach near where he is stationed and gradually strikes up an acquaintance with her. She is married to famous painter Charles Bickford, now blind on her account and bitterly possessive of her.

Solitude is the theme of "The Woman on the Beach," says Renoir, and he emphasizes the isolation of these three unhappy people. The compassion he extends to them and the care with which he observes them lifts "The Woman on the Beach" out of routine, as do the exceptional performances of Miss Bennett, Ryan and Bickford. Produced

by Jack J. Gross, "The Woman on the Beach" is a highly poetic, finally redemptive film charged with emotions that are an admixture of love and hate.

Unfortunately, "The Woman on the Beach" was not a success at the box office and therefore became the last of Renoir's American films. He then went to India to make "The River" and resumed making films in France but continues to make Beverly Hills his home to this day.