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LA REGLE DU JEU (1938)

Director Jean Renoir
 Script Jean Renoir and Koch
 Camera Bachelet, Jacques
 Lemare, Alan Renoir,
 Alphen
 Art Directors Lourie, and Douy
 Music (from Mozart, Monsigny, &
 Saint-Saens) Roger Desor-
 miere
 Producer Claude Renoir
 Editors Marguerite Renoir, Mme.
 Huguot
 Players Dalio, Nora Gregor, Ro-
 land Toutain, Jean Ren-
 oir, Mila Parely, Paul-
 lette Dubost, Carette,
 and Gaston Modot

(The following is taken from Gavin Lambert's review in the summer, 1950 issue of SEQUENCE, a now defunct film quarterly.)

LA REGLE DU JEU was Renoir's last film in France and his last really personal document. It represents not only the height of his brilliance as a film maker, but the richest development of his humanist approach to the kind of life he understood best. Renoir is a keen observer of society and manners--one might describe his approach as nearer to a man like E. M. Forster than to the general climate of the French cinema in the thirties. . . LA REGLE DU JEU is a study of the manners of upper class society, the complexity of human relations.

The story...is of a weekend party in a country chateau. Its wealthy owner, Robert della Chesnyest, has just effected a reconciliation with his wife, Christine, and decides to abandon his mistress Genevieve (also invited to the party.) To the houseparty, a mutual friend, Octave (played by Jean Renoir) brings an airman, Jurieux, with whom Christine has been enjoying a mild adventure. Jurieux, however, believes himself genuinely in love with her, and she with him. These intrigues and unresolved misunderstandings are typical of the society in which La Chesnyest moves: easy-going, spoilt, instinctively unprincipled people who always evade the important issues of life. They see love in terms of adultery or flirtation, it is enough to profess honesty rather than practice it, to manoeuvre elegantly through misunderstandings rather than try and resolve them. They rely on luck, charm, and their own talents for light deception to carry them through. Left to themselves, they will continue to manipulate feelings and situations; but the good-natured and simple Octave, and Jurieux the airman, capable of enduring feelings, are unrecognised intruders in this society. They threaten, more seriously than they realise, to overturn its whole equilibrium.

But the final denouement is due not only to the incursion of non-deceivers. Another of la Chesnyest's foibles is to patronise the lower classes, and on the morning before the guests arrive he discovers an engaging poacher on his land. He takes a liking to him and gives him a position on the domestic staff. The poacher immediately makes out outrageous love to the gamekeeper's flirtatious little wife, and his comic pursuit of her, the gamekeeper's simmering jealousy, are recurring motifs in the events of the weekend.

It is the gamekeeper, who, seeing Jurieux at night in the grounds with a woman he takes to be his wife (it is really Christine) shoots him. In the early light of morning all the guests line up on the terrace, silent and frightened, as the body is carried back to the house. With a final twist of the screw, Renoir shows that most of the guests believe that La Chesnyest has really shot Jurieux for attempting to elope with Christine.

The complex intrigues of this extraordinary tragi-comedy are handled with a skill no less many-sided. The film's lucid though occasionally untidy progression is all the more remarkable in view of the way in which it was made. Renoir had no final script; he shot the film in sequence, improvising some scenes as he went along--particularly his own part. There are two passages, however, of exciting shape and tension: the sequence of the guests going out on a shoot--the refined brutality of this occupation as conveyed almost entirely in natural sound and images-- during which Christine accidentally catches sight of her husband with Genevieve through her binoculars. And we realise that La Chesnyest is much too weak, too malleable, ever to break with her. The other scene is the fancy-dress ball, in which the guests dance, mime and clown, some of them dressing up as skeletons and performing with unconscious irony a dance of death.

The untidinesses in La Regle du Jeu are due to a lack of polish rather than to any falterings in the narrative. . . . There is no confusion in the development. . . . Much of the action is related by cross-cutting-- sometimes...on three parallel lines...A minor phenomenon of LA REGLE DU JEU is the acting: one would have thought its obvious imperfections would be very detrimental to a film of this kind, and why exactly they do not seriously affect it is difficult to answer... It may be that the general air of amateurishness is somehow in keeping with the film itself, its alternating levels of the realistic and the fantastic, the remorseless and the inconsequent.

LA REGLE DU JEU was taken from a comedy by Demusset: "Les Caprices de Marianne."

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