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Desiree Clary), Guitry, Sacha, 1942

Remontons les Champs-Elysées (Champs-Elysées), Guitry, Sacha,

1938

Désiré, Guitry, Sacha, 1937

Les perles de la couronne (Pearls of the crown), Guitry, Sacha,

1937

Faisons un rêve (Let us dream), Guitry, Sacha, 1936

Le mot de Cambronne, Guitry, Sacha, 1937

AN INTRODUCTION TO GUITRY

Were artists to be 'twinned' as cities are, then Noël Coward might find himself bracketed with the comparably versatile French actor, wit, dramatist and film-maker, Sacha Guitry, with whom he shared a flamboyant urbanity, a sentimental chauvinism and a partiality for gaudy dressing-gowns. Sacha - as with Noël, Oscar (Wilde) and Jean (Cocteau), the familiar form of address seems apposite, somehow - was born exactly a century ago. The son of a matinee idol father, Lucien, he naturally gravitated towards the theatre: in 1905, the triumph of his first play, the farce Nono, determined his vocation as the Lope de Vega of the Boulevard. Then, in 1935, his cinematic transcription of another play, Pasteur, launched him on a parallel trajectory as movie-director. Most of the ensuing films (of which, owing to a copyright wrangle, we are able to screen only a baker's half-dozen) were drawing-room comedies of a rarified featheriness, enlivened by their director's actorish aplomb and indelibly nasal whinny.

On the other hand, a French critic once (rashly) termed Sacha 'the father of modern cinema'. How, one Gilbert Adair.

determinedly bijou, even so reactionary (cf his more than equivocal conduct during the Occupation) be at all 'modern'? Paradoxically, that modernity derived from a basic contempt for the cinema, which he exploited almost exclusively as a means of granting wider currency – by an adaptive process often as casual as stencilling – to works written for the stage. Disdaining anything that approached thralldom to the medium, he consequently ignored - as, for very different reasons, an avant-gardist would - many of its established codes and practices, visual, technical and narrative. Thus his bizarrely radical use of voice-off commentary, multilingual soundtracks, speedy, uncumbrous shooting methods and, above all, assumption of total, indeed imperious, control over his material decades before the formulation of the Auteur Theory.

In his obstinately passéist way, then, he might be considered 'before his time'. 'I believe the cinema to be past its prime' is, these days, a not so exceptionable statement. It was made by Sacha Guitry in 1912.-

wonders, could a figure so apparently lightweight, so

Yet another variation on the Husband, the Wife and the Lover (seldom has this triangle appeared more literally 'eternal' than in Guitry's filmography), Faisons un rêve is a seamless confection, as airy and insubstantial as a bubble, perhaps, but an amorously chiselled one. France 1936/With Jacqueline Delubac, Raimu. Le Mot de Cambronne, a witty jeu d'esprit in alexandrine couplets, apparently took Guitry not much longer to write than it does to play. France 1937/With Marguérite Moréno, Jacqueline Delubac.

Sun 22 Sep

Let's Dream Together/ Cambronne's Word

(Faisons un rêve/Le Mot de Cambronne)



Characterised by its author as 'a light tragedy', this semi-autobiographical account of a father's attempts to influence his son ('In trying to stop you from being unhappy, I nearly prevented you from being happy') had been, with the Guitries père et fils, a theatrical triumph. Now, twenty years later, Sacha appropriated Lucien's role, absent-mindedly remarking to his director of photography, 'I love the way you lit that scene between my father and Jacqueline!' France 1936/With Paul Bernard, Jacqueline Delubac.

Tue 24 Sep My Father Was Right (Mon Père avait



Concerning this fizzy comedy of a majordomo whose mistresses inexorably become . . . his mistresses, the most Lubitschian of his films by its ironic commentary on social hierarchies and 'good manners', Guitry remarked that the greatest compliment paid him was by his chambermaid, who indignantly accused him of having eavesdropped on the servants' quarters. The film's dialogue positively shimmers and, it should be recalled was written for his own incomparable delivery the way a musician composes for a specific timbre. France 1937/With Jacqueline Delubac, Arletty.

Tue 24 Sep Désiré



A trilingual - in French, English and Italian - toast to Wed 25 Sep the Entente Cordiale, Les Perles de la couronne is not much more than the sum total of its parts, but what delightful parts! Raimu, Marguérite Moréno (subsequently Giraudoux's 'Madwoman of Chaillot'), Arletty as a dusky Abyssinian snake-charmer, Jean-Louis Barrault as Napoleon and the Maestro himself in a quartet of roles, irresistibly impudent dialogue, a score by Francaix and a visual style in permanent ebullition. France 1937/With Jacqueline Delubac, Cécile Sorel.

The Pearls of

the Crown (Les Perles de la couronne)



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Sun 29 Sep 8.45

Let's All Go Up the Champs-Elysées

(Remontons les Champs-Elysées) Uniquely, perhaps, for the cinema – the history of a street, from its 17th-century inception as a boggy pathway to its garish bourgeois splendour under Napoleon III (played by Guitry himself). Though the film reduces history to a parade of carnival floats, its dramatis personae almost exclusively drawn from the Almanach de Gotha, and though the filming is sometimes negligent, it illustrates, as James Harding wrote, 'the superiority of one man's wit and intelligence over the machine'. France 1938/With Jacqueline Delubac.



Mon 30 Sep 8.45

The Fabulous Destiny of Désirée Clary

(Le Destin-fabuleux de Désirée Clary) The heroine of this two act film – there is a brief entr'acte halfway for the credit titles – was a young Marseillaise of modest origins who became both Napoleon's fiancée and Queen of Sweden. As always, Guitry blithely juxtaposes two species of the starsystem – that of the cinema and that, even more questionable, of history itself – but wears his idolatry of l'Empereur (the role which, by droit de seigneur, he plays) considerably more lightly than Gance. France 1941/With Gaby Morlay, Geneviève Guitry.