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# / A TRIBUTE TO JEAN RENOIR: BOUDU SAVED FROM DROWNING (1932)

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## A Shaggy Man Story

Jean Renoir's *Boudou Saved from Drowning* was made in France in 1931 when talkies were new and subtitling had not yet become a standard procedure, and so, like many other

*Boudou Saved from Drowning*  
(Pathé-International)

films of the early sound period, it was not imported. Some of those talkies waited a few years, some a few decades; others are still waiting – and may go on waiting because of the New York press response to *Boudou*.

The four New York dailies agreed: to Crowther at the *Times* it is "a second-rate antique"; the *Post* found that it "is easily dismissed"; the *World Journal Tribune* said it should not have been rescued; and the *Daily News* gave it two stars – an event which should have alerted everyone that *Boudou* was a movie of unusual quality, because the *Daily News* plasters almost every Hollywood dud with four stars. They fall harder that way.

One may suspect that many early classics of the screen would be given the same short shrift by the daily reviewers if they opened now – the 1931 *A Nous La Liberté*, for example, or Vigo's *Zero for Conduct* (1932) or *L'Atalante* (1934); Louis Jouvet's performance in the 1933 *Dr. Knock* would probably be patronizingly put down as a curiosity. Fortunately, most of the best work from France plays regularly at revival houses and at colleges and doesn't depend on the daily reviewers to find its audience. Books and magazine articles over three decades, a reference here and there, even affectionate parental memories send new people each year to the Carné-Prévert *Bizarre*, *Bizarre* (1937) or Pagnol's adaptation of Jean Giono's *Harvest* (1937), to Renoir's *A Day in the Country* (1936) or *La Grande Illusion* (1937), as well as to revivals of the French films of the forties and fifties.

Other works by Renoir have come late and are taking their rightful place: the great 1939 *The Rules of the Game*, one of the key works in the history of movies, first seen here in a cut version and then restored in the sixties; and, a lesser but still important film, *The Crime of Mr. Lange* (1935), not subtitled for American audiences until the sixties. But with *Boudou*, it's different: it belongs to an earlier era, it gives a different kind of pleasure. The style and rhythm of *Boudou*, that whole way of looking at things, is gone, and so

it may be a movie only for those who know and care about that way.

*Boudou* is a more leisurely film than we are used to now, not that it is long, or slow, but that the camera isn't in a rush, the action isn't over-emphatic, shots linger on the screen for an extra split-second – we have time to look at them, to take them in. Renoir is an unobtrusive, unself-conscious storyteller: he doesn't "make points," he doesn't rub our noses in "meaning." He seems to find his story as he tells it; sometimes the improvisation falters, the movie gets a little untidy. He is not a director to force things; he leaves a lot of open spaces. This isn't a failure of dramatic technique: it's an indication of that movie-making sixth sense that separates a director like Renoir from a buttoned-up-tight gentleman-hack like Peter Glenville or a genius-hustler like Sidney Lumet. Glenville suffocates a movie; Lumet keeps giving it charges to bring it to life. *Boudou* is a simple shaggy-man story told in an open way, and it is the openness to the beauty of landscape and weather and to the varieties of human folly which is Renoir's artistry. He lets a movie breathe.

*Boudou* is a tramp saved from suicide by a bookseller who takes him into his home and tries to do for him what decent, generous people would try to do – make him over in their own solid-bourgeois image, make him one of them. But *Boudou* is not a lovable tramp like Chaplin nor a Harry Langdon innocent nor a precursor of the artist-in-rebellion tramp like Alec Guinness' Gulley Jimson or Sean Connery's Samson Shillitoe. *Boudou*, bearded and long-haired like a premature Hell's Angel, is a dropout who just wants to be left alone. And this may help to explain why the movie wasn't imported earlier: he doesn't want romance or a job or a place in society (like the forlorn little hero of *A Nous La Liberté*), he isn't one of the deserving poor. There's no "redeeming" political message in *Boudou* and no fancy Shavian double-talk either.

*Boudou* is the underside of middle-class life, what's given up for respectability. We agree to be clean and orderly and responsible, but there is something satisfying about his refusal. There's a kind of inevitability – like someone acting out our dream – about the way he spills wine on the table, leaves the water running in the sink, wipes his shoes on the bedspread. There's some

disorderly malice in him. He's like a bad pet that can't be trained: he makes messes. If *Boudou's* character were reformed, that would be defeat. The bookseller, despite his mistress-maid, is unmanned by the female household – and by being a householder. *Boudou* is, at least, his own dog.

Michel Simon, who plays *Boudou*, is better known for his masochistic roles, as, earlier, in Renoir's *La Chienne*, and, later, in Duvivier's *Panique* and *La Fin du jour*. But his *Boudou*, like his tattooed Père Jules of *L'Atalante*, which Agee described as "a pre-mental old man . . . a 20th-century Caliban," is a misfit loner. The loose walk, the eyes that don't communicate, the Margaret Rutherford jaw and the Charles Laughton sneaky self-satisfaction are not those of a man who rejects society: rejection is built into him, he merely acts it out. This, too, does not make the film easy for audiences: it is so much nicer to respond to a *Georgy Girl*, knowing that a pretty actress is putting us on. One of those four reviewers complained that Michel Simon "misses completely. . . . He is gross where he should be droll. He does wrong all the things that Fernandel later was to do right." That's rather like complaining that Olivier in *The Entertainer* is no Tony Bennett.

Renoir's camera reveals the actors as if they were there naturally or inadvertently – not arranged for a shot but found by the camera on the streets, in the shop, on the banks of the Seine. The camera doesn't overdramatize their presence, it just – rather reticently – picks them up, and occasionally lets them disappear from the frame, to be picked up again at a later point in their lives.

Despite the problems of sound recording in 1931, Renoir went out of the studio, and so *Boudou* provides not only a fresh encounter with the movie past but also a photographic record of an earlier France, which moved in a different rhythm, and because of the photographic equipment and style of the period, in a softly different light. The shop fronts look like Atget; the houses might have modeled for Bonnard. It is a nostalgic work, not in the deliberate embarrassing way we have become inured to, but in spite of itself – through the accidents of distribution. And because Renoir is free of the public-courting sentimentality of most movie directors, our nostalgia is – well – clean.

PAULINE KAEI