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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

So different, yet so alike

'Casque d'or' and 'The Earrings of Madame de ...,' two French films from 1952, have a hold on one viewer.

By KENNETH TURAN
Times Staff Writer

YOU don't always realize how much the things you love may have in common. So it wasn't until two of the films I treasure most were scheduled in the same series that I understood how many traits they shared.

Of course I already knew that Jacques Becker's "Casque d'or" and Max Ophuls' "The Earrings of Madame de ..." were both made in France in 1952. But I was so blinded by their individual allure that, until they were included in a coming Los Angeles County Museum of Art series called "La Belle Epoque on Film," I hadn't focused on the fact that both had evocative music by Georges Van Parys and that both were set in that pleasure-loving period that lasted roughly from 1890 to 1914.

Seeing them recently back to back did more than solidify their position in my personal pantheon. By underlining their similarities as well as their differences, the recent viewings gave me more of a sense of why each occupies such a special place in my heart.

Both films not only are set in La Belle Epoque, they feature superlative period re-creations that go to great lengths in terms of costumes, sets and décor to so sweep us up in the story that we happily forget that this is a tale that has been specifically contrived for our enjoyment.

More than that, both films are fatalistic romances of the most swooning, devastating kind — films that absolutely insist that love is the most powerful force in the universe, capable of defying even the supposed authority of death. With plots that do not cater to the happily-ever-after crowd, these pictures introduce characters for whom love has previously been a distraction. Now they were forced, almost against their wills, to value that emotion above all others.

What's even more interesting about

these films is that they make the same thematic points, even though the styles their directors use are radically different and the social classes they deal with couldn't be further apart. "Earrings," which opens the series Friday at 7:30 p.m., is dazzlingly upper class, while "Casque," which follows at the same time Saturday, deals with habits of the hardened criminal underground.

The almost unbearably moving and beautiful "Earrings" is one of the masterworks of director Ophuls, of whom Stanley Kubrick admiringly said, "His camera could pass through walls." Revered as a master of tracking and crane shots, Ophuls' mobile camera managed to intoxicate without seeming excessive, making the most extravagant moves look natural and inevitable.

"Earrings" is the story of a woman (Danielle Darrieux) whose name we never quite catch. A countess whose husband (Charles Boyer) is a prominent general as well as an aristocrat, she's a frivolous dilettante addicted to exquisite, expensive luxury. Madame is, in fact, introduced languidly searching through her luxurious closets for something to sell. She settles on a pair of earrings that were a pricey wedding present from her husband.

Her jeweler promises secrecy, insisting, "We only sell to men because of women, discretion is part of our profession." But he soon confides the situation to the general, and the earrings find themselves on the way to Constantinople and then back to Paris, each change symbolizing the ebb and flow of love.

Bringing the jewels back from Constantinople is an Italian diplomat, Baron Fabrizio Donati (Italian actor and director Vittorio De Sica), an acquaintance of the general's. He soon understands the countess' reputation: She's a formidable coquette and flirt who practices "torture through hope" on her many admirers.

Yet, against overwhelming odds, the countess and the baron commit the ultimate sin in their deeply cynical world: They fall into a love so powerful they are heedless of the consequences.

We get to witness this surprise in the film's spectacular centerpiece, a montage of gliding, gilded balls where swirling camerawork allows one glorious evening to flow into the next. As critic Philip Lopate exactly put it, "no other director



Photographs courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

UNDERWORLD DENIZENS: Simone Signoret, left, and Claude Dauphin in Jacques Becker's "Casque d'or."



CLASSIC: Danielle Darrieux in Max Ophüls' "The Earrings of Madame de . . ."

in the history of movies wrung so much emotional resonance from cinematic technique."

A beloved 'Casque'

IF what Ophüls does as a director is easy to recognize (though not to duplicate), Becker is a different story. A lifelong friend and sometime assistant of director Jean Renoir, Becker was a master craftsman whose deft style so baffled French critics that Francois Truffaut, very much a fan, wrote simply, "There are no theories about Jacques Becker."

Yet the cool reality of Becker's unwa-

vering gaze has, if anything, added to "Casque d'or's" allure. This is a film so revered in France that the government placed it on a postage stamp, and star performances of unusual magnitude by Simone Signoret and Serge Reggiani are a good part of the reason.

Signoret plays Marie, whose piles of blond hair form the "golden helmet" of the film's title. Famous for her temper and her beauty, Marie is so radiant with frank sensuality that every man that sees her wants her. Perfectly aware of her powers, she refuses to be pushed around, not even by gangster boyfriend Pretty-boy Roland.

The mustachioed Reggiani plays

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Manda, a former tough guy now gone straight as a carpenter. Small and compact compared to the abundant Marie, Manda has a quiet masculine assurance that gives purpose to even his smallest movements.

These two meet at a riverside tavern, and the looks they exchange as Marie dances with Roland have both a concupiscence and a complexity that are one-of-a-kind. Their ill-starred romance, complicated by crime, jealousy and the code of the underworld, ends with one of the most memorable reveries in French cinema.

While "Earrings" brings its dazzling technique to the pinnacle of French society, "Casque d'or" and its semidocumentary style has its heart firmly in the gutter. Yet both are joined by their portrayal of loves that refuse to compromise no matter how much reality is stacked against them. No matter how often you've seen them, once these films get you in their power you can't take your eyes off the screen.

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