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pretext that I would not like to make a film that I don't like, and that has little in common with my point of view." * In between these two made-to-order movies, Renoir had a chance to direct Tire-au-flanc [literally, *Good-for-nothing* or *Ne'er-do-well*]† under more independent conditions, though it was essentially a commercial film. Was his decision to direct the film voluntary or imposed? "I no longer really know," he said on a television interview. "I know we are a group of friends, people who had decided to work together. Braunberger was part of the group. We chose *Tire-au-flanc* because it gave us a chance to do something amusing which, because the title was very well known then, would also be easy to sell."

Braunberger, who had just set up a production company, produced the film and said he would try to ensure its success in the marketplace.

Renoir acknowledges a taste for paradox, and it shows up in

* *Pour Vous*, May 2, 1929.

† *Tire-au-flanc*, based on a popular vaudeville by Mouezy-Eon and A. Sylvane, was released before either *Le Tournoi* or *Le Bled*. See filmography, p. 225, for production details.

this attempt to make a silent film out of a variety show. Moreover, in order to get as far away from "filmed theatre" as possible, he cast a dancer, not an actor, in the lead role. Georges Pomiès was working in another movie when Renoir found him: "He tells me he's sure I'll be great, and gives me the script to read. I read it . . . and I give it back. It doesn't do a thing to me. Renoir insists, gives it back. We talk it over, and end up in agreement." *

Renoir has said it was partly because of Pomiès that he wanted to make the film. Also, the modest debut of Michel Simon gives the film a special interest. André Bazin has written of *Tire-au-flanc*: "A general indifference to the script is maintained throughout. Every scene uses Mouezy-Eon simply as a point of departure, dissolving rapidly into a kind of commedia dell'arte remindful of the way Chaplin imperceptibly transforms the repetition of a gesture into pure choreography." † The great critic also draws particular attention to a "marvelous Stroheim-like bit"—the scene where the lieutenant cuts the rose.

The shift of tone between the first and second parts of the movie is striking. The beginning sets out the situation rather awkwardly, in silent vaudeville-style, and then evolves little by little into a burlesque, finally blossoming, with the colonel's party, into slapstick in the Mack Sennett manner. The fact that the film had been relatively scorned by film historians, the unbridled and highly improvisatory freedom that reigned throughout the production, and the broad, leg-pulling plot, all served to rehabilitate the film in the eyes of younger critics. Truffaut has also spoken of it in reference to Chaplin, and praises the "heroic hallucination" of the camera work.

But the "auteur" theory of film can deceive us in the case of

* Georges Pomiès, *Cinémonde*, 1932 (p. 501).

† *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 8.

Renoir. Despite the technical achievements pointed out by Truffaut, the film's comic spirit is often quite heavy-handed and sometimes strained. For example, the clumsy handling of the gas mask scene and the interrupted party are a far cry from Chaplin's subtle, delicate treatment of similar events in *Police* or *The Cure*, with which Truffaut compared *Tire-au-flanc*.

But even though it lacks finesse, the film did realize in part its maker's aims. Critics of the time had reservations. "The gaiety can be cut with a knife, and it hasn't much charm," declared *Cinémonde*. "Where is its comic sense?" asked Lucien Wahl in *Pour Vous*.