

'The Little Theater of Jean Renoir': The French Auteur's Last Film

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Jean Renoir was a Notable French Auteur

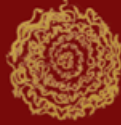
Source: TV Tropes and Britannica



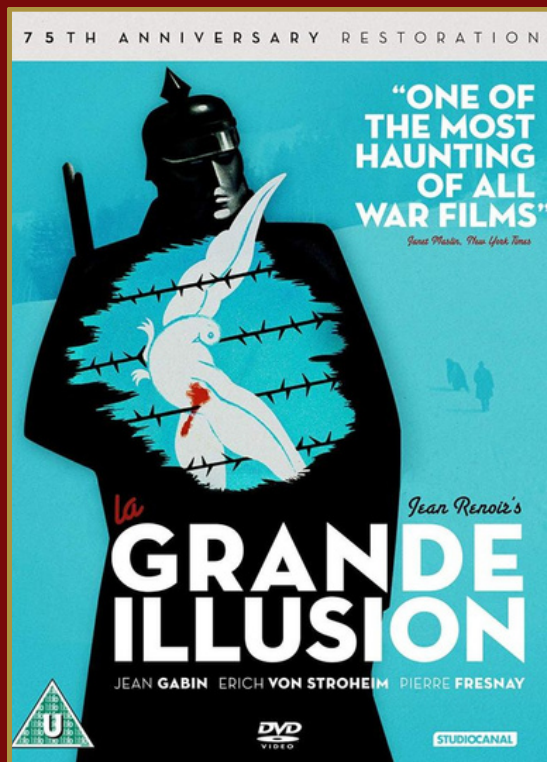
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Jean Renoir was a key French filmmaker of the twentieth century. Renoir was one of the first filmmakers referred to as an auteur, with his films *La Grande Illusion* and *The Rules of the Game* often placed on lists of the greatest films of all time. Renoir was born in Montmartre, Paris, and grew up in southern France. The influence of art and cinema on him was quite strong from a very young age. His father was an Impressionist painter, his elder brother was an actor, and his younger brother also had a brief stint in the film industry. Renoir was taken by his aunt to watch several puppet shows and even his first film when he was a few years old.



La Grande Illusion and *The Rules of the Game* are Often Considered Renoir's Best Films

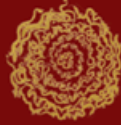
Source: BFI Shop and IMDb



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He served in the French cavalry and later on as a reconnaissance pilot during the first World War. After the war, he tried his hand at ceramic art upon his father's suggestion, but the pull of cinema was too strong to keep him away for long. He made his first silent film in 1924 and became quite a successful filmmaker by the thirties. He made a move to Hollywood during the forties, where he made his Academy-nominated film *The Southerner* (1945). After making a few movies in the United States, he traveled to India to shoot his first color film, *The River* (1951), which won the International Prize at the Venice Film Festival.



Renoir is known as a Master Filmmaker

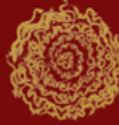
Source: NPR



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He returned to Europe and worked on a trilogy of musical comedies. He also produced Clifford Odets' play, *The Big Knife*, and wrote and produced his own play, *Orvet*, both in Paris. He continued to write screenplays and a novel alongside directing a few more films, including a memoir based on his father. He worked on his last film in 1970 and published his personal memoir, *My Life and My Films*, in 1974. In 1975, he received a lifetime achievement Academy Award, and London's National Film Theatre showcased a retrospective of his work. He passed away in 1979, and his legacy has continued to influence countless film industry professionals, both newcomers and veterans.



The Little Theater of Jean Renoir was Renoir's Last Film

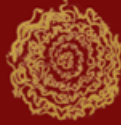
Source: IMDb



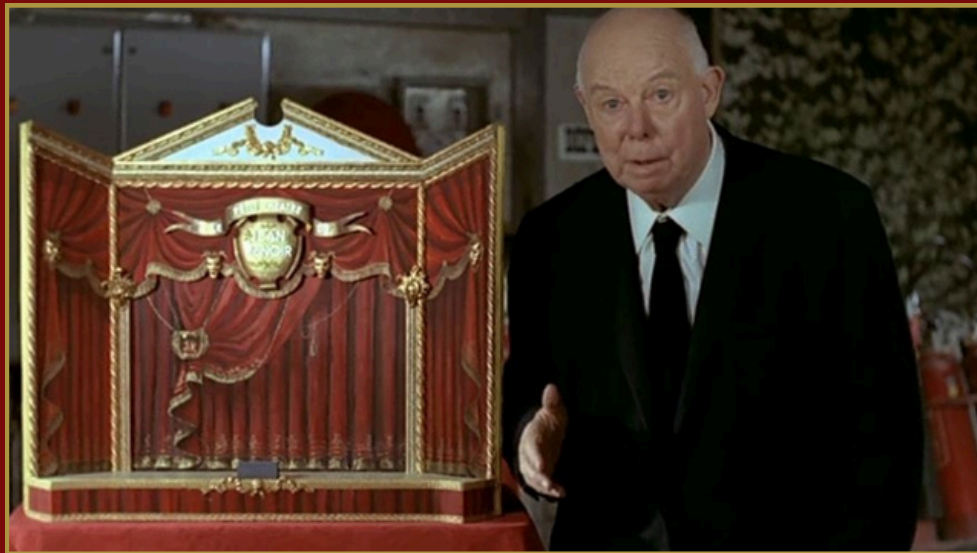
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Le Petit Théâtre de Jean Renoir (English title: *The Little Theater of Jean Renoir*) (1970) was the last film directed by Renoir. It was an international co-production between France, Italy, and West Germany. The 100-minute-long film was produced by Pierre Long and edited by Geneviève Winding. Originally released on December 15th 1970, it has been described as “an essential key to understanding this great filmmaker’s range and breadth” (Rosenbaum, 1990). In the film, Renoir “recaps the stylistic progression of his career, from expressionism to naturalism, focusing all the while on his eternal theme, the vicissitudes of love” (Kehr, 1985).



The Film has Four Segments, each introduced by Renoir himself

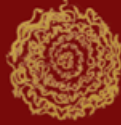
Source: MUBI



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The film is a compilation of four separate segments: three short films and a musical performance. The compilation begins with a short film titled *Le Dernier Réveillon* (English title: *The Last Christmas Eve*). Dedicated to Hans Christian Anderson, this segment features Nino Formicola and Milly as homeless beggars. Formicola's character stands outside a restaurant window and stares longingly inside until the restaurant gives him leftovers to make him leave. He then takes the leftovers to Milly's character, whom he has loved for many years. While reminiscing about the good old days, they fall asleep, and two other beggars take off with the food.



The First Segment Depicts the Story of a Homeless Couple

Source: Bas de Données de Film Français

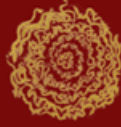
The second segment is titled *La Cirques électrique* (English title: *The Electric Floor-Waxer*). Performed in a highly stylized manner, it has been described as “a comically mad opera, complete with singing choruses, arias, and sudden deaths” (Canby, 1974). It stars Marguerite Cassan as Emilie, a woman on a mission to obtain an electric floor waxer.



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**The Second Segment Shares the Tale of a Woman
and Her Love: An Electric Floor-Waxer**

Source: SensCritique



Stills from the Second Section of the Film

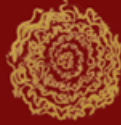
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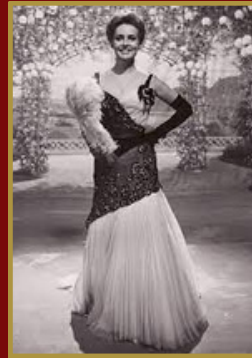
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Emilie's husband, Gustave (played by Pierre Olaf), finally relents after he gets a promotion and purchases the waxer for her. Unfortunately, the waxer works too well, and Gustave slips on the overly polished floor and passes away after he gets a severe head injury. Emilie gets back together with her childhood sweetheart, Jules (played by Jacques Dynam), who grows to detest the waxer and its relentless noise. While trying to get the crazed Emilie to let go of the waxer, Jules talks to a photograph of Gustave. Eventually, Jules has had enough and throws the waxer out the window, leading Emilie to jump out after it as well.



The Third Segment is Sung by French Movie Star Jeanne Moreau

Source: Prime Video and Jeanne Moreau

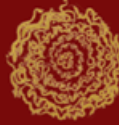
The third section is called *Quand l'amour meurt* (*An Excursion into the Past*) and features a musical performance by highly lauded French actress, singer, writer, and director Jeanne Moreau. The film concludes with *Le Roi d'Yvestot* (English title: *A Tribute to Tolerance*), a short film starring Fernand Sardou as Duvallier, a "prosperous landowner who seems blessed with everything" (Durgnat, 1974). Françoise Arnoul plays the role of his beautiful and much younger wife, Isabelle. Duvallier finds out about Isabelle's affair with a young doctor (played by Jean Carmet). The rest of the short film chronicles Duvallier's journey towards tolerating and eventually accepting the truth. This short film is shot in "the generous and realistic manner expected from Renoir" (Rosenbaum, 1990).



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The Final Section of the Film is Considered More Realistic and Humanistic

Source: Linternaute.com and Madelen

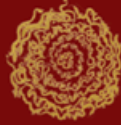
Although many focus on the “more realistic and humanistic fourth segment” of the film and dismiss the others, “all four segments taken together make this a final masterpiece from the great director” (Anderson, 1970). After all, “the film as a whole is a complex manifesto of his pluralistic approaches to both realism and style,” and “the subtle interaction between these facets of his vision makes it a musical suite in four movements, with each movement illuminating the others” (Rosenbaum, 1990). It significantly substantiates Renoir’s reputation as “the most Mozartean of film directors” (BAMPFA, 1994). It also serves as “the most perfect conclusion to Renoir’s remarkable career: a collection of masterfully crafted vignettes” (Travers, 2017). *The Little Theater of Jean Renoir* is thus a must-watch made by one of the most impactful auteurs of the twentieth century.



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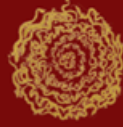


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