

Credits

Director	Jean Renoir
Screenplay	Jean Renoir
Photography	Claude Renoir
Music	Paul Bozzi

Cast

'Toni' Canova dit	Charles Blavette
Josefa	Celia Montalván
Fernand	Édouard Delmont
Albert	Max Dalban

In Brief

The Jean Renoir remains one of the most highly regarded of film directors, a creative genius whose films reveal an exceptional humanity and encompass a remarkable range (farce, satire, tragedy, policier, classic literature, history...). His auteurist approach to film-making has inspired generations of independent film makers, most notably the New Wave directors of the 1960s.

Yet, when the average cinephile thinks of Jean Renoir, only a handful of titles come to mind. "La Grande Illusion", "The River", "La Bete Humaine", and "La Regle du Jeu", all rightfully considered masterpieces, have prevented the intrusion of other lesser-known Renoir films upon his canon.

This season attempts to correct this and gives you a chance to discover a few treasures among Renoir's filmography spanning 45 years. From history with "La Marseillaise", to socio-realism with "les Bas-Fonds" or "Toni", to horror (!) with "Le Testament du Docteur Cordelier"

It's the time of year when, so we're told, peasants and paupers once wore paper crowns, leaving temporarily crownless kings and queens to clear up after the mid-winter revelries. Patchily observed though they might have been, there's something reassuring about such role-reversing rituals, their very remoteness seeming to show that global society really is becoming more equal. Sadly, this little thought doesn't override the feeling that we continue to be caught up — all year round — in an endless, universal game of Boss-and-Bitch. One explanation for the gloom might be that we're watching far too much neo-realism and film noir. That goes double, or maybe triple, for proto, classic, and neo-noir, not forgetting, of course, proto and neo-neo-realism. And it's not Dutch courage prompting me to make fun of potentially crazy-making categories. It happens I've just watched, if not the best ever stage or film Hamlet, then far and away the best British TV production. Set in our own era, complete with CCTV footage and video diaries, this was directed by RSC top-notch Gregory Doran, and starred David Tennant, the brilliant young Scottish actor who has finally regenerated into anyone but Doctor Who. Naturally, on December 26, 2009, between five and eight o'clock in the evening, not many viewers were there to say goodnight to Tennant's sweet prince, certainly not the critics, most of whom were in the kitchen, up to their eyes in other people's pots and pans. However, I'm sure I wasn't alone in feeling sorry for Shakespeare's most unstoppable boring old fart, Polonius, who goes for broke on the subject of Renaissance drama, very famous for its tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, . . . and so on and so forth, until put out of his — and our — misery behind the arras. Meanwhile, instead of being sucked under by a tsunami of genre analysis, or indeed hiding behind the curtains, my hope is we'll survive the merely bracing effects of a wintry moral shoreline by focusing on just one film: from 1934, Jean Renoir's proto-neo-realistic Toni.

I start with someone whose sense of style might, in some hierarchies, have placed her out of reach of all hard-nosed realities; yet in the case of Coco Chanel — though I missed both recent movies — it seems there's much more to her than a Little Black Dress. I'm thinking of her role in introducing "big bear" Renoir — at thirty-nine one of world cinema's hottest properties — to her new Italian friend, a handsome twenty-seven-year-old aristo, restlessly seeking to halt Europe's drift toward mass suicide. More prosaically: even before the Front Populaire had come into being, Luchino Visconti was hoping to work in France with anyone who also wanted to make popular art out of anti-fascist sentiment. The fact that, so far, he had only designed a couple of rather routine theatrical sets did not hinder the original hook-up with the theatre-loving, always artistically open Renoir; and this occurred sometime in 1933, a year or so before standard texts have assumed. In 2003, for example, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith updated his own 1967 book on Visconti with added notes on this point. Its importance is clear when we see that, though Toni was Visconti's first film job, with the Popular Front now up-and-running, he went straight in as assistant director.

William Empson at CambridgeRenoir and Visconti were to remain in steady contact until well after the start of World War II, and more collaborations soon followed: Une Partie de Campagne and Les Bas-fonds (both 1936). Yet, when discussing any of these films it's not surprising if we end up talking mostly about Renoir. Before going on to do just that — and if only to scotch the notion that, by the early '30s, diktats of Left and Right had already hardened the arteries of all social and creative possibility — I want to mention another,



much better-known, equally welcome arrival of youthful genius onto a scene, if anything, more fluid and receptive than ever. In 1930, just when the Talkies were panicking thousands of silent screen actors into grabbing the nearest elocution coach (see Singin' in the Rain) a twenty-four-year-old mathematics maestro, William Empson — having decided that the most natural thing in the world would be to stay on at Cambridge and do English — published one of the least linguistically hung-up, most excitingly articulate works of criticism of any era. The fact that it was also one of the most outrageously complex only makes the achievement more startling. While it continues to shape Eng Lit studies, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* might still seem irrelevant to Film. Yet when a critic of genius gets hold of crypto-expressionist sentiments in the sonnets of Shakespeare or Donne or — more obviously — in quintessentially noir plays like *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*, I think we're going beyond the loosely associative. Intrepidly enough, we're entering the brightest and darkest areas of research into Language, Class, and Media — not to mention the political philosophy of Belief and Being. Admittedly, when Renoir and Visconti began filming the true story of a working-class woman who shoots dead her abusive husband, it was not, as far as I know, because they'd been reading *Seven Types*. But — like Empson — they were also seeking the freshest, least prejudicial ways to explore a vividly complex, slowly darkening sense of reality.

I emphasize "slowly" because — despite the internationalising effects of cinema itself, and despite the bell-like note of rational hopes for an imminent fusion des races with which Toni's opening titles ring out — we remember that, in 1934, we're just a couple of years off the Spanish Civil War: the conflict that, for many, would finally bring home exactly how dark things were becoming. Before that, in books and films on both sides of the Atlantic we're dealing mainly with a fictional proto-noir ethos. For example, Roy del Ruth's 1931 version of Dashiell Hammett's *Maltese Falcon* had already hovered brightly, if briefly, overhead. And at a time when sex and violence had not yet been sorted into neatly separated American and European boxes, the pre-code sexiness of a now almost forgotten film would surely have struck a chord with Renoir and Visconti. Thankfully, neither man was ever the kind of brain-dead ideologue who saw "people's art" as one of the infamous "contradictions of capitalism." But, such was the turnover in new movies, del Ruth's rather urbane bird of prey would soon seem, even to the least demanding of audiences, not quite desperate enough for its next meal.

Of course, beyond early Hollywood and Hammett, other kinds of cultural terrain had already been opened to new traffic. A prime example, from as early as 1924, was George Gershwin's mighty engine of multi-ethnicity, *Rhapsody in Blue*. Maybe this kind of inclusive creative energy just made it that much harder for people to conceive of an accompanying — and still quite gentle — slide into world-wide, mono-cultural madness. Certainly by the mid-'30s Ernest Hemingway — who, like Hammett, had acquired his mix of serious and snappy amid the enormities of World War I — was off hunting in Africa, trying not to get caught up in yet another European danse macabre. But, reminding us how little of social reality will form into easily predictable patterns, by 1937 in an interesting if entirely coincidental balancing act, Visconti was in Hollywood, and Hemingway — with much more end-product — finally made it to war-torn Spain.

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Jean Renoir's *Toni* Situated on a kind of isthmus, Les Martigues is the location for the original police dossier around which *Toni* is built. Its rail services run on a viaduct system that, under the southern sun in Renoir's movie, looks more modernist/picturesque than wearily industrial. As though this were a straightforward documentary, we come into town and, at the end, out of it again with a trainload of cheerful Spanish workers, one of whom sings and plays folk guitar. Those who know Marcel Carné's *Les Enfants du Paradis* — and those for whom that pleasure still lies in store — will surely be thrilled by Renoir's way of bringing in these lovely sounds as a "natural" part of the action; and he did indeed take to sound cinema as easily — to use a Hitchcockism — as a duck to a quack. But Carné's own highly refined use of integrated — or diegetic — music wouldn't be achieved for another decade. So here's another petit coup from the cinematic pace-setter of the 1930s.



Still in the sun and still accompanied by our singer/guitarist, we walk through customs, French and Italian now added to Spanish dialogue. In fact, at this time Italians formed the bulk of the town's immigrant population, which was perhaps not irrelevant to Visconti's prominence on the shoot. As for being in this region at all, Renoir was determinedly doing without the help of his usual Parisian backers, who'd just ruined his hopes of a more fully-fledged *Madame Bovary*, resulting in the desperately thin model that did emerge. Never shy of going on the road, Renoir was therefore in vengeful artist mode. Not so furious, though, as to lose all sight of economic reality, he guessed that, with the right contacts, he could successfully pitch a rugged provençal tale to Monsieur Provence himself, Marcel Pagnol. In return for his financial support, Pagnol was given a writing option, but generously — and perhaps wisely — he decided to trust his equally famous northern counterpart with a script that was frankly a bit of a mystery to him.



In fact, if Toni developed any "tone," from Renoir's point of view it was already going wrong. So what we must expect — and what for the most part we get — is something far more flailing and archetypal than folkishly romantic and arch. However, when recounting the plot, the lack of readable conventions doesn't seem at all obvious. Aside from the multiculturalism, we could be summarising a lesser Thomas Hardy novel: Toni immediately finds a love he doesn't want (the devoted, French Marie); and, for the rest of his short life, wants a love he can never have (the flirtatious femme fatale, Spanish Josefa). Meanwhile, in a way that makes no great sense at the time, the fathers of Marie and Josefa die in full knowledge that their time is up. Then, with Toni's marriage as joyless as ever, Marie makes her highly cinematic "cry for help" — rowing out to bisect white sky and lake for a self-drowning that doesn't succeed but, nevertheless, has the desired effect. Morosely, Toni marries Marie, in the same ceremony that binds Josefa to his much despised Belgian work foreman, Albert. In the ensuing period, measured by the presence of Josefa's baby (whose is it, by the way?), Toni's sullen but largely passive frustration is only deepened when Josefa has a fling with that

undeserving egoist, Albert's lodger, Gabi. Albert isn't too thrilled about this either and resorts to a short bout of wife-beating. Unfortunately, having forced Josefa to cower under the kitchen table, while putting his belt back on he drops his pistol, whereupon Josefa seizes her chance for swift retribution. Toni arrives and decides to put Albert's body on the hillside and make it look like suicide. A local policeman catches him in the act, but Toni goes on the run; a brilliant overhead tracking shot of the fugitive dashing along the viaduct gives way to a static scene where he's challenged and shot by the anonymous fat guy who seems to go everywhere with an umbrella, but remembers this time to take a shotgun. Toni then dies in the arms of the older mentor/friend who's constantly been trying to help Toni and Marie get along. It's not Horatio and Hamlet — too many inarticulate silences already for that — but, told with the Noh-like-abruptness that hallmarks so many scenes, "happy" or "sad," another young life is lost, leaving audiences with a sense, not of melancholy inevitability, but utterly raw futility. (This is when we might remember the contrasting timeliness of the deaths mentioned above, though on first and even second viewing, that didn't occur to me.)

Jean Renoir's Toni Putting the above lines together reminds me that — if there were literally no sound — I could easily be talking about a film from the silent era, which was, of course, where Renoir's career began. Thinking again of Hardy and Carné, the basic theme of unattainable true love is just what we find in rural Wessex and the banlieux of Paris. Yet Renoir uses documentary distance (through outdoor scenes) and humanistic intimacy (up close and personal indoors) in such a strangely unpredictable and compressed melange as to defy attempts to snap Toni back into even the most smartly designed travelling chess set of genre. For now, after several viewings, I've decided that at least one important key to this fascinating but undeniably awkward movie is to see it not just as unique — almost any arresting film might deserve that epithet — but as unusually, perhaps uniquely, free from all tired literary connections, popular or classic. So maybe we owe a debt to those mean producers who refused to go with Renoir's vision of Bovary. But this now leaves us with something so purely filmic it hardly seems relevant to ask whether it's realistic or not. Coming to my rescue, I remember Orson Welles's suggestion that a good film can be "unreal and true." The man who made Citizen Kane at the age of twenty-five will do very nicely as another example of agelessly brilliant youth. And Welles, by the way, is not referring here to the uses of symbol or myth in cinema — though he might well be slyly hinting at their abuses. Applying these thoughts to Renoir, few of his films seem to me so unrealistic as to make the latter error. And if *The River* — another big location shoot, this time in India — does seem the obvious exception, its unashamedly youth-oriented humanism is free enough of sentimentality or genre cliché to have set Satyajit Ray off on his own extraordinary career.

D. J. M. Saunders