

The Lower Depths (Les Bas-fonds)

France | 1936 | 95 minutes

Credits

Director Jean Renoir
Screenplay Yevgeni Zamyatin/Jacques Companéez/
Jean Renoir/Charles Spaak (based on a
play by Maxim Gorky)

Photography Féodor Bourgasoff

Music Jean Wiener

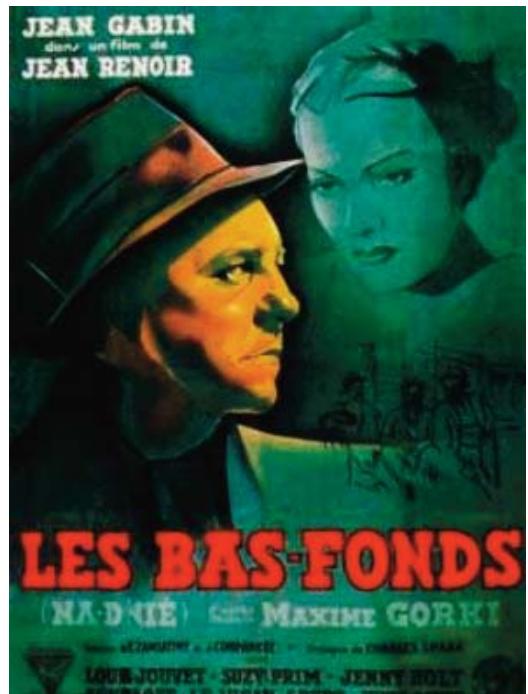
Cast

Wasska Pepel	Jean Gabin
Vassilissa Kostyleva	Suzi Prim
The Baron	Louis Jouvet
Nastia	Jany Holt

In Brief

One evening, a baron gambles away the last of his fortune at the card table. Returning home, he is surprised by a young burglar, Pepel, whom he befriends. When the baron loses his house to his creditors, he moves into the home for the poor where Pepel is staying.

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In its time, *Les Bas-fonds* was something of a groundbreaking film, offering an honest and humanist portrait of those at the lowest end of the social spectrum – crooks, gamblers, prostitutes and drunks. The film coincided with the Popular Front taking power in France, a time of great optimism and solidarity among the working classes. This all-too-brief period of bonhomie before the economic and political crises of the late 1930s (culminating in World War II) left its impact on a number of French films (most notably Julien Duvivier's *La Belle équipe*). *Les Bas-fonds* would certainly have been a very different film if it had been made at a different time.

Although overshadowed by Renoir's subsequent masterpieces (*La Grande Illusion* was made straight after this film), *Les Bas-fonds* is an impressive work, which, through its very evident humanity, remains a surprisingly modern film. Its wry comic touches have an ironic edge to them, a suggestion perhaps that Renoir might have preferred this to be a much darker work, in the vein of the poetic realists. This is also hinted at by the location filming which uses an almost neo-realist style to convey the grim reality of poverty. Noticeable also in this film is Renoir's admiration for his two heroes of the silent era, Eric Von Stroheim and Chaplin. In the final scene of the film he pays homage to Chaplin with a direct reference to his *Modern Times*.

The film's greatest selling point is its cast. The Gabin-Jouvet pairing is a masterstroke, with both actors providing fine performances that are charged with conviction and humanity. Despite their different backgrounds and approaches to their art, the two actors complement each other perfectly, the down-trodden and passionate proletarian played by Gabin making a poignant contrast with Jouvet's ruined but nonchalant aristocrat. The scene where the two characters meet and, realising the absurdity of the barriers which separate them, become friends is one of the enduring moments of the film, and is certainly in keeping with the ethos of the Popular Front. The large supporting cast give the film its richness and colour, with notable performances from Suzy Prim, Robert Le Vigan and Junie Astor.

Les Bas-fonds was based on a successful play by the celebrated Russian writer Maxim Gorki. Renoir was persuaded to make the film when it was suggested that Jean Gabin and Louis Jouvet would fill the leading roles. However, before agreeing to take on the project, Renoir insisted that the film be set in France (not Russia), and that some drastic changes be made to the plot. The most significant change was the ending; the tragic denouement in Gorki's play was replaced with a happier ending, in keeping with the mood of the time. Renoir was obliged to write to Gorki to receive permission for these alterations to the story, which was duly given (although Gorki died a few months before the film was released).

At a later stage, under pressure from the Communist Party (for which Renoir had great sympathies), the director was coerced into reinstating some of the Russian elements of the play – but in a half-hearted way. The characters were re-christened with Russian names, "franc" became "kopeck", a few samovars were thrown in, but the setting remained recognisably France of the mid-1930s. It is possible that it was this awkward mélange of French and Russian which prevented the film from being the popular success its producers had been expecting. The film was well-received by the critics, however, and was awarded the first Prix Louis Delluc in 1937. © James Travers 2002

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Jean Renoir