

# The Vanishing Corporal (Le Caporal Épingle)

Year | Country of Origin | Running Time

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Jean Renoir
<b>Screenplay</b>	Guy Lefranc/Jean Renoir/ Charles Spaak (based on a novel by Jacques Perret)
<b>Photography</b>	Georges Leclerc
<b>Music</b>	Joseph Kosma
<b>Cast</b>	
<b>Le caporal</b>	Jean-Pierre Cassel
<b>'Papa'</b>	Claude Brasseur
<b>Ballochet</b>	Claude Rich
<b>Hippolyte Dupieu</b>	Raymond Jourdan

## In Brief

An upper-class corporal from Paris is captured by the Germans when they invade France in 1940. Assisted and accompanied by characters as diverse as a morose dairy farmer, a waiter, a myopic intellectual, a working-class Parisian, and a German dental assistant, the corporal tries to escape from prison camps, sometimes making it a few yards, sometimes reaching the French border.



-No, I'm escaping, just like you.

-Is this your first try?

-My third. I've become a pro at this.

It is not easy to make a comedy about war. Especially a war as devastating as World War Two. There are people who believe that it still is not appropriate to mock the events that happened during the greatest conflict our world has ever seen. Some movies have been able to pull it off like Kelly's Heroes. But still, warfare is the greatest of human tragedies and the idea of juxtaposing it with comedy can seem sacrilege. But some directors have made the bold decision of trying anyway. One of those directors was the great cinematic humanist himself, Jean Renoir. In his penultimate film, *Le Caporal Épingle*, Renoir returns to a theme already explored in one of his earlier masterpieces, *La Grand Illusion*: the prison break.

Most people consider the two companion pieces. After all, the similarities are astounding between the two films. Both are about French soldiers trying to break out of a German prison camp during a world war. *La Grand Illusion* was based in World War One while *Le Caporal Épingle* inhabited the second. Both contain failed attempts executed by determined men who shrug off their losses and continue to try. Both end with just two men remaining making for a border. In *La Grand Illusion*, the border was Switzerland. In *Le Caporal Épingle*, the border is their home of Paris. It should also be mentioned that both were in black and white. *Le Caporal Épingle* was the first film that Renoir directed in black and white in over ten years. It raises questions of whether or not he truly tried to emulate his earlier success.

However, to call *La Grand Illusion* and *Le Caporal Épingle* companion pieces would be entirely incorrect. It would be like calling *La vita è bella* (*Life is Beautiful*) a companion piece to *Schindler's List*. They may share subject matters, but they are two entirely different movies with two entirely different agendas. *La Grand Illusion* is a cornerstone of the poetic realism movement, an early precursor to

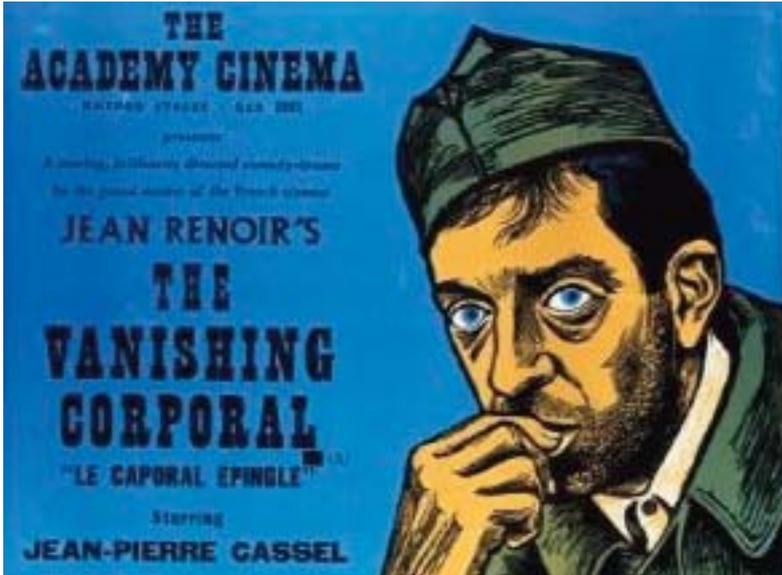


the film noir genre. It was serious in tone, spoke of the humanity that was innate within us all, and discussed serious social issues. *Le Caporal Épingle*, on the other hand, is a comedy. Renoir himself once even said that the movie was simple "entertainment." The hero is a corporal played by Jean-Pierre Cassel who would later go on to work with such greats as Buñuel, Altman, and Melville in his legendary *L'armée des ombres*. However, in this movie, he has no name. He is simply referred to as *Le Caporal*. His goal is simple; he wants to escape from prison and get back home to Paris. And try he does again and again and again.

But he is not alone in the prison. He lives with an assorted mish-mash of French prisoners. It is here that one of the biggest differences between *La Grand Illusion* and *Le Caporal Épingle* becomes apparent: the prisoners and guards themselves. *La Grand Illusion* dealt with officers and upperclassmen (take the dining scene right after the main characters are captured). The men in this movie are regular

Jean Renoir

# The Vanishing Corporal



foot soldiers. The first one we meet is trying to leave the camp because he is worried about his cows. After being pushed back and mocked by the German guards, he walks away muttering “Mais, mes vaches...” The other soldiers are insurance workers, waiters, and other lowly positions. Contrary to much of the civility shown to the prisoners by the guards in *La Grand Illusion*, the Germans in *Le Caporal Épinglé* push the French soldiers into forced labor. The days are long, the conditions bad, and the soup watery.

However, this is a comedy. We know this because in real life, an escaping French POW would not be allowed to live after trying to escape so many times. After he is captured following a particularly bold attempt to escape that managed to get him to the border, instead of getting a quick shot to the back of the head, he is sent to a “disciplinary camp” where he has to endure such tortures as forced aerobics for two months. He returns exhausted, but for the most part no worse for ware. A few spoonfuls of bean stew, a few sips of schnapps, and he's

ready to try again. Why is this? Well, if the movie were historically accurate, he would have been killed within the first 10-20 minutes of the movie. No hero, no movie. No movie, no audience, no ticket sales...you can see where I am going with this. So, he must be allowed to continue to escape and the guards must continue to catch him. At this, the audience laughs, and Renoir hopefully gets the funding for his next film.

Unlike so many comedies in foreign languages, the comedy remains intact after being translated. Scenes like the train station escape attempt are genuinely funny; It's rare when the single utterance of something so simple as “auf Wiedersehen” is so funny. Much of the humor comes from the escape methods themselves. They are not as elegant or well planned as those in *La Grand Illusion*. In fact, we find ourselves laughing at how simple and insipid their methods are. In the corporal's second escape attempt, he and another prisoner lock a German guard in a latrine while they hide on a truck carrying rubble, only to be dumped out in front of another guard. “What are you doing?” The guard yells. “Working,” they reply. They then immediately join ranks with the rest of the workers and being to pick the rubble apart. This is a far cry from the heartbreaking escape scene that required multiple stages and the sacrifice of a main character in *La Grand Illusion*.

But why did Renoir shoot this movie in such a way? Why is it so light hearted in comparison with his earlier work? Maybe it had to do with the times. In the years following World War One when *La Grand Illusion* was made, the idea of dignity amongst the upper classes and fair play among civilized men may have still remained. Of course, as the title says, it was all an illusion, but the characters, and certainly the director, tried to act as if it wasn't. However, twenty years after World War Two, after the Vichy Government and the Holocaust, after the Beaches at Normandy and the Firebombing of Berlin, all thoughts of a “civilized” war fought by “civilized” enemies had vanished. All preconceptions of innocence had vanished. The French prisoners now had comedic foils in the German guards because they weren't seen as good-natured men the way they were in *La Grand Illusion*, but instead as tyrannical, scowling occupiers.

But maybe the tone of the movie results from the actions of the director, Jean Renoir. In the Thirties, Jean Renoir was an internationally renown talent, producing such classics as *Boudu Saved from Drowning* and *La Bête Humaine* with such beloved French stars as Michel Simon and Jean Gabin. Then came the war, his flight from Europe to America, and his disastrous attempts at working in Hollywood. After clearing his head in 1949 by directing one of his true cinematic triumphs, *The River*, in India, he returned to Europe. He then focused on Technicolor musical comedies for his next three pictures. Who knows? By the time he directed *Le Caporal Épinglé*, maybe he was just in a softer state of mind. But then there is the fact that the studio meddled with the final cut of the film and Renoir later said that he didn't like it. Whether or not the final product of *Le Caporal Épinglé* actually fulfilled his artistic vision is a discussion best saved for another time. What can be said now is that in the twilight of his career, Jean Renoir managed to pull out one more great film for the ages. That he was able to accomplish such a feat is a testament to his artistic luminescence, which can be best summed up in the words that his friend Orson Welles wrote upon Renoir's death, “Jean Renoir: The Greatest of all Directors.”

- Nathanael Hood

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Jean Renoir