

“TOUCHEZ PAS AU GRISBI”

- RIALTO PICTURES PRESSBOOK-

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Directed by..... Jacques Becker
Produced by Robert Dorfmann
Screenplay Jacques Becker, Maurice Griffe, Albert Simonin
Dialogue..... Albert Simonin
Based on the novel by Albert Simonin (1953)
Assistant directors Marc Maurette, Jean-François Hauduroy,
Jean Becker
Director of photography..... Pierre Montazel
Cameraman André Dumaitre
Sets..... Jean d’Eaubonne, Jacques Gut
Sound Jacques Lebreton, Jacques Carrère
Editor..... Marguerite Renoir
Music..... Jean Wiener
Musical direction..... Ernest Guillou
with Jerry Mengo and his orchestra
Harmonica played by..... Jean Wetzel
Scriptgirl..... Colette Crochot
Make-up Jean Ulysse
Production manager Léon Carré
Studio Paris-Studio-Cinéma (Billancourt)
Shooting locations Paris and outskirts of Nice
Principal photography Sept. 21 - Dec. 18. 1953
Paris release..... March 17, 1954
U.S. release July 13, 1959 (55th St. Playhouse)
Subtitles (2003 Rialto re-release) Lenny Borger

A Del Duca Films (Paris) – Antares Produzione Cinematografica (Rome)
co-production

1954 black & white aspect ratio: 1.33:1 running time: 94 minutes

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CAST

Max le menteur Jean Gabin
Henri Ducros, alias Riton René Dary
Pierrot, the club owner (“Fats”) Paul Frankeur
Angelo Lino Ventura
Marco Michel Jourdan
Josy Jeanne Moreau
Lola Dora Doll
Madame Bouche Denise Clair
Marinette, Pierrot’s wife Gaby Basset
Oscar, the fence Paul Oetly
Huguette, his secretary Delia Scala
Fifi-le-Dingue¹ Daniel Cauchy
Ramon Vittorio Sanipoli
Bastien Angelo Dessy
Betty, the American Marilyn Buford
Hotel Moderna concierge Jean Riveyre

¹This character, a punk hood, is called “Fifi” and other female names, as Max and Pierrot’s way of humiliating him. “Le Dingue” means “the nutcase” or “the crackpot.”

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THE STORY

Max le Menteur (“Max the Liar”) and Riton are sitting pretty. The two aging hoods have just pulled off the heist of a lifetime — 50 million francs in gold bullion snatched at Orly airport. For Max, this *grisbi* (loot) will ensure him a cushy retirement; in addition, for Riton it will — or so he thinks — help him hold onto his two-faced girlfriend Josy who, along with Max’s moll Lola, is appearing in a new floor show at the nightclub of their long-time underworld buddy, Pierrot (nicknamed “Fats”).

But Max and Riton, whose friendship goes back 20 years, have another thing coming. Riton has stupidly gone and boasted to Josy about the loot, which Max has stashed away in a car locked up in his building’s parking garage. Josy passes the news on to Angelo, a young drug dealer whom Max discovers making out with Josy in her dressing room at Fats’ club.

Before Max and Riton can realize Angelo’s game, it’s too late. After a first failed attempt to nab both hoods, Angelo finally kidnaps Riton and puts the heat on Max to hand over the *grisbi* if he ever wants to see his friend alive again. Max, at first angered by Riton’s recklessness, soon realizes the selfishness of his own reaction.

When Angelo calls for an exchange — the *grisbi* for Riton — on a deserted nighttime country road outside Paris, Max asks Fats for help. Bringing their old weapons out of mothballs, they prepare for the bloodiest reckoning in the annals of the French underworld.

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NOTES ON “GRISBI” – BOOK AND MOVIE

By Lenny Borger

- When Albert Simonin’s *Touchez pas au Grisbi!*² appeared in bookshops early in 1953 as part of Gallimard’s famous *Série Noire* (number 148 in the collection), it became an overnight sensation, selling out its first printing of 200,000 copies in no time. Two weeks after publication, the novel received the prestigious Prix des Deux Magots literary prize. Simonin’s innovative use of argot was sometimes so impenetrable that Gallimard added a slang glossary. Many of Simonin’s words and expressions have since become part of idiomatic French.
- According to Jean Becker, the director’s son (who made his professional debut as third assistant director on *Grisbi* and also plays the nightclub doorman), the initiative to bring the book to the screen came from Jacques Becker, who immediately saw its cinematic possibilities. However, his interest turned out to be what was only suggested in the book: first, the friendship between Max and Riton, and, second, the image of a respected and feared underworld figure as a kind of grand bourgeois, a man concerned with his creature comforts and his retirement.
- Becker, with co-screenwriters Simonin and Maurice Griffe, jettisoned most of the plot-driven action and re-framed the film around Max and Riton, who in the novel is more talked about than seen and is bumped off two-thirds of the way through the action. Becker was also careful to water down the dialogue, keeping the hard-core argot to a minimum so as not to confuse audiences.
- Curiously, Jean Gabin was not Becker’s first choice for the role of Max, even though they’d known one another since Becker’s work as assistant to Jean Renoir. At the time, Gabin was in a career slump that began with his attempt to make a French studio comeback in the company of then-companion Marlene Dietrich. Becker had been considering Daniel Gélin or François Périer for the role but realized they were much too young for what he wanted to do with the material (both were in their early 30s!). As it turned out, Gabin was the right age — pushing 50 (Becker was 48). As François Truffaut wrote, *Grisbi* is “a movie about turning 50” (see full text on page 8). *Grisbi*’s success restored Gabin to public favor and won him the Best Actor prize at the Venice Film Festival.

² The exclamation point was dropped in the film title.

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- *Grisbi* also launched the career of another beloved French actor: Lino Ventura, who plays Max and Riton’s treacherous nemesis, Angelo, the drug dealer. Ventura, who’d never acted before, was cast when an Italian actor was needed among the leads to fulfill French-Italian co-production quotas of the time. Becker was told about an Italian-born wrestler and match organizer who spoke French without an accent and was “quite a character.” Becker called him in for an interview but Ventura played hard to get, saying he wasn’t interested in making movies and that if Becker wanted him, “it would cost.” He did however agree to a screen test—provided that Gabin do the scene with him. Gabin did and Ventura turned in a “sensational” test. The rest is movie history.
- The role of Marinette, the club manager’s wife, was played by Gaby Basset, who was Jean Gabin’s first wife, from 1925 to 1933. She died in 2001 at the age of 99.
- The role of Betty, the rich American who symbolizes the bourgeois luxury and tranquility to which Max aspires, was played by Marilyn Buford, Miss America of 1946.
- The character of Fifi, one of Angelo’s henchmen, played by Daniel Cauchy (soon to play Bob le Flambeur’s sidekick in Melville’s 1955 classic), was originally supposed to perish in the film’s apocalyptic showdown. But when filming moved down to Nice because of persistent rain and fog up north, Cauchy found himself with timetable problems, being committed to a film in Paris. Becker found a solution by having Max and his friends simply — if not quite understandably — throw Cauchy out of the car on their way to the film’s bloody climax.
- Becker’s producer was Robert Dorfmann, to become one of the leading French producers of the 60s. His credits include two all-time French b.o. champions, both starring Louis de Funès and Bourvil, *Le Corniaud* and *La Grande vadrouille*, as well as Jean-Pierre Melville’s last three films: *Army of Shadows*, *Le Cercle Rouge*, and *Un Flic*.
- *Grisbi* opened in France on March 17, 1954 to near unanimous critical praise and the best box office results Becker had known to date.

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“TOUCHEZ PAS AU GRISBI”

an appreciation by David Boxwell

Touchez pas au Grisbi is a paramount example of cultural cross-fertilization between France and America. [After *Grisbi*], French crime films took on a harder, tougher edge. They were faster paced and more kinetic; there was more overt violence, so the body counts got higher, and glossier women were more forcefully roughed up by thugs who dressed in sharper suits and hats than their 1930s counterparts. Crooks even started driving over-sized imported American convertibles around Montmartre, refusing to keep a low profile. These films moved out of the working-class neighborhoods or provinces [where pre-war “poetic realist” crime films like Carné’s *Le Jour se Lève* and Renoir’s *La Bête Humaine* were set) and started inhabiting the more glamorous parts of Paris.

Grisbi [paved the way] for two other great American-style heist films: Melville’s *Bob le Flambeur* and Jules Dassin’s *Rififi*. These mid-'50s crime movies collectively garnered enough attention from the New Wave critics-turned-directors to inspire their first efforts in the hard-boiled genre: Godard’s *Breathless* (1959) and Truffaut’s *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960).

In fact, in its day, Becker's film was well-respected enough for Jean Gabin to be awarded the Best Actor prize at the Venice Film Festival for his carefully contained and rueful performance as an aging hood out for one last heist to put him on easy street. A comfortable retirement is the ultimate desire for many criminals who are also, deep down, good bourgeois Frenchmen. And this hood is quintessentially middle-class in his style of living and highly performative sense of domestic proprietorship (there's a great extended sequence of Gabin and his partner-in-crime eating a midnight snack of pâté, washed down with a special white wine in an apartment that has an elaborate industrial-strength lock on the inside of the front door). We don't get much of an indication that he's even a criminal, since we don't see him pull off the job, only the desperate, and doomed, effort to preserve the spoils of crime a month after the job.

One of the great things about *Grisbi* is that the carefully delineated procedural conventions of the post-war heist film established by such influential American entries as *Criss-Cross* (Robert Siodmak, 1949) and

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The Asphalt Jungle (John Huston, 1950) aren't of interest to Becker. Indeed, Becker's film doesn't even bother to show the heist itself, merely a newspaper report of it. What's of more interest is the complicated and violent aftermath. Presumably the heist of 50 million francs in gold bullion from Orly Airport was easy; the hard part is waiting out the period it takes for the loot to “cool off” so that it can be fenced. Beset by a rival gang coveting the swag, and in danger of inadvertent betrayal by Riton, a sexually insecure and cuckolded partner-in-crime, Max (played by Gabin) serves as the subdued center of a noisy and cluttered world of tawdry nightclubs, sinister restaurants, and explosive roadside shootouts. Max is weary of the greed and stupidity of the underworld from which he wishes to escape. And out of Gabin's thin lips come such muttered, grim phrases as “I don't give a damn” and “I'm fed up,” expressing an exhaustion that might seem defeatist or even nihilistic, except for the unassailable loyalty to the pathetic Riton that gives Max his nobility and admirable moral strength.

So *Grisbi* patently elevates male homosocial desire above any other kind of love, and Max's seeming indifference to, or contempt for, underworld women (like Jeanne Moreau's lacquered Josy) exemplifies the degree to which post-war French crime films, like their American counterparts, could reduce women to dangerous and decorative objects. One of the most startling examples of the genre's retrograde sexual politics is embodied by Lola (played by the too-aptly named actress Dora Doll) in her baby outfit, carrying a huge bottle of milk as a prop for a nightclub routine and proud that her bib is short enough to reveal acres of cleavage. [The American] Betty is one woman, at least, who merits Max's amorous attention, but only because she's not one of the molls or showgirls who swarm around suckers like Riton and Angelo (Lino Ventura) and, in Max's words, “use [them] up.” She's got “class,” even though she's as ornamental and materialistic as every other woman on display in the film. Betty represents a world to which Max aspires, but can only attain through illegal and illegitimate means. Gabin gives a great performance of a man who wants to be in a totally different milieu, but only knows one way to gain access to it -- a futile and destructive way of living which he himself has come, tragically, to recognize well before the film ends with a harmonica tune spun mechanistically on a Wurlitzer juke-box imported from America.

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FRANCOIS TRUFFAUT ON “TOUCHEZ PAS AU GRISBI”

There are no theories in circulation about Jacques Becker, no scholarly analyses, no theses. Neither he nor his work encourages commentary, and so much the better for that.

The truth is that Becker has no intention of mystifying or demystifying anyone; his films are neither statements nor indictments, which means that his work is outside the parameters of current fashion, and we could even place him at the opposite pole to every tendency in French cinema.

It's not so much the choice of subject which characterizes Becker as how he chooses to treat this subject and the scenes to illustrate it. While he will keep only what is essential in the dialogue, or the essential part of what is superfluous, he will readily make short work of something anyone else would handle with extreme care, so that he can take longer over characters having breakfast, buttering their toast, brushing their teeth³, etc. There is a convention whereby lovers are only allowed to kiss in a dissolve. If in a French film you show a couple undressing and walking around in nightclothes in the bedroom, it would be meant as a joke. You could suppose that these unspoken rules are dictated by a concern for elegance. What does Becker do in a situation like this? That taste for doing things the hard way which I have already mentioned will make him handle the scene in a way that breaks the rules. In *Casque d'Or* he shows us Reggiani in a nightshirt and Simone Signoret in a nightgown; in *Grisbi*, Gabin in pajamas.

What happens to Becker's characters matters less than the way it happens to them. *Touchez pas au Grisbi* is about nothing more than a demand to hand over 96 kilos of gold. "What most interests me is the characters," Becker says. As a matter of fact, the real subjects of *Grisbi* are growing old and friendship. This theme came through clearly in [Albert] Simenon's book but very few screenwriters would have known how to bring it out, pushing the violent and picturesque action to the background. Simenon is forty-nine and Becker forty-eight; *Grisbi* is a film about reaching fifty. At the end of the film, Max (Gabin), like Becker, puts on his glasses "to read." When Angelo kidnaps Riton to force Max to hand over the fifty million, Becker comments on Max's legendary

³ as Max and Riton do in *Grisbi*

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friendship for Riton but also, unwittingly, on Max growing old, for he is allowed to imagine that Max, ten years earlier, would have got things moving to get back both his friend and the money, and settle his score with Angelo, too.

The beauty of the *Grisbi* characters comes from their muteness, the economy of their gestures. They only speak or act only to say or do the essential. Like Monsieur Teste⁴, Becker kills the puppet in them. These killers become no more than tomcats facing one another. I see *Grisbi* as a kind of settling of scores between big cats, but high-class cats – tired and, if I dare say it, used up.

For those of us who are twenty or a little older⁵, Becker's example is both instructive and encouraging. Renoir we've known only as a genius, while Becker was making his debut at the same time we were discovering cinema. We were present at his first tries and experiments. We have watched as the body of his work was put together. Becker's success is that of a young man who could see only one path, who chose it, and whose dedication to films has been repaid.

-- excerpted from the original review in *Cahiers du Cinéma* (1954). Translated by Liz Heron.

JACQUES BECKER (director/co-screenwriter)

Born in Paris in 1906, the son of a wealthy industrialist and a Scotswoman of Irish descent, Jacques Becker developed an early passion for jazz, movies and mechanics. At the age of 18 he got a job on an ocean liner operating between Le Havre and New York. During one crossing he met famed Hollywood director King Vidor, who purportedly offered him a job on the production of his upcoming film, *The Crowd* (1928). The opportunity came to nothing.

Becker met his future mentor Jean Renoir⁶ during vacations spent at Marlotte, thanks to a mutual friend of their families, Paul Cézanne (another famous painter's son). Their friendship grew through Becker's long, difficult apprenticeship as a filmmaker, with Becker appearing as an extra in Renoir's last silent film, *Le Bled* (1929). Becker's first official

⁴ *Monsieur Teste* is a famed novel by French poet Paul Valéry (1871-1945)

⁵ Truffaut was 22 years old when this piece was first published.

⁶ See Renoir's appreciation of Becker on page 12.

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collaboration came with Renoir’s 1932 Maigret murder mystery, *La Nuit du Carrefour*, on which he served as second assistant director and production manager. He was then promoted to first assistant on *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932), in which he had an amusing cameo as a poet on a park bench. Becker would remain Renoir’s assistant and closest collaborator until 1938, working on some of his greatest films, especially *Grand Illusion*, in which he briefly appeared as a British POW with a very un-British accent⁷.

At the same time, Becker tried to get his own directing career off the ground. In 1935, he made two comedy shorts, *Une Tête qui Rapporte*, and (in collaboration with another struggling tyro, Pierre Prévert) *Le Commissaire est Bon Enfant*, based on a famous one-act farce. Becker was originally set to direct what would become *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, but in a last-minute turnaround, the project was assigned to Renoir. This led to a brief falling out between the two friends.

Under Renoir’s aegis and thanks to the producers of *Grand Illusion*, Becker finally landed his first feature film assignment, *L’Or du Cristobal*, a tale of modern piracy on the high seas based on a novel by the popular Flemish author Albert t’Serstevens [*Sic!*]. Unfortunately, budget problems and the outbreak of the “phony war” led to a suspension of the film, which was finished in 1940 by another director. Becker disowned the film entirely. His only other credit at this time was as assistant director on a Fernandel comedy filmed in... Berlin!

Ironically, as was the case with other young hopefuls of the 30s (Robert Bresson, Claude Autant-Lara, Henri-Georges Clouzot and Jean Delannoy), Becker got his big break under the German Occupation. Repatriated home from a German POW camp (after having faked an epileptic fit), he finally made his first official feature, *Dernier Atout*. Though an uninspired substitute for Hollywood gangster movies, it was a commercial success and confirmed Becker as a director to follow. He immediately went on to make two of the finest films of the Occupation years: *Goupi-mains Rouges* (1943), an off-beat comedy-mystery about a murder in a greedy peasant family, and *Falbalas* (1945), a study of pathological Don Juanism set in the world of Paris high fashion (a setting Becker knew well thanks to his mother’s professional experience).

⁷In *Grand Illusion*, it’s Becker who has a memorable fit when asked to hand over his valuables, stomping on his pocketwatch rather than surrendering it to the Germans.

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Though Becker was now one of the leading hopes of the post-war French cinema, he was not afraid of making films of modest thematic scope. *Antoine and Antoinette* (1947), a portrait of a young working class couple, was small in scale but enriched by Becker's sympathetic attention to character and detail. These qualities also enhanced *Rendezvous de Juillet* (1949), a group portrait of jazz-crazy young people in post-war Saint-Germain-des-Près.

After another Parisian comedy about a young couple, *Edouard & Caroline* (1951), Becker produced the masterpiece he is perhaps best remembered by, *Casque d'or* (1952), a tragic love story set among the *apaches* of *fin-de-siècle* Paris, with Simone Signoret at her most luminous. Ironically, the film flopped domestically upon its first release, though its success abroad subsequently helped the film rebound favorably at home.

Rue de l'Estrapade, another domestic comedy, followed in 1953, and then came *Touchez pas au Grisbi*. To the surprise of many admirers, Becker went from this triumph to direct the big-budget Fernandel vehicle *Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves* (which he has signed to do before the success of *Grisbi*). The film was a fatal mis-marriage of temperaments but a box office success. Becker followed this with *The Adventures of Arsène Lupin* (1956), a stylish comedy mystery about Maurice Leblanc's gentleman-thief, which succeeded perfectly on its own modest level.

Montparnasse 19 (1957), a project about the life of Modigliani, developed by Max Ophuls at the time of his death, was bequeathed to Becker. Becker re-wrote the script to suit his own artistic preoccupations, but, saddled with a miscast star (Gérard Philipe), he could not add the film to his A-list of successes.

Becker's final film, however, was one of his greatest artistic achievements, though a commercial failure: *Le Trou* (1960), an almost documentary style drama about an aborted prison break, based on an autobiographical novel by José Giovanni. Becker died during post-production at age 54. *Le Trou* was finished by his son and then-assistant, Jean Becker.

Becker's second wife was actress Françoise Fabian, who played the title role in Eric Rohmer's *My Night at Maud's*.

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JEAN RENOIR ON JACQUES BECKER

Before proceeding further with my personal recollections, I must speak about my assistant, Jacques Becker. I can't get used to the idea that Jacques is dead. He was my brother and my son; I can't believe that he's now rotting in his grave. I would sooner think that he's in some corner of the next world, waiting for us to make another film together.

When Jacques first came to see me, he was a youngster and the perfect embodiment of everything that I most dislike -- a member of the French upper-class, well acquainted with bars and nightclubs and given to the pursuit of elegant sports. But when I got past that veneer I found myself confronted by someone who was both lovable and ardent. His enthusiasm for the films which I also liked, notably Stroheim's *Greed*, and above all his approach to his fellow men definitely rid me of the idea that he was a snob. He loved mankind not in any generalized, theoretical way but directly and in terms of the individual. He had no prejudices in his choice of friends, being as capable of sturdy attachment to a plumber as to a well-known writer.

[Jacques] was passionately interested in my film activities, but always with the conviction that his passion would remain platonic. He saw no way of escaping his fate, which was to be an honest manufacturer of batteries. He was then twenty and possessed a talent for elegance. He understood fashion and knew how to adapt it to his own personality. I'm not thinking only of clothes, but of the modes of thought and action, of seating oneself, of paying the waiter who serves the drink in a café, which were current among the small group of people who were "in the know." In all the ritual gestures of life he was ten years ahead of his time.

During the making of *Grand Illusion*, we decided to live together. The affection between us went far beyond the bounds of normal friendship, so much so indeed that had it not been for our physical aspect, ill-intentioned minds might have suspected a relationship of quite another kind. And why not? I am a firm believer in loving friendships in which there is no sexual element. The relationship between Rauffenstein and Boieldieu in *Grand Illusion* was simply a love story. Our friendship was to last eight years until we were separated by the second World War. When I returned to France, Jacques Becker had become a leading film director in his own right. He went his way as I had gone mine.

-- excerpted from *My Life and My Films* by Jean Renoir (1974, Atheneum), translated by Norman Denny

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JEAN GABIN (Max Le menteur)

Born Jean-Alexis Moncorgé in Paris in 1904, Gabin was the child of music hall artists. At age 18 he followed in their footsteps, becoming a music hall and operetta star, and played leading man to the legendary Mistinguett (who had also partnered Maurice Chevalier). He continued to sing into his early films, even when cast as the young Parisian street tough (as in Anatole Litvak's 1932 *Coeur de Lilas*). Julien Duvivier was the first to recognize his full dramatic potential and cast him in *La Bandera* (1935), *La Belle Equipe* (1935) and *Pépé le Moko*⁹ (1937), three films that laid the foundation for the Gabin myth of the tragic working-class (or déclassé) hero.

Gabin's talents were magnified by several other great French directors of the time: Renoir in *The Lower Depths*, *La Bête Humaine* and *Grand Illusion*¹⁰, Jean Grémillon and Marcel Carné whose pre-war masterpieces *Quai des Brumes* and *Le Jour se Lève* owe as much to Gabin's performances as they do to Jacques Prévert's screenplays for their lasting power and poignancy.

With the war and the Occupation, Gabin went into exile in the U.S. where he made two undistinguished Hollywood films (*Moontide* and *The Imposter*) before returning home with the Free French forces. His post-war career got off to a rocky start when he and then-companion Marlene Dietrich abandoned Marcel Carné's *Les Portes de la Nuit*, but he successfully negotiated his eventual screen gentrification, moving away from doomed working class heroes to middle-class patriarchs and gentleman gangsters. He effectively made this transition in Becker's *Touchez pas au Grisbi*, for which he won the Best Actor award at Venice.

Though increasingly less selective about his roles and directors, Gabin racked up some distinguished credits in the 50s that, in addition to *Grisbi*, included Max Ophüls' *Le Plaisir* (1952), Duvivier's *Voici les Temps des Assassins* (1955) and Claude Autant-Lara's *La Traversée de Paris* (1956) and *En Cas de Malheur* (1959). He remained a major French star right up until his death in 1976.

⁹ Re-released by Rialto Pictures in 2002.

¹⁰ Re-released by Rialto Pictures in 1999.

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JEANNE MOREAU (Josy)

A graduate of the Paris Conservatory of Dramatic Art, she made both her stage and screen debuts in 1948. But while her theatrical career was gaining momentum almost from the start, with the Comédie-Française and later with the Théâtre National Populaire, she remained a lower-rung screen actress for 10 years. It was Louis Malle, then a fledgling director, who launched her into true stardom and international recognition with *Elevator to the Gallows* in 1957 and *The Lovers* in 1958. She has since become a widely respected star of French and international films, an incarnation of French femininity, an intelligent, subtle, intuitive actress, projecting both worldly sophistication and earthy sensuality, in a wide range of roles. Nobody has ever worked with a more diverse and acclaimed array of international filmmakers; in addition to Malle, Moreau's directors included Orson Welles, Jean Renoir, Luis Buñuel, Michelangelo Antonioni, Tony Richardson, François Truffaut, Marguerite Duras, Elia Kazan, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, John Frankenheimer, Philippe de Broca, Jacques Demy, Peter Brooks, Luc Besson, Ismail Merchant, Wim Wenders, and many others. In 1976 she made her debut as a director with *La Lumière*. She recently gave an acclaimed performance as her friend Duras in *Cet amour-là*. She has received lifetime achievement awards from the Berlin and Venice film festivals and in 2003 received an honorary Palme d'or at Cannes.

LINO VENTURA (Angelo)

Born Angelo Borrini in Parma, Italy, Lino Ventura emigrated with his family to France at the age of eight. He found his first calling as a professional wrestler and fight manager. Ventura's success in his debut appearance in *Grisbi* immediately brought him other screen parts, often as a heavy opposite Gabin. In 1956, his popularity continued its upward arc when he embodied a muscle-bound French secret agent nicknamed The Gorilla in the first of a popular series of commercial spy thrillers. Two years later the young Claude Sautet cast him in the lead of his superb first feature, *Classe tous risques*, in which Ventura began to show the instinctive talents that would make him one of France's best-loved stars. He became a certified French movie star in the 1961 war movie *A Taxi for Tobruk*.

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Though often restricted to playing gangsters and tough guys, Ventura displayed depth and subtlety behind his gruff, chunky exterior. He even moved easily into tongue-in-cheek comedy in Georges Lautner's *Les Tontons Flingueurs* (1963) and two Claude Lelouch films, *Money Money Money* (*L'Aventure c'est l'aventure*, 1971) and *A Pain the A...* (*L'Emmerdeur*, 1973)¹¹, in which he played the stone-faced foil to Jacques Brel's suicidal schlemiel.

Two of Ventura's finest roles came under Jean-Pierre Melville's direction, in *Le Deuxième Souffle* (1966) and the great French Resistance epic, *Army of Shadows* (*L'Armée des ombres*, 1969)¹². He also turned in memorable performances in Francesco Rosi's *Illustrious Corpses* (1975), Claude Miller's *Garde à vue* (1981) and was a fine Jean Valjean in Robert Hossein's *Les Misérables* (1981).

Ventura died in 1987. Oddly, while no Paris street is named for native son Gabin, a square in Montmartre bears the Italian-born actor's name.

RENE DARY (Riton)

Born in 1905, Dary's movie career peaked early -- he was only three when he was featured under the name of Bébé, then Bébé Abelard, in his own series of kids' comedy shorts directed by Louis Feuillade for Gaumont between 1908 to 1914. As an adult, Dary abandoned the studios for such disparate careers as boxer (as Kid René) and operetta singer. He returned to film acting (and sometimes producing) in 1935, becoming popular playing soft-at-the-center tough guys. During the German Occupation he thrived as a sort of stand-in for Jean Gabin who had opted for exile in the U.S. *Grisbi* was the memorable high point of a mediocre screen career which terminated with a role in Walerian Borowczyk's *Goto, Island of Love* (1969). He died in 1974.

¹¹ Re-made in Hollywood by Billy Wilder as *Buddy, Buddy* (1981) with Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau.

¹² *Army of Shadows* has never been released in the United States. A new 35mm restoration will be released in 2005 by Rialto Pictures.

“TOUCHEZ PAS AU GRISBI”

- RIALTO PICTURES PRESSBOOK-

ALBERT SIMONIN (story & co-screenplay)

Simonin, the son of an artificial flower manufacturer, was born in 1905 and raised on the means streets of La Chapelle, a notorious working class neighborhood on the northern outskirts of Paris. Obligated to go to work at age 12, Simonin plied a large variety of trades in his youth before getting into journalism. His experiences as a taxi driver led to his co-authoring a first book, *Voilà Taxi* in 1935. But another 17 years would go by before he tried his hand at another book: *Touchez pas au Grisbi*, which was published in 1953 as part of the Editions Gallimard's prestigious “Série Noire” collection¹³. Overnight, French argot became part of everyday language and literature. Simonin's masterly use of slang was so dense that Gallimard had to include a glossary.

Simonin's success immediately produced imitators, of whom the most talented was Auguste Le Breton, whose *Rififi* followed a year later in the Série Noire collection, with Jules Dassin's famed screen version¹⁴ following hard on the heels of Becker's film of *Grisbi*. The two films became the twin beacons of French gangster movies for the next decade.

Simonin produced two follow-ups to *Grisbi* featuring his gangster hero Max le menteur, *Le Cave se rebiffe* (1954) and *Grisbi or not Grisbi* (1955). Both were adapted to the screen, the later famously so by Georges Lautner in 1963 under the title *Les Tontons flingueurs*, a now-classic pastiche of the genre and conventions Simonin created single-handedly a decade earlier. Among Simonin's other filmed novels, *Du mouron pour les petits oiseaux* (1960) was adapted by Marcel Carné in 1963. Simonin's memoirs, *Confessions of a Child of La Chapelle*, were published in 1977. He died in 1980.

¹³ “Série Noire” is a play on a French idiom meaning a run of bad luck; it was apparently suggested by Jacques Prévert as the title for Gallimard's thriller collection. “Film Noir” is a descendant of the literary term “roman noir,” which originally referred to the English gothic novel but is now used almost exclusively to describe the thriller novel.

¹⁴ Re-released by Rialto Pictures in 1999.

“TOUCHEZ PAS AU GRISBI”

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JEAN WIENER (composer)

Born in 1896, Wiener’s long, extraordinarily eclectic musical career ranged from classical to jazz, from avant-garde to film music. A master of improvisation, he inaugurated his famous musical genre-mixing evenings, the “salad concerts,” with fellow pianist Clément Doucet at the famous Right Bank cabaret, *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*. His virtuoso keyboard style and love of jazz earned him the nickname “the French Gershwin.”

Weiner was credited with music for some 300 films— from Louis Jouvet’s film of his famous stage vehicle, *Knock* (1932) and Robert Bresson’s debut (comic!) featurette, *Les Affaires Publiques* (1934) to Bresson’s late films, *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1965) and *Mouchette* (1966), both upcoming Rialto Pictures re-releases¹⁵. In addition to Becker, his most distinguished film work was done with Julien Duvivier (some 10 films), Jean Renoir (*Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, 1935), Louis Daquin, and Georges Franju.

Weiner composed works for piano, orchestra, set numerous poems by Robert Desnos to music and wrote a famous symphony for orchestra and accordion. He died in 1982.

JEAN WIENER ON THE GRISBI THEME

Jean Wiener’s harmonica melody for Grisbi remains one of the most famous French movie themes of all time. Its success was such that the melody was quickly supplied with lyrics for a vocal version. Re-titled “The Touch,” the theme even reached the United States — long before the film did¹⁶— with Norman Gimbel¹⁷ providing English lyrics.

In his memoirs, Jean Wiener recalled how the Grisbi music was born.

¹⁵ *Au Hasard Balthazar* opens in New York in October.

¹⁶ The theme was recorded in 1954 and 1955 by at least 13 American artists, yet the movie remained unreleased here until 1959.

¹⁷ A decade later, Gimbel’s English lyrics for “I Will Wait for You”, the haunting refrain from Jacques Demy’s *Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (music by Michel Legrand), would help make the song a huge hit in the United States.

“TOUCHEZ PAS AU GRISBI”

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THE GRISBI THEME (cont.)

...The most outstanding composers can lack both the feeling for and understanding of what the moving image requires. And it's not the number of musicians we use that makes the big difference: finding the right tone, even if it's performed by a single instrumentalist, is much more important; there are many examples of this—remember *The Third Man*, *La Strada*, *Moulin Rouge*, and my own adventure on the film *Touchez pas au Grisbi*. I had followed the shooting closely and had had frequent discussions with Jacques Becker, a man I was very fond of. We both agreed that I would work on two themes: the theme for Jean Gabin, who, before pulling a hold-up would say to the members of his gang, “Lay off me! I want to play my tune”; and most of all (and this theme seemed the most important), the friendship between Gabin and Dary... As soon as Marguerite Renoir (the editor, and a friend) provided me with the final timing of the scenes, I began to look for that theme; and when I found it, I wrote the score with unusual enthusiasm. But I gave scant attention to the other theme, the record melody. The recording sessions were coming up. When Marguerite asked, worried, if I had written everything, I explained my theme idea. She then told me that Becker had thought of asking an American musician he admired, Mezz Mezzrow¹⁸, to give him one of his melodies for the record scene. Marguerite was adamant: “You're the one who has to compose it...”

So, one night, I sat down at my piano, and within five minutes I was singing the “melody” of the record scene and writing down the notes; then – and for me, this is the only explanation for its subsequent success — I thought of having this tune played on the harmonica. Some time before, I'd heard a young musician, Jean Wetzel, playing this instrument and was impressed by the potency of the tone. The next morning, I phoned Wetzel and asked him to come over at noon. I had asked Becker to come by around 1 o'clock. His enthusiasm was immediate: “What luck! You're going to be rich!” he said as he left. I have to admit I attached no importance to this minor “folly.” But the recording day arrived: in the afternoon, I stormed out of the studio, asking Marguerite to represent my “interests,” as Jacques, that morning, had “thrown into the garbage” everything I had composed for my beautiful friendship theme and replaced it with the *Grisbi* theme!

¹⁸ Mezzrow and his orchestra had previously provided a jazz score for Becker's *Rendez-vous de Juillet* (1949).

“TOUCHEZ PAS AU GRISBI”

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Shortly after the film’s premiere, when all the music shops in Paris were wildly promoting the recordings the music firms had rushed out, Becker phoned me: “Still mad at me, Jean?” What could I say? Thanks to his stubbornness, I was going to make the only big commercial killing of my career; thanks most of all to *Grisbi*, I was going to have the great, inexpressible pleasure of hearing it sung and whistled by everyone: in the street, in cafés, by slot machines, by the painter painting the shutters on the house across the street, by the little telegraph boy who’s just leaned his bicycle against my door; the world...had my melody in their heads, in their hearts. Six months after the record came out, a friend phoned me from Rome: “If this keeps up,” he said, “your tune’s going to become the Italian national anthem.” For an entire year, the recordings kept pouring in from all over the world. “Larry Adler, the Horowitz of the harmonica,” recorded it. I realized why I had the preface of this book written by my friend Vincent Scotto¹⁹: he’d experienced this joy not for one tune, but for hundreds. And all this because I’d hit on the idea of using an harmonica and also because the first eight bars had miraculously deeply affected people and stayed with them...

-- from *Allegro Appassionato* by Jean Weiner (Paris: Belfond, 1978)
[excerpt translated by Lenny Borger]

LENNY BORGER (English subtitles)

Born and raised in Brooklyn, translator and film historian Lenny Borger has lived for 25 years in Paris, where he was the long-time correspondent and critic for *Variety*. He has re-titled all of Rialto Pictures’ French classics since the company’s acclaimed re-release of *Grand Illusion* in 1999. Prior to *Grisbi*, he tackled the French argot of Jules Dassin’s *Rififi*, Jean-Pierre Melville’s *Bob le Flambeur*, Julien Duvivier’s *Pépé le Moko* and Henri-Georges Clouzot’s *Quai Des Orfèvres* – all reissued theatrically by Rialto. He has also created sorely-needed new subtitles for the DVD releases of Marcel Carné’s *Children of Paradise*, three classics by René Clair (*Under the Roofs of Paris*, *Le Million* and *A Nous la Liberté*), Clouzot’s *Le Corbeau*, and Renoir’s *Rules of the Game*. Working with fellow translator Cynthia Schoch, Borger has also subtitled recent films by Bertrand Tavernier, Patrice Chéreau and Jean-Luc Godard.

¹⁹ Scotto’s eighty film scores include *Pépé le Moko* (and its American re-make *Algiers*) and Pagnol’s *The Baker’s Wife*.

“TOUCHEZ PAS AU GRISBI”

- RIALTO PICTURES PRESSBOOK -

RIALTO PICTURES

Rialto Pictures, a company specializing in the re-release of classic films, was founded in 1997 by Bruce Goldstein. A year later, Goldstein was joined by Adrienne Halpern as co-president. Last year, Eric DiBernardo joined the company as National Sales Director.

Rialto's releases have included Renoir's *Grand Illusion*, Carol Reed's *The Third Man*, Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria*, Jules Dassin's *Rififi*, De Sica's *Umberto D.*, Godard's *Contempt*, *Band of Outsiders* and *A Woman is a Woman*, Melville's *Bob Le Flambeur*, Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko*, Buñuel's *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* and *Diary of a Chambermaid*, John Schlesinger's *Billy Liar*, Clouzot's *Quai des Orfèvres*, Mike Nichols' *The Graduate*, Mel Brooks' *The Producers*, and many others. This year, Rialto has had tremendous success with *Le Cercle Rouge*, a late noir masterwork by Jean-Pierre Melville, being released for the very first time in its complete, uncut version. The company's very first first-run film, *Murderous Maids*, the chilling true story of two homicidal sisters in 1930s LeMans, will be released on DVD in September 2003.

This fall, Rialto will re-release Georges Franju's *Eyes without a Face*, described by Pauline Kael as “perhaps the most elegant horror film ever made,” and Robert Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar*, voted one of the great films of the 20th century in the British Film Institute's 2002 international critics and filmmakers poll.

In 1999, Rialto received a special “Heritage Award” from the National Society of Film Critics. In 2000, Rialto received a special award from the New York Film Critics for its re-release of *Rififi*, presented to Goldstein and Halpern by Jeanne Moreau. The Rialto partners have each received the French order of Chevalier of Arts and Letters.

rialtopictures.com

Biographies and pressbook compilation: Lenny Borger
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Special thanks to Jean Becker

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