

# TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 17

7 P.M. • HUMANITIES

QUADRANGLE

ALICE CINEMA

# GRAND ILLUSION

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM  
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



GRAND ILLUSION is, in the words of Kevin Maher, “a peerless film that makes sweeping rhetorical statements about the futility of war while maintaining a laser-sharp focus on an ensemble of meticulously drawn characters.” Others have praised it as “one of the true masterpieces of the screen” (Pauline Kael), “the greatest World War I movie ever made” (Mick LaSalle), “one of the key humanist expressions to be found in the movies” (Jonathan Rosenbaum), “a model of simplicity and grace” (Kenneth Turan), “funny, heart-wrenching, nail-biting, caustic, and profound” (Stephen Garrett), “soaringly elegiac” (Stanley Kauffman), and “a sorrowful, acutely thoughtful, and wholly imperishable masterpiece” (Tim Robey). Even Franklin Delano Roosevelt weighed in on GRAND ILLUSION, saying, “Everyone who believes in democracy should see this film.”



It tells the story of a group of French officers attempting to escape from a series of World War I POW camps. Through a cacophony of languages, class markers, musical genres, and acting styles, it examines the collapse of old social systems brought on by that war, from the perspective of filmmakers on the cusp of World War II. André Bazin—one of the first great scholars of director Jean Renoir—remarked, “Grand illusions are doubtless the dreams which help men to live, such as a simple obsession with pyrography or translating Pindar, but more than this, the grand illusions are the illusion of hatred, which arbitrarily divides men who in reality are not separated by anything; the illusion of boundaries, with the wars which result from them; the illusion of races, of social classes. The message of the film is thus a demonstration *a contrario* of the fraternity and equality of men.”

Renoir's World War I service contributed greatly to his interest in cinema, both because of all the Chaplin and Griffith films he watched while in the hospital recuperating from a bullet wound, and because his work as a reconnaissance pilot gave him hands-on experience with a camera. (For GRAND ILLUSION, Jean Gabin was costumed in Renoir's old uniform.) One of his fellow pilots, Major Armand Pinsard—who was shot down seven times, and who was captured and escaped seven times—saved Renoir's life during combat, and Renoir claimed Pinsard's stories were the inspiration for GRAND ILLUSION. Unable to film in Germany due to the rising fascist threat, Renoir opted for Alsace on the upper Rhine, where locations included artillery barracks in Colmar constructed under Wilhelm II and Upper Koenigsbourg Castle.

GRAND ILLUSION premiered at the Marivaux in Paris in June, 1937, and screened that August at the Venice Film Festival, where it was given a newly-invented ensemble award to avoid giving it the top prize, then known as the Mussolini Cup. The film was banned in Italy and Germany, with Goebbels calling it “Cinematic Public Enemy #1”. It was also soon banned in France for the duration of the war, due to its anti-war message. (It had been a huge hit in France before the ban, selling 12 million tickets.) It was released in the U.S. in September of '37, and became the first foreign language film nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture.

It was long believed that GRAND ILLUSION's original nitrate negative had been lost during a 1942 Allied air raid, and when Renoir oversaw the restoration of the film in the late '50s, he had to work from a poor-quality print. However, the Germans had in fact confiscated the negative in 1940 when they entered Paris, and sent it with other stolen French film material to the Reichsfilmarchiv vaults in Berlin. The vaults were located in what would soon be the Soviet zone, and the Soviets shipped material from the vaults—including the GRAND ILLUSION negative—to Gosfilmofond film archive in Moscow. The negative was returned to France as part of a large swap in the '60s, but for years it sat unidentified in storage at the Toulouse Cinémathèque. In the '90s, new prints were made from the pristine rediscovered negative, with an American rerelease by Rialto in 1999. That same year, GRAND ILLUSION became the very first film released on DVD by the Criterion Collection.

DIRECTED BY **JEAN RENOIR**

SCREENPLAY BY **CHARLES SPAAK**  
AND **JEAN RENOIR**

CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **CHRISTIAN MATRAS**

PRODUCED BY **RÉALISATION D'ART**  
**CINÉMATOGRAPHIQUE** (1937), 113 MINS.

STARRING **JEAN GABIN, DITA PARLO, PIERRE FRESNAY, ERICH VON STROHEIM, JULIEN GARETTE, AND MARCEL DALIO**

**DID YOU KNOW:** THE BRITISH OFFICER WHO DESTROYS HIS WATCH RATHER THAN GIVE IT TO THE GERMANS WAS PLAYED BY JACQUES BECKER, GRAND ILLUSION'S ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, WHO WOULD LATER WIN RENOWN FOR WRITING AND DIRECT FILMS SUCH AS CASQUE D'OR, TOUCHEZ PAS AU GRISBI, AND LE TROU.

**NEXT UP:** “I BELIEVE THERE IS A MIRACLE IN WANDA,” WROTE MARGUERITE DURAS. “USUALLY THERE IS A DISTANCE BETWEEN REPRESENTATION AND TEXT, SUBJECT AND ACTION. HERE THAT DISTANCE IS COMPLETELY ERADICATED.” COME SEE BARBARA LODEN'S 1970 MASTERPIECE IN A BRAND-NEW 35MM PRINT MADE FOR THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE ON **THURSDAY, DECEMBER 1 AT 7 PM**