



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The River

+ intro by Geoff Andrew, *Programmer-at-Large* (Wednesday 4 May only)

Jean Renoir worked with Rumer Godden to adapt her novel, a portrait of an English family living in Bengal towards the end of the Raj. The film comes close to documentary in its contemplative realism, and is partly about the pains and pleasures of young love as experienced by several young women, partly about the cyclical nature of life and death. It boasts remarkable Technicolor camerawork by the director's brother Claude.

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A contemporary review

The career of Jean Renoir has often seemed an enigma. His reputation is, justly, high, but so few of his films have really satisfied. Of the pre-war French films, only the bitter tragicomedy *La Règle du jeu*, and the beautiful *Partie de campagne*, can be called unqualified successes. Much of *La Grande Illusion* still looks impressive, but the film itself is incomplete. Many of the others have wonderful moments, but as a whole they are disappointingly untidy, episodic, even garbled: yet there is hardly one which does not suggest a great talent. In America Renoir seemed to acquire more technical discipline, sometimes wasted on unworthy subjects, but in *Swamp Water* (finished by another director) and, more especially, *The Southerner*, his observation of the South had power and atmosphere. He is said to dislike the streamlined production methods of Hollywood, and it is certainly true that, more polished and better shaped though *The Southerner* may be, one would still exchange it for *Les Bas fonds* or *La Bête humaine*. His new film, besides, makes it clear that we should accept Renoir for what he is—an imperfectionist, with talent great enough to contain the kind of faults that few directors today would dare to commit.

The River, which Renoir shot in India, in Technicolor, from a novel by Rumer Godden, and with a largely unfamiliar cast, has been acquired for release in this country by United Artists. It shows Renoir's talent in full flower, the film of a humanist and a poet, and in its tender intuition, affectionate understanding, follows the line of his most memorable work. As in his best American films he absorbed and reflected a new locale, so here – with more leisure, more freedom – he creates, with evident fascination, an Indian background. Nearly all the main characters, however, are English, and the film is a gentle, episodic evocation of an English household in a Bengal village on the Ganges. The central figure, and the narrator, is Harriet, a girl of fourteen; on the fringe of adolescent experience when the story opens, she is taken by events to its centre. The mother and father, her young brother and two little sisters, remain in the background. In the foreground are herself, Valerie, a girl of seventeen, and a half-caste girl, all rivals for the affections of a young American who has come to stay in the village. All three girls fall romantically, impermanently in love with the young man, who has lost a leg in the war, and is secretly lonely, uncertain, embittered. Harriet, writing poems in an exercise book, plain and awkward, is mortified by Valerie's beauty, arrogance and success; the half-caste girl, with a more mature understanding, comes closer than the others to Captain John. And Captain John finally goes away again.

The slightness of the story is filled out by the richness of the background, and a constant series of events, some everyday, some important. Playing quoits with Captain John, Valerie humiliates him by causing him to fall and lie helplessly on the ground. The little brother, who spends his days with an Indian boy trying to charm snakes, is stung by one and killed. Dismayed by her first experience of death and love, Harriet takes a skiff out on the river at night, tries to kill herself, is picked up by fishermen and enjoyably consoled by Captain John. And the river, used as a symbol of time, life, the world, flows calmly and broadly on.

It is, deliberately, a westerner's view. Renoir communicates landscapes and customs as a charmed outsider, and reinforces this impression by using the English girl as narrator. A marriage dance ceremony, the colour and excitement of a market, the exquisite landscapes and the ragged beggars, a firework ritual, a simple act of idolatry, all these are observed with a clear enchantment. Against this background Renoir sets the leisure and the quietness of the English household as the old waltzes the children play on their gramophone are contrasted with the village music. The drama of the whole film is, in a sense, as alien to its background as the waltz to the Indian music: a nostalgic, retrospective sketch of childhood and adolescence, stemming from a novel that is, basically, of today's ever so sensitive female school, but given a purity of feeling by Renoir's own personality. Its core, perhaps, is contained in the speech of the half-caste girl's white father, when he hears of the little boy's death and muses on the innocence and simplicity of childhood, finding a beauty, even a satisfaction, in the death itself. Both the half-caste girl and her father are new characters, not in the original novel, and they strengthen the central situation.

Not all of this, it must be said, is satisfactorily done. Renoir has made little attempt to shape his material. The film starts confusingly, overburdened by narration, slow to establish any direction or purpose. Its episodes are often carelessly linked together, scenes end with disconcerting abruptness, and one or two sequences – notably the children's party – undoubtedly suffer from untidy direction. Some of the acting is no more than adequate. Patricia Walters (Harriet) and Thomas Breen (Captain John) are perhaps the weakest; the latter in particular has not the charm his part requires. Esmond Knight is peculiarly, though briefly, stilted as the father. The Indian actress, Radha, is charming, and wonderful in the dance sequence; and Adrienne Corri as Valerie shows beauty, force and much personality – though there are traces of inexperience in her acting.

The imperfections are undeniable, and at times really distracting; yet there is something marvellous about a film that can hold and entrance one in spite of them. The final sequences are, fortunately, the most sustained, and with the little boy's open air funeral, and the episodes that follow, *The River* moves to a rare depth and intensity. Previously it has attained this only at certain moments – the beautiful sequence of the dance, of the afternoon siesta, of the fireworks in the garden – and its continuity is most firmly established by Claude Renoir's colour photography, as lovely and expressive as any yet recorded. It ranges from the gaudiness of the market scenes and the opulent dance sequence, to the mysterious blue shades of the river at night and the delicate, pale landscapes.

Memorable alone in a contemporary film, *The River* does not contain one disagreeable character. Instead, one is aware of the sympathy, the wisdom and understanding of a remarkable artist who loves human beings.

Gavin Lambert, *Sight and Sound*, March 1952

THE RIVER

Directed by: Jean Renoir
©/Production Company: Oriental International Films
A presentation of the: Theatre Guild
Produced by: Kenneth McEldowney
Production Manager: Kalyan Gupta
Personal Assistant to Jean Renoir: Eleanor Wolquitt
Production Assistant: Subrata Mitra *
Assistant Directors: Harishadhan J. Das Gupta, Sukhamoy Sen, Bansi Ashe
Assistant Director: Satyajit Ray *
Assistant to Mr Renoir: Forrest Judd
Screenplay by: Rumer Godden, Jean Renoir
Based on the novel by: Rumer Godden
Director of Photography: Claude Renoir
Camera Operator: Ramananda Sen Gupta
Editor: George Gale
Production Designer: Eugène Lourié
Set Designer: Bansi Chandragupta
Music: M. A. Partha Sarathy
Sitarist: Subrata Mitra *
Sound Engineers: Charles Poulton, Charles Knott
Technical Adviser: M. A. Partha Sarathy
Narrator: June Hillman

Cast

Nora Swinburne (the mother)
Esmond Knight (the father)
Arthur Shields (Mr John)
Thomas E. Breen (Captain John)
Suprova Mukerjee (Nan)
Patricia Walters (Harriet)
Radha (Melanie)
Adrienne Corri (Valerie)
Richard Foster (Bogie)
Penelope Wilkinson (Elizabeth)
Jane Harris (Muffie)
Jennifer Harris (Mouse)
Cecelia Wood (Victoria)
Ram Singh (Sajjan Singh)
Nimai Barik (Kanu)
Trilak Jetley (Anil)

USA 1951©
99 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

A Farewell to Arms

Sun 1 May 12:00; Mon 16 May 18:15; Tue 24 May 20:50

Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans

Mon 2 May 12:20; Mon 30 May 18:20

Tokyo Story (Tokyo Monogatari)

Tue 3 May 14:30; Sat 7 May 15:00; Sat 21 May 11:10; Wed 25 May 18:00

The River

Wed 4 May 18:10 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large; Sun 15 May 15:10

El Sur (The South)

Thu 5 May 14:30; Mon 16 May 18:10

Daughters of the Dust

Fri 6 May 20:50; Fri 20 May 14:40; Thu 26 May 20:40

Syndromes and a Century (Sang sattawaat)

Sat 7 May 18:10; Thu 12 May 20:50

Still Walking (Aruitemo aruitemo)

Sun 8 May 15:15; Wed 11 May 17:50 + intro by Dr Alexander Jacoby, Senior Lecturer in Japanese Studies; Mon 23 May 20:45

The Long Day Closes

Mon 9 May 18:30; Sun 22 May 12:30; Thu 26 May 20:50

Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia)

Tue 10 May 20:50; Thu 19 May 18:10; Wed 25 May 20:50; Fri 27 May 18:20

The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)

Fri 13 May 20:45; Tue 17 May 20:50; Sat 28 May 18:15

Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)

Sat 14 May 14:45; Wed 18 May 18:10 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large

The Miracle Worker

Tue 17 May 14:30; Sun 29 May 11:20

The Incredible Shrinking Man

Thu 19 May 14:30; Tue 31 May 18:20

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