



## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

# Orphée

### Orphée

*Director:* Jean Cocteau  
*Production Company:* Films du Palais Royal  
*Presented by:* André Paulvé  
*Production Manager:* Emile Darbon  
*Associate Production Manager:* Alain Darbon \*  
*Unit Production Manager:* J. Loutre  
*Location Manager:* A. Volpe  
*Production Secretary:* Simone Nuytens \*  
*Assistant Director:* Claude Pinoteau  
*Assistant Director:* Claude Clément \*  
*Script Girl:* Claude Vériat  
*Continuity:* Sylvette Baudrot \*  
*Screenplay:* Jean Cocteau  
*Director of Photography:* Nicolas Hayer  
*Camera Operator:* N. Martin  
*Camera Assistants:* Paul Souvestre, Pierre Charvein \*  
*Stills Photography:* Roger Corbeau  
*Editor:* Jacqueline Sadoul  
*Assistant Editor:* Hélène Baste  
*Art Director:* Jean d'Eaubonne  
*Assistant Art Director:* Fred Marpeaux  
*Props:* René Veltrin, Roger Bollengier \*  
*Tapestries:* René Brun \*  
*Costumes:* Marcel Escoffier  
*Costumers:* Simone Gerber, Jeannette Soudane \*  
*Make-up:* Alexandre Marcus  
*Hairdresser:* Jean Lalaurette \*  
*Music:* Georges Auric  
*Orchestra Director:* Jacques Météhen  
*Sound:* Pierre Calvet  
*Assistant Sound:* Maurice Dagonneau \*  
*Dedicated to:* Christian Bérard  
*Cast:*  
Jean Marais (*Orphée*)  
François Périer (*Heurtebise*)  
Maria Casarès (*the princess*)  
Marie Déa (*Eurydice*)  
Henri Crémieux (*the editor*)  
Juliette Gréco (*Aglaonice*)  
Roger Blin (*the poet*)  
Edouard Dermithe (*Cégeste*)  
Maurice Carnège  
René Worms (*third judge*)  
Raymond Faure  
Pierre Bertin (*the police inspector*)  
Jacques Varennes (*first judge*)  
André Carnège (*second judge*) \*  
Jean-Pierre Melville (*hotel manager*) \*  
Jean Cocteau (*the voice*) \*  
Renée Cosima (*a Bacchanalian*) \*  
René Lacour (*postman*) \*  
Julien Maffre (*agent*) \*  
Jean-Pierre Mocky \*  
Claude Mauriac \*  
Claude Borelli \*  
Paul Amiot \*  
Anne-Marie Casalis \*  
Jacques Doniol-Valcroze \*  
Philippe Bordier \*  
Victor Tabournot \*  
France 1950  
94 mins  
Digital

\* Uncredited

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Cocteau took the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice (familiar from Virgil and Ovid) and updated it to a fantastical version of post-war Paris, where the poet, played by Cocteau's muse and lover Marais, becomes intrigued by a mysterious princess. A multi-faceted allegory about creativity, sexuality, mortality and much more, the film is open to endless interpretation. Whatever its meaning, it is full of cinematic magic.

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Cocteau has used the legend of Orpheus as a starting point for one of his favourite themes: the poet's ecstatic conflict between the real world and the unknowable. His first experiment in the cinema, *Le Sang d'un poète* was a more obscure exposition of the same theme, and though on re-viewing today it appears much too slow and static, it is of considerable interest for the symbols and ideas which have reappeared since. *Le Sang d'un poète* is deliberately unreal in the sense that it takes place in a personal dream world just as *La Belle et la Bête* seeks to create its own fairyland of no special period or location. *Orphée*, however, is set in the framework of a contemporary world. Cocteau's Orpheus is a handsome, successful and envied poet, an isolated figure in the café life of St Germain; his dark lady is a chic, wealthy-looking Princess, who travels in a Rolls Royce driven by a young chauffeur; his wife, Eurydice, is a simple, middle-class girl who used to work at a women's club run by her friend Aglaonice. Thus the magic and the legend that follow arise from an ordinary world, from recognisable objects and surroundings; and from this they gain immeasurably in excitement. The revelation of fantasy occurs through the apparently ordinary.

Looked at simply as a film, without regard to its symbolism, *Orphée* is first an unmatched achievement in the telling of a magical adventure. The balance of the real and the magical is marvellously sustained: after the first scene in the poets' café, at the end of which Orpheus goes off with the Princess in her car, it keeps to a slow, dreamlike rhythm that builds up a poetic and enigmatic atmosphere – but the narrative is so full of invention that it never ceases to be dramatic. Always it points to the crack in the normal surface: the mirror that opens, the Princess appearing and disappearing about her business in the streets of Paris while Orpheus distractedly pursues her, the motor cyclists that shoot past along the dusty road, the radio in the car with its clear, unfathomable messages.

All this, no doubt, is responsible for the publicity catchline – 'The immortal thriller'. With characteristic brilliance, Cocteau has in fact used much of the cinema's apparatus of melodrama for his purpose. The secret radio becomes one of the film's most important symbols: its code is the source of all mystery, the mouthpiece of death itself, its signs and portents constantly enriched by the new dead, by Cégeste and others like him who transmit new messages of their own imagining. It becomes the most tangible evidence of the poet's

## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

### Le Mépris Contempt

Thu 1 Feb 14:40; Tue 13 Feb 20:20; Mon 19 Feb 20:50; Wed 28 Feb (+ intro by film academic and curator Michael Temple)

### Adaptation

Fri 2 Feb 20:30; Wed 7 Feb 18:15 (+ intro by culture writer Kemi Alemoru); Sun 18 Feb 18:30

### O Brother, Where Art Thou?

Sat 3 Feb 20:45; Sun 11 Feb 15:50; Thu 15 Feb 20:50

### Rear Window

Mon 5 Feb 20:45; Fri 16 Feb 18:10; Fri 23 Feb 18:00

### Babette's Feast Babettes Gaestebud

Tue 6 Feb 20:40; Mon 12 Feb 20:50; Wed 21 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

### The Bridges of Madison County

Thu 8 Feb 20:20; Sat 24 Feb 15:40

### Don't Look Now

Fri 9 Feb 20:35; Thu 15 Feb 18:05; Thu 29 Feb 14:30

### Orphée

Sat 10 Feb 12:45; Sat 17 Feb 21:00; Tue 27 Feb 14:30

### High and Low Tenguko to Jijuko

Sat 10 Feb 17:45; Sun 25 Feb 18:00

### A Farewell to Arms

Wed 14 Feb 18:00 (+ intro by film critic and writer Christina Newland); Sat 24 Feb 18:15; Mon 26 Feb 20:35

### The Big Sleep

Thu 22 Feb 18:10; Tue 27 Feb 20:45

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anguished ecstasy, as he feverishly listens for its voice and its signals. Again, the Princess's headquarters are a deserted villa, every room bare and spattered with builder's rubbish except for her own, which is comfortably furnished. The infernal tribunal to which she is summoned takes place in one of these rooms, her soberly dressed judges with their whisperings and sharp glances have the sinister bureaucratic façade of secret police.

As well as realigning in effect the Orphic myth to centre on the conflicting obsessions of a poet fascinated by the unknown and unseen, which he comes to recognise as the province of death, Cocteau replaces the arbitrary force which death represents in Greek mythology by human figures with human desires and feelings. The Princess loves Orpheus; Heurtebise loves Eurydice; both sacrifice their love, knowing it to be fruitless. This, unlike the other motives in the films, would seem to be a purely poetic conceit, but in a logical sense too it matches the conception of the whole. Since the dead have acclimatised themselves to this world, entering it by mirrors, using its machines both for convenience and essential business, communicating with each other by radio, a further reciprocity is not unimaginable. Poets have been in love with death: here, death also falls in love with poets. The symbols, the mysteries and the powers of death must indeed, to fascinate so acutely, be 'living'. This personification is traditional with Cocteau, though by the number of times it has earned him the epithets 'pretentious' and 'decadent' one might think it unique to him, and not itself a romantic tradition.

For, in essence, *Orphée* reasserts a romantic mood at an unfashionable moment. It reasserts wonder, ritual, the power of illusion and magic, reinterpreting them in a contemporary setting which brings the myth closer, gives it a disturbing edge of reality. Probably, too, it contains a good deal that is autobiographical, which is a highly interesting precedent in the cinema. The film is finely photographed by Nicolas Hayer, the trickwork refined and convincing, and beautifully acted, especially by Maria Casarès. Her Princess is a haunting creation, dark, formidable and yet tragic on a human level. Auric's score, notably a recurring tune for flute, is the best he has composed for some time: but it is the menacing drum rhythms of the Bacchantes (the film's most striking sound effect) that remain the strongest aural memory.

Gavin Lambert, *Sight and Sound*, July 1950