

Reflections on "Les Enfants du Paradis"

by Stuart Fernie

BACKGROUND

Directed by Marcel Carné, scripted by Jacques Prévert, and starring Arletty, Jean-Louis Barrault, Pierre Brasseur, Marcel Herrand, and Pierre Renoir (among many others!), LEdP was a huge critical and financial success in post-war France. Filmed intermittently during the Nazi Occupation, it became something of a monument to French artistry on its release.

STORYLINE

The storyline can be summed up fairly simply. Set in the mid 19th century, it is the story of a free-spirited young woman, Garance, and four men who fall for her, one way or another. However, the story should be regarded as a means to the end of a broader investigation into the nature of life, love, chance, society, and the ways in which people's lives are interwoven.

The action takes place in or around the 1840's. This was a period of development for the Enlightenment Movement, a philosophical movement which caused people to question the existence of God, the nature of society, and their place within it. It was this movement which led indirectly to the French Revolution, and it evolved into the 20th century's Existentialism. (Carné's own "Le Jour se Lève" is a dark examination of the impact on one individual of the disintegration of a relationship).

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

To look into the nature of relationships, love, freedom and responsibility, society, and even morality, Carné and Prévert chose the world of the theatre, mixing three genuine historical figures (Baptiste Debureau, Frédérick Lemaître, and Lacenaire) with characters of their own fabrication to illustrate the complexities of life. The world of the theatre is perhaps the ideal domain as, at their best, actors aspire to seek and reveal the "truth" about the human soul and condition.

Underpinning the film is the premise that we are all actors, doing what is expected of us in society, playing out our roles on the stage of chance, though with certain conventions to respect. Each of the male principals provides a different "take" on life, love, and one's place in society. The common thread running through each of their lives is Garance and the feelings she provokes in them.

THE CHARACTERS

Garance is pivotal, but does little to advance the narrative herself, acting instead as the inspiration for emotion and the catalyst for action in the male principals.

She prizes her freedom above all else and is true to herself, behaving as she wants, when she wants. She leaves Lacenaire's table at the "Ruby Throat", telling him she is bored and he is obsessed with death, while she desires laughter, dancing, and gaiety. She cherishes her freedom and seeks no ties or responsibilities.

Our first tantalising sight of Garance is on the Boulevard du Crime in a side show where she symbolises nothing less than truth (sitting naked in a revolving barrel of water, staring into a hand mirror). Use of mirrors is made later in the film to suggest almost a mask, a "face" which one chooses to present, but here it is tempting to suggest that truth may be found by looking within oneself, or, indeed, that truth is whatever you happen to believe, or choose to see.

Within just a few minutes we are very cleverly introduced to three of the four male principals, Frédéric, Lacenaire, and the mime artist Baptiste - all in a short walk along the boulevard.

Frédéric is an actor par excellence, seemingly playing a role at almost every moment. We meet him outside a theatre, just after he has caught sight of Garance in the crowd, and he confesses a great love for her, putting into practice his skills as an actor to try and win her over. As soon as he sees he has failed with Garance, he turns his attention (using exactly the same lines) to another pretty girl he has spotted. From this encounter and his conversation outside the theatre we see Frédéric is charming, pleasant, talented, ambitious, ego-driven, but not altogether sincere! He is a sort of charming and shallow rogue who knows what he wants and is determined to achieve it, though he is harmless and has a very attractive zest for life. His principal motivation is self-promotion - he does not seek the truth through the characters he wishes to play, but seeks simply the public's attention and admiration in playing these roles, though the role of Othello eludes him as he has never experienced jealousy.

Lacenaire is an intelligent gentleman criminal. He is one who, from appearance and apparent learning, belongs to the upper classes (or is this yet another "role" he chooses to play?), but he has long since declared war on a society he considers vile and false. He is a man of great pride who believes only in himself and his particular view of morality and society. He makes his living by theft, violence, and even murder. He has rejected the standard view of morality and does what he pleases and considers necessary to survive, yet he maintains an outward aspect of "civilisation" and social grace. His true vocation is that of dramatist, and he does not shy from acting on his own plots and schemes. Where others merely act and discuss or threaten, Lacenaire takes action. Thus he is an author not

just of drama, but of fate, with others playing parts in his works. He seeks to create chaos and disorder where there was order.

Baptiste is a mime artist who takes his art very seriously. He is not ego-driven, nor does he question the structure of society. He wishes to please his public by touching them with truth about the human soul and condition. This he achieves by expressing inner feelings outwardly through physical gesture and using no words. His performance perhaps best sums up what an actor tries to do - his purpose is to clarify and explain reality - achieved, paradoxically, through fakery. Baptiste seeks truth. He is innocent, sincere, insightful, and spontaneous. When he sees Garance and she throws him a flower she was wearing, he falls for her almost instantly and permanently. He can't really offer an explanation, but this "coup de foudre" tells us that love is uncontrollable, and that Baptiste is genuine and guileless, to the point where he can act impulsively on his feelings.

The fourth and final male principal is Count Edouard de Montray, a member of the "upper classes" who makes a proposition of sorts to Garance after seeing her in a show. He is stunned when she turns down his offer of all things material. Garance has previously made it clear she appreciates being appreciated and she considers the Count a sort of "chasseur" out to add her to his collection. He has shown her little real respect or affection, but offers his help if ever she needs it. Once again, it seems almost as if the Count is playing a role. He conforms to various conventions and behaves as is expected of a man in his position. He is, of course, a man accustomed to wealth and is proud of his possessions and position. He treats Garance like one of his prized possessions, and although he undoubtedly has genuine feelings for her, she is effectively a prisoner in a gilded cage as she turned to him for help and she now lives with him to pay her debt, and the Count is happy to take advantage of the situation.

There are, of course, many other characters whose presence sheds light on the main protagonists. Nathalie, who becomes Baptiste's wife, is clearly devoted to him from the outset, but she is well aware that Baptiste does not share these feelings. She is desperately hurt when she discovers he has fallen for Garance, but that doesn't prevent her loving him. Later in the film her wifely devotion is compared to the romantic and sexual appeal of Garance.

Another intriguing character who turns up regularly in the course of the film is Jéricho, the ragman. His is an unpleasant and unpopular character whose purpose and nature are difficult to define. He is known by many names and appears parasitic. He is apparently known as an informer and is distrusted by all. Quite apart from representing an unpleasant and parasitic aspect of life (as opposed to the others who remain true to themselves and their characters), it may be that he represents the hated collaborators during the Nazi occupation of France in World War 2.

THE CROWD

There are several crowd scenes – notably at the beginning and end of the film. As the film opens and the curtain literally rises on the production, we are met with a huge crowd gathered on the Boulevard du Crime, and gradually we zoom in on the particular individuals whose interwoven lives we are going to follow. The point, however, seems to be that while chance brought these individuals together out of the crowd, given the nature of their work and the desire of the crowd to see their work, all, (performers and public) are to some extent interdependent. The one cannot fully exist without the other – they are linked to form society, a society made up of all sorts of individuals.

At the beginning, Baptiste is decidedly the odd man out, in dress and manner, and at the end, though he is lost in the crowd, he remains different because a large number of people are dressed as mimes, yet he is now dressed ordinarily. He has exercised an influence on the crowd who know his work and seek to emulate his dress, yet he has now developed – he no longer plays at interpreting drama, he is experiencing it first hand. He has grown and is now living the emotions he has previously sought to express as a mime artist. Paradoxically he has become a "man", a member of the crowd, just as the crowd appears to have learned something from him.

There is probably one character more than any other who symbolises the idea that we are all actors, one way or another, in society – the blind beggar met by Baptiste outside the "Ruby Throat". Once safely inside the inn (a sort of haven where all are welcome), the beggar reveals he can, in fact, see perfectly well – this is simply a role he plays in order to make some money. Baptiste is astonished, not just at the insolence of his "scam", but also at how well he carries it off. Baptiste admires his skill – after all, here is an actor making a living out of his skills!

LOVE

Apart from dealing with differing attitudes towards life, morality, and society, the film is largely concerned with love and relationships.

Differences in the nature of love and relationships are expressed through Garance and the four male principals.

Baptiste falls for Garance immediately. His is a romantic, poetic, idealistic form of love. Garance is willing to sleep with him, but he leaves her, saying he wants her to truly love him as he loves her. He seeks something more spiritual, something Garance warns him she may not be able to give him. She thinks love is simple and she is not as he thinks she is. He is a dreamer, while she is more of a realist who loves life and wishes to extract happiness from the moment, appreciating the advances of those who genuinely like her.

This is something of a reversal of roles for Baptiste, who has had a remarkably similar conversation with Nathalie, using virtually the same dialogue but of course from the opposite point of view.

Very similar dialogue is heard later in the film as Edouard tells Garance he would like her to love him as he loves her, though by this time Garance has learned to seek more from a relationship than she feels the Count can give her.

When Baptiste leaves Garance she is disappointed, but hardly heartbroken as she finds solace in the arms of Frédérick almost immediately after his departure. This would seem, on the face of it, the perfect match as neither is seeking anything more than the pleasure of the other's company, and each is boosting the other's ego through the compliment of finding one another attractive. However, their relationship is fairly short-lived as Garance points out to Frédérick that they are not really happy together, but are just using one another. Clearly she feels a depth of feeling is missing, and it is at this point we learn Garance has been saying Baptiste's name in her sleep.

Lacenaire would very much like to have a relationship with Garance, but she refuses his advances as there is no warmth or depth in his feelings for her. She sees he desires her, but she likes to be appreciated. She appears to feel much the same towards the Count, whom she accuses of being a sort of "collector of beauty". However, circumstances dictate that she must turn to him to maintain her freedom (her most precious possession), yet that is exactly what she must give up as, indebted to him, she becomes his consort.

Love, or "true love", is seen as a relatively rare commodity which can bring great joy but also sadness as it "erupts" between two individuals, releasing emotions over which they have no real control, and which can strike at any moment. At the end of the film it is Garance who shows the greater strength by leaving Baptiste as they are reminded of the reality of responsibility and everyday family life, which requires a different and more demanding form of love. Garance appears to understand and is willing to turn her back on their relationship, but Baptiste pursues Garance (and the ideal of romantic love), calling out her name as she disappears into the crowd.

EXISTENTIALISM

Relationships can have, then, several bases for their foundation. The most attractive and fulfilling is also perhaps the most elusive, but it must be mutual. Although we are not in control of how others feel about us, we have a duty to respect others and their feelings. Garance appears to recognise the sense of what Nathalie says in the final scene – Baptiste has a family and responsibilities which should be placed above his personal desires, desires which Garance cannot allow to be fulfilled at the expense of others.

This is one of several nods to existentialism in the course of the film. The recognition and burden of responsibility towards others, the insistence on chance, the doubts concerning morality (Lacenaire will face justice only of his own volition) are all essential elements of existentialism. Yet beneath this apparent emptiness there is the possibility of love which offers hope among the myriad of complications it also can evoke.

The title is generally considered to be a reference to the public in the cheapest (and highest) seats "in the gods" of the theatre. I cannot help but wonder if it is not also some reference to heaven, with some divine entity looking down on us on Earth and finding our stories of love, life and death entertaining, as if we are playing out some drama for the amusement of others. I don't know what Carné and Prévert had in mind, but I am indebted to them and their excellent cast for producing this fine, thought-provoking, and enduring film.