



Carné, Marcel (1906-1996)

by Daryl Chin

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The master of "poetic realism," Marcel Carné was a prodigy who created some of the defining films of French cinema from 1936 until 1945, including the Dadaist comedy-thriller *Drôle de drame* (1937; American title: *Bizarre Bizarre*), the fatalistic melodrama *Quai des brumes* (1938; American title: *Port of Shadows*), the intricate, flashback-structured tragedy *Le jour se lève* (1939), the medieval allegory *Les Visiteurs du soir* (1942), and his masterpiece, the magnificent theatrical epic *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945; American title: *Children of Paradise*).

Working with a powerful team of collaborators (the poet Jacques Prévert as scenarist, the designer Alexandre Trauner, the composers Maurice Jaubert and Joseph Kosma, the editor Henri Rust, the cinematographer Roger Hubert), Carné provided the French cinema with some of its most emblematic images, including Michele Morgan with trenchcoat and beret walking through the fog in *Port of Shadows*, Jean Gabin waiting for the police alone in his attic room in *Le jour se lève*, and the mime sequences, with Jean-Louis Barrault's lovesick Baptiste pining for Arletty's statuesque Garance, in *Children of Paradise*.

Carné's "poetic realism" consists of a meticulously recreated studio environment in which every element of lighting, decor, and design could be utilized to maximum expressivity.

After World War II, there was a dispersal of his collaborative team. Carné himself would remain a master craftsman as a director, but his insistence on themes of fatalism and doomed romance did not have the same urgency.

Still, *Juliette ou la Clef des songes* (1951) had atmospheric design and a wonderful performance by Gerard Philippe, and *Thérèse Raquin* (1953) proved to be a vigorous updating of Zola's novel, with exceptional performances by Simone Signoret and Raf Vallone.

Carné's last feature film, *Le Merveilleuse visite* (1974), about a beautiful young man who turns out to be an angel visiting Earth, is an allegory in which male beauty is used as an indicator of innocence.

A man noted for his generosity and sensitivity, in his private life Carné tended to place personal relationships above political considerations: on the sets of *Les Visiteurs du soir* and *Children of Paradise*, there were artists who would later be tried for collaborating with the Nazis, as well as artists who were members of the Underground resistance and Jews in hiding who were given shelter.

During the 1970s, however, Carné issued several statements to the press indicating that he wished the openness of the post-Stonewall era had been available to him earlier in his career. Although he regretted that he had not infused his work with a political consciousness, he believed that his partiality to themes of impossible romance derived from his acute awareness of the societal oppression of homosexuals.

He was an outspoken champion of filmmakers such as Pier Paolo Pasolini and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who politicized questions of gender and sexual orientation.

Although his career was uneven, Carné will be remembered for the masterful films that began his career: *Jenny* (1936), *Drôle de drame*, *Port of Shadows*, *Hôtel du Nord* (1939), and, above all, for *Children of Paradise*. The latter, indisputably one of the classics of French cinema, was recently voted one of the greatest films in French history by a poll of French film critics in the year 2000.

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