



Marais, Jean (1913-1998)

by Charles Krinsky

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Jean Marais became one of the most celebrated stars of French movies, theater, and television partly because of the early sponsorship of writer and film director Jean Cocteau. In a career that lasted over sixty years, Marais's blond, classical good looks and--with experience--skillful acting were seen in more than seventy movies and numerous plays and television programs.

On stage, Marais achieved his greatest success in classical roles. On screen, he established himself as a romantic leading man in poetic dramas, light comedies, crime melodramas, and, perhaps especially, swashbuckling adventure stories.

Marais was born Jean-Alfred Villain-Marais on December 11, 1913 in Cherbourg to a shoplifting, sometimes violent, sometimes loving mother. Growing up in Cherbourg, the future actor was a poor student but always interested in drama.

He was expelled from high school when, to amuse his friends, he masqueraded as a girl and flirted with a male teacher. After leaving school, Marais worked at various jobs, including newspaper boy, photographer, and sketch artist.

An early interest in painting, which would become a lifelong avocation, led to the twenty-year-old Marais's first opportunity in movies. After purchasing one of his paintings in 1933, director Marcel L'Herbier offered Marais small parts in several of his films.

Marais's career breakthrough came a few years later, with Cocteau's help. The 24-year-old actor first met the 48-year-old poet in 1937, when Marais auditioned for a supporting role in a revival of Cocteau's play *Oedipe-roi* (*Oedipus Rex*, 1927).

Besides giving Marais the part, Cocteau fell instantly in love with the young man. Marais later remembered that, for him, the encounter marked the moment of a "second birth."

Marais and Cocteau became partners in both their personal and their professional lives. At Marais's suggestion, Cocteau wrote a screenplay designed as a vehicle for the ambitious actor, *L'Éternel retour* (*The Eternal Return*, 1943). The film turned out to be both a commercial success and a critical triumph for both its author and its star.

Marais continued to perform in movies and plays while German troops occupied France during World War II. He joined France's Second Armored Division after the liberation of Paris, however, and drove trucks carrying fuel and ammunition to the front during the Allied invasion of Germany. Marais was eventually awarded the Croix de Guerre for his wartime service.

After the war, *La Belle et la bête* (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1946), directed by Cocteau, introduced Marais to



Jean Marais in 1949.
Photograph by Carl van Vechten, October 14, 1949.
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American audiences and cemented his international fame. His face and physique became favorite pin-up images not only for teenage girls, but also for gay fans aware of his unpublicized relationship with Cocteau.

Marais went on to make four more films with Cocteau: *L'Aigle à deux têtes* (*The Eagle Has Two Heads*, 1947), *Les Parents terribles* (*The Storm Within*, 1948), *Orphée* (*Orpheus*, 1949), and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (*The Testament of Orpheus*, 1960). He also starred in films by such celebrated directors as René Clément, Marc Allégret, Jean Renoir, Luchino Visconti, and Claude Lelouch.

Although the romantic relationship between Marais and Cocteau began to cool by 1949, the two men remained close friends until Cocteau's death in 1963.

When his acting career lost momentum in the 1970s, Marais lived in semi-retirement on the French Riviera. He returned to painting, took up sculpture as alternative means of artistic expression, and also wrote several volumes of memoirs.

Marais appeared in his final screen role in 1996, in Bernardo Bertolucci's *Io ballo da sola* (*Stealing Beauty*). The same year, he was awarded the Legion of Honor for his contribution to French cinema.

He died on November 8, 1998, aged 84, survived by his adopted son, Serge Marais.

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