



## Big Screen Classics

# French Cancan

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**Director:** Jean Renoir

**Production Companies:** Franco London Film (Paris), Jolly Film (Rome)

**Production Supervisor:** Louis Wipf

**Production Manager:** Lucien Lippens

**Unit Production Manager:** René Forgeas

**Location Managers:** Robert Turlure, Charles Chieusse

**Administration:** Georges Walon

**Production Secretary:** Simone Clement

**Assistant Directors:** Serge Vallin, Pierre Kast

**Trainee Assistant Director:** Jacques Rivette

**Script Girl:** Ginette Doynel

**Scenario/Dialogue/Adaptation:** Jean Renoir

**Based on an idea by:** André-Paul Antoine

**Director of Photography:** Michel Kelber

**Camera Operator:** Henri Tiquet

**Camera Assistants:** Vladimir Lang, Georges Barsky

**Stills Photography:** Serge Beauvarlet

**Editor:** Boris Lewin

**Art Director:** Max Douy

**Set Dresser:** Vigneau

**Properties:** Daniel Lagille, Édouard Duval

**Costume Designer:** Rosine Delamare

**Costumes Executed by:** Coquatrix, Karinska

**Dressers:** Paulette Tentave, Elise Servet, Mariette Chabrol

**Make-up:** Yvonne Fortuna

**Make-up Assistant:** Georges Klein

**Hair:** Huguette La Laurette

**Music:** Georges Van Parys

**Choreography:** G. Grandjean

**Sound Recording:** Antoine Petitjean

**Sound:** Jean Labussière

**Boom Operator:** Gaston Ancessi

**Publicity:** Georges Cravenne

**Cast:**

Jean Gabin (*Danglard*)

María Félix (*La Belle Abbesse*)

Françoise Arnoul (*Nini*)

Jean-Roger Caussimon (*Baron Walter*)

Gianni Esposito (*Prince Alexandre*)

Philippe Clay (*Casimir*)

Michel Piccoli (*Capitaine Valorgueil*)

Jean Parédès (*Coudrier*)

Lydia Johnson (*Guibole*)

Max Dalban (*owner of 'La Reine blanche'*)

Jacques Jouanneau (*Bison*)

Jean-Marc Tennberg (*Savate*)

Hubert Deschamps (*Isidore, boy in café*)

Franco Pastorino (*Paulo, the baker*)

Valentine Tessier

(*Mme Olympe, Nini's mother*)

Albert Remy (*Barjolin*)

Annik Morice (*Thérèse*)

Dora Doll (*La Génisse*)

Anna Amendola (*Esther Georges*)

Léo Campion (*the commander*)

Madame Paquerette (*Mimi Prunelle*)

Sylvine Delannoy (*Titine*)

Anne-Marie Mersen (*Paquita*)

Michèle Nadal (*Bigoudi*)

Gaston Gaboroche (*Oscar, the pianist*)

Jaque Catelain (*the minister*)

Pierre Moncorbier (*the porter*)

Jean Mortier (*the hotel manager*)

Numes Fils (*the neighbour*)

Robert Auboyneau (*the elevator operator*)

Laurence Bataille (*the pygmy*)

Pierre Olaf (*pierrrot whistler*)

Jacques Ciron (*'gommeux' 1*)

*Introduced by Dr Roland-Francois Lack, University College London*

*Le plus beau métier du monde* is how Danglard, the impresario figure in Jean Renoir's *French Cancan*, describes the world of showbiz and spectacle that is his first love – 'the most wonderful profession in the world'. But if the character is clearly referring to the popular music hall of France's *belle époque* of the 1890s, Renoir himself also made plain that his film was a tribute to the whole spectrum of artistic creativity, including music, painting and of course, cinema. 'I believe in having your trade,' he said. 'It seems to me that that's what we should base our lives on, and I think that *French Cancan* is above all else a homage to a trade.'

A fictionalised view of the creation of the dance routine of the title, *French Cancan* was a great comeback for its director. Renoir had not made a film in France since fleeing the occupation in 1940 to take up residence in Los Angeles. Once there, the creator of the universally acclaimed *La Grande Illusion* (1937) and the woefully misunderstood

*La Règle du jeu* (1939) struggled to find his place in the Hollywood system. 'Renoir has a lot of talent, but he isn't one of us,' was the verdict of Darryl F. Zanuck, his first studio boss. (The director's retort was that it had been 'a pleasure working at 16th Century-Fox.')

In the early 1950s, Renoir nurtured a film project on Van Gogh, to star Van Heflin. But the announcement of Vincente Minnelli's forthcoming biopic of the painter, *Lust for Life*, put a stop to that. At the same time, Renoir received an invitation from the producer Henri Deutschmeister to return to France to make a film with the title *French Cancan*. There was a vague story, and at one stage another director (Yves Allégret) had been attached. But now Renoir was given carte blanche to write his own script from the idea of an impresario (based on the real founder of the Moulin Rouge, Charles Zidler) and his discovery of a young dancer. For Renoir, this was the chance to reach a large audience in France once again, working with people he knew, who shared his language. It was also an opportunity to recreate the proletarian, almost rural Montmartre he had known around the turn of the century, growing up as the son of the great Impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

Renoir's newly shaped narrative follows what became a favourite template: a woman pursued by three suitors. Laundry girl Nini is discovered dancing in a café by Danglard, wooed by a wealthy prince of Balkan origins, and followed everywhere by her first love, a fiercely jealous young baker. Renoir was at first determined to have Nini played by Leslie Caron, who two years earlier had triumphed in *An American in Paris*. When that proved impossible, he agreed to Françoise Arnoul, then popular in France as a pre-Bardot 'sex kitten'.

The producers wanted Charles Boyer for Danglard, but when he dropped out, the name Jean Gabin came up. Gabin had starred in three Renoir films in the 1930s but, having largely disappeared into service during the war, had only just reasserted himself on the French screen in Jacques Becker's *Touchez pas au grisbi* (1954). At first the actor was wary of Renoir, finding it unacceptable that the son of the great French painter should have taken US citizenship. But the two were successfully united from day one of filming, which took place at the Francoeur Studios between October and December of 1954. In spite of the cold (in photos from the set, Renoir is often wearing an overcoat), a warm rapport was quickly established between Renoir, his crew and his actors.

Shot entirely on studio sets, *French Cancan* has production design by the veteran Max Douy that is remarkably realistic and evocative. The images undoubtedly owe their foundation to the impressionistic vistas of Renoir's father, with Utrillo, Degas and Lautrec also clearly there as references (though without any explicit homage).

Claude Arnay (*'gommeux' 2*)  
 France Roche (*Béatrice*)  
 Michèle Philippe (*Éléanore*)  
 R.J. Chauffard (*police inspector*)  
 Gaston Modot (*Danglard's servant*)  
 Jacques Hilling (*the surgeon*)  
 Patachou (*Yvette Guilbert*)  
 André Claveau (*Paul Delmet*)  
 Jean Raymond (*Paulus*)  
 Edith Piaf (*Eugénie Buffet*)  
 Jedlinska (*La Gigolette*)  
 Jean Sylvere (*the groom*)  
 Palmyre Levasseur (*laundry worker*)  
 André Philip  
 Bruno Balp  
 Jacques Marin  
 H.R. Herce  
 René Pascal  
 Martine Alexis  
 Corinne Jansen  
 Maïa Jusanova  
 Paul Mercey (*young man at the inauguration*) \*  
 Yvonne Arnaud \*  
*With the voice of:*  
 Mario Juillard  
 France/Italy 1955  
 102 mins

\* Uncredited

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Renoir made a point of sampling Paris's modern café-concert scene to find performers suited to play their 1890s counterparts, and the singers Edith Piaf and Patachou turn up in brief cameos playing period artistes. He also gave small parts to old favourites, including Gaston Modot (from *La Règle du jeu*) and Max Dalban (from *Boudu* and 1935's *Toni*), and cast his Madame Bovary, Valentine Tessier, as Nini's mother.

Renoir once commented that the subject of *French Cancan* was 'as thoroughly childlike and as obvious as that of a western'. For him, it was all about the expressivity that the subject afforded – the pleasure he could take in recording movements and gestures. In this he felt a deep connection with his father, who rigorously rejected any intellectual interpretation of his paintings. Renoir had featured a cancan sequence in his silent 1926 version of Zola's *Nana*. But, frustrated by the lack of sound at the start of his career, he had always dreamed of making a thoroughly musical film. In *French Cancan* there are nods to this ambition, with popular artiste Philippe Clay suddenly bursting into song, to the accompaniment of an unseen orchestra.

It's an aspect of Renoir's mastery that such moments blend perfectly with dialogue and action that's spontaneously flamboyant and alive. The final cancan sequence, 20 minutes of explosive joy, is a total vindication of the directness of Renoir's art. The sheer ebullience of the performers and a classic editing style prove vastly more effective than Baz Luhrmann's machine-gun cutting in *Moulin Rouge* (2001), or indeed the studied framing of John Huston's 1952 film of the same title, which does try a little too hard to emulate Lautrec.

What might appear brazen in *French Cancan* today is its refusal to judge the characters – especially the exploitative Danglard, who changes lovers at whim, wedded only to his art. His declaration of independence to Nini – who almost jeopardises the whole show because of her jealousy – is based on the idea that all that counts is serving the audience (and anyway, he'd make a lousy husband). Gabin was an imposing 50 when the film was made, so his character's advances to the 23-year-old Françoise Arnoul perhaps have a different resonance today. After all, Nini gives up her virginity to her young lover in the knowledge that subsequently she will have to sacrifice herself to Danglard. Renoir was unrepentant about such matters, exposed as he had been by his father to a casual, hedonistic view of the opposite sex. The spectator either accepts this as a generosity of spirit, or will be sorely tried by such pervasively Gallic attitudes.

Either way, *French Cancan* is full of irresistible force and vigour, and in its day it wowed cinemagoers in Europe. Ever more resplendent in its colours and energy after a digital makeover, it should continue to give the same extraordinary pleasure today.

David Thompson, *Sight & Sound*, September 2011