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THE NEW TESTAMENT

LE NOUVEAU TESTAMENT

1936 • 35MM • 1.37:1

CAST

Sacha Guitry Dr. Jean Marcelin
Jacqueline Delubac Juliette Lecourtois
Betty Daussmond Lucie Marcelin
Pauline Carton Mlle. Morot
Marguerite Templey Marguerite Worms
Charles Dechamps Adrien Worms
Christian Gérard Fernand Worms
Louis Kerly (as Kerly) Servant

CREW

Directed and Written by **Sacha Guitry**
With the Collaboration of **Alexandre Ryder (as M.A. Ryder)**
Director of Photography **Jean Bachelet**
Sound **Paul Duvergé**
Assistant **André Alexandre (as A. Alexandre)**
Assistant **Maurice Wolf (as M. Wolf)**
Director of Production **Serge Sandberg**

MY FATHER WAS RIGHT

MON PÈRE AVAIT RAISON

1936 • 35MM • 1.37:1

CAST

Sacha Guitry Charles Bellanger
Gaston Dubosc Adolphe Bellanger
Serge Grave Maurice Bellanger (younger)
Paul Bernard Maurice Bellanger (older)
Jacqueline Delubac Loulou
Betty Daussmond Germaine Bellanger
Robert Seller Servant
Pauline Carton Servant
Marcel Lévesque The Doctor

CREW

Directed and Written by **Sacha Guitry**
Director of Photography **Georges Benoît**
Sound by **Georges Leblond**
Editing by **Myriam Borsoutsky (as Mlle. Myriam)**
Assistant **Guy Lacourt**
Director of Production **Serge Sandberg**

LET'S MAKE A DREAM...

FAISONS UN RÊVE...

1936 • 35MM • 1.37:1

CAST

Sacha Guitry The Lover
Raimu The Husband (Gustav)
Jacqueline Delubac The Wife
Andrée Guize (as Andrée Guise) Servant
Robert Seller Hotel Manager
Louis Kerly (as Kerly) Valet

The Prologue Party

Arletty
Baron Fils
Pierre Bertin (Pierre Bertin of the Comédie-Française)
Victor Boucher
Jean Coquelin
Claude Dauphin
Rosine Deréan
Yvette Guilbert
André Lefaur
Marcel Lévesque
Marguerite Moreno
Gabriel Signoret (as Signoret)
Michel Simon

CREW

Directed and Written by **Sacha Guitry**
Cinematography **Georges Benoît**
Camera Operator **René Ribault (as Ribault)**
Sound by **Joseph De Bretagne (as J. De Bretagne)**
Production Designer **Robert Gys (as Gys)**
Set Dresser **Jean Schmit**
Editing by **Myriam Borsoutsy (as Myriam)**
Gypsy Orchestra Conductor **Jacques Zarou**
Director of Production **Serge Sandberg**

LET'S GO UP THE CHAMPS ÉLYSÉES

REMONTONS LES CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES

1938 • 35MM • 1.37:1

CAST

Sacha Guitry
Lucien Baroux
Jean Pèrier
Roger Bourdin
Robert Pizani
Jean Coquelin
Émile Drain
Georges Morton (as Morton)
Jean Davy
Réne Fauchois
Jacqueline Delubac
Germaine Dermoz
Josseline Gaël
Jeanne Boitel
Jeanne Marken
Mila Parély
Lisette Lanvin

CREW

Directed and Written by **Sacha Guitry**
Music Composed by **Adolphe Borchard**
Performed by the **Orchestra Padeloup**
Conductor **Georges Derveaux (as G. Derveaux)**
Costumes **Georges K. Benda (as G.K. Benda)**
Wardrobe **Louis Granier (as Granier)**
Wardrobe **Muelle**
Director of Photography **Jean Bachelet**
Camera Operator **Marc Fossard**
Sound by **Joseph De Bretagne (as J. De Bretagne)**
Set Dresser **René Renoux**
Editing by **Myriam Borsoutsy (as Myriam)**
Executive Producer **Serge Sandberg**





SACHA

An Introduction to Sacha Guitry

by Gilbert Adair

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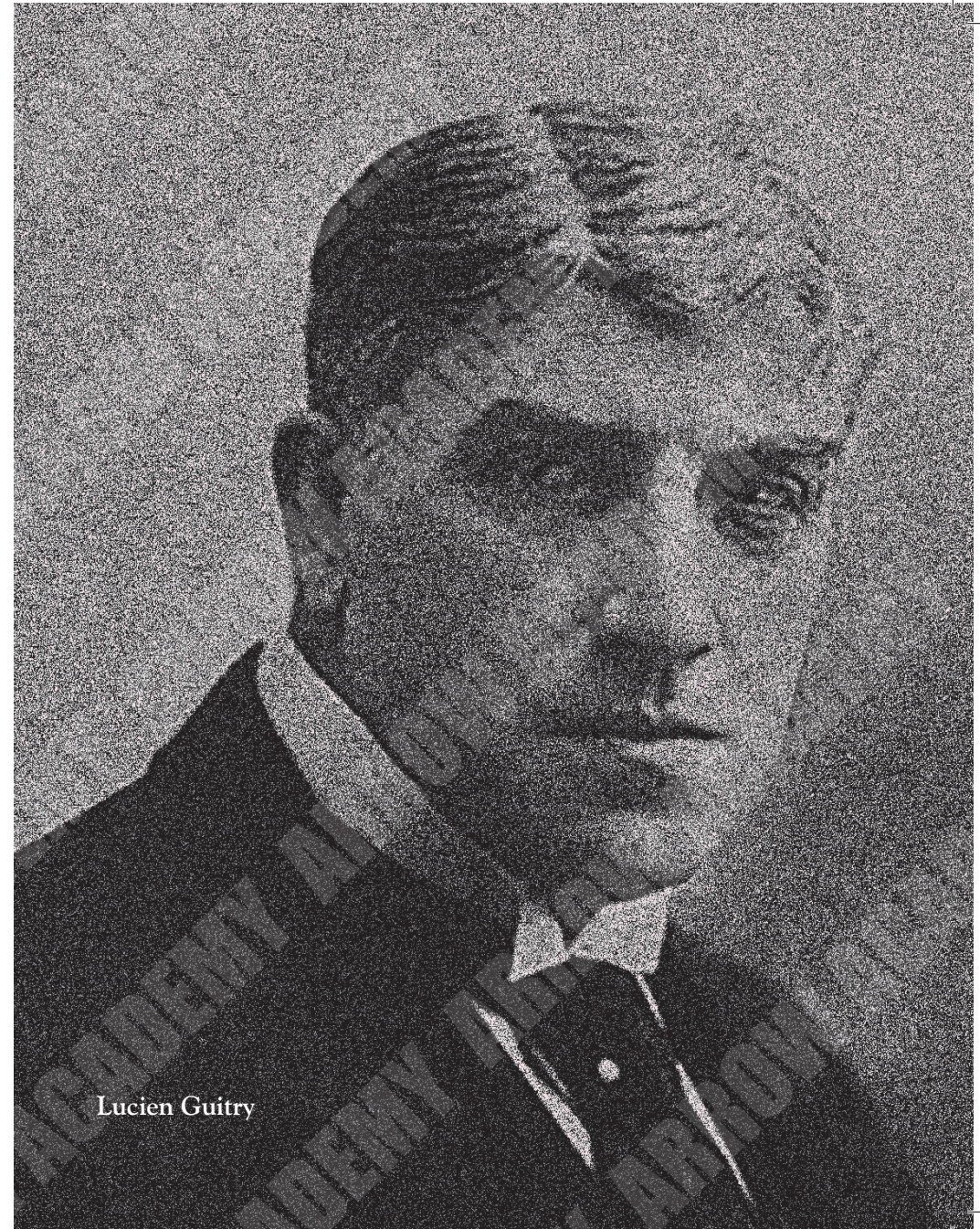
BIOGRAPHICAL

Alexandre ("Sacha") Guitry was born in 1885 at No. 12 Nevsky Prospekt, St Petersburg. His father, Lucien Guitry, was the most fêted French actor of his day, Armand Duval to Bernhardt's Marguerite in *La Dame aux Camélias* [*The Lady with the Camelias*, Alexandre Dumas, *fils*, 1852] and soon to create the eponymous cock of Rostand's *Chantecler* [1910]; Sacha's birth in Russia resulted from Lucien's having signed a contract with the Mikhailovsky Theatre for nine consecutive winter seasons. His mother, *née* de Pont-Jest, was a much-loved if somewhat shadowy figure in his life, already divorced from his father in 1890. As Sacha subsequently commented: "I had two parents and adored both — but separately." Along with his father's slightly corpulent features and matinée idol poise, Sacha was heir to his wit. Accosted by an importunate journalist whose self-righteous justification for his boorishness was that "I speak as I think," Lucien instantly retorted: "Yes — but more often."

After his parents' divorce, Sacha was brought up in Lucien's sumptuous apartment, which managed to boast two of the best addresses in Paris, being situated astride the Place Vendôme and the rue de la Paix. There, for example,

he was allowed to sit in on Rostand's preliminary reading of *L'Aiglon* [*The Eaglet*, 1901] and his childhood companions seem to have been limited to the Algonquish set of cronies whom his feather frequented: the *boulevardier* Alfred Capus ("Since I got married I've never set foot inside another woman"), the misanthropic Jules Renard ("It's not enough to be happy. We need to know at the same time that others aren't"), and the perennially good-natured Tristan Bernard ("I wage a valiant battle with laziness, but when I've conquered it I'm so tired, so very tired, that I no longer have the courage to work"). Another friend was the humorist Alphonse Allais, who might be described as the French Stephen Leacock — and then some. Sacha recalled Allais once paying an impromptu visit to a diminutive provincial railway station and complimenting the station-master: "I congratulate you. You have a charming station here, charming. But it's not in a very good position. Now, if you had it in Paris you'd make a mint of money."

In this atmosphere Sacha's own gravitation towards the theatre became inevitable; and after a couple of false starts, he contrived to scribble an estimable three-act comedy, *Nono*, within almost as few days. Its successful première in 1905 launched him overnight on his career as the Lope de Vega of the Boulevard, of whose 126 plays only the merest handful would flop. Although such titles as *Le KWTZ* [1905], *Tell père, tell fils* [*Tell Senior, Tell Junior*, 1909], *Mozart* [1925] (with a score by Reynaldo Hahn!), *Charles Lindbergh* [1928] (bizarrely subtitled "a fantasy"), *Frans Hals, ou l'Admiration* [*Frans Hals, or: Admiration*, 1931], *La S.A.D.M.P.* [*La Société Anonyme des Messieurs Prudents, The League of Prudent Gentlemen*, 1931], and *You're Telling Me!* [1939] intrigue rather than entice, it's possible that the best of his work was dismissed with even greater facility than it was written. A play like *Faisons un rêve...* [*Let's Make a Dream...*, filmed in 1936] is as perfect a confection as, say, *Private Lives*, as airy and insubstantial as a bubble, no doubt, but a lovingly chiselled one. When in his seventh comedy, *Chez les Zoques* [*At Home with the Zoques*, 1906], the star fell ill, Sacha stepped in and proved to be his own definitive interpreter. Henceforth what he would write was not so much plays as leading roles with plays attached, even setting them, to make himself feel more at home, amid furnishings brought from his *hôtel particulier*, 18 avenue Élisée-Reclus. A legend not simply in his lifetime but in his youth, already by his early thirties addressed as "Maître", Sacha was soon able, as it were, to buy out his father's share in the name "Guitry".



Lucien Guitry

His private life, though no less glittering, was certainly less uniformly enviable. He suffered from chronic hypochondria, complaining frequently of being undertreated (“Morphine was invented to give our doctors a good night’s sleep”). He was married five times, twice to actresses: Charlotte Lysès, who taught him the rudiments of his *métier* only to be overtaken by his success, and Yvonne Printemps, who notoriously cuckolded him with Pierre Fresnay; then to three unknowns whom he determined, willy-nilly, to turn into actresses: Jacqueline Delubac (“I am 50 today. Jacqueline is 25. What could be more reasonable than that I make her my better half?”), Geneviève de Sérévillie (“I see I’m going to be alone again... and I begin to wonder who with”), and Lana Marconi (“You’re different. The others were only my wives. You will be my widow!”). And there was, above all, the fact that in 1944 Guitry spent sixty days in prison for collaboration with the enemy, a charge of which no formal proof was ever established. To the end of his life he couldn’t bring himself to forgive the indignities he had borne at the hands of his captors; and more scoring out went on in his address book than there had ever been in his manuscripts.

It’s a delicate task, after so many years, attempting to distinguish substance from speculation. To be sure, no fewer than six of Guitry’s fluffiest comedies were premièreed during the Occupation in theatres whose best seats were... occupied by high-ranking German officers; and, while many of his compatriots endured extreme privations, he himself saw no reason why circumstances should alter the princely habits of a lifetime. But his apologists (including his English biographer, James Harding, to whom I am indebted for much information contained in this article) have tirelessly endorsed Guitry’s own twofold rationalisation of his conduct: that if he dined out with Nazis, it was the more effectively to aid friends in danger; and if he sanctioned performances of his work, it was to prevent French culture from being totally snuffed out. Maybe so. What is certain is that Guitry’s stance towards the invader was rarely one of servility. Consider the case of Hitler’s pet sculptor, Arno Breker: in the preface to an exhibition at the Grand Palais, Cocteau (who flattered himself on knowing just “how far to go too far”) went much too far by formulating a desire to see Breker’s bronze Aryan athletes stride in droves up the Champs-Élysées; whereas, at the *vernissage*, Guitry was heard publicly to remark that if all the sculptures were in erection, no-one would be able to move around.

After this rehabilitation, Guitry remained something of an Elysian recluse, writing ‘only’ eight plays and directing ‘only’ twelve films; the most prestigious (though not critically) from among the latter proved to be his three historical extravaganzas, *Si Versailles m’était conté* [*If Versailles Was Told to Me*, 1953], *Napoléon* [1954] (whom he idolised no less than Gance), and *Si Paris nous était conté* [*If Paris Was Told to Us*, 1955]. When he died in 1957, the last Mme Guitry immediately arranged for the *hôtel particulier*, which he had long hoped would be accorded museum status, to be razed to the ground, its accumulated treasures sold off by auction. In its place, there stands today an anonymous and not even particularly lofty skyscraper.

HAGIOGRAPHICAL

The often violent polemic provoked by Guitry’s perverse defence of *théâtre filmé* has tended to obscure the fact that his first film, *Ceux de chez nous* [*Those from Where We Live*, altered and with new opening and audio commentary by Sacha Guitry for a re-edition in 1952], was shot in 1914-15 and was silent. (The commentary, which he had originally spoken in person, matching it impeccably



Auguste Rodin in *Ceux de chez nous*



Ceux de chez nous

ABOVE: Claude Monet

BELOW: Jean and Pierre-Auguste Renoir

to his own lip movements and thereby inventing post-synchronisation, was recorded on to the film in 1939; in 1952 footage was added of Guitry reading his text and rather complacently showing off the artworks in his collection.) *Ceux de chez nous*, a filmed ‘introduction’ to twelve national luminaries of the period — Bernhardt, France (Anatole), Degas, Rodin, Saint-Saëns, Renoir (Auguste), Henri-Robert (a celebrated barrister), Rostand, the theatrical innovator Antoine, Monet, Mirbeau, and Guitry (Lucien) — engaged, or pretending to be engaged, in furtherance of their respective arts, was not only a uniquely fascinating precursor to Clouzot’s *Le Mystère Picasso* [*The Mystery of Picasso*, 1956] but also, perhaps, the first of the cinema’s interrogations into the nature of its own specificity. Two decades after cinema entered the twentieth century by the train to La Ciotat (as filmed by Lumière) — when it would eclipse all rival modes of representing ‘reality’ — here was Guitry blithely recording the ebbing tide of ‘pre-cinema’ France, of which it was not yet true to say that, paraphrasing Mallarmé’s Symbolist dictum, “*tout existe pour finir dans un film*”. [“everything exists for the purpose of ending up in a film”].

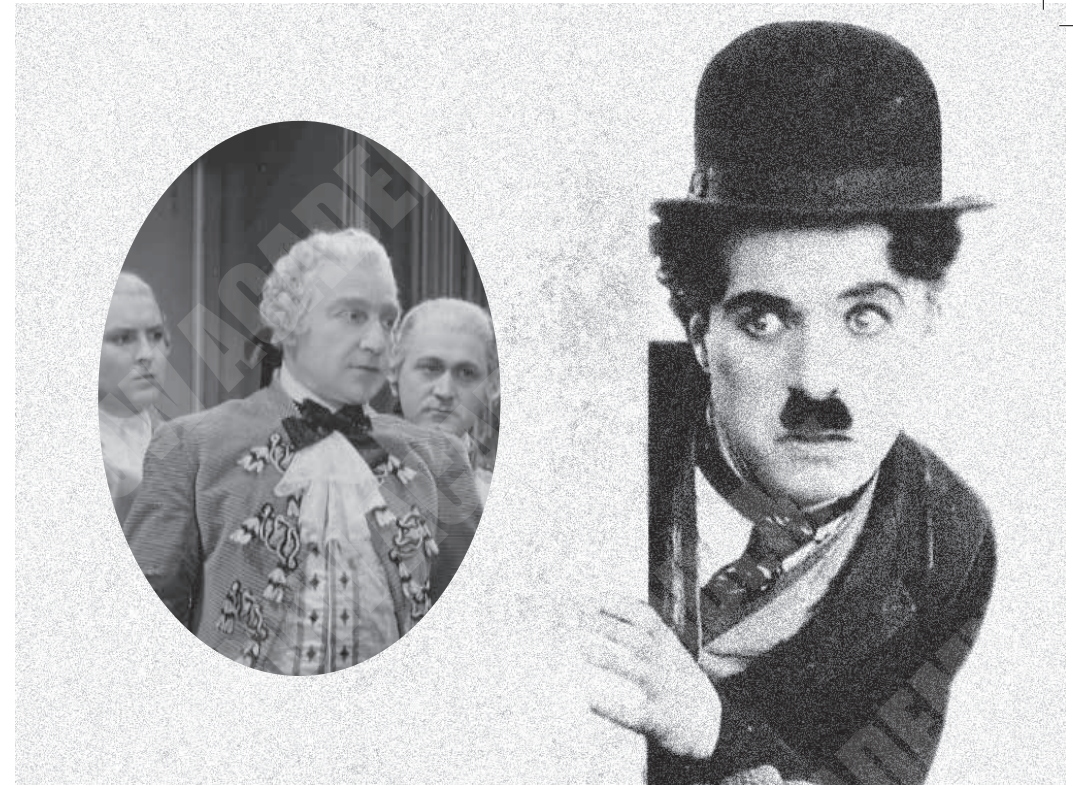
Already a few classic cinematic parameters were innocently subverted by the behavioural eccentricities of his subjects. Rodin, for example, comically uncertain of the difference between still and movie photography, requested Guitry to “tell me to stop when you’re ready so that I shan’t move.” Mirbeau, too, adopted a static pose as churlishly as for a bothersome press photographer; and Anatole France could hardly refrain from giggling at the absurdity of playing the man of letters for the exclusive benefit of an outlandish contraption. Alternatively, Guitry seemed to anticipate certain documentary and narrative techniques that would become important to the medium he professed to despise. Degas, flatly refusing to be filmed, had to be ambushed unawares, almost candid camera style, as he emerged from his apartment in the Boulevard de Clichy, the archetypal little bourgeois with his neat black brolly [umbrella]; while, in a sequence that vaguely prefigured Kuleshov’s famous experiment in perception, Maître Robert was seen pleading a cause with such mute eloquence that numerous spectators were lastingly persuaded of his client’s innocence. In fact, it was a mock trial, shot with considerable panache in the advocate’s home, his cook’s account-book serving as the scratch pad which he would learnedly consult between bouts of oratorical *élan*. So, in his modest way, Guitry was preserving a system of gestural rhetoric more proper to the nineteenth century, as well as a choice of evocative accessories that mainstream cinema, ever avid

for the up-to-date, has either excluded from its field of vision or laboriously (and too often decoratively) reconstructed for the dubious purposes of nostalgia: Anatole France's monkish library, Rostand's prim, razor-sharp wing collar.

But even in relation to Guitry's filmography, *Ceux de chez nous* is far less marginal than may immediately be apparent, except that the commemorative value of its moving snapshots goes some way to validating an unattractive characteristic of his historical spectacles: the reduction of a period to its élite. For Guitry, who had the theatrical's tendency to equate 'the people' with 'the public', was equally and on occasion debilitatingly insensitive to the paradox that posterity habitually judges an age by those who were considered *ahead of it*. How else to explain his preference for the academician Saint-Saëns over Debussy or Ravel, or for Rostand and Anatole France over Apollinaire and Proust? If Monet, Degas, and Rodin were great artists by any standard, so too were (and already, if not universally, recognised as such) the painters of the Bateau-Lavoir in Montmartre. But whatever the rationale behind his selection — whether, for example, he conjectured that the younger men would one day be filmed at the height of their careers — the fact remains that he has bequeathed us an invaluable and well-nigh unique record of a few of the Belle Époque's declining glories.

POLEMICAL

In 1912 Guitry prophesied drily: "I believe the cinema to be already past its peak." As a dramatist, for whom the text, his text, reigned supreme, he was predictably deaf to the charms of silent film — predictably, but with an acrimony that is hard to square with a love of painting that caused him to disburse several fortunes in the pursuit of minor Impressionist masterpieces. *Ceux de chez nous* apart (and it must be remembered that in 1914 he conceived it as a propaganda film, merely exploiting the seventh art to extol the other six), Guitry's standpoint was the reverse of Chaplin's. It was the very 'universality' of the silents that he most feared and distrusted. If the advent of sound chipped away at the pedantic rigour of this bias, it scarcely lessened the animosity; but he did welcome it (as did Pagnol) as an un hoped-for means of extending the Boulevard into the provinces and thereby vastly augmenting his audience. Indeed, he saw the mechanical reproduction of pre-existent theatrical texts as the primary task of all cinema. Though a devoted admirer of Chaplin, he held



that *The Gold Rush* [1925], *City Lights* [1931], etc., were unworthy vehicles for his genius and actually regretted that there had existed no American Feydeau or Courteline to write three-act farces for him!

These *propos*, obsessively reiterated in a posthumously published collection of Guitry's writings on film — *Le Cinéma et moi* [*The Cinema and I*] edited by André Bernard and Claude Gautéur — though often wittily put, make for such tiresome reading that, however reluctantly, one is forced to side with the legion of obscure journalists (plus Marcel L'Herbier) who over the years crossed swords with him. Basically, the articles of his faith can be resumed thus:

1. “An actor on the screen does not act — he has *already* acted.” (What Guitry adored in the theatre was precisely its potential for imperfection and reinterpretation.)

2. “When the cinema enables us to observe the labour of an insect, the Niagara Falls, the birth of a bird, the flight of an aeroplane, a boxing match, in short, whenever it reproduces life, it affords us a pleasure that is both unique and instructive. But when all it offers is *Ruy Blas* in 21 tableaux, *Galino Chapelier*, or else *Les Angoisses d'une mère*, it cheats the public and discredits itself.”

3. “Cinema is not Latin — it is American.”

In Guitry's defence is the fact that his frame of reference was so narrow. Like many of the French intelligentsia of the *entre-deux-guerres*, exposed to only domestic and American films, he was ignorant of the German, Scandinavian, and Soviet schools, nor could he envisage a French cinema that was not one of *adaptation*, whether from Hugo or contemporary farces and melodramas. But equally, and crucially, in his defence is the fact that, filming his stage hits with a disregard for the codified ‘opening out’ process that verged on provocation, or writing and directing original scripts in which the hoariest clichés of the Boulevard remained piously intact (a charismatic, usually dressing-gowned central character, a drawing-room set that would lend itself to flamboyant entrances and exits, a series of ingenious variations on the Husband, the Wife, and the Lover — rarely has this triangle seemed more literally ‘eternal’ than in Guitry's theatre), he produced a body of work not only as ‘civilised’ as Lubitsch's but one for which a number of plausible claims of ‘modernity’ have been made. (In an irony unlikely to be appreciated by Guitry's ghost, he will probably be remembered more for his films than his plays.)

FILMOGRAPHICAL

To call Guitry “the father of modern cinema,” as one French critic rashly did, is to risk doing his cause an injustice. But, logically enough, his unconcealed contempt for the medium must have encouraged him to set about undermining its more inhibitive conventions as overtly (if frivolously, and always within a reactionary ideological framework) as certain radical film-makers of a later generation. **ITEM:** Long before *India Song* [Marguerite Duras, 1975], his *Le*

Roman d'un tricheur [*The Story of a Cheat*, 1936], a suavely sardonic account of a confidence trickster's progress, had been narrated almost wholly in voice-off, Guitry's own inimitably nasal whinny ‘dubbing’ the dialogue of every single character on the screen, including those played by Jacqueline Delubac and Marguerite Moreno. (Truffaut has also detected this film's influence on the Welles of *The Magnificent Ambersons* [1942] and *F for Fake* [1972], to which might be added his own *L'Homme qui aimait les femmes* [*The Man Who Loved Women*, 1977]; and, of lesser significance, the multiplicity of disguises donned by Guitry the actor predated the comparable versatility of Guinness and Sellers.) Before *Le Mépris* [*Contempt*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1963], his [Guitry's] *Les Perles de la couronne* [*The Pearls of the Crown*, 1937, co-directed with Christian-Jaque], had deployed a trilingual soundtrack (in French, English, and Italian) with most of the film's quid pro quos deriving directly from linguistic misunderstandings and misinterpretations. **ITEM:** Before *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* [*The Young Girls of Rochefort*, Jacques Demy, 1967] (and the Gance



Cyrano et d'Artagnan [*Cyrano and d'Artagnan*, 1964]), his medium-length squib, *Le Mot de Cambronne* [*Cambronne's Word*, 1937], had been spoken entirely in alexandrines. In it Guitry played the elderly General Cambronne, struggling in his retirement to live down the notoriety conferred on him by his "word" ("*merde*", of course), whose identity he has never revealed to his family. But under relentless interrogation by his wife (Moreno), fielding at him one twelve-syllable question after another, all of which end inexorably in "*-erde*" (a difficult rhyme in French), he is driven to a pitch of distraction from which he is rescued only by the intervention of the maid (Delubac), who drops a tureen and inadvertently — but smack on the missing twelfth syllable of Cambronne's uncompleted answer — let's slip the fateful word.

One of Guitry's innovations has never been (nor will ever be) surpassed. For a gala evening in 1942 sponsored by the COIC (the Organisation Committee for the Cinematographic Industry), he cobbled together a short comedy, *La Loi du 21 juin 1907* [*The Law of 21 June 1907*], starring Arletty and Fernand Gravey. This dealt with a conventional amorous dilemma of which the law in question — relating to the rights of children to marry without their parents' consent — would prove to be the *deus ex machina*. Its extreme originality consisted in its setting up of a bilateral interplay between the auditorium and the film. As an usherette wandered down the aisle noisily selling ices, Arletty tartly snapped at her from the screen: "*Really, Madame, can't you see we've already begun!*" When Gravey, having misplaced his watch, wonders what time it is, a member of the audience called out "*Nine o'clock,*" to be gracefully thanked from the screen; and, at the dénouement, when Gravey attempts without success to contact his lawyer, the latter (Fernand Ledoux) suddenly shouted "*Here I am!*" from the auditorium, hurried down the aisle, 'entered' the screen inform the unhappy couple of the famous law, then just as nonchalantly 'exited'.

But Guitry was not merely the cinema's Satie, as it were, whose whimsical divergences from the norm deserve our indulgence only in so far as they were to be more 'scientifically' developed by others (and, anyway, the notion that Duras, say, might have been directly influenced by his work is spectacularly risible). He can lay claim to being one of the first *auteurs complets*, directing, writing, acting in his films, and often furnishing their sets (as in the theatre) from his own home. At least two, *Mon père avait raison* [*My Father Was Right*, 1936] and *Le Comédien* [*The Actor*, 1947], were enriched by unmediated

autobiographical elements. In the latter, Guitry was cast — almost typecast — as his own father; and the former was based on a play in which he had once played the 'Son' to his father's 'Father'. Twenty years later, however, he appropriated the role of the 'Father' for himself, absent-mindedly remarking to his director of photography during the screening of some rushes: "I adore the way you lit that scene between my father and Jacqueline."

He was fond of surrounding his pertly pretty wives and his own floridly rotund person, dressed up to the nines (or Nineties) in spats, canes, and gaudy Lavallières, with a loyal repertory company: on the one hand, Pauline Carton, Jeanne Fusier-Gir, and the two Marguerites, Moreno (subsequently Giraudoux's 'Folle de Chaillot') and the extraordinary Pierry, whose facial expressions managed to stay just this side of professional contortionism; on the other, a shuffling entourage of supporting actors — Aimos, Andrex, Sinoël, Craven — whose first and second names seemed to have merged into one as if to symbolise the equality of affection and respect in which they were held by the public. Guitry offered them all a delectable 'last hurrah' in the shape of *Ils Étaient neuf célibataires* [*They Were Nine Celibates*, 1939], in which he played an amiable charlatan hiring out nine unmarried old codgers as husbands in name only to any rich foreign ladies who, in the wave of xenophobia that swept France just prior to the Second World War, risked having their residence permits revoked.

Though one is tempted to compare Guitry with Noël Coward (the dressing-gowns, the actorish urbanity, the sentimental jingoism underlying such *Cavalcade*-like spectacles as *Les Perles de la couronne* and *Remontons les Champs-Élysées* [*Let's Go Up the Champs-Élysées*, 1938]), and though the ironic stress placed on social hierarchies and 'good manners' links him with Lubitsch (e.g., the enchanting below-stairs comedy, *Dé-si-ré!* [1937], in which he played a Parisian Jeeves), his post-war work especially was shot through with a ferociously misanthropic strain reminiscent of Buñuel's Mexican period or the Chaplin of *Monsieur Verdoux* [1947]. It surfaces most farcically in a strange film, *Adhémar, ou le Jouet de la fatalité* [*Adhémar, or: The Plaything of Destiny*, 1950, directed by its star, Fernandel, when Guitry fell ill]. The luckless fate of poor, unloved Adhémar is to be a creature totally devoid of humour while, at the same time, endowed with a set of goofily equine features that would be a clown's — and indeed were Fernandel's — fortune. For example,

after he solicitously rushes to the aid of a pedestrian knocked down by a police horse, the victim, on recovering consciousness, insists to the policeman: "But officer, I'm certain I saw TWO horses..." Our hero finally seeks refuge in a château donated to the physically underprivileged by some malformed philanthropist, and his first lugubrious dinner-party with its inmates must rank as one of the most sheerly tasteless comic *trouvailles* in the history of the cinema. In another 1951 film, *La Poison* (meaning, with its feminine gender, not "poison" but "a virago"), a pitifully hen-pecked clerk (one of Michel Simon's most affecting performances) arrives in his lawyer's office to announce that he has just murdered his wife. The lawyer, intrigued, meticulously proceeds to outline the plan of his defense — whereupon Simon returns home and only then, in accordance with the advice so generously proffered him, commits the crime.

If Guitry was a real original, however, it was less in the sense of doing something that had never been done before than in doing something so perfectly it could never be done again. And what one should speak of here, rather than 'filmed theatre', is perhaps 'theatricalised film'. To be sure, the least accomplished of his adaptations (*Toâ* [1949], *Aux deux colombes* [1949], little more than crude records of stage performances) bear only an academic relation to cinema proper. But in his best work, as in that of Pagnol or Cocteau's *Les Parents terribles* [*The Ghastly Parents*, 1948], an elegantly thrifty *mise-en-scène* coupled with Guitry's own incomparable vocal delivery does produce the desired suspension of disbelief, even if the 'life' we momentarily appear to be sharing in is that of the stage (which is, after all, by the very physicality of its live performers, 'closer to life' than the most seamlessly naturalistic of films).

So acutely do we identify with this theatrical 'realism' that when, Guitry having all but monopolised the first half of *Let's Make a Dream...*, there follows a brief scene in his absence between Jacqueline Delubac and Raimu, we have the distinct impression that it was inserted — in the film — for the sole purpose of permitting him to snatch a breather in his dressing-room. And the sound of technicians breaking for elevenses on an adjacent set, clearly audible on the soundtrack of *Assassins et voleurs* [*Murderers and Thieves*, 1956, his last film — technically directed by Clément Duhour], impinges on our attention only as much as the occasional noises-off which we more or less take for granted in the theatre. People want from the theatre, Guitry said, "the illusion that they are in the theatre"; only he also managed to indulge this illusion in the cinema.

As for his historical films, from the sarcastic hagiography of *Le Destin fabuleux de Désirée Clary* [*The Amazing Life of Désirée Clary*] (whose spoken credits, delayed until fully halfway through the narrative, introduce a whole new set of actors who will incarnate the characters' older selves — but the ingenuity of Guitry's credit titles in general would require an article to itself) and *La Malibran* (a biopic of the diva with Cocteau as Alfred de Musset), made in 1941 and 1943 respectively, to the final spectaculars, in which French history is reduced to a procession of pageant of 'floats', they possess their own quaint charm. A single example, from *Si Paris nous était conté*, will have to suffice. Marat, in the classic David pose, sits soaping himself in his tub. There is a knock at his bathroom door. Without turning his head, he cries "Entrez!" The door opens to reveal Charlotte Corday brandishing a huge knife. As she stealthily approaches the unsuspecting Marat, Guitry's voice is heard on the soundtrack: "Il a dit 'Entrez!' et elle est entrée..." ["He said 'Enter!' and she entered..."] (synchronised to the precise moment her knife slices his flesh) "...profondément!" ["...deeply!"]





The New Testament



MAIS NON MONSIEUR!— MAIS SI MADAME! 20th Century Sacha

by Craig Keller

“I’m against women; I’m right up against them.” —*Sacha Guitry*

The above aside, we never had anyone like Sacha Guitry in America. More than merely embodying, Guitry outright *espoused* empyrean urbanity, withering wit, practiced disgust for modern morés — a star-restaurateur’s deeply cultivated palate for the concerted flaunting of societal and social convention. We count the pairing of Ernst Lubitsch and Samson Raphaelson, to be sure, but their collaboration lacked the will to amorality that one suspects served Guitry as his corrective, or at least his contribution, to that universal balance in the Buddhist traditions. Lubitsch dreamed up duchies and kingdoms; Guitry toiled to warp, reshape, his immediate world.

Guitry’s character was, if not nationalist, intensely national; Guitry, as quoted by Gilbert Adair: “The cinema is not Latin; it is American.” Not a compliment;

merely an observation — misted with a little spritz of *acide sulfurique*. For Guitry's is precisely a Latin cinema, fashioned out of observations, *des bons mots*, as opposed to a cinema of action, at least in the traditional sense of, say, the universal figures cut from an ostensibly, benignly (sham) nationalist cloth in Hawks or Ford. Yet, another filmmaker comes more readily to mind when thinking of Guitry: this one, like Guitry, representative of a distinct cultural pedigree, but associated often with contemplation rather than observation: Yasujiro Ozu. From the films of the latter one might draw the lesson: "Mind in gear before mouth in motion"; for the former, to think *is* to perceive, which *is* to talk, and *is* to perform. A lengthy inventory could be made of shared tangents or abutments between the two directors, negative equivalents, but for the confines of this piece perhaps the following observation Venns the hardest: that Ozu's essential question was: "How do we carry on living together?" while Guitry's, as posed explicitly in *The New Testament*, was: "Why do we carry on living together?" For Ozu, family was the crux of the social dynamic, at once personal support system and obligation. For Guitry, on the one hand, hell is other people, as Sartre nicely put it; on the other, family is something to be *tolerated*, and the members or friends we're closest to earned their clearance because, to paraphrase Jack Kennedy, they either amuse us or inform us. Sacha Guitry was a fabricator of delectations, that is, of entertainments that expressed the impulse toward sex and freedom — altogether distinct from libertinage, for caddishness assumes a specific *élan*.

Ozu: Can the security of the offspring be ensured to the degree the parents not only desire, but expect?

Guitry: You see, there is a *spectrum* of the gigolo...

THE BAD TESTAMENT

The New Testament both is and is not the story of a revolutionary bursting through the temple entryway to upend the tables of the money-changers — except here the money-changers are the craven spouse and family of friends expecting to live off our hero Guitry, Dr. Marcelin's, largesse; the temple: the city of Paris, a playground for the idle rich, populated by four statues of Jeanne d'Arc once raised more in tribute, as testaments, to woman, purity, and country, than as the totems of displaced idolatry, landmarks for trysts. Take too the

film's title, another of those delicious blasphemies that bring Guitry so much pleasure and articulate so well, so meaningfully drive home, the paving over of the Elysian Fields. The testament in question, well, it doesn't even arrive until nearly 40 minutes into the film — and exists (1) as a means of affording him the opportunity to upbraid in a series of stunning speeches the less than entirely faithful members of Marcelin's immediate circle, and (2) as the means of revelation of his undisclosed family-on-the-side.

A May-September rendezvous between a young man (Fernand Worms, performed by Christian Gérard) and an older woman (Lucie Marcelin, performed by Betty Dausmond) plays out in the backseat of a cab, *in media res*. The camera, stationed directly behind the driver and passenger-seats up front, shoots directly through the windshield, and allows a documentary view onto the streets of Paris 1936, the driver blaring his horn at actual pedestrians moving over crosswalks in a scene that anticipates Pagnol's *Fanny* [1932] and Bresson's *Les Dames du bois de Boulogne* [*The Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne*, 1945] as much as Melville's *Bob le flambeur* [*Bob the Gambler*, 1956] and draws a straight thread through to the early films of the Nouvelle Vague. The lovers conceal their faces; the woman's husband is thought to



have been spotted in a passing auto. (Lucie remarks to Fernand: “I’m SURE I saw him; I THINK he saw me.”) She hops from the cab and click-clacks home, followed shortly after by her husband Jean/Guitry, a doctor with a wide spread of well-off clientele. He presents the news for the day: he’s brought aboard a pretty young woman as his new secretary, one Mademoiselle Lecourtois (Jacqueline Delubac) whom his wife naturally suspects to be his new lover. (Jean explains: “One doesn’t watch one’s secretary, but one sees her. ... The spectacle of youth is as necessary to us as vitamins.”) As for her own paramour Fernand, the assemblage of a dinner party in the Marcelin flat that night reveals him to be the son of the family friends, the namesake Worms. When, winding up the soirée for which Jean has left to tend to a patient (the “Bey of Tunis”) the party retires to the drawing room, a messenger delivers Jean’s coat, sans Jean, the assembled leap, physically even, to the conclusion he’s dead — perhaps has done himself in (Guitrian exasperation, more on this later, prevailing) — and ransack the pockets only to discover a newly revised last will and testament.

Ah, the will: the second and third parts of Jean’s fortune are to be left to Madeleine and Juliette Lecourtois, one of whom is a mistress, the other, his daughter. Further in the letter, Jean alludes to knowledge of young Fernand’s affair with Lucie, which shocks his parents — until the next elaboration discloses Jean’s own affair decades prior with Mme. Worms. “The son has unknowingly avenged the father’s honor.” So much, then, for Lucie’s scheme to replace Mademoiselle Lecourtois with Fernand Worms in the role of Jean’s secretary. The more Guitry movies one sees, the more one develops the sense that matters of honor, vied for, avenged, exist within the man’s work as pretense for the duel itself. Examine the following skirmish earlier in the film between Lucie and Lecourtois. The wife tells the secretary she’s provocative:

WIFE: Just look at you.

SECRETARY: Looking at YOU, it’s far more understandable. Any provocation I have, I read in YOUR eyes yesterday. That look that swept over your eyes: it was the enemy entering.

WIFE: The enemy? You do exaggerate! You look just like a little girl.

SECRETARY: We can’t all look like mothers. M. Marcelin didn’t talk about me last night. You talked to him about me. Oui, madame, oui. You told him I probably had tuberculosis. No: I’m neither tubercular nor provocative. Ah, what I have is more serious: I am 22, madame, and, alas, that isn’t catching.



The New Testament



Refreshingly, and unlike conventional moral dramaturgy, inconstancy is not necessarily its own ruse in Guitry. Trysts are not solely the manifestation of interior delusions about oneself — about one's social power, one's sex appeal. The film will climax in a fashion that is 'thoroughly Sacha,' which I'll come back to below in a passage on the brilliant close of *My Father Was Right*. For now, we take leave of this particular testament, or testimonial, with the image in mind of Jean returning home, his imperious phallic cane ringing the buzzer at the front door of the flat...



YOUR FATHER SHOULD KNOW

Composed by Adolphe Borchard, deeply 'sincere' strings play for bars over a black screen, something like the beginning of an Ozu film. Even the title itself carries a sentimental note: *My Father Was Right*.

Are we at the outset of a Guitry film in a different register?

A grandfather, Adolphe Bellanger (Gaston Dubosc) arrives at his son's estate, only to be greeted in the gravel drive by his 10-year-old grandson Maurice (Serge Grave). "I haven't forgotten your bicycle," he kindly assuages. "But I remember only when I see you!"



No, it's business as usual *chez Guitry*. Which is to say we are at the 'launch' of a film that will be anything but typical, both in form and in the manner by which the story will ignite. Nothing so vulgar as the galvanization or spurring-on of a plot, *non madame*: Adolphe has simply dropped by for a chat with his son, Charles (Guitry), will jimmy his cigarette into its filter, and proceed to mull over love — happiness — women. Far from a rose-eyed retrospective on the contours of a life well lived, the discussion progresses into an extended and intimate exchange between two generations of the Bellangers in what, in the 21st century, might be characterized as fully 'male' or 'masculine' or (before misogynist) "chauvinist" takes. But there was once a space for that.

One quick digression... Age differences in Guitry serve at least two purposes: not only as a signal to the audience of romantic interdiction or transgression as a plot device, but as an establishment of a generational link which suggests, perhaps paradoxically, familiarity, where -in one party is somewhat guaranteed to know the other. In the instance of Charles and Adolphe, Charles's father tells him one should get sick every ten years, as one feels much better, younger afterwards; while he also admits to bumping his age *up* now to 77 so he can profess to having known Louis-Philippe and thus put one over on people by expressing feeling rather quite *better* than the average 77-year-old, thereby teasing out the sympathy of doting admirers. "The joy of lying!" he exclaims. "One of life's great pleasures!"



Get people on your side; subterfuge it out. This amazing nearly 20-minute scene where Adolphe holds court with his son and chats, shooting the shit and musing on the pleasures of growing old (appearing younger than one's stated age, experiencing deafness's myriad conveniences, taking something from married life before indulging as a widower in the perks of reacquired bachelorhood) charms the viewer and the son alike. Defenses

down, Charles admits his marriage isn't so great, has been on the rocks for some time. Adolphe runs through a series of too-true pick-me-ups before admitting: "My father was right! I wish I could give you what he gave me: the unlimited confidence we must have in life." No sooner does Adolphe take his leave than Charles's wife phones to say the reason she hasn't come home yet today is because she's leaving him. Charles was only just discussing boarding school with his son Maurice; he now vows to home-school him, adding: "I think I recall a lot of French history after all."

Fast-forward twenty years, his son Maurice, a grown man (Paul Bernard), comes to visit Charles, hair powdered with time. Picking up right mere minutes from the last scene decades prior, his wife Germaine phones again, this time to say she's coming over. But when the bell rings at the front gate it turns out to be Loulou, a stranger in a near harlequin print blouse: she's Maurice's girlfriend of two months whom Charles has not been introduced to. She tells him Maurice won't ever stay overnight at her place because Papa Charles date her best friend, Henrietta. Loulou also mentions that Maurice expresses to her a fear of abandonment: "One day you'll phone and tell me you're leaving." She notes that a planned trip to Venice for that night may go off the rails as he doesn't want his father to be alone, at which point Charles hands her a roll of bills and insists she buy the ticket for that very night along with a birthday present. Loulou thanks him and leaves, passing Germaine (Betty Dausmond) on her way out. She's come to try to reconcile with Charles after twenty years; her "friend" she was living with in Rio de Janeiro has, after all, died a few months earlier. Charles rebuffs her, — she asks his counsel as to what she should do next. "Come back in ten years." Can she see her son? No. But can Charles at least say something nice to her before she leaves? "You want me to say you can still easily fool me? — Yes — you can." Delighted, she exits, and fade to black.

We pass to a camera gesture unexpected in the oeuvre of Sacha: a lateral pan and dissolve of newly updated furniture and newly hung portraits on the wall. Charles is primping...

It must be understood at this point that the furniture in Charles's room consists of Guitry's own. The playwright-filmmaker was known to populate his sets, on

stage and screen, with the appointments that he was extraordinarily proud to have acquired — we can say that Sacha was wickedly vain in his acquisitions. His predilection will play a larger role in the next film under discussion, *Let's Make a Dream...*, but the general point to be made is that for Guitry, such *objets* were not merely for showing off, but rather represented, yes, testaments to his personal pantheon of heroes: artisans, craftsmen, Great Figures, especially within the purview of French culture. His first feature, *Ceux de chez nous* of 1915, which he revised in 1952, consists of portraits of his heroes *in situ*, at home and at work — Rodin, Monet, Renoir, et al. His sets and, for more permanent posterity, his films, notarized his admirations. Take the exchange in *The New Testament*, which glides by quickly:



LUCIE: In life, you must swear to nothing.

JEAN: You don't mess around with love.

LUCIE: Why?

JEAN: I don't know. I too wanted to quote a play by Musset.

Both characters invoke the title of two separate Musset plays, and to hop back to *My Father Was Right*, it's curious and interesting to note, I think, that Musset's

On ne badine pas avec l'amour [*No Trifling with Love*, 1861], is precisely the play rehearsed in the opening minutes of *À nos amours*. [*Here's to Our Loves*, 1983] by Maurice Pialat, the author of *Loulou* [1980].

So Maurice and Loulou return from Venice; Loulou plots with Charles that he'll pretend he doesn't know her; Maurice does all he can to sidestep his affiliation with a woman, figuring it to come at the expense of his father's happiness and presumed loneliness — a projection of Charles' own psychography and its tendency toward a nuttily perceived codependence. Charles' absence (spending his nights with Henrietta) has already tipped off the servants that his 'bizarre' happiness may be the onset of "futility," as diagnosed by the doctor whom Maurice consults shortly before his father's return home.

It all works out in the end, with a brilliant closing monologue that not only incorporates the theme of continued *je-ne-regrette-rien* affection for past loves but opens vastly to a general analysis and espousal of happiness. "I was like you — you'll be like me! My father was right. One day you'll be like me the way I'm becoming like him!"

DRAWING-ROOM CONCLUSIONS

Guitry's films conclude with the complication that resolves delightfully and satisfyingly (if Sacha's plotting were ASMR, there would be as many 'likes' as 'views'), yet he goes against the dynamical complications by protracting the conflict scenes with utter delight and relish.

Guitry is the detective of his own plot. He convenes the players, extends his confrontations to epic lengths, drawing out the fight and relishing in his oratorical verve, and explains how he committed the ruse — what we might refer to, in both *The New Testament* and *My Father Was Right*, the big reveal of the *complot*, that beautiful French term whose English equivalent might said to be 'plot,' but which wrangles the narrative sense of the term along with, say, 'conspiracy.' (It's a key concept in the cinema of lifelong Guitry-admirer Jacques Rivette, who wonders aloud about the etymology of the term across both languages in Claire Denis's classic documentary portrait of the director, *Jacques Rivette, le veilleur* [*Jacques Rivette: The Nightwatchman*, 1990]). There's an Arthur Conan Doyle element in the sense of Sherlock Holmes's

disquisitions on crime; whether or not Guitry was himself an admirer of ACD I have no idea, but biographically speaking we can find alignment with the detective's propensity for injectable cocaine and "Guitry's own" late-night indulgences with morphine exactly to buttress his incessant workaholic jags that supplemented if not propelled the balance of intense mental concentration and the ability to dream. In some sense, Sacha, who is dead and thus free to disagree, remains the Baudelaire of the Boulevard.

THE TERRIBLE BROW OF RAIMU

Last detour: *Let's Make a Dream...* — a film that is everything. It begins with a prologue to a prologue involving a Gypsy/Romany orchestra, and shifts into an elegant party hosted by a society husband and wife (Raimu and Jacqueline Delubac) in which the luminaries of French stage and screen appear. (Are they playing themselves?) The camera dollies from one group to the next and we overhear the attendees' pithy observations on love, marriage, the theatre — sometimes all at once. ("[The audience] always wants the same thing: they're only happy with a marriage." "Ah yes, a marriage — they call that a well-ended comedy." "Whereas it's often a tragedy just beginning.") During a dance, Guitry asks the hosting wife if she and her husband might come by his place the next day at 3:45pm, casually noting he has something to show them. (A few minutes prior, Raimu has suggested to a guest that he has a 4:00pm rendezvous; we see only the back of the man's head, but at this instant with Delubac, we realize that it was Guitry.)

Now the main bulk of the movie begins. When the husband and wife arrive, the servant informs them that Guitry is not back at home yet, a piece of information which incenses the husband, as he's itching to keep his secret 4:00pm assignation. Looking around, Delubac remarks, "It's a pretty place he's got!" "Yeah, it's nice," Gustav (Raimu) replies. She responds, "It's more than that! It's in very good taste! Each object was clearly chosen with care! The house bears the mark of its owner's personality!" As pointed out earlier, note that the furniture and appointments (a Renoir hangs on a wall) are Guitry's own personal collection. We learn that the owner has studied law, but "has a name" and is an established society figure. The wife grills the husband about his impatience; he's evasive, saying he has a meeting in the heart of Paris with "a South American," and there's a two- or three-hundred-thousand franc deal



on the line. She pushes him to leave, although he suspects she suspects...

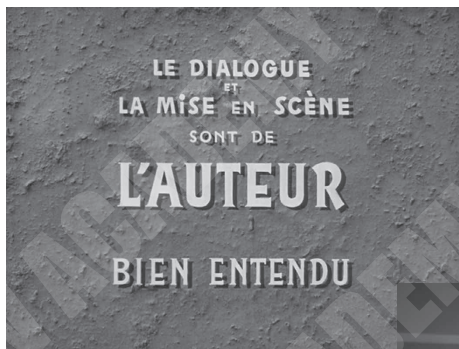
Guitry emerges from the bathroom, having been hiding all along. After some *badinage*, he invites her to come over at 9:00pm; she accepts. Cut forward: He's having a meltdown because she's not yet showed. They spend the night together, and realize it's morning; she hasn't been home yet. Her husband arrives, she hides in the bathroom. His morose demeanor when he enters panics Guitry — but then Gustav/Raimu tells him he hasn't been home yet, he's been out on "a spree." Guitry announces he has a lady over, and charitably helps Raimu concoct a scheme where this husband will admit there *was* no South American, but that his aunt

in Orléans was ill, and he'll be tending to her for two whole days in her native town, with sweets on the side. He leaves, and Guitry shuts the doors. "Chérie!" "We have a lifetime?" "Much more than a lifetime — we have two days!"

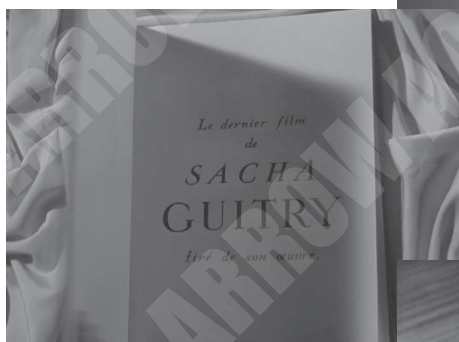
I'll leave it to Sabrina in the following essay to go up the Champs-Élysées through all of Sacha's oeuvre — that film in this collection, after all, is the outlier: an outlier among outliers...

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La Poison
Dé-si-ré!
La Vie à deux
Le Destin fabuleux de Désirée Clary



SACHA GUITRY PLAYS SACHA GUITRY

by Sabrina D. Marques

GUITRY & SACHA: A WORK OF THE SELF

There is little disagreement concerning Sacha Guitry's genius. The author, playwright, screenwriter and actor receives as much acclaim today as he did during a lifetime of prolific work. Guitry adventurously migrated from the theatre to the big screen and, with humor, wit and invention, progressively grounded his style in the infinite possibilities of the word. Even if he first stepped on a stage for pantomime, the role of playing 'Sacha Guitry' would be his ultimate performance. And the persona Sacha Guitry was made of words.

GUITRY & MIMICS: A FAMILY OF EXAMPLES

Alexander Guitry (Sacha) was born in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1885 to a prestigious family of theatre artists. Even if his fame would end up crossing the oceans (reaching Orson Welles, no less) he was mostly adored and popularly acclaimed in Paris, where he reigned in the role of a refined gentleman of spirits and eccentricity. He would die in the City of Light in 1957, without the opportunity to read the eloquent defence constructed by some of the most brilliant young critics of that hour of the world: names such as François Truffaut or Jacques Doniol-Valcroze (from the yellow-era *Cahiers du cinéma*) and, later, Noël Simsolo.



Assassins et voleurs

Although Guitry was never a good student (attending twelve high schools in twelve years and never finishing the first year), his intelligence was clearly stimulated by the vivid environments he grew up in. His father, Lucien Guitry, was an admired actor working in Imperial Russia and Sacha was honoured to have the Czar Alexander II as his godfather. After his parents' divorce, five-year-old Sacha was taken from his mother, an heiress of the French aristocracy and, spoiled by his father, he grew fond of art, luxury, and sophistication. Growing up among celebrities such as Sarah Bernhardt, Anatole France or Davidoff, Sacha the child closely watched his personal hero — his father — while dreaming of becoming an actor or, even better, his father's double. Watching Guitry's oeuvre in retrospective is to witness how every film mirrors his personal biography, progressively proving his belief in the inextricable contamination between art and life. Inspired by the father-son relationship, in *Le Comédien* [*The Actor*, 1948], Guitry plays both his father and himself, eternalizing his admiration for his elder. Yet, Guitry's films are made for himself. The elaborate and inventive credits are a clear demonstration of the defining power of his signature and leave no room for doubts about the vision he had about himself: he was an author.

GUITRY & MEMORY: STATUES ARE THE MEN WHO NEVER DIED

"You can't fake a spirit," said Guitry, recalling *les hommes de génie* that are evoked in almost every text that he staged or filmed. Having grown up amongst great men, he would firmly consider those who lack genius to be unworthy of his friendship. So, he surrounded himself with his most fascinating contemporaries. Guitry's notorious megalomania was only the first impression of a resourceful man who could draw, paint, sculpt, and write with equal excellence. And in spite of all these talents that assured him early fame, a genuine desire to appraise his inspirations was what ignited his wish to eternalize them in his first film, *Ceux de chez nous* [*Those from Where We Live*, 1914-15]. Even though he had no clue about lighting (so necessary for the impression of early film) or about sound recording, this first contact with the movie camera still captured unique and remarkable moving images of names such as Auguste Rodin, Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas, Anatole France, Claude Monet, Sarah Bernhardt, and (of course) Lucien Guitry. In 1952, facing "the camera who looks at me while I speak," in a final edit for TV of *Ceux de chez nous*, Guitry reflected on this great documentary dedicated to his idols, commenting how "cinematography has, today, made some predictable progressions and also some that we could not predict." As for ourselves, it is while seeing the great Rodin at work and while hearing Guitry's self-confessed motivations "of eternalizing" that we realize how *Ceux de chez nous* functions as a broader metaphor for all of Guitry's work. This cinema filled with statues is, convergingly, and consequently, filled with examples. That is to say: in this (dark) room, the past is present.

GUITRY & ART: GREAT WORK IS GREAT LIVING

So, the statues are there at all times and the characters are meditating nearby. In *Ceux de chez nous*, we hear about Rodin, sculptor of human fragments, of impossible men and women. And then, amongst busts with no head or hands and without arms, we come to think about the amputation of these recognizable forms, realizing we are there just for study, away from verisimilitude. Inside Guitry's laboratory, this great human play, filled with archetypes and stereotypes, is a continuum that extends to theatre, to radio, to cinema. Guitry was never afraid of the "complicated machines" of the cinema, as François Truffaut recalls in the 1957 Guitry obituary. The transition to film was natural to an indefatigable author who had always expressed himself in different forms. Even if he wasn't technically specialized, "Guitry had no



Ceux de chez nous



Le Destin fabuleux de Désirée Clary

Let's Go Up the Champs-Élysées



*In melancholy,
he had fallen in love with love.*



Le Comédien



Donne-moi tes yeux

such complexes,” and in *Ceux de chez nous*, he remembers one of his idols, the impressionist Claude Monet, as an artist who would “work for a living, work as a living.” A mirror for his own experience.

GUITRY & HISTORY: EACH MAN A STORY

The successive book covers that open Guitry films, tell us we are about to witness a story. History is made of stories. Playing the role of a Professor who’s keen on storytelling (maybe portraying the engaging teacher he never had?) in *Remontons les Champs Élysées* [*Let’s Go Up the Champs Élysées*, 1938], Guitry tells his audience stories rather than teaching them History. “History is his obsession,” notices Noel Simsolo in the book he dedicated to Sacha in 1988. But his history is made-to-measure. As an actor-director, with this film he takes on the roles of Napoléon III, George Washington, Francis I, Cambronne, Louis XIV, Louis XV, Barras, Napoleon I, Louis XI and, also fictionalizes the lives of Diderot, Grimm, Florian, Béranger, Claude Monet, and Pasteur. All according to his will, of course. Answering to accusations of a lack of veracity and that the stories were light on facts, he promptly answered: “When drama is showing a great image of the past, one cannot hesitate in giving it the image we imagine.” With the freedom of appropriation, the human dimension of these historical characters is bought to life, in portrayals enriched with moral dilemmas and rarely missing out on the games of erotica. Sacha Guitry, absolute lover is, also, a lover of the absolute.

GUITRY & WOMEN: THE IMMODERATE CENTER

With his deep and resonant voice, Sacha Guitry was a man of many charms, often invoking in his works how mediocre it is to be a moderate lover. Yet this seductive man put his verve at the service of gallantry. According to Guitry, grandiosity and pretension are the traits at the heart of the farce of every rite of seduction. Here, the word is always of vital importance. The fast-paced narratives of his films, the monologues and verbal exchanges, tell of family dramas, generational divides, romantic encounters, and, above all, of a total lack of faith in marriage. Throughout Guitry’s work, marriage is a stage for various conflicts and the themes of adultery or incest are recurrent. Mostly staged within the ennui of the bourgeoisie, his series of comedies of manners à la Molière construct a ferocious class-satire that also acts as self-critique. Married for five times with his actresses Charlotte Lysès, Yvonne Printemps, Jacqueline Delubac, Geneviève de Séréville, and Lana Marconi, Guitry

was never shy when showing his love for women: “There are two types of women: those who are young and pretty and those who please me.” The aestheticizing and the objectifying were uninhibitedly there, which has seen him frequently critiqued as a misogynist. But the truth is that, inside this universal feminine/masculine tension, everybody is illusive and eluded: in this world of deception, both men and women are agents of actions outside the borders of convention, tradition, and institution.



GUITRY & THE MODERN: SPOKEN SUBVERSION

“The little I know, I owe it to my ignorance,” said Guitry, the insatiable collector of experiences. If he did not receive any specialized training in the cinema, he would, as a director, explore several possibilities to avoid stylistic repetitions, and his formal progression is noticeable even at a glance. Beyond technical virtuosity, Sacha Guitry is, above all, a storyteller. The sense of the classic ‘scene’ is always there in the form of a three-act narrative wherein plays the actor - the hero since the beginning of time. His respect for actors built him a troupe, a family of regular collaborators. The primacy of the word, of the dialogue, and of meticulous punchlines are the major tools he imported from the theatre. His films, dense and textual, do not foreground the formal specificities of the cinematographic apparatus. At the same time, the irony, the sketching-out, the timing, the gag, and the burlesque so well appreciated by this Chaplin fan, are the everlasting resources of a cinema primarily built upon humour. It is a cinema of variations. The inventiveness of the forms goes beyond

the suspicion that it is nothing but filmed theatre. Some intellectuals despised him as an example of patriotic glamourization, and the later years of his career were overshadowed by accusations of collaborating with the occupying Germans after the capitulation of France in the Second World War. But if the young French film critics rashly destroyed his reputation as another case of the traditional Cinéma de Papa, it would take an attentive group to evaluate the vitality of a work made from reinvention. Inside this raw and anarchic energy of all sorts, Sacha Guitry reigned above and raged against convention, alone above all voices, as a serious example of pure freedom.

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OBITUARY

B. ST PETERSBURG 1885 D. PARIS 1957

by Louis Marcorelles

The below was originally published in *Sight & Sound* magazine,
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With Sacha Guitry, who died on July 24 at the age of seventy-two, after a long illness, there passed one of the last, if not the most brilliant, representatives of that "vie parisienne" celebrated by Offenbach. Undisputed master of the Boulevard Theatre, Guitry inherited from the *Belle Époque* its taste for luxury, its insolence and extravagance, as well as an amorality as simple as it was total. 124 plays bear witness to the prodigality of a talent which moved easily from the complexities of love and adultery to the exaltation of science (Pasteur), the arts (Mozart), and literature (La Fontaine).

Last season Paris was somewhat startled to rediscover the extraordinary freshness of Guitry's best work, when his *Let's Make a Dream...* was revived with Robert Lamoureux and Danielle Darrieux. Despite the absence of the author, who created the leading rôles in most of his plays, the work seemed wholly undated and displayed his extreme skill at discovering humour in triviality. Written in 1912, in a couple of days, the play was brought to the screen in 1936 by its author, with Raimu, Guitry, and Jacqueline Delubac, one of the master's five wives, in the leading parts. A classic exercise in the husband-wife-lover triangle so dear to the French theatre, it contains the superb moment when

the lover, having just seduced his best friend's wife, replies to the latter, who is already dreaming of an eternal love, "For ever? No, much longer! Two days!"

Guitry's first great screen success, though, came with another film made at about the same time. This was *Le Roman d'un tricheur* [*The Story of a Cheat*, 1936], remembered for its use of a narrative monologue developed as a witty counterpoint to the action. Of his considerable screen output, amounting in all to about thirty films, one remembers not so much the grandiose historical confections (*Si Versailles m'était conté*, [*Royal Affairs in Versailles*, 1952], *Napoléon* [1955]) as the bourgeois tragi-comedies in which he gave *gree rein* to a merciless talent for observation. (Guitry was, incidentally, a great admirer of Octave Mirbeau and Jules Renard, whom he had known in his youth.) After the Liberation, Guitry suffered an eclipse. He was accused of having acted for the Germans, spent two months in prison, and was further a victim of that malice and ill-feeling so often encountered in the theatre.

After 1947, however, Guitry set about recapturing his public and did so with the two big historical films already mentioned. *Versailles*, first introduced to the French public through the radio, ran for months and was the top box-office film of its year in France. Eighteen months later, his *Napoléon* was given a spectacular première at the Opéra, in the presence of the President of the Republic. Guitry himself, paralysed in the legs, was carried to the performance in an arm chair. On his death, with one or two rare exceptions, the entire Paris press paid tribute to an artist who had entertained generations of Frenchmen.

Too complex a personality to sum up easily in a few sentences, Guitry brought to the cinema some rare personal qualities: invention and wit, great culture, and a brilliant gift for words. He made his films as he conceived them, shooting them 'straight,' with all the devices of cutting already worked out at the script stage. But to him, in any case, the cinema was mainly a kind of larger theatre, permitting an infinite variety of scenic construction. During rehearsals, having given his actors their final instructions, he would often close his eyes so that he could concentrate his attention exclusively on their rendering of his text.

During the last few years, apart from his historical pictures, Guitry rediscovered, in *La Poison* [1951] and *Assassins et voleurs* [*Lovers and Thieves*, 1956], an almost diabolic aptitude for describing thieves and rogues. He approached

villainy with relish, deliberation, and a characteristically macabre humour, hurling by the way a few darts at an immoral and cynical society. As an observer of human behaviour, he was ruthless and disillusioned, a confirmed enemy of the high-sounding, empty phrase. With greater penetration and discrimination in his approach to character, and rather more firmness in his choice of material, Sacha Guitry might well, one feels, have had his place among the cinema's truly creative talents.

But he was perhaps a victim of his own facility — the ease with which he could manipulate language and dramatic intrigue. He loved art and beautiful women; he was a tireless worker; he could even, when he felt like it, be a moralist. He will probably hold his place in the years to come — a minor place though by no means a negligible one — not among the creative artists but among the great entertainers of the theatre and cinema. He had, in the highest degree, wit; and in France this covers a multitude of sins. In a recent interview, published after his death, Guitry defined his own attitude to the cinema: "It does not have to pose social problems. It is a magic lantern. Irony and grace should not be excluded from it." Among his own favourite films, he included *Le Corbeau* [*The Raven*, Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1943] and *Kind Hearts and Coronets* [Robert Hamer, 1949].



Death of Sacha Guitry with mourners, at his residence, 1957



ABOUT THE TRANSFERS

The films in this collection were restored from the original film and audio elements by Gaumont and delivered to Arrow Films in High Definition. The films are presented in their original aspect ratio of 1.37:1 with 1.0 mono sound.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs Produced by **James Blackford**
Booklet Produced and Designed by **Craig Keller**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Production Coordinator **Liane Cunje**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**
Blu-ray Mastering **David Mackenzie**
Artwork **Scott Saslow**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

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Ginette Vincendeau, Rob Winter, Jean-Marc Zedde