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Review of Boudu Saved from Drowning

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Boudu Saved from Drowning
(Criterion Collection, 8.23.2005)

Though best known for *Grand Illusion* and *The Rules of the Game*, Jean Renoir, in a career that lasted from 1925 to 1971, made many other films, and *Boudu Saved from Drowning* is arguably the best of these. This lovely 1932 film captures the director's fluid style and flavors his usual humanism with a gentle satire of bourgeois conventions.

Edouard Lestingois (Charles Granval), a smugly liberal Paris bookseller, mostly ignores his wife, Emma (Marcelle Hainia), while carrying on an affair with his maid, Anne-Marie (Severine Lerczinska). Spotting a rambling bum he considers "a perfect tramp" jumping into the Seine, he rescues the man and brings him home, much to Emma's despair.

Instead of a sentimental plot having the warmhearted tramp change his hosts for the better by exposing the shallowness of their lives, Boudu (Michel Simon) is ungrateful and rebellious. The reluctant guest makes demands and thoroughly disrupts the Lestingois household. He eats sardines with his fingers, polishes his shoes on Emma's bedclothes, sleeps on the floor in a passageway, keeping Edouard from his nightly visits to Anne-Marie, makes passes at the servant, and seduces Emma.

Boudu Saved from Drowning is full of wonderful moments. Boudu is first seen in the Bois de Boulogne snuggling his large, shaggy dog. When the dog goes missing, no one cares. When an attractive young bourgeois woman says she cannot find her Pekinese, several cops are called into action. After a little girl gives Boudu five francs to buy bread, the tramp holds a man's car door open in hopes of a tip. When the man cannot find any money, Boudu gives him the five francs. The seduction of Emma is especially well directed, cutting from Boudu's lecherous face, to a wallpaper image of someone blowing a trumpet, to Emma's immensely satisfied post-coital expression. This light touch, typical of Renoir, is missing from Paul Mazursky's bland 1986 remake *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*.

Simon made this film at the peak of his powers, between Renoir's *La Chienne* and Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante*. With his huge head and enormous teeth, Simon looks like no one else. Because his face is initially mostly hidden by an uncontrollable beard, the sudden appearance, after a visit to a barber, of his goofy grin is startling. Simon uses his lanky body like a silent-film comedian, with a shuffling amble while a bum and a brisk, stiffer gait after he has been cleaned up and dressed properly. His Boudu, in strong contrast to the others, is always in motion, constantly creating chaos.

In an undated introduction to the film, Renoir explains that he and Simon wanted to work together again after *La Chienne* and that the actor suggested an adaptation of the Rene Fauchois play. Unlike most films from this period based

on plays, *Boudu Saved from Drowning* is very cinematic, with several long tracking shots. Renoir says that he used a long lens to shoot Boudu's street scenes to show how the tramp was essentially invisible to the public.

As is usual with Criterion, the high-definition transfer is excellent, with occasional lines down the center of the screen, and the soundtrack has only a few hisses. In addition to Renoir's introduction, the extras include a 1967 interview with Renoir and Simon; a 2005 analysis by Jean-Pierre Gorin, a screenwriter who has worked with Jean-Luc Godard, describing the film as a "criticism of liberalism"; an interactive map of 1930s Paris, offering a historical perspective on the film's locations; an essay by Renoir scholar Christopher Faulkner; and an undated conversation between director Erich Rohmer and critic Jean Douchet. As it often does, Criterion has included the latter only because it is available. Douchet cares more for showing off his brilliance, which consists mostly of pointing out the obvious, and Rohmer, much more animated than his films would suggest, struggles to get in a few comments about Renoir's use of music and natural sounds. For those not familiar with Renoir's work, *Boudu Saved from Drowning* will be a delightful introduction. Perhaps next, Criterion will offer the much darker *La Chienne*, which shows another side of Renoir's brilliance.--Michael Adams