
July 12 1971  The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"LES JEUX SONT FAITS" (Les Films Gises, 1947) Director: Jean Delamoy Original scenario by Jean Paul-Sartre, with dialogue by Sartre and Jacques Laurent Bost; Camera: Christian Matras; Art Direction, Pinsmomf; Production Supervisor, Louis Wipf; Music: Georges Auric 9 reels With Micheline Presle, Marcel Paglieri, Charles Dullin, Marguerite Moreno, Colette Rispert, Fernand Fabre, Jaques Erwin, Jim Gerald, Guy Decombe, Houlloudji.

Although Sartre's existentialist philosophy influenced most of the purely dramatic and very downbeat French films of the post-World War Two period ("Les Portes de la Nuit" etc.) actual filming of his work was delayed until the later 40's. "Les Jeux Sont Faits" was his first foray into writing directly for the screen. It was not well-liked in Europe, where critics reacted the fact that Sartre's ideas were mystical yet at the same time atheistic and/or anti-religious. It was not released in the U.S. until 1949, where the basic unfamiliarity with Sartre was a handicap; the film got tepid reviews and soon disappeared. It is however a beautiful production in many ways, scoring on its wry humor, its beautifully controlled performance from Micheline Presle, a surprisingly good one from Marcel Paglieri (whose dialogue had to be dubbed, since he spoke no French), and a hauntingly melancholic score from Georges Auric at his Wagnerian best. Despite the philosophic content on Sartre's dialogue, it is a film that is very easy to follow even in its unsubtitled form, particularly since it is so full of visual symbols (the repeated motif of a head clutching at hair or fabric, signifying a desperate attempt to cling to life; the little dead end roadway between life and death, dead trees on one side, living ones on the other, emphasizing the dividing line between life and death and the absence of half-measures). Thanks to the playing - and to Auric's score - the film is perhaps more persuading emotionally than it is intellectually, which is probably not what M. Sartre had in mind. It's a pessimistic film but - like a beacon film - not a depressing one since the pessimism is taken for granted. And there are certainly moments of joyful comedy - particularly from the magnificent Marguerite Moreno, as the ante-room secretary to Sartre's particular heaven - or hell.

"SILVIE ET LE FANTOME" (André Paulve Productions, 1948) Director: Claude Autant-Lara; scenario by Jean Auremche from the play by Alfred Adam; Camera, Philippe Agostini; Music: Rene Cloesre; 9 reels With Odette Joyeux, Francois Perier, Jaques Tati, Louis Salou, Pierre Larquey, Julien Carette, Jean Desailly.

While it may no longer be true that the NY Times can alone make or break a film, it was certainly true in 1950 when this enchanting film opened at the out-of-the-way Beverly Theatre. Having loved the film in London, where it received warmly enthusiastic reviews (and where it was brilliantly double-billed with a revival of "Dead of Night" to a long and successful run at the Academy cinema), I anticipated similar approval for the film here. But the NY Times gave it one of the cruellest and unkindest reviews ever afforded any foreign import; they certainly had the right to dislike it, but they went out of their way to be malevolent seemingly just because it was fairy-tale whimsy, and thus an unworthy subject for the director who had so recently made "Le Diable Au Corps". Despite the preponderance of dialogue, it is a thoroughly enchanting film, beautifully mixing comedy and pathos almost in the manner of James Barrie. Another major asset (as in "Les Jeux Sont Faits") is an incredibly magical score, played much of the time on a particularly emotional tin whistle. The public alas never got much chance to discover the film for themselves; after a very brief run at the Beverly, it got a week in 42nd Street as a co-feature at the Apollo, and then vanished.

Both of tonight's prints are from Europe and are therefore unsubtitled; however, we have prepared rough guide synopses which we think will be of some help, although in both cases, like all good films, they tell their stories quite visually.

Wm. K. Everson
"LES JEUX SONT FAITS" is of course a familiar gambling term, meaning literally that the game is under way. The American translation was "The Chips Are Down", although a more meaningful title would be "The Die is Cast", since it refers to the basis existentialist philosophy of a predetermined destiny, and the futility of trying to struggle against fate.

In an unnamed totalitarian state, Eve (Michelle Prasie) is being systematically poisoned by her politician husband, who seeks to inherit her money, and is also on the brink of consumating an affair with her sister, Pierre (Marseil Paglieri) in a resistance worker leading an insurrection against the dictator. Eve dies, and almost simultaneously Pierre is killed in a street battle with the fascist forces. Both wander to a mysterious little street leading to heaven's ante-room. There, the busy and efficient secretary explains that under certain conditions those who might well have met and become lovers in life, may return to life on an experimental basis. If they prove their love, they can live out their normal lives; if they fail, they must return, with no further appeal. Eve and Pierre, appalled by the soulless existence after death, in which the dead can witness the living but can communicate only with the dead and without emotion, welcome the chance to return. One of the dead asks that they rescue his little girl from a loveless existence with her slatternly mother and current lover and place her in a good home. Back in the normal world, Eve and Pierre find their lives picking up from the instant of their apparent death. Eve is now aware of her husband's true intentions, and seeks unavailinglly to warn her sister. Pierre, who in his hours of death had visited the dictator's palace, now knows that the dictator actually wanted the insurrection, and is merely using the resistance movement to further his own ends. Pierre's attempt to persuade his fellow resistance workers of this merely arouses their suspicions, suspicions that are increased when he re-establishes contact with Eve who, as wife of a governmental official, is regarded as being in the enemy camp. Both Eve and Pierre are too concerned with their own problems to concentrate on their own future; moreover Pierre is embarrassed by encounters with Eve's society friends. They do however remember their promise and rescue the child from its tragic home life. Convinced that Pierre is a traitor, the resistance plans to assassinate him; however he is warned by a friend, and the assassins, believing him to be out, go away, leaving him and Eve alone in the apartment. They consummate their love, and feel sure that they will be allowed to remain with the living. Next day however, Pierre has pangs of conscience, and feels it his duty to warn his comrades of the folly of an operation they plan that day. Eve, failing to dissuade him, goes to her husband's home to make one final attempt to disillusion her sister. A traitor in the pay of the police shoots and kills Pierre just before his allotted 24-hour span is up; at the same time, Eve dies again - aware now that her husband has already seduced her sister. Hopelessly they return to the after-world; as they are about to part for the last time they are approached by a young couple who have committed suicide, and who ask about the possibilities of returning to life. "You can always try" they tell them, without conviction, as they separate.

Since the dead and the living mingle so much in the film, it is at times a little difficult to keep them sorted out without a full knowledge of the dialogue; and the dialogue itself is full of typical Sartre irony and pessimism. However, none of it is really essential to a full understanding of the basic story-line.

"SYLVIE ET LE PANTOME" has rather less physical movement than "LES JEUX SONT FAITS" and a greater reliance on dialogue; nevertheless the basic situation is fairly simple, and given that you should have no great trouble in placing it all together!

Sylvia is an impressionable adolescent who lives in an old castle, and who nurtures a nostalgic love for the lover of her dead grandmother; his picture (with faithful hunting dog) adorns the wall, and his ghost is said to haunt the castle. She fully believes herself in love with the ghost, which does indeed follow her about the castle, although she has never seen it. In order to please her on her 16th birthday, her father arranges for the ghost to make an appearance. Actually, the ghost is to be enacted by three widely disparate men: a handsome young amateur actor, the vacant, and an out-of-work ham actor (Louis Salen) who intends to play the ghost in terms of traditional terror. At the party, the overjoyed Sylvia meets all three "ghosts", only to be puzzled by their difference in demeanor as they talk to her, finding that the gentle sadness of the burglar, who is falling in love with her, most fits her image of the ghost. Finally the real ghost manages to get under the prop shroud and confronts her, but is unable to talk to her. Accidentally, the hoax is given away - and Sylvia, saddened and disillusioned, doesn't realise that she is in the presence of a genuine ghost. She decides it is time to put aside childish fantasies and grow up - perhaps to romance. She is saddened, but matured, and doesn't witness the moment when the guests, in on the hoax, are suddenly terrified by undeniable proof that at least one of the ghosts is genuine. His haunting at an end, the ghost leaves the castle for a new celestial home.