

La Grande Illusion



'Boeldieu?' bellows the German officer who is performing the roll call. 'De Boeldieu?' The only reply is the sound of a flute through the night air. The prisoner of war camp commandant, Von Rauffenstein, held tightly in a neck brace, nervously adjusts his monocle before taking it out again in order to better pinpoint the location of the missing French officer, who is casually sitting on top of the fortress walls. The white-gloved Captain De Boeldieu plays a tune, 'le petit navire' (the little boat) on his flute (which had remained undetected and therefore had been not confiscated by his jailers). A huge commotion breaks out in the main courtyard of the castle, known as Wintersborn in the film. The hunt for De Boeldieu is taken up by German soldiers and the beams of searchlights. He runs up the steps of the staircase, hardly touching the ground. Lieutenant Maréchal and Lieutenant Rosenthal make the most of the confusion and quietly steal away from their French, British and Russian fellow-prisoners. They have a length of rope that they made right under the noses of their guards. They throw the rope off the top of a wall and successfully escape from the forbidding medieval fortress that now serves as a prisoner of war camp. Meanwhile, De Boeldieu makes his way across a snow-covered roof to a mass of rocks. He taunts his pursuers with a tune on his flute. They take aim and fire, but the fugitive officer throws himself to the ground just in time. A worried Von Rauffenstein rushes over. He begs De Boeldieu to come back: 'You understand! That if you do not obey my order now I'll have to shoot. I'd hate to do that. I beg you, man to man, come back...'

The château at the centre of la Grande Illusion

In the depths of the winter of 1937, the château du Haut-Koenigsbourg provided the setting for one of the most famous scenes of 'La Grande Illusion', Jean Renoir's cinematic masterpiece. As the story of the film was set in Germany, Alsace was an ideal location with its 'Germanic' style architectural backdrops. Renoir would certainly have been won over by the forbidding appearance of Haut-Koenigsbourg and by its sheer, high walls. The script required an 'eagle's nest' from which 'escape was impossible'. Perhaps Renoir was also influenced by the fact that the château had been restored thirty years before by the German Kaiser Wilhelm II, portraits of whom appear in the film on several occasions.

For a few days, Haut-Koenigsbourg played host to the actors Erich von Stroheim ('the Man you Loved to Hate'), Pierre Fresnay (the 'local favourite'; real name: Pierre Laudenbach) and Jean Gabin (the 'young lead'). Jean Renoir enlisted the help of an assistant-director, Jacques Becker (who returned to the château twenty years later for the filming of 'Les aventures d'Arsène Lupin' (the Adventures of Arsène Lupin) with Robert Lamoureux) and a script supervisor who appears in the film credits as 'Gourdji' and who was none other than

Françoise Giroud. The story goes that the colt leather horsehide jacket that she wore led to her being affectionately nicknamed 'mon petit cheval' (my little horse) by Gabin...

La Grande Illusion is back!

Banned in France in 1940 because of its lack of patriotic message, the film was also banned in Germany by Goebbels, who called it 'Cinematic Public Enemy number one'. However, La Grande Illusion has stood the test of time to become a 'must-see' film.

Seen by many as one of the cinematic masterpieces of the 20th century, La Grande Illusion is a great example of anti-war cinema and of a film that promotes universal human values. Jean Renoir's work is ultimately neither really about history nor about war; rather it shows individuals in all their complexity, regardless of questions of nationality. Shot on location at Colmar army barracks, Neuf-Brisach/Volgelsheim, on the high ground in the municipality of Fréland, and of course, at the château du Haut-Koenigsbourg, 'La Grande Illusion' boasted an impressive cast including Jean Gabin, Erich Von Stroheim and the Alsatian Pierre Fresnay.

Orson Welles once said that if he were to take just one film with him 'on the ark' in order to preserve it for posterity, it would be Renoir's La Grande Illusion. Franklin Roosevelt said, referring to La Grande Illusion, 'every democratic person in the world should see this film'.

One of the most important films of the 20th century

During your next visit to the château, you'll be able to see the courtyards, wards, façades, staircases and wall walks that featured in the film. You will get to know a location which, thanks to 'La Grande Illusion', definitely has a very prestigious place in film history.

We should say a few words about the highly symbolic geranium, 'the only flower in the fortress', which is lovingly looked after by the officer played by Erich von Stroheim in the film. During a location-spotting trip to the château du Haut-Koenigsbourg a few months before filming began, Set Decorator Eugène Lourié noticed a geranium gracing a window ledge. Delighted by the touch of colour and the poetic note that it brought to the dizzyingly steep and sinister-looking fortifications of the château, he suggested to Renoir that he should feature an identical flower in Von Rauffenstein's apartment (filmed in a studio). 'A geranium? Why not! Maybe I'll use that idea', Renoir said.

About forty extras were recruited at Sélestat for the film. In a scene shot at the 'parc aux bêtes' one of these walk-on actors is clearly heard giving an order in Alsatian to Sylvain Itkine, (lieutenant Demolder), 'Dü sollsch dô Owe bli!', when Itkine, caught up in his book, wanders away from a group of prisoners who are enjoying a snowball fight.

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