La Grande vadrouille (Don’t Look Now - We’re Being Shot at)

French Resistance in Film

In Brief

During World War II... When their combat aircraft is shot down by the Germans, three English airmen parachute to the comparative safety of Nazi occupied France. One lands on the scaffold of an amiable painter and decorator, Augustin. Another lands on top of a concert hall and is rescued by the irascible but patriotic conductor Stanislas Lefort. The third ends up in the otter enclosure in a Parisian zoo. When they try to help the airmen keep a rendez-vous at the Turkish baths in Paris, Augustin and Stanislas quickly find that they themselves have become targets for the German soldiers. Assisted by the daughter of a puppeteer and an anti-German nun, the two unwilling heroes accompany the three airman on a reckless trek across France towards the neutral zone and safety.

La Grande vadrouille is one of the great comic achievements of French cinema. A magnificent action comedy, it had until very recently the distinction of being the most popular film ever shown in France. Its box office sale of 17 million tickets has only recently been topped by the 1997 American blockbuster Titanic. Even today, its airings on French television attract stupendous audience figures. The phenomenal success of the film is a remarkable achievement given that the film makes light of one of the most unfortunate periods of French history.

This is a big budget film, a comparative rarity at the time, but not a French franc was wasted. From start to finish this has the feel of a lavish period production, paying a remarkable attention to detail. Director Gérard Oury is to be credited with achieving one of the most believable recreations of wartime France in French cinema history (even if no blood is spilt in the film).

A major factor in the film’s success in France was the top billing of Bourvil and Louis de Funès, at the time the two most popular comic actors in France. The two comedians had previously appeared two years earlier in another film, Le Corniaud, which was also a staggering box office success in France. The combination of two quite different comic styles works so brilliantly that you wonder why film producers took so long to get round to pairing the two actors.

These two French comic geniuses are joined by the incomparable English comic actor Terry-Thomas, who, true to form, plays one of the English airmen. The actor is on fine form and relishes in the mad cap scenes he is thrown into. A platoon of jack-booted sausage-eating German soldiers completes the comic book stereotyping to a tea.

The ebullience of the film’s comic performances is matched by Claude Renoir’s exuberant photography. Comic situations arise with consummate ease in a script which sparkles with some of the funniest one-liners ever written for a French film. Despite its strong comic slant, La Grande vadrouille is actually a creditable war film which gallops along at a fair pace, bolstered by some breath-taking action scenes. The film’s grand finale is particularly memorable.

What is most remarkable about this film is how little it is known about outside of France. If there is one popular French film that deserves an international audience, this is surely it.

Gérard Oury

Gérard Oury (29 April 1919, Paris – 20 July 2006, Saint-Tropez) was a French film director, actor and writer. His real name was Max-Gérard Houry Tannenbaum. Living together with the French actress Michèle Morgan, he was the father of French writer Danièle Thompson and grandfather of actor/writer Christopher Thompson. He died aged 87 in Saint-Tropez on 20 July 2006.

The son of Serge Tannenbaum, a violinist, and Marcelle Houry, a journalist, Oury studied at Lycée Janson de Sailly and at the National Conservatory of Dramatic Art. He became a member of the Comédie-Française, just one year before World War II, but fled to Switzerland to escape the anti-Jewish laws decreed by the Vichy government.

After 1945, he re-started his career as an actor, playing at theatre and in second-role in cinema. He became a movie director in 1959 (The Itchy Palm), and gained his first success in 1961, with Crime Does Not Pay (Le Crime ne paie pas).

Joining Bourvil and Louis de Funès as a comic duo, he burst into commercial filmmaking with The Sucker (Le corniaud), followed three years after by Don’t Look Now - We’re Being Shot At (La Grande Vadrouille), drawing the largest audiences ever in France, only later surpassed by Titanic from James Cameron.