

## La Règle du Jeu (PG)

Director: **Jean Renoir**

France 1939

27<sup>th</sup> October 2003

(Subtitled) Running time: 113 minutes b/w

LEADING PLAYERS: **Marcel Dalio** (Robert, Marquis de la Chesnaye), **Nora Gregor** (Christine de la Chesnaye), **Jean Renoir** (Octave), **Roland Toutain** (André Jurieux), **Mila Parély** (Geneviève), **Paulette Dubost** (Lisette), **Julien Carette** (Marceau, the poacher), **Gaston Modot** (Schumacher, the gamekeeper), **Pierre Magnier** (the General), **Eddy Debray** (Corneille, the major-domo)  
SCRIPT: **Jean Renoir**, **Carl Koch** CINEMATOGRAPHY: **Jean Bachelet**, **Jean-Paul Alphen**, **Alain Renoir** EDITING: **Marguerite Renoir**, **Marthe Huguet** MUSIC: **Roger Desormières**, **Joseph Kosma**, from Mozart, Monsigny, Saint-Saëns

A weekend party assembles at the château of the Marquis de la Chesnaye. Among the guests André, an aviator, is in love with the Marquis's wife, Christine; the Marquis himself is conducting an affair with Geneviève; Octave, an old family friend, is also secretly in love with the Marquise. Meanwhile a poacher, appointed servant by the mischievous Marquis, comes to blows with the gamekeeper over the latter's flirtatious wife.

The set-up may remind one of *The Shooting Party* or *Gosford Park*, but the debt is naturally in the present film's favour. Rather, the upstairs-downstairs intrigue, the mingling of comedy with drama, and the setting prior to cataclysmic social/political change owe much to Beaumarchais's *Le mariage de Figaro*. Which explains the hostility of audiences and government alike on the film's release; it was cut, then banned outright, and not reconstituted until well into the 1950s.

To tap the source of the disquiet aroused by this superficially fluffy piece of bedroom farce ('Surely just the French doing what they do best?'), one must look beyond the typical observation that it was 'socially insidious because it was a clear attack on the haute-bourgeoisie, the very class who would shortly lead the troops

against the Germans'. The auto-critique goes deeper than that.

Consider. The lower orders are no better than their irresponsible masters: the women are no less immoral, the men just as concerned to preserve their foreheads from cuckoldry. This is the culmination of Figaro's contract with the Count: he enjoins the latter to behave like an honest man, as befits his station; two centuries later, not only has the nobility welshed on the deal, it has brought the servant classes down with it. Renoir serves up for the French a portrait of a society which is rotten from top to bottom. 'The Rules of the Game' are: keep up appearances, and somehow the whole charade will be preserved indefinitely (barring Adolf and his Panzers, that is).

André, the aviator, the crosser of the Atlantic (distance, perspective), is the one who threatens the edifice. Being Christine's lover is not enough; she must elope with him, it must be 'honest'. If she does this she will be showing that feelings matter more than money and position. The choice is too much for her and she runs for cover with Octave, and thus sets in motion the mechanism by which everything ends in tragedy but the status quo is maintained, for now.

The working out of this theme in Renoir's hands leads to some striking juxtapositions of tone. Renoir the 'humanist', like Octave whom he plays, was a lover, and forgiver, of humanity. It was not in him to condemn without affection. In one scene the gamekeeper chases his rival through the drawing room discharging a pistol, while the guests barely look up from their cards: he is merely playing by the rules, after all. It was perhaps the coexistence of farcical sequences like this with the wanton slaughter of wildlife in the hunt scene that audiences found hard to take. Renoir himself wrote: 'During the shooting of the film I was torn between my desire to make a comedy of it and the wish to tell a tragic story. The result of this ambivalence was the film as it is.' Amen.

**David Clare**