

CHILDREN OF PARADISE

Directed by Marcel Carne
Produced by Adrien Remauge
Distributed by Tricolore
Released in 1946

A momentous film, all the more remarkable for having been made during one of the most trying times in French history, *Children of Paradise* is a comedy-tragedy exploring our inability to transcend reality. We may prefer the fantasies of the unconscious, in dreams; or fantasies of the conscious expressed in drama. But there is no way of escaping the human condition.

A variety of richly archetypal characters populate this most intimate of epics.

Lacenaire is a calculatingly cynical criminal. He justifies his wrongdoing by exposing the vanity and hypocrisy of his supposedly less genuine countrymen. A sometime playwright, he comes to realize there is a spark of divine glory in all of us when he chances upon Frederick Lemaitre. Planning to kill him should this most successful performer refuse to loan him money, Lacenaire is bewildered when Frederick, instead, gives him a sizable quantity of francs. They become friends and find themselves aligned against the powerful Count Edouard of Montray, who hides his pathological jealousy and violent temperament behind a façade of haughty gentility. Lacenaire murders him in cold blood, but welcomes arrest. He kills the count as he would have killed Frederick. But knowing he cannot blame the world for his sins anymore, he defers to the judgment of his fellow man. Perhaps he truly believed the count deserved to die. But he is also realizing that this is not his decision to make. Here at the end of his life, he is, for the first time, of two minds.

Both men were obsessed with the mysterious Garance, a blithe creature devoid of guile who, despite her benign temperament, manages to leave a trail of destruction in her wake. But to her credit, she seeks to save Frederick (another ardent admirer) from death in a duel with Count Edouard. She, as his mistress, is willing to pledge her troth in order to assuage his anger. (Garance observes that Edouard would know her words of love to be false, but he is willing to continue the charade; he's happy as long as Garance loves no one.)

But the most pitiful wretch beguiled by Garance must be Baptiste, France's most revered pantomime. Enamored with her for years, but unwilling to do anything but idolize her, he finally embraces her even as he embraces her dictum: "Love is so easy."

She is right in the sense that making love is no trouble, requiring very little thought or planning. However, sacrificing oneself, dedicating your life to another, is hard. Real love is hard. More than the other characters, Baptiste cannot accept reality.

No one sees this better than Nathalie, who married Baptiste after Garance left Paris for several years. She knew his obsessions before she married him, taking a great risk, even if Garance not return, that Baptiste could be won over. Nathalie is stubborn, unable to accept that he does not love her. She willingly lets him play the role of Happy Husband. This leads to our film's heartbreaking conclusion: Garance leaves Baptiste after they've finally consummated their

'love.' But Baptiste will not let her go, despite a crestfallen Nathalie begging for his affections (even if they be mere affectations?) whence she chances upon the couple in mid-embrace. Chasing after Garance, Baptiste loses track of her amidst the carnival, running right past his precious five-year-old son, dressed as a cavalryman.

Baptiste, oblivious to his son, would rather chase after a dream.

Frederick, despite his coarse jocularity, is the kindest character in the story. But he does not give a great deal of thought to the consequences of his actions. (Baptiste is paralyzed by indecision, while Frederick doesn't even bother to decide!) He lives life without any worries. That's his greatest strength and greatest weakness. He does a great disservice to Baptiste by telling him that Garance visits the theater in secret every night to see him perform. Frederick isn't sharing this to stir up trouble, but he's a romantic and generous, not wanting anyone to be unhappy. He wants Garance to be happy, even if it's not with him...but he's not thinking about Baptiste's family and Baptiste's weaknesses. Baptiste is surprisingly strong and brave (remember when he bested Lacenaire's henchman). But he is fundamentally incapable of letting go. Garance is a precursor to Madeline in *Vertigo* (1958)—she is better as an idealized abstraction, more goddess than lover. (She even plays a role in one of Baptiste's pantomimes as a life-like statue worshipped for its/her beauty.)

So while Baptiste fights the crowd and roars her name, she rides away, serene in her detachment.

Would that the film could end as delightfully as the scene in which Frederick ad-libs his way through a play, turning tragedy into comedy, even pretending to watch the very play he's starring in. (From the con-man playing a blind beggar, to Baptiste re-enacting the watch theft, and on to Lacenaire planning the count's murder like a script in one of his unperformed dramas; Frederick using the same pick-up lines on every pretty woman he meets; duels serving as a theatrical airing of grievances; and the old, cantankerous crook Jericho complaining that his persona was stolen for a stage performance, the theme of life-as-drama permeates the film.) So this audacious set-piece, better than the Marx Brothers, emphasizes the film's main idea that life is like a play, with each of us inhabiting a role (and few of us revealing our true character).

Indeed, like Frederick, we can write the script for ourselves. We can step outside the drama and find a new ending.

So while it's true that not one of these characters manages to wrest from life anything but fitful successes won through blind bravado or studied complacency, *we* are not lost to our fate but can still wake up in time...before we chase our dreams into oblivion.