

# FRENCH CINEMA STARS

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David provided far more detail and research into the FRENCH CINEMA STARS than there was space for in the France and Colonies Philatelic Society Journal (Vol 74, # 3 Whole number 306). Here is the section in full.

### FRENCH CINEMA STARS

The Celebrity series continued in 1998 with a booklet containing six 3F + 60c values depicting French cinema actors and actresses with a large label depicting the featured stars on a widescreen before a cinema audience.

#### ROMY SCHNEIDER 1938-82

Rosemarie Magdalena Albach was born in Vienna under the German Reich to a theatrical family – her father was a leading actor in Vienna's *Volkstheater* and her mother had starred in scores of musical films in Germany whilst her maternal grandmother had been one of the most popular actresses in the Austrian theatre. At four weeks old Romy, as she was invariably known by the family, was taken to Germany to live with her grandparents. Privately educated, she had planned a career in art but was also attracted to the stage and made her first film, *When the White Lilacs Bloom Again* (a re-make of a 1929 silent and the title of a popular 1920's song), at the age of 15 in 1953 credited as Romy Schneider-Albach and appearing alongside her mother – Magda Schneider.

Billed as Romy Schneider in 1954 she followed up with *Victoria in Dover* (US *The Story of Vickie*) playing a young Queen Victoria. Her breakthrough came in 1955 playing Empress Elisabeth of Austria in *Sissi*; this and the two sequels *Sissi-the Young Empress* (1956) and *Sissi-Fateful Years of an Empress* (1957) elevated her to cult status. Her next appearance was in *Christine* (a re-make of the 1933 film *Liebeli* [flirtation] in which her mother had played the same role) in 1958; during the filming she fell in love with her co-star Alain Delon and moved to Paris in 1959 where they became engaged.

Working in France, Romy made *The Trial* for Orson Welles in 1962 and, under the direction of Luchino Visconti appeared in the film *Boccaccio '70* as well as various prestige stage productions. A brief spell in Hollywood led to starring roles in the comedy *Good Neighbor Sam* (1964 with Jack Lemmon) and the zany *What's New Pussycat?* (1965 with Peter Sellers, Peter O'Toole, Capucine, Paula Prentiss, Ursula Andress and Woody Allen, music by Burt Bacharach and the title song by Tom Jones – grossing almost USD20m at the box office).

Although Schneider and Delon had separated in 1963 they remained on amicable terms and starred together in the psychological thriller *La Piscine* (*The Swimming Pool* – 1968) and *The Assassination of Trotsky* (1972). However most of her 1970's work centred on five films directed by Claude Sautet the first in 1970 *Les Choses de la Vie* (*The Things of Life*) made her an icon in France and in 1971 *Paris Match* stated "Forty years after Greta and Marlene, fifteen years



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after Marilyn the screen again has a great star". Re-uniting with Visconti in 1973 Romy reprise the role of a more mature Empress of Austria in *Ludwig*. She won her first César award in 1975 for *L'Important c'est d'Aimer* (*That Most Important Thing: Love*), in which her performance was judged one of the greatest ever by a screen

actress, and a second in 1978 for her final collaboration with Sautet – *Une Histoire Simple (A Simple Story)*. In all Romy starred in over sixty films and was awarded a posthumous honorary *César* in 2008. One of the greats of the cinema who was taken tragically early from a heart attack aged only 43.

#### **SIMONE SIGNORET 1921-85**

Born in Germany, Simone Henriette Charlotte Kaminker, both her parents were French (her father an interpreter for the League of Nations) she grew up in France and after completing her education became responsible for supporting the family as her father (who had Jewish antecedents) had left in 1940 to join De Gaulle's forces in England. Simone was obliged to work as a typist for a collaborationist newspaper but mixed with writers and actors in Paris and developed an interest in acting. Encouraged by her lover, Daniel Gélin (who became a leading man in the 1950's and later a prolific character actor), and adopting her mother's maiden name she won a few small parts notably in *Le Voyageur de la Toussaint* which was based on the Simenon novel and after being rejected by director Clouzot was filmed by Cinex in 1942.

Simone was active in the cause of *La Comité de Défense du Cinéma* which sought to promote French films at a time in the late 1940's when cinema showings were dominated by US productions and her major breakthrough came in 1950 with a leading part as a prostitute in *La Ronde* - an anthology film portraying ten amorous episodes. This won a BAFTA award for best picture and two Oscar nominations. Another role as a prostitute in Jacques Becker's *Casque d'Or* (1952 with Serge Reggiani) yielded an acting award from the British Film Industry and other films included *Thérèse Raquin* (1953), *Les Diaboliques* (1954) and *Les Sorcières de Salem (The Crucible)* – a 1957 reworking of Arthur Miller's play with a screenplay by Jean-Paul Sartre and co-starring Yves Montand.

In 1959 the English independent film *Room at the Top* established Simone as an international star although accidentally as her role as Alice Aisgill was originally planned for Vivien Leigh! This gritty drama, based on the 1957 novel by John Braine, was more “washing machine” than “kitchen sink” and significantly elevated the ceiling for working class ambition. From a long list of well-known British actors, Laurence Harvey (the principal character – Joe Lampton originally planned for Stewart Granger), Heather Sears (in the role originally planned for Jean Simmons), Donald Wolfitt, Donald Houston and Hermione Baddeley made it onto the marquee. The film was nominated for six Oscars and delivered two – Leading Actress for Simone and best screenplay for the Neil Paterson adaptation of the book. Although Hermione Baddeley's best supporting actress nomination was unsuccessful it was based on 2 minutes and 19 seconds of screen time which established a record for the shortest ever nominated performance. From a host of other nominations Simone won best actress at Cannes and best foreign actress from the British Film Academy where the film picked up the best film and (unsurprisingly) best British film awards.

The successes of the book and the film inevitably led to sequels and Braine's 1962 follow up *Life at the Top* was filmed in 1965. With another strong British cast (several reprising their original parts) Jean Simmons played the role of Lampton's wife originally planned for her and, as Simone's character had killed herself in the original, the femme fatale role fell to Honor Blackman. 1970 saw the start of a 23 episode ITV series *Man at the Top* with Kenneth Haigh as Lampton and Zena Walker as his wife heading a long cast of familiar names. The BBC were not to be outdone and produced *Room at the Top* as a BAFTA winning two-parter in 2012 starring Matthew Mc Nulty as Lampton, Jenna Coleman as his girlfriend/wife and Maxine Peake as Alice.

Her success led to offers from Hollywood but Simone preferred to work in England and France notably appearing with Laurence Olivier and Sarah Miles in *Term of Trial* (1962). Also in 1962 she translated Lillian Hellman's play *The Little Foxes* for a production which ran for six months at the *Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt* in Paris. However a 1966 effort playing Lady Macbeth opposite Alec Guinness in London proved unsuccessful – one critic complaining that her English was too Gallic (and I thought Lady Macbeth was Scots!)

A spell in Hollywood starring in *Ship of Fools* (1965 with a stellar cast including Vivien Leigh in her final role) earned another Oscar nomination and she appeared in a few more Hollywood productions before returning to France where she gave an acclaimed performance in the title part in *Madame Rosa* (1977) which won her a *César* for best actress and the film an Oscar for best foreign film. In all Simone appeared in over sixty films although some early performances were uncredited.

#### **JEAN GABIN 1904-76**

Born Jean Gabin Alexis Moncorgé, the son of a cabaret entertainer, he left school early and worked as a labourer until securing a bit part in a *Folies Bergère* production aged 19 and had other small parts until called for military service.

Thereafter he returned to show business under the name Jean Gabin singing in the style of Maurice Chevalier and taking anything on offer in the music halls and operettas of Paris. Taking an opening in a troupe which would tour South America he was sufficiently well known on his return to secure work at the Moulin Rouge which in turn led to better stage parts and a couple of opportunities in silent films in 1928.

Parts in sound productions followed and an association with Duvivier brought second billing in *Marie Chapdelaine* (1934), top billing in both *La Bandera* (1936) and the iconic *Pépé-le-Moko* (1937); the latter bringing him international fame. Working with Jean Renoir he starred in *La Grande Illusion* (1937) and *La Bête Humaine* (1938 with Simone Simon) and in 1939 starred in Marcel Carné's *Le Quai des Brumes (Port of Shadows)* which won France's top cinematic prize and cemented his reputation for rugged charisma in the manner of Bogart and Cagney – but his performances pre-dated theirs!



Gabin was inundated with offers from Hollywood and after the German occupation joined Duvivier and Renoir in the USA. Regrettably his Hollywood efforts were unsuccessful so he joined de Gaulle's Free French Forces winning the *Médaille Militaire* and the *Croix de Guerre*.

Things did not improve after the war and even a starring role in *Au-delà des Grilles* (*The Walls of Malapaga*) which won an Oscar for best foreign picture in 1948 did not stop the rot and his career continued in freefall until a starring part in Jacques Becker's *Touchez pas au Grisbi* [*Don't touch the loot*] *Honour Among Thieves* UK, (*Grisbi* USA) gained him critical acclaim in 1954.

During the next twenty years he made almost 50 films including *French Cancan* (1955), three as *Maigret* (1958-63) and appeared with a host of great stars including Brigitte Bardot, Alain Delon, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Luis de Funès (coming up), Sophia Loren and Simone Signoret. Most of these were critically and commercially successful and many were produced by Gafer Films – a production partnership between Gabin and Fernandel (who we have encountered earlier).

#### **LOUIS DE FUNÈS 1914-83**

Born of Spanish parents who had eloped to France in 1904 his full name was Louis Germain David de Funès de Galarza. Whilst fluent in French, Spanish and English and fond of art and music he dropped out of formal education and being unable to hold down menial jobs became a bar pianist mainly playing jazz in Pigalle. He studied acting for a year where he made the useful contact of Daniel Gélin and resumed his music studies during the German occupation when he met and in 1943 married his second wife – a member of the de Maupassant family who thought he played jazz like a god – and they would stay together until his death.

He became noted for his energetic portrayal of a conservative middle-class aspirant who would know-tow to authority whilst berating their subordinates combining this with an array of facial expressions and tics (something he had developed as a pianist in order to amuse the audience). Whilst he made over 150 films and appeared in over 100 stage performances the first 50 or so films involved only walk-on or bit parts. However in 1963 he starred alongside Mirielle Darc in the Jean Girault comedy film *Pouic-Pouic* and its success guaranteed star billing in all his subsequent films. In 1964 *Le Gendarme de Saint-Tropez* (and its five sequels) brought international fame and in the same year the *Fantômas* series catapulted him to superstar status.

More success followed with the 1965 production *Le Corniaud* (with Bouvril) and the next year the same pair

appeared in a follow up – *La Grande Vadrouille* [The great stroll] (UK *Don't Look Now We're Being Shot At!*) which also featured British comic Terry-Thomas and although first released in UK proved to be one of the most popular French films ever selling over 17 million tickets. It was hoped that the duo could be re-united for *La Folie des Grandeurs* (1970) but Bouvril's death left Funès in an unlikely pairing with Yves Montand (the film still grossed over US\$40m).

During his career Funès appeared with many top actors and his films were regularly box office toppers and he was undoubtedly the favourite actor in France. His ebullient stage and screen persona were belied in life as he kept a low public profile living (courtesy of his wife's inheritance) at the Château Clermont overlooking the Loire.

#### **BERNARD BLIER 1916-89**

Born in Buenos Aires where his father, a researcher for the Pasteur Institute, was working Blier became an accomplished and versatile character actor who appeared in over 175 films from 1937. His rotund features and premature baldness were particularly suited to henpecked husband or harassed policeman roles and he could switch effortlessly between comedy and drama. In his last decade he appeared frequently in Italian films.

He was awarded an honorary *César* shortly before his death.

#### **LINO VENTURA**

Angiolino Giuseppe Pasquale Ventura was an Italian born actor who worked in France for most of his life but never adopted French nationality. A professional wrestler whose career was ended through injury he was considered one of the greatest leading men of the 1960's and 70's playing tough guy parts appropriately making his film debut as a gangster in *Touchez pas au Grisbi* (1954 – see earlier under Jean Gabin).

In all he appeared in 75 films attributing his success to his limited range frequently quoting "If I cannot believe in a character, or if something does not ring true, I cannot act it". Frequently playing alongside the top stars, including several films with Jean Gabin, he was *César* nominated for his role as Valjean in *Les Misérables* (1982).

Despite steadfastly remaining Italian and taking no interest in French politics a 2025 poll voted him the 23<sup>rd</sup> greatest Frenchman. Having a disabled daughter, he and his wife founded the charity *Perce-Neige* [Snowdrop] which supports disabled children and their parents.