

37-year-old film premieres

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Jean Renoir made "Boudo Saved From Drowning" in 1932 and next Wednesday it will have its West Coast premiere at the Los Feliz Theater (one week only). It is a tribute to the permanence of the cinema and the art of Jean Renoir that "Boudo" is today, dollar for dollar, one of the best movie investments in Los Angeles.

"Boudo" is not merely great in the patronizing manner we refer to "film classics." Thirty-seven years after it was made "Boudo" competes on a first-run basis only with the latest films of Bergman, Bunuel, and Truffaut. It has survived three decades intact and appears today as great, or greater, than it was in 1932. Because of its short LA run I suggest that you see "Boudo" as soon as possible; we've missed "Boudo" for too long as it is.

Boudo (Michael Simon) is a mangy tramp who, losing his equally scruffy dog, interrupts his dallying in the Bois de Boulogne to jump into the Seine. He is rescued—much to his chagrin—by Lestingois, a thoroughly bourgeois Left Bank bookseller. Lestingois makes Boudo his guinea pig—his slumming out at home—and attempts to bestow upon Boudo some of the simple proprieties of middle-class life. Boudo remains adamant and although wedged into a plain black suit continues to sleep on the floor, do handstands in the hall, eat sardines with his fingers, goose the maid, and coup de grace! spit in a first edition of Balzac's "Physiologie du Mariage." After Boudo wins 10,000 francs in a lottery, Lestingois decides to legalize his household's double adultery (he with the maid; Boudo with his wife) by having Boudo marry the maid. But this newfound respectability proves too much for Boudo, and he sends the wedding party flopping in the Seine as he floats back to the Bois and a tramp's clothes.

Renoir adapted "Boudo Saved From Drowning" from a mediocre play of the same name by Rene Fauchois. Renoir's adaption shifted the central concern of the play from the bookseller to Boudo. For Fauchois, Lestingois was the primary character. He was interested in the manner in which the bookseller was affected by the accidental and symbolic

'Boudo Saved From Drowning'

appearance of Boudo. But Renoir plunges us into the free spirit of Boudo and regards Lestingois as some do-gooding interloper. There lies the secret of "Boudo's" success.

Traditional moralists make the viewer a window-shopper who views abnormality from the outside, accepting or rejecting it. Their protagonist is one of "us," their plot device is one of "them," and the moral revelation comes when one of "us" realizes that one of "them" isn't so bad after all. This technique has brought Stanley Kramer popular acclaim in films like "The Defiant Ones" and "Ship of Fools." But a great artist and moralist like Renoir takes abnormal behavior (that is, uncivilized, unpolluted, and, in effect, very natural behavior) and makes it look so central to life itself, so enjoyable, and so contagious so that even the most hard core establishment sycophants can identify with it. Only later are they forced to reconcile the contradiction Renoir has thrust upon them. This basic plot inversion has been responsible for some of the greatest films. It made us see the war through German eyes in "All Quiet on the Western Front," and the big cities through gangsters' eyes in "Scarface."

Because of the central importance of the character of Boudo, "Boudo Saved From Drowning" is more an actor's picture than any of Renoir's films. Michael Simon recently remarked that Boudo was his favorite role, and this is certainly because Simon's personal and unhindered creation of the Boudo role was essential to Renoir's concept of the film. The director and the actor both maintain such individual integrity that "Boudo" could almost be described as a collaboration film.

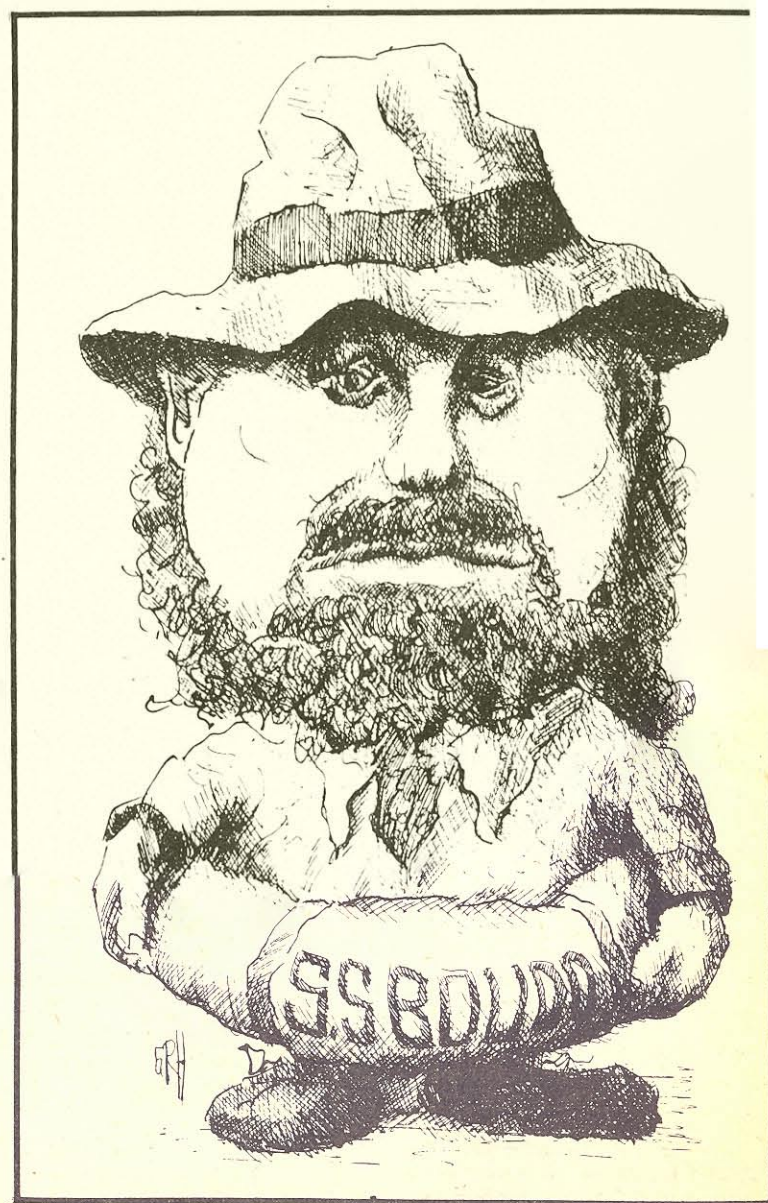
Although Simon works from the comedian's conventional bag of tricks, he transcends them to create a mythic personage (as we shall see later). He used all the traditional comic devices: sight gags, double-takes, slow-burns, running gags, puns, and pratfalls. But as with pandemic comedians like Chaplin or Keaton, the gags become an adjacent manifesta-

tion of Boudo's infectious personality. People of every country have responded to Chaplin's tramp; so it would be for Simon's Boudo were it not for the language barrier.

Chaplin and Simon have more in common than being two of the screen's great hobos: they are both variations on the same mythic theme. Chaplin's tramp and Simon's Boudo have both been described as descendants of the Greek God Pan, idyllic purveyor of flocks and fields, although Boudo owes more to Priapus, a related diety. Before Lestingois rescues Boudo he sighs, "One day a shepherd will come and take me away. My 'pipeaux' (the reed-pipes of Pan) are weary." When he spies Boudo poised over the Seine, the bookseller exclaims, "Priapus!" And as all good classical yahoos know, Priapus is the god of male generative power, of screwing, and the phallus is his symbol. Boudo is Priapus to Chaplin's guileless Pan. Boudo makes no secret of his sexual aggressiveness toward Lestingois' maid and wife. When he clamps his dirty palms around the maid's hips, it is as natural an action as when he polishes his shoes on the satin bedspread. The maid is his far from virginal Chole, defiled by Boudo long before marriage, but not after. Boudo is the spirit of license—and licentiousness.

The bourgeois have always suspected inferior minorities (negroes, hippies) of having more sexual fun, and Boudo proves it. Everything Boudo does is sexual: his lumbering, carefree walk, his jutting jaw, and his roving eyes. Although also a member of the "undeserving poor," Boudo is a cut above Shaw's Alfred Doolittle. After becoming wealthy Doolittle exploits the bourgeois for his own good, while Boudo continues to exploit the bourgeois for everybody's good. Boudo is not the flower-child type either; it is sex, not love, he wants. He is a primitive sensualist: he gets pleasure from everything he does.

In this context it is important to understand Boudo's suicide attempt. It is not a case of "he who loseth his life shall find it," which is how Lestingois, Fauchois and the dimstore moralists would have regarded the situation. He decides to kill himself simply because he has lost



something which was dear to him, his dog. It is a primitive non-thinking reaction, and is completely misunderstood by Lestingois, a man who sells books.

"Boudo Saved From Drowning" has been criticized by some because it was an attempt by Renoir to sweeten the French film industry after its antagonism toward his previous film, the naturalistic "La Chienne." But even on this level Renoir foils those concerned with cinematic respectability, pro or con. And at the close of "La Chienne" Michael Simon, having killed his sluttish sweetheart, becomes a street tramp. There is a suspicion that, as in Sternberg's "Blue Angel," this is what Renoir thinks becomes of foolish lechers. But "Boudo" discounts any such tendency. Boudo ambles in from the

sets of "La Chienne," but he is not remorseful, nor guilt-stricken, he is simply free of the social conventions which cause men to commit acts like murder.

Renoir has described Boudo as a "loiterer" and has said that a loiterer is the highest achievement of the best society. Implicit in that statement and in "Boudo Saved From Drowning" is the belief that in civilizations like our own, which are far from the best, free spirits like Boudo are anachronistic—but never dangerous. We all cannot become Boudos—the Seine isn't large enough to hold us all when we jump. Although Renoir cannot discount the little niceties of civilization which make life endurable, he wants to remind us of the high price we have paid for our "civilization."