



Above image courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art stills collection.

*Les Bas-fonds* (*The Lower Depths*) is a 1936 feature film drama directed by Jean Renoir. It's loosely based on the play by Maxim Gorky. Below is Kino Ken's review of the Criterion Collection dvd release of that film as part of a two-disc set titled *the lower depths*.

11 of a possible 20 points = \*\*1/2 = a mediocre film

France 1936 black-and-white 89 minutes subtitled live action feature comedy Films Albatross Producer: Alexandre Kamenka

Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 1 Direction: Jean Renoir
- 1 Editing: Marguerite Renoir
- 2 Cinematography: Fédote Bourgasoff\* and Jean Bachelet\*  
Still Photography: Roger Forster
- 1 Lighting  
Special Effects: Paul Minine and Nicolas Wilcké
- 1 Screenplay: Jacques Companeez, Jean Renoir, Charles Spaak, and  
Eugene Zamiatine based on the play by Maxim Gorky
- 1 Music: Jean Wiener
- 2 Production Design: Eugène Lourié\*  
Set Decoration: Hugues Laurent\* and Eugène Lourié\*

Makeup: Igor Keldich  
1 Sound: Robert Ivonnet  
1 Acting  
0 Creativity  
11 total points

Cast: Jean Gabin (Pépel, the thief), Suzy Prim (Vassilissa Kostylyov, the landlady), Junie Astor (Natasha, Vassilissa's sister), Vladimir Sokoloff (Kostylyov, the landlord), Louis Jouvet\* (the baron, a gambler), Robert Le Vigan\* (the actor), Jany Holt (Nastia the prostitute), Paul Temps (Satine, ex-telegrapher), Robert Ozanne (shoemaker), Henri Saint-Isle (Kletsch, Anna's husband), André Gabriello (Toptoun the police inspector), Léon Larive\* (Felix, the baron's valet), Maurice Baquet\* (Alouchka the crazy accordionist), Camille Bert (the count), René Genin\* (Luka the pilgrim), Alex Allin (the Tartar), Nathalie Alexeff (Anna), Jacques Becker (a walker), Fernand Bercher (an officer), Paul Grimault, Irène Joachim (solo singer), Lucien Mancini (tavern patron), René Stern (the count's emissary), Sylvain Schenkel (prison clerk), others

Not one of Jean Renoir's masterpieces, *Les Bas-fonds* (*The Lower Depths*) was a very loose adaptation of Maxim Gorky's tragedy. Renoir turned it into a comedy, finishing it off with a reverse shot version of Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times*. While the Russian playwright intended his work as an ensemble piece for a proletarian acting group, the French director preferred to refashion it as a star vehicle for Jean Gabin and Louis Jouvet. He also found irresistible the inclination to pay homage to his father's paintings of waterside pleasure gardens, though those played no part whatsoever in Gorky's original drama.

An even greater blight on the 1936 film production was catastrophic casting choices. Particularly uninspiring were Junie Astor, as a lackluster Natasha who improbably wound up winning the heart of Jean Gabin's gentleman thief Pépel, and Jany Holt's dreamy prostitute Nastia, a completely lifeless characterization that failed to justify her screen time. Kyoko Kagawa's Natasha in the 1957 Akira Kurosawa adaptation of the same Gorky work, was far superior, revealing both greater tenderness and more agonizing indecisiveness. Suzy Prim was likewise far from believable in the role of Vassilissa, a thoroughly detested landlady of

the flophouse Gorky used as his play's centerpiece. As alternately subservient spouse and vengeful lover, she lacked the turbulent dynamism of Kurosawa's choice for that role, Isuzu Yamada. Yamada also exhibited an alluring sensuality joined with selfish callousness, qualities notably absent or submerged in Prim's rendition. Vladimir Sokoloff's Kostilyov perhaps overemphasized the hypocrisy of the duplicitous man at the expense of his cunning stinginess and abusive relationship with dependent sister-in-law.

Furthermore, in Renoir's interpretation of Gorky, Anna and her husband Kletsch barely register at all, vastly overshadowed by escapades of Jean Gabin's thief and Louis Jouvet's gambling addict.

On the plus side, René Genin's Luka both looked and acted the role of advice dispenser Luka effectively. Despite appearing without introduction and disappearing in an equally unremarked manner. If it lacked the uplifting empathy of Bokuzen Hidari in *Donzoko*, Genin's achievement at least did no disgrace to its origins. Maurice Baquet's lunatic accordion player totally embodied what Gorky depicted. It dwarfed unattractively hyper-frenetic acrobatics of his Kurosawa counterpart.

Alas, Jean Gabin's thief suffered from the same off-kilter ineffectiveness as Toshiro Mifune's. It's possible the underlying defect traces back to Gorky's own writing. Pépel simply is unrealistic. His shifts between materialism and idealism defy logic. At any rate, this French leading man would show himself a vastly better performer in *Pépé le Moko*, *La Bête humaine*, and *La grande illusion*, all made subsequent to *Les Bas-fonds*. Here his acting was eclipsed by that of Louis Jouvet and Robert Le Vigan.

As the downward-spiraling baron, Jouvet melded together in just the right proportions casual negligence in speech with a small, but discernible degree of physical stiffness. Pursuing risk at any cost, he alone of all the film's characters warmly embraced the shame of descent to an impecunious existence, along with corresponding social ostracism from polite society. His obliviousness to joys and sorrows of fellow lodgers was made transparent by a complete lack of interest in their past lives or current troubles. The baron showed no compassion for Anna. Nor any enthusiasm for either encouraging or discouraging Pépel's wooing of Natasha. He was entirely cocooned in a gambling obsession, to the neglect of every other consideration.

Even finer was Robert Le Vigan's achievement in bringing to life the personality of Gorky's anonymous actor. Le Vigan had reinforcement courtesy of several lines cribbed from Shakespeare, as well as a commanding physical presence partly due to sheer height and partly chargeable to large, expressive eyes which riveted viewer attention.

The film's screenplay was all too obviously inconstant in tone. Rejecting an early version co-authored by Russian dissident Evgeny Zamyatin, Renoir largely dispatched with gloom and gravity. These he replaced with dialogue leaning towards farce and *joie de vivre*, creating a lightweight musical comedy along the lines of a René Clair soufflé. It would seem likely from scanning his overall oeuvre that Charles Spaak, Renoir's writing partner, contributed occasional witticisms and the baron's philosophical monologue delivered during his country outing.

How a work containing three deaths, none accidental, could be postulated as comedy by any director remains an unfathomable mystery.

The film's plot, a series of barely connected interlocking loops, introduced a thief longing simultaneously for reformation and escape. Action then transferred to the baron, an aristocrat who had been embezzling government funds to finance gaming expenses. This illegal activity had reached such enormous proportions that a supervising count intervened, warning the embezzler pursuit of unauthorized private expenditures must halt immediately. It didn't. The inveterate gamer quickly found himself deprived of home and job by creditors and exasperated employer.

The night before eviction, he was visited by an ill-informed burglar. Pépel imagined ransacking the nobleman's mansion would result in quick enrichment and early exit from clutches of a flophouse owned by law-breaking spouses. The cashiered grandee, however, caught him in the act of theft. Then, to his amazement, the blunderer was invited to help himself to whatever items he might wish to carry off. They would be that many fewer for auctioneer or creditors to deal with.

After sharing a nocturnal meal, the affable pair parted. Only to be brought together again at a police station where Pépel had been detained in possession of what was believed to be stolen merchandise. Protestations of innocence fell on deaf ears until his benefactor of the previous night showed up to corroborate the accused's claims and exculpate him. After leaving behind with the police a

cigarette lighter as token of goodwill, two wayward buddies again separated, with the gambler predicting they would likely soon meet again.

Which of course they did. At the flophouse, where Pépel and his former lover, a domineering landlady, clashed over future plans. Both wished to leave the premises. But each had a different partner in mind. Vassilissa was tired of dealing with a skinflint husband, as well as the rowdy company of drunks, vagrants, and petty criminals which inhabited Kostilyov's tenement. Her adulterous opponent, once again cheated of means to depart from a cruelly unreliable fence and his treacherous wife, hoped to at least win sympathy and affection from the latter's oppressed younger sister. Natasha, on the contrary, wanted no bond with a potential jailbird. She resisted all his efforts to woo her.

This set of complications propelled her wannabe rescuer towards homicide when his virginal object of affection was sacrificially offered to a leering police inspector in order to dodge imminent cancellation of the Kostilyovs' operating license. Everything else in mid play was decidedly peripheral, of secondary interest to ornately appointed sets.

These elegant settings, masterfully designed by Eugène Lourié with furnishings co-created by Hugues Laurent, depicted the baron's upscale haunts before his ruin and bustling outdoor Parisian cafés. They appeared to receive the lion's share of attention from the director, much more so than either script or cast.

A second highlight was superb cinematography by Fédote Bourgasoff and Jean Bachelet, particularly notable in tracking shots scattered throughout the film. Most particularly rewarding were those featuring interior apartments of the baron's residence and classical artwork scattered throughout a favorite gambling resort, passages through al fresco woodland cafés resembling pastoral watering holes in impressionist paintings, and the ultimate one pulling away from two tramp lovebirds footing it along a dusty road.

Lighting, sound, and music were adequate, though not distinguished. The same holds for Marguerite Renoir's partiality for blackout editing.

All in all, this Gorky adaptation is markedly inferior to Kurosawa's *Donzoko*. Lighter in tone, it can be viewed as moderately entertaining by both teens and adults. However, no one should make the mistake of believing it a major or essential Renoir film.

Special features of the Criterion double-disk *The Lower Depths* include a short introduction to *Les Bas-fonds* by director Renoir running six minutes, an audio commentary on *Donzoko* by film historian Donald Richie, cast biographies by Stephen Prince for *Donzoko*, and a thirty-three minute documentary relating to *Donzoko* titled *Akira Kurosawa: It Is Wonderful to Create*. The accompanying twenty-page booklet includes an essay by Alexander Sesonske titled "Jean Renoir's Lower Depths" and one co-written by Keiko McDonald and Thomas Rimer headed "Akira Kurosawa's *The Lower Depths*."

Special note: Both films retain some graininess in these transfers as well as sporadic annoying horizontal lines which shouldn't be present but distractingly are.