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2/20

## Jean Gabin: Working Class Hero to Godfather at BFI Southbank in May



**Jean Gabin** (1904–1976) is one of the most renowned stars of French cinema. Throughout May **BFI Southbank** celebrates a career that spanned over four decades and which featured performances in both silent cinema and the talkies. Beginning with **Jean Gabin: Anatomy of a Myth**, on Wed 2 May, an introduction from season curator Ginette Vincendeau, Professor in Film Studies at King's College London, the centrepiece of this season is the nationwide release and extended run of a newly restored classic of 'poetic realism' **Le Quai des brumes** (France 1939) from 4 May.

Between 1930 and 1976, magnetic French star Jean Gabin built an unparalleled screen image that encompassed the tragic working-class hero with a rugged charisma to underworld Godfather figures. He remains one of the great icons of cinema, and this season explores the appeal of his mythical vision of the 'ordinary' Frenchman.

Born Jean Alexis Moncorgé in 1904 to a family of performers, Gabin started out as a comic singer at the Moulin Rouge. His performances started getting noticed, and better stage roles came along that led to parts in two silent films in 1928. Two years later, he easily made the transition to the talkies, and soon switched to dramatic parts in cinema. From 1935 to 1939, he was the most popular French matinee idol of the pre-war period and gave

performances in an extraordinary run of masterpieces **Pépé le Moko** (Dir, Julien Duvivier, 1937), **La Bête humaine** (Dir, Jean Renoir, 1938) and **Le Jour se lève** (Dir, Marcel Carné, 1939).

It was **Renoir's** anti-war masterpiece **La Grande Illusion** (1937) (on extended run at BFI Southbank throughout April) that cemented Gabin's international superstar status, and the film received universal critical acclaim. A certified classic of world cinema, the film has recently been re-released to celebrate its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Gabin's fame was reinforced by a series of hits, including **Marcel Carné's** marvellously moody crime thriller **Le Quai des brumes** (1939) playing one of his most memorably iconic roles as an army deserter on the run.

The war propelled Gabin to a brief stint in Hollywood, where he made **Moontide** (Dir, Archie Mayo, 1942) under contract with Fox. It was a fascinating attempt at 'Americanising' his image but Gabin felt uncomfortable speaking English. At Universal, he and **Duvivier** were reunited for **The Impostor** (1944). While working for RKO Pictures, Gabin's difficult personality did serious damage to his Hollywood career. Scheduled to star in an RKO film *The Temptress*, he demanded Marlene Dietrich to be cast as his co-star (they were ensconced in a torrid, real-life affair throughout the early-to-mid 1940s). The studio refused. Gabin remained stubborn in his demand, yet he was fired and the project was shelved. RKO issued the warning that he would never work in Hollywood again; Gabin shrugged off the threat and proceeded to rejoin the French troops in North Africa.

However by the early 1950s it looked as if Gabin's era had passed. But then Jacques Becker's **Touchez pas au grisbi** (1954) and Renoir's **French Cancan** (1955) catapulted him back to the top of the box-office. Suddenly Gabin was again a global star. Over the next twenty years until his death in 1976, Gabin made many more films, most of them very successful, commercially and critically. The season includes his later films such as **Maigret tend un piège** (Dir, Jean Delannoy, 1958), the first and best of three films in which he tackles **Georges Simenon's** illustrious Commissaire Maigret; the nail-biting thriller **Melodie en sous-sol** (Dir, Henri Verneuil, 1963) co-starring Alain Delon who would always credit Gabin as a great influence; and the most poignant of his later films, **Le Chat** (Dir, Pierre Granier-Deferre, 1971) with tour-de-force performances by Gabin and the great Simone Signoret as an ageing and feuding husband and wife.

Gabin's career lasted over 40 years and he became a mythical figure of French cinema. His rugged looks, rough voice and Parisian accent still anchored his characters in the same social milieu, and this is why he kept his popular following. Ultimately Gabin's charisma endowed the ordinary man with dignity and prestige.

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The season curator Ginette Vincendeau, Professor in Film Studies at King's College London is available for interviews.

**Programme Information:****King's@BFI:****Key Scholars in Film Studies:****Jean Gabin: Anatomy of a Myth**

The 'myth' of Jean Gabin is central to understanding popular French cinema. Remarkably, the much-loved star projected – with equal authenticity – both tragic working-class heroes in the 1930s in such classics as *Le Jour se lève*, and bourgeois criminal Godfathers after the war, from *Touchez-pas au grisbi* onwards. In this illustrated talk, Ginette Vincendeau explores the continuities between the two parts of Gabin's career and the complexities in his projection of charismatic 'ordinariness'. Ginette Vincendeau is Professor in Film Studies at King's College London. She has written widely on popular French cinema. Among her books are *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* (2000), *Jean-Pierre Melville, An American in Paris* (2003) and *La Haine* (2005). She has just completed a book on Brigitte Bardot, and has curated this month's BFI Southbank season of Gabin films

**Wed 2 May 18:20 NFT2**

**La Bandera**

France 1935. Dir Julien Duvivier. With Annabella, Pierre Renoir, Robert Le Vigan. 103min. EST

Duvivier's colonialist film put in place the main elements of the Gabin 'myth' and made him an overnight sensation. He plays Gillieth, a Parisian worker who commits an unpremeditated murder. He escapes by joining the Foreign Legion in Spanish Morocco where he meets the 'native' Aischa (Annabella) and is pursued by the louche Fernando (Le Vigan). Virile loyalty and courage in combat lend him, eventually, heroic status.

**Wed 2 May 21:00 NFT2**

**Sun 6 May 18:20 NFT2**

**Les Bas-fonds****The Lower-Depths**

France 1936. Dir Jean Renoir. With Louis Jouvet. 90min. EST

Based on Maxim Gorki's novel, the hugely popular *Les Bas-fonds*, made in the heady, optimistic spirit of the Popular Front, testified to Renoir's commitment to the Left. Gabin

plays Pépel, the working-class hero who rids his proletarian community of their exploiter, the repellent Kostilev (Vladimir Sokoloff) and at the end hits the road

with his sweetheart Natacha (Junie Astor), in a tribute to Chaplin's Modern Times.

**Thu 3 May 18:20 NFT2**

**Wed 9 May 20:50 NFT2**

### **Pépé le Moko**

France 1937. Dir Julien Duvivier. With Mireille Balin, Fréhel. 94min. EST. PG  
One of the all-time classic gangster films. In hiding in an exoticised Casbah in Algiers, the dashing Pépé (Gabin) rules over men's loyalties and women's hearts ('When they kill Pépé, there will be 3,000 widows at his funeral!'). He falls for the glamorous Gaby (Mireille Balin) who revives his nostalgia for Paris, with tragic consequences. So successful it was remade twice in Hollywood (as Algiers and Casbah).

**Mon 7 May 15:50 NFT3**

**Sat 19 May 16:00 NFT2**

**Tue 22 May 18:10 NFT3**

### **La Grande Illusion**

France 1937. Dir Jean Renoir. With Eric von Stroheim, Pierre Fresnay, Marcel Dalio. 114min. Digital. EST. U

Renoir's anti-war masterpiece, a profound reflection on national and class divisions, was his second collaboration with Gabin whose star power got the project off the ground. Within an impeccable ensemble cast, Gabin plays the working-class Maréchal, alongside aristocratic de Boieldieu (Fresnay) and wealthy Rosenthal (Dalio) – a group of French prisoners staging an escape from two German camps, including one guarded by the forbidding Colonel von Rauffenstein (von Stroheim).

**Mon 7 May 20:40 NFT3**

**Fri 11 May 18:20 NFT2**

**Sat 19 May 18:10 NFT3**

### **La Bête humaine**

France 1938. Dir Jean Renoir. With Simone Simon. 100min. EST. PG

The third Renoir-Gabin collaboration turns Zola's naturalist novel into a prototypical film noir. Gabin plays Jacques Lantier, a train driver with a fatal alcoholic inheritance who witnesses a murder and falls for the dangerous, kittenish Séverine (Simone Simon). Gabin is pivotal to the film's ability to weld together a social picture of workers' solidarity (he was decorated by the railworkers' union for his authentic portrayal) and a powerful, dark crime melodrama.

**Tue 8 May 20:50 NFT1**

**Thu 10 May 18:15 NFT3**

**Fri 18 May 18:20 NFT2**

### **Le Jour se lève Daybreak**

France 1939. Dir Marcel Carné. With Jules Berry, Arletty, Jacqueline Laurent. 93min. EST. PG

A brilliant culmination of the poetic realist universe and the definitive pre-war Gabin performance, combining charismatic masculinity, noir sensitivity and 'boy-next-door'

charm. Gabin's François is the epitome of the tragic working-class hero, the victim of crushing social forces and moral corruption embodied by the evil

Valentin (Berry) – despite romance with the young Françoise (Laurent) and banter with the sassy Clara (Arletty). The use of flashbacks was groundbreaking.

**Wed 16 May 18:10 NFT1**

**Sun 20 May 20:50 NFT1**

**Mon 28 May 20:50 NFT1**

### **Moontide**

USA 1942. Dir Archie Mayo. With Ida Lupino, Claude Rains. 94min. PG

Made while Gabin was in exile in Hollywood, Moontide is a fascinating attempt at Americanising his image, which The New York Times summed up as ‘Charles Boyer from the other side of the railroad tracks.’ He plays Bobo, a rough ‘Frenchie’ with a heart of gold (and startling blonde hair) who lives in California. Although he felt uneasy speaking English, Gabin gives a touching performance, with strong support from Lupino.

**Thu 17 May 20:40 NFT2**

**Sun 20 May 16:00 NFT2**

### **Le Plaisir**

France 1952. Dir Max Ophuls. With Danielle Darrieux, Madeleine Renaud, Daniel Gélin, Simone Simon. 97min. EST. PG

Gabin stars in the central, longest episode (‘La Maison Tellier’) in Ophuls’ adaptation of three Guy de Maupassant short stories. Prostitutes from a provincial brothel attend a girl’s First Communion ceremony in a Normandy country church. From Maupassant’s sardonic and licentious material, Ophuls extracts a subtle tale of emotional awakening and wistful regrets. Gabin as Joseph, the brother of the brothel’s Madam (Renaud), brings great gravitas to this unusual peasant role.

**Fri 18 May 20:40 NFT2**

**Tue 22 May 20:40 NFT2**

**Sun 27 May 14:30 NFT1**

### **Touchez pas au grisbi** Honour Among Thieves

France 1954. Dir Jacques Becker. With Lino Ventura, René Dary, Jeanne Moreau. 94min. EST. 15

Becker’s film, based on a popular série noire novel, re-launched both Gabin’s post-war career and the French gangster film. In Pigalle, Max (Gabin) is a world-weary underworld godfather wishing to retire after one last heist. Nightclubs and plush apartments are his territory, champagne his drink of choice. When Angelo’s rival gang threatens both his loot and his hapless friend Riton, Max is forced to rejoin the fray.

**Mon 21 May 20:50 NFT1**

**Sat 26 May 17:40 NFT1**

**Wed 30 May 17:50 NFT2**

### **Razzia sur la chnouf**

France 1955. Dir Henri Decoin. With Lino Ventura, Marcel Dalio, Magali Noël. 105min. EST

Gabin’s godfather persona gets another airing in this popular thriller, also based on a série noire novel. He plays Henri Le Nantais, the boss of a drugs cartel bent on finding a traitor in the organisation. But all is not what it seems... Gabin and Ventura, in trench coats and double-breasted jackets, outdo each other in

broad-shouldered toughness, Henri leading the spectator through a series of noir underworld dives.

**Thu 24 May 18:20 NFT2**

**Sun 27 May 18:20 NFT2**

### **La Traversée de Paris**

Pig Across Paris / Four Bags Full France 1956. Dir Claude Autant-Lara. With Bourvil. 80min. EST

One of the best – and darkest – films about the German occupation of France, as well as the meeting of two great stars. Thrown together by circumstances, the cynical Grandgil (Gabin) and the naïve Martin (Bourvil) spend one eventful night carrying suitcases full of black-market pork through Paris. Bourvil's timid nervousness sets off perfectly Gabin's authoritative presence in this comic, yet caustic epic. With a hilarious cameo by Louis de Funès.

**Wed 23 May 18:00 NFT3**

**Fri 25 May 21:10 NFT3**

### **Des gens sans importance**

France 1956. Dir Henri Verneuil. With Françoise Arnoul. 101min. EST

The bitterly ironic title of this film signals an excellent social melodrama set among 'ordinary people'. Gabin reverts to his pre-war persona to embody married, working-class lorry driver Jean, who starts an affair with the young Clothilde (Arnoul). Disaster ensues when she becomes pregnant and tries to have an abortion. Gabin's ambivalent father-lover figure in this film would be reprised on many subsequent occasions.

**Wed 23 May 20:50 NFT2**

**Sat 26 May 15:40 NFT2**

### **Maigret tend un piège** *Maigret Sets a Trap*

France-Italy 1958. Dir Jean Delannoy. With Annie Girardot. 119min. EST

The first, and best, of three films in which Gabin tackles Georges Simenon's illustrious Commissaire Maigret. The search for a serial killer in the Marais brings Maigret/Gabin in contact with a range of picturesque Parisian types. Gabin brings a stolid humour and weightiness to the part, puffing away on his pipe through the streets of a studio-recreated yet authentic feeling quartier that was, then, a working-class area.

**Fri 25 May 17:50 NFT2**

**Sat 26 May 20:40 NFT2**

### **Melodie en sous-sol** *The Big Snatch / Any Number Can Win*

France-Italy 1963. Dir Henri Verneuil With Alain Delon. 118min. EST

In this adaptation of John Trинian's *The Big Grab*, Gabin plays godfather to Delon's rookie gangster in a meticulously planned heist of the Palm Beach casino in Cannes. The rugged Gabin – the brain of the operation – and the diabolically handsome young Delon, who would always credit Gabin as a great influence, form a terrific team in a nail-biting thriller that also comments on the modernisation of 1960s France.

**Sun 27 May 20:30 NFT3**

**Mon 28 May 17:30 NFT3**

### **Le Chat**

France-Italy 1971. Dir Pierre Granier-Deferre. With Simone Signoret. 88min EST.  
15

The most poignant of Gabin's late films. This Simenon adaptation stages a stand-off between ageing husband and wife, a couple between whom all love has seemingly been replaced by hatred, to the point that they communicate only through written notes and, tragically, a cat. The bitterness of the story is offset by tour-de-force performances by Gabin and the great Simone Signoret, at last united in a perfect match.

**Tue 29 May 21:00 NFT3**

**Thu 31 May 18:15 NFT2**

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- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

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