

Review #84 : *Beauty of the Devil* (1949)

Gérard Philippe, Michel Simon and Simone Valère

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVBY8SwhD9o>

With impeccable credentials — **René Clair**'s direction, **Michel Simon** and **Gérard Philippe** playing both Dr. Faust and Mephistopheles, young and old, swapping identities until the demon takes earthly form in a New Testament twist and finds himself on the hook for alchemical scandal, a screenplay by dramatist **Armand Salacrou**, nostalgic and lavish 19th century sets inspired by **Méliès** — *what could possibly be wrong ?*



For all of the movie's **visual gorgeousness**, it stands as perhaps the most **thought-provoking and philosophical** of all *Faust* films. **Moral issues of desire and happiness are twisted into knots** through unhindered **Sartrean engagement**. Typically, for René Clair, the hero's ultimate salvation lies not with the angels or with **Simone Valère**'s princess, but in a gypsy caravan with a loving brunet, a sweet echo of the director's own *À Nous la Liberté*.

And yet this escapist fantasy is no match for **Marcel Carné**'s *Les Visiteurs du Soir*.

SYNOPSIS

Scientist and Professor Henri Faust (**Michel Simon**) is set to retire after decades of study, but he feels **there is still much to discover**. The senescent savant, anxious for life to continue his alchemist's quests, is also a man who has **never known real youth and love**, always surrounded by a stupendous array of alembics, retorts and the appurtenances of learning. Enter Mephistopheles (**Gérard Philippe**), a minion of Lucifer who once plaintively describes himself as a '*second-rate devil*', who offers Faust the **gift of universal knowledge in exchange of his eternal soul**. Although Faust does not make his pact, Mephisto is willing to give his man time to consider and he does so by endowing Faust with youth, the love of a gypsy girl, Marguerite, and, later, the power to make gold. The temptations, naturally, do not cease, as Faust becomes an idol titled by his prince and acclaimed by the people, who appreciates this unending spate of gold the young Faust provides.

The affair he has with the beautiful princess (**Simone Valère**) seems ample reward until Mephisto gives Faust a **glimpse of the future**, a view that shows the power-mad youth a philanderer who kills the prince to marry the princess and then dallies with others...

REVIEW

The titanic **struggle between good and evil** is an ageless subject, and René Clair turns it into **an imaginative, lavishly mounted and often fascinating** restatement of the Faust legend.

In the fight for the possession of Faust's soul, René Clair has also added a few present-day insinuations, such as **atomic power and mankind's self-destruction**, which gives the drama a momentary pertinence and places it apart from standard versions of this ancient parable.

Michel Simon is the most outstanding performer of the fable. As in *Paradise Lost*, the **devil gets the best lines** and *La Beauté du Diable* is essentially Simon's show. There's a priceless moment when he cracks up at the sight of a costumed horned Satan prancing around as part of a court pageant. Even when the movie turns **didactic**, Simon keeps it **high-spirited**. Once Faust rebels and refuses to fulfil his part of the deal, Mephisto loses all restraint — rubbing his hands with comic gusto as he calls on his master Lucifer to help him incite mobs, send Marguerite to the stake, and drive Faust mad. **Gerard Philippe** is a convincing portrayal as well but one that is overshadowed by Simon's majestic job. **Nicole Besnard** is appealing as Marguerite and **Simone Valère** is a vision of blonde loveliness as the Princess.

BETWEEN THE LINES

World War II changed everything. When in 1950, pioneer **avant-garde film-maker René Clair** pondered the nature of a post-Hitler post-Hiroshima *Faust*, no doubt he was inspired by the idea of **reinventing the German text right after that same nation had lived through the disaster of selling its collective soul to the devil**. Faust also has some **humanitarian impulses** and deals with **world hunger** — but, the movie suggests, he is fated to take another path, inventing weapons of mass destruction to become a dictator with atomic power.

Steeped in the imagery of Nazi occupation and driven by the filmmaker's need to expiate his own wartime collaboration (and, in the wake of *neo-realist* films and *café existentialism*, his sense of anachronism), **Jean Cocteau's** *Orphée* is another one of those fusty, old-fashioned and **self-conscious post-World War II fantasies** written and directed by an aging member of the 1920s avant-garde.

CRITICS REVIEW

★ ★ ★ ★ FASCINATING ! ESSENTIAL MOVIEENESS !

Michael Atkinson, *Time Out New York*

'A venerable story retold, but it is philosophy for sophisticates presented with vitality and movement and portrayed by a whole professional cast... In Michel Simon, M. Clair has the consummate thespian... at once a fearsome, impish and, at times, jolly devil. His characterization is broad enough for him to bellow in stentorian tones for help from Lucifer. At other times, he is the sly schemer who is not averse to ogling the ladies and guzzling more than his share of the wine. He is, in short, both a bearded Mephisto — sometimes happy, sometimes frustrated, and sometimes frightening — and a bumbling, confused and aged Faust groping for time to finish his research. Gérard Philippe as the youthful Faust gives the role a wistful, tender and, at times, gay reading.'

A.H. Weiler, *New York Times*

'The devil steals the show here. Michel Simon's portrait of the aging Faust, muttering absent-mindedly while the learned do him honour, is precise and human, and in the role of Mephistopheles, he is brilliant, sardonic, and devilishly charming... It is one of the finest films I have seen.'

Paul V. Beckley, *New York Herald Tribune*