

Life as defiance

Obituary: Jeanne Moreau died on July 31st

The great French actress of the New Wave was 89



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THE moment Jeanne Moreau fell in love with acting was when, at 16, she saw Jean Anouilh's "Antigone". She was not allowed to go to the theatre, so she lied to her father and went anyway. To her delight, the play was also about a girl who said no.

She said it again when her father, a few years later, tried to stop her being an actress by calling her a *putain* and slapping her across the face. Off she went to the Conservatoire, then to the Comédie Française, then to the Théâtre National Populaire, where her tottering, gauzy Maggie in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" was soon

the toast of Paris. You see?, she silently told him.

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When she became, in the 1960s, the most famous actress in France and an international star of film, people called her a Grande Dame. She wouldn't have it. She was a woman, which was title enough for her: the sometime muse and sometimes lover of her dear friends Louis (Malle), François (Truffaut), Luis (Buñuel), Joseph (Losey) and Orson (Welles). She was simply herself. The New Wave that swept French

cinema in the late 1950s, into which Malle induced her after some fruitless forays into film, allowed her to slip the thrall of costume designers complaining about the bags under her eyes and her lack of fashionable beauty. Instead she was in a real world of hand-held cameras, natural light, unmasked skin, rain: total freedom.

She could now play complex, thinking women. And she would not let herself be typecast. True, at first she had a run of bored, bourgeois wives longing for love, roaming the night streets and parks with almost too much emotional turmoil brimming in her world-weary eyes. But she could also do tomboy light-heartedness, as the enchanting, cruelly teasing Catherine in "Jules et Jim", or jumped-up insolence, as Célestine in "The Diary of a Chambermaid", or full-feathered, gun-toting burlesque, with Brigitte Bardot in "Viva Maria!". Any outrageousness she blamed on her English blood, from her Tiller Girl mother. It let her flout convention in ways which, if purely French, she might not have dared.

These roles were still mostly *femmes fatales*. But they were weaponised with brains and spirit, as well as sex. (Spiritless ones, like Lidia in "La Notte", drove her to pills with their emptiness.) In almost every character spirit showed in the lift of her jaw, sometimes emphasised by the way the lines deepened round her downturned mouth as she let a cigarette dangle, then flicked the ash away. Perhaps only she could make defiance so desirable.

"Sensuality" was the word she wanted. "Sexuality" just meant a woman as an

object, a piece of meat. Sensuality meant power, as in her eating of a strawberry in “Les Amants” in 1958, very slowly, savouring it so her potential lover saw. That was the film in which she showed the world, for the first time on celluloid, how a woman really felt at the height of pleasure. Audiences gasped, and the censors cut away, but who cared? She had broken the taboo. In “Lumière”, the first film she directed herself, women just sat around looking any old how, talking about their affairs. Again, she showed women as they were, in liberated mode. Not how men portrayed them, though it was still a man’s world.

Well, perhaps it was. Yet she cut a cool swathe through it: Malle and Truffaut, Marcello Mastroianni and Miles Davis, Peter Handke and Tony Richardson, Pierre Cardin. (All Paris thought he was gay, but she saw to that.) She loved easily, deeply; then, when the fragrance wore off, moved elsewhere. Her two marriages were brief, because she would not be controlled. She was the one in charge: the one who hid any mismatching cups and put towels in rational piles, who stopped drinking in a day when it began to take her over, who gave up owning houses because they tied her down. Discipline in every part of her life.

As for that life, it was like a piece of land she had been given as a gift, and was meant to cultivate with concentration and dedication. The best thing she could do, was act. And acting meant she had to expose herself down to the bare nerves; or rather, lay bare the character imagined by somebody else. Under the simplest surface she built up elaborate back-stories, especially for the bit-parts she took as she grew older. Nothing would be said on screen explicitly; but when she played, for example, the lonely grandmother in François Ozon’s “Time to Leave” (2005), she could still glow with a secret history of passion gratified.

Her favourite lover

That glow remained in her, too, and much hidden history. She resisted talking about it. Mystery added to her allure. Who were her influences? A widower who had told her the names of flowers, a grandfather who had shown her the stars. Her favourite director? You might as well ask who was her favourite lover. It was Buñuel who noticed that in heels she walked a little unsteadily, as if not so sure of herself. She admitted that the only thing she was certain of was what she did not want to

do.

She knew that her films added up to a revolution in cinema, especially its portrayal of women. And yes, much of her life was in them, in one way or another. But why gape at the past? When anyone asked if she watched them, whether she gave a damn...the answer again, with a smoky laugh, and a toss of the perfect hair, and that tilt of the jaw, was no, and no.

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