



LA RONDINE PUCCINI



GREEN
SEASON



Les années folles

Henrietta Bredin

Café society – what does that phrase conjure up? It seems to be most redolent of the 1920s and 30s in terms of time, and in particular of Paris in terms of place. Procope, where Voltaire’s desk is lovingly preserved and where he was reputed to have drunk around 40 cups of coffee a day; La Coupole, where Josephine Baker reigned in inimitable exoticism before founding her own restaurant, Chez Josephine in 1928; Les Deux Magots and the Café de Flore, rivals for literary, intellectual and artistic connections, the former frequented by Hemingway, James Baldwin, Sartre and de Beauvoir, the latter by Tristan Tzara, Louis Aragon and Picasso (actually Picasso is claimed by pretty much every café in Paris).

And a café, Bullier’s, is at the heart of Puccini’s *La rondine*, which is a heady mix of a work in itself, commissioned for Vienna (another great café society city), from an Italian, and set in France. Puccini would have appreciated the atmosphere of Bullier’s to the full, given his fondness for convivial company and the unleashing of hilarity and emotion that such places can engender – just think of Musetta and her Christmas Eve antics at Café Momus in *La bohème*. He would, however, almost certainly have considered the coffee inferior to that on offer in any Italian establishment.

Paris at the end of the 1920s, a decade known as *Les années folles*, or the crazy years, had seen an explosion of cultural and artistic activity of every kind after the horrors of the First World War. Cafés, brasseries and nightclubs became the gathering places for an extraordinary mix of people. The old social hierarchies were breaking down, unbridled individualism was encouraged, extravagant behaviour not just tolerated but sought after and slavishly imitated. Raymond Radiguet summed it up in his novel *Le Bal du Comte d’Orgel*: ‘It is at these troubled periods that frivolity, even license, are most easily understood, because one enjoys with gusto what tomorrow may belong to somebody else.’ The hedonism

Adolphe Menjou and
Edna Purviance in
A Woman of Paris, dir.
Charles Chaplin, 1923

of those years, the wildness and the giddy atmosphere appealed to tourists as well as locals. This was the time of the great drift of Americans and English to Paris, looking for escape in a haze of fantasy, drink and drugs. It was possible for the impoverished artist to idle away many hours in a café, with only minimal outlay, a glass of absinthe or a small coffee served on an *assiette tarifaire*, the price printed on the dish. It was a combustible combination of money and want, of stark contrast between the haves and the have nots.

It is easy to view this era as a time of unalloyed pleasure but it was also a time of extreme, grinding poverty. In 1928, after five years in the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, the 24-year-old George Orwell, determined to make a living as a writer, moved to Paris, settled into a cheap hotel in the Latin Quarter and took up a job as a 'plongeur', or kitchen dishwasher to make ends meet. It was gruelling work and Orwell, who wrote of his experiences in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, was especially aware of the difference between behind-the-scenes and front-of-house. 'It was amusing to look around the filthy little scullery and think that only a double door was between us and the dining room. There sat the customers in all their splendour – spotless tablecloths, bowls of flowers, mirrors and gilt cornices and painted cherubim; and here just a few feet away, we in our disgusting filth. There was no time to sweep the floor till evening and we slithered about in a compound of soapy water, lettuce leaves, torn paper and trampled food. The room had a dirty mixed smell of food and sweat, a dozen waiters with their coats off, showing their sweaty armpits, sat at the table mixing salads and sticking their thumbs into the cream pots, but the customers saw nothing of this.'

The division between these worlds was wafer-thin. Orwell noticed the extraordinary transformation of a waiter going from the kitchen to the public dining room: 'A sudden change comes over him. The set of his shoulders alters; all the dirt and hurry and irritation have dropped off in an instant. He glides over the carpet with a solemn, priest-like air.' For a woman such as Alice Prin, who became known simply as Kiki, and later the Queen of Montparnasse, there was the narrowest of margins between being seen as a free spirit and a prostitute. She was born in 1901 in eastern France, into a muddle of siblings and cousins, as she described later, 'six little love-babies, our fathers having overlooked the small matter of acknowledging us'. Existence was hand-to-mouth and when her mother moved her brood to Paris, to an apartment near the Gare de Montparnasse, a quarter that was already known as a centre for artists and bohemians, the teenage Kiki met the painters Chaim Soutine and Amedeo Modigliani and began to work as a nude model. Most of the painters she posed for were as broke as she was so she soon had to extend her activities, taking up painting herself, singing in night clubs and playing bit parts in films. She had a quality of joyfulness and open delight in life that made her extraordinarily appealing. Something of that comes over in a description of her at the Jockey Club where, as Kiki wrote, 'Everyone drinks a lot and everybody's happy'. While singing, Kiki would 'lower her head, moving it from side to side. All her movements were economical and rounded; she made a light dance with her hips, very slow and almost imperceptible. She performed her outrageously dirty songs in a way that offended no-one. Smiling softly she would begin her trademark song, an old folk tune with new words, "The young girls of Camaret say they are all virgins, but ..."'. Kiki herself had no high opinion of her abilities: 'I can't sing if I'm not high, and I can't see how these other women can sing as easily as they pee. I have a good ear, but a bad



memory, but luckily I have a friend who prompts me.' She had an intense and passionate relationship through the 1920s with Man Ray, who took photographs of her that encapsulated her warm, slow sensuality.

This was a time when women became, at a cost and not at speed, more emancipated. Many had spent years living alone and dealing with whatever life had to throw at them while the men were fighting and dying in the trenches. The result was a kind of frenzy, a time when both men and women were intoxicated with hope. They wanted to enjoy life, to live for pleasure. In fashion this was represented by the designs of Coco Chanel, who abandoned all the corsetry and underpinning by which women had been restricted for so long. Her simple, tubular dresses had dropped waistlines, they finished in flirtatious pleated skirts just beneath the knee. She pioneered the wearing of trousers for women, short shingled haircuts and the wearing of red nail polish, which really took off after 1928 when Cutex came up with an acetone based polish remover that was safe for use at home. At around the same time Eugène Schueller, a brilliant chemist and businessman, founded the company L'Oréal and introduced safe, natural-looking hair dye. He thought that the fashion for cropped hair would see a drop in demand for dye but in fact it had the opposite effect, as hair needed more frequent cutting and maintaining to keep its shape. Spotting another new outlet he produced a bleach, L'Oréal Blanc, that prompted a rage for platinum blonde hair. Schueller would no doubt have approved thoroughly of the smug advertising tag in current use: 'Because you're worth it'. The scent that wafted after this modern woman, light,

'Taxi girls' wait for customers at a Paris nightclub, 1920s. Taxi girls, or taxi dancers, were so named because they were identified by a number on a ticket (seen here attached to their dresses), offering dances to clients for a fee



Pierre Alcover and
Brigitte Helm in
L'Argent, dir. Marcel
L'Herbier, 1928



clean, floral and uncloying, was, of course, Chanel No. 5, while the sound of the era was probably the taxi horn. George Gershwin, who came to Paris in 1928, was intoxicated by their sound and wove them into the opening section of *An American in Paris*, conceiving the work's central motif as 'a walk on the Champs-Élysées, the honking taxi, homesickness, the blues'. Persistent in his search for horns that sounded precisely the right notes he went shopping for them on the Avenue de la Grande-Armée, which was at the time a centre for automobile shops. In the end he bought about 20 and had them delivered to his hotel where he piled them on top of the Steinway grand piano and got friends to help out by sounding them to his instructions as he played and composed, capturing the traffic noise of the Place de la Concorde during the rush hour.

If Puccini's Magda had inhabited this world she would have been familiar with every aspect of its joyous atmosphere and precarious freedom. She knows and revels in romantic love but is all too aware that her dreams cannot survive as reality. When Kiki was urged to put aside money for the years to come she just laughed and said, 'But I don't give a damn. All I need is an onion, a bit of bread and a bottle of red. And I will always find someone to offer me that.' Is Magda so insouciant in the face of what might lie ahead? Les années folles came to an end with the great financial crash of 1929. For Magda the party is over when she realises that her love is not enough – she must carry on alone, into an uncertain future.

