

# The Museum of Modern Art

**Modern Matinees: Lino Ventura**  
**September 8–October 28, 2022**  
**The Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters**

A professional wrestler before Jacques Becker cast him as a supporting hood in *Touchez-pas au grisbi* (1954), Lino Ventura became one of France's most popular stars of the 1960s and '70s, balancing taciturn, tough-guy roles for directors such as Jean-Pierre Melville (*Army of Shadows*, 1969) and Claude Sautet (*L'Arme à gauche*, 1965) with comedies (most famously, Georges Lautner's *Les Tontons flingueurs*, 1963) that drew on his considerable gifts as a frustrated straight-man. Born in Italy and raised in a hardscrabble Paris neighborhood by a single mother, Ventura never took an acting lesson but brought an unshakeable authenticity to his performances, grounded in a strictly pre-Method reticence and interiority, multiplied by the imposing physicality of his athletic bulk, hooded eyes, and rasping voice.

Famously, Ventura never employed an agent, but insisted on auditioning writers and directors himself in his home office in the Parisian suburb of Saint-Cloud. Said to be reluctant to extend himself beyond his comfort zone in genre filmmaking, Ventura nevertheless contributed memorable work in naturalistic dramas, such as Francesco Rosi's *Illustrious Corpses* (1976), and a range of adventure films like Henri Verneuil's *Cent mille dollars au soleil* (1964), in which he costars with his friendly rival, Jean-Paul Belmondo. This program includes a rare 35mm print of Ventura's first starring vehicle, *Le Gorille vous salue bien*, from MoMA's film archive.

## SCREENING SCHEDULE:

***L'Armée des ombres (Army of Shadows)***. 1969. France. Directed and written by Jean-Pierre Melville, from the novel by Joseph Kessel. With Lino Ventura, Simone Signoret, Paul Meurisse, Jean-Pierre Cassel. In French; English subtitles. 35mm. 145 min. With *Army of Shadows*, Jean-Pierre Melville, the French master of the philosophical, pseudo-American gangster film, drops the metaphor of the criminal underworld and deals directly with his experiences as an underground soldier of the Resistance during the Nazi occupation of France. As the central figure—a resistance leader in Marseille who needs to retain absolute anonymity—Ventura hides his charisma behind a fussy mustache and a pair of glasses, yet his inner struggle seems all the more vivid for never being brought to the surface. Heroism becomes a matter of betraying moral principles in order to preserve them. The film's remarkable low-light cinematography is by Pierre Lhomme.

Sept 15, 1:30 T2; Oct 7, 1:30 T2

***Touchez pas au grisbi***. 1954. France. Directed by Jacques Becker. Screenplay by Becker, Albert Simonin, Maurice Griffe, from a novel by Simonin. With Jean Gabin, Rene Dary, Dora Doll, Jeanne Moreau, Lino Ventura. In French; English subtitles. 94 min. 35mm. His career as a professional wrestler compromised by an injury, the 35-year-old Ventura reluctantly accepted an offer from the director Jacques Becker to play a supporting role in this 1954 crime film. It became a major hit, relaunching the career of its fading star, Jean Gabin, and sealing a friendship between Ventura and Gabin that continued until Gabin's death. Becker's take on the genre emphasizes relationships over action, as Gabin's character, an aging gunman, tries to secure his place in an underworld increasingly dominated by unprincipled rivals (such as Ventura's aggressive young Angelo). Watch for Jeanne Moreau, also at the beginning of her career, as a dancer who finds Ventura a better bet for the future.

Sept 9, 1:30 T2; Sept 30, 1:30 T2

***Maigret tend un piège (Maigret Sets a Trap)***. 1958. France. Directed by Jean Delannoy. Screenplay by Delannoy, Rodolphe-Maurice Artaud, Michel Audiard, from a novel by Georges Simenon. With Jean Gabin, Annie Girardot, Olivier Hussenot, Jeanne Boitel, Lino Ventura. In French; English subtitles. 119 min. DCP. Jean Gabin secured his late career resurgence with his distinctive portrayal of Georges Simenon's beloved

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Inspector Maigret, a police detective with a world-weary attitude and aching feet who relies more on psychology than physical clues to solve crimes. Ventura makes a token appearance as one of Maigret's men, in a film otherwise dominated by an early performance by Annie Girardot, who would become France's most important female star of the 1970s. Director Jean Delannoy, doomed to live in critical infamy when François Truffaut denounced him as an exemplar of the fusty French "tradition of quality," contributes some atmospheric views of the then-crumbling Marais neighborhood.  
Sept 8, 1:30 T2; Oct 28, 1:30 T2

***Cent mille dollars au soleil (Greed in the Sun)***. 1964. France/Italy. Directed by Henri Verneuil. Screenplay by Michel Audiard, Marcel Jullian, from a story by Claude Veillot. With Jean-Paul Belmondo, Lino Ventura, Bernard Blier, Andrea Parisy, Gert Froebe. In French; English subtitles. 130 min. DCP. After appearing together in Claude Sautet's unfortunately unavailable *Classe tous risques* in 1960, Lino Ventura and Jean-Paul Belmondo quickly became dominant French stars in the ensuing decade, and their reunion in Henri Verneuil's action thriller *Cent mille dollars au soleil* became a major commercial success. Shot in gorgeous black-and-white scope on location in Morocco, the film is a sort of anti-Hawksian buddy movie in which two best friends, both highly skilled truck drivers who ply the cross-Saharan route for dubious entrepreneur Gert Froebe, become rivals when Belmondo takes off with a truck filled with a mysterious but valuable cargo, and Ventura is sent after him. Verneuil shrewdly treats their rivalry as a tortoise-and-hare situation, pitting Ventura's stoic determination against Belmondo's jittery energy. The film also features Bernard Blier as Walter Brennan, and the richly vernacular dialogue of Michel Audiard.  
Sept 23, 1:30 T2; Oct 27, 1:30 T2

***Un témoin dans la ville***. 1959. France/Italy. Directed by Edouard Molinaro. Screenplay by Molinaro, Gerard Oury, Alain Poire, Georges Tabet, Pierre Boileau, Thomas Narcejac. With Lino Ventura, Sandra Milo, Franco Fabrizi. In French; English subtitles. 86 min. DCP. Edouard Molinaro—who later found success with popular comedies like *La Cage aux folles* and *Oscar*—directed this excellent, overlooked film noir early in his career, proving himself an apt pupil of Alfred Hitchcock and Henri-Georges Clouzot with this adaptation of a novel by Boileau and Narjac (*Vertigo*). Lino Ventura deploys the full range of his quiet soulfulness as a sympathetic killer who sees no choice but to eliminate the taxi driver (Franco Fabrizi) who is the only witness to Ventura's murder of his wife's lover. The jazz score features Kenny Clarke, Kenny Dorham, and Barney Wilen.  
Sept 22, 1:30 T2; Oct 6, 1:30 T2

***Cadaveri eccellenti (Illustrious Corpses)***. 1976. Italy. Directed by Francesco Rosi. Screenplay by Tonino Guerra, Lino Jannuzzi, Francesco Rosi, from a book by Leonardo Sciascia. With Lino Ventura, Renato Salvatori, Alain Cuny, Tina Aumont. In Italian; English subtitles. 120 min. 4K restoration courtesy of The Film Foundation and Cineteca Bologna. The agony of Italy during the *anni di piombo* ("leaden years") of the 1970s, when the country was racked by terrorism on the left, a neo-fascist moment on the right, and a seemingly impotent national government in between, inspired its own sub-genre of cinema, called *le poliziottesco*. Directors such as Umberto Lenzi and Stelvio Massi explored new levels of violence and cynicism in films built around the endless, amoral conflict of bloodthirsty gangsters and corrupt cops. Francesco Rosi's 1976 *Cadaveri eccellenti* attempts to take a step back from the genre's nihilistic tendencies, with Ventura (in a rare performance in his native language) as a principled police inspector who begins to suspect that a grander conspiracy lies behind the chaos.  
Sept 16, 1:30 T1; Oct 20, 1:30 T2

***Le clan des Siciliens (The Sicilian Clan)***. 1969. France. Directed by Henri Verneuil. Screenplay by Verneuil, Jose Giovanni, Pierre Pelegri, from a novel by Auguste Le Breton. With Jean Gabin, Alain Delon, Lino Ventura, Irina Demick. In French; English subtitles. 121 min. 35mm. The combination of three legends of French cinema—Ventura, Alain Delon, and Jean Gabin—is reason enough to see this expensively produced crime thriller from 1969, yet director Henri Verneuil doesn't generate much heat from his stars,

who remain largely isolated in subplots of their own. The plot, from a novel by Auguste Le Breton (*Rififi*) is centered on a wildly unlikely attempt to steal a shipment of valuable jewelry by hijacking a jumbo jet and landing it on a deserted stretch(?) of what appears to be the Long Island Expressway. Still, Ventura's farewell to his old friend and mentor Gabin in the film's final scene is touching; it was the last of the six films they made together.

Sept 29, 1:30 T2; Oct 21, 1:30 T1

***L'Arme à Gauche (The Dictator's Guns)***. 1965. France. Directed by Claude Sautet. Screenplay by Sautet, Fouli Elia, Michael Levine, from a novel by Charles Williams. With Lino Ventura, Sylva Koscina, Leo Gordon, Alberto de Mendoza. In French; English subtitles. 103 min. Five years after his debut film, *Classe tous risques*, director Claude Sautet reteamed with Ventura for this little-seen follow-up, based on the novel *Aground* by hardboiled maestro Charles Williams. Set in the Caribbean but filmed on the Mediterranean coast, the film seems less an homage to American B thrillers than a meticulous recreation of one, down to the casting of the Hollywood veteran Leo Gordon as the heavy. Ventura seems to be channeling John Garfield as the protagonist, a freelance ship's captain duped into providing cover for a gun-running plot. Oct 14, 1:30 T2

***Le Gorille vous salue bien (The Mask of the Gorilla)***. 1958. France. Directed by Bernard Borderie. Screenplay by Jacques Robert, from a novel by Antoine Dominique. With Lino Ventura, Charles Vanel, Pierre Dux, Bella Darvi, Rene Lefevre. In French; English subtitles. 90 min. 35mm. After steadily rising through supporting roles in the 1950s, Ventura made his official debut as a headliner, identified only as "The Gorilla" in the posters and opening credits, in this klutzy but amiable French programmer. The character, an undercover agent for a super-secret government intelligence agency headed by "The Old Man" (the venerable Charles Vanel), seems based on Ventura's wrestling background—he wears double-breasted suits with broad shoulder pads and tosses around opponents as if they were sandbags (which, in many cases, they clearly are). For director Bernard Borderie, who had successfully launched the Lemmy Caution series with star Eddie Constantine, the film was meant to be the first in a series, but Ventura, who had already outgrown this kind of thing, wisely walked away after this initial episode. Oct 13, 1:30 T2

*Modern Matinees: Lino Ventura* is organized by Dave Kehr, Curator, Department of Film, The Museum of Modern Art.

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