

# JACQUES!

Feature film script by Jens Luckwaldt  
Synopsis, version 21 April 2021



**Can-Can and Barcarolle—who doesn't know them? But who knows their creator?**

**JACQUES OFFENBACH: We immerse ourselves in his life and times. A sympathetic ego-maniac, obsessive musician and theatre man who travels in carriages and trains throughout Europe hunting down and incorporating the mad esprit of his times in his music. Interactions with contemporaries of all kinds bring Offenbach's world vividly to life, between Empress Sisi's Vienna, the summer spa of Bad Ems and Napoleon III's Paris. A world in upheaval with its aristocrats, coquettes, dandies, journalists and culture entrepreneurs. High and Low, all flock to Offenbach's theatre. The sublime and the ordinary merge in his irresistible works. Emotional performances, turbulent parties, comic intrigues, the clash between conservative family values and free-spiritedness of the theatre world, setbacks and triumph—we experience Offenbach as a modern artist and self-promoter, and are swept along into the frenzy of a time of social contradictions and political power plays, in which we recognize the blueprint of today's *theatrum mundi*.**

## BACKGROUND:

1864: Prussian Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck settles the conflict over territorial claims with Denmark by force of arms. He initiates the first of the so-called German Wars of Unification, which result, after the defeat of France in 1871, in a Germany under the rule of the House of Hohenzollern. In the same year 1864, the Paris-based German-Jewish composer Jacques Offenbach receives what is probably the most prestigious commission of his life: a grand romantic opera commissioned by the Vienna Court Opera, and dedicated to the Emperor of Austria: "Die Rheinnixen". It is the first decidedly anti-militaristic, pacifist opera in history. Its appeal for peace is drowned out in the chauvinist spite of the Viennese press, and the work falls into oblivion until its triumphant rebirth in 2002 at the Festival de Radio France in Montpellier. Its musical heart, however, made its way into immortality as a message in a bottle: Offenbach used the Song of the Rhine Spirits again 15 years later as the "Barcarolle" in the Venice act of "The Tales of Hoffmann". Offenbach is able to make up for the Viennese failure in the same year 1864 with the triumph of "La Belle Hélène", the "Beautiful Helen". This second myth parody after "Orpheus in the Underworld" cements his reputation as the inventor of a new genre, the Offenbachiade, from which the Viennese Operetta as well as the English Savoy Opera and US-American Musical would develop. Erotically charged, full of allusions to high society and the decadence of the French imperial house, Offenbach, who as the son of a Cologne synagogal cantor made his way to the top of European society, achieved something previously unthinkable: the democratization of the opera stage. People from all social classes, from servants to the crowned heads of Europe, flocked to his productions, which dominated international repertoires in the 1860s.

For more than 70 years, no feature film has attempted to capture Offenbach's singular personality and his impact on times and the arts. Our film revolves around the composer in a decisive year of his life, which is also a decisive one in European history. It is a dive into turbulent times as seen through the critical eyes of an eccentric *bon vivant*—Jacques Offenbach.

With musical know-how and rights clearance, the international music publishing house of Boosey & Hawkes stands by the project's side, issuing the first and authoritative Offenbach Complete Edition which in the last 20 years has been able to recover numerous works that were thought lost, making them available once more for the stage and the concert hall.

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## SYNOPSIS:

At the beginning of 1864, Offenbach supervises the production of his romantic grand opera “Die Rheinnixen” in Vienna, an important commission from the Imperial Court. However, the premiere is under a bad star. The nationalistic, anti-Jewish press, disappointed by the dismissal of Wagner’s “Tristan” in favour of Offenbach, writes against the Frenchman who as a composer is most successful especially in the genre of light music. In addition, the new piece has to be shortened considerably due to the mental illness of the main singer. The hoped-for resounding success does not materialise, Offenbach travels home to Paris disappointed and physically exhausted.

There, money disputes with the director of the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens, which is committed to Offenbach’s works, cause further concern. Privately, Offenbach stands between his wife Herminie, faithful companion and mother of his five children, and the young singer Zulma Bouffar. The first signs of his gout disease do the rest. He feels he has reached a dead end and longs for a new success on stage, like a few years ago with “Orpheus in the Underworld”.

His favourite librettist Ludovic Halévy then creates a new antique parody about the abduction of Helen of Troy. Offenbach immediately catches fire and separates from the Bouffes-Parisiens in order to be able to work at the Théâtre des Variétés under new, also artistically better conditions. In Paris, he composes with such a furor on the libretto that his authors Halévy and Henri Meilhac can hardly keep up with the verses. Besides, Offenbach enjoys the summer activities in the spa, popular with the nobility: gambling, pleasure trips and evening guest performances of his Parisian artist friends. Offenbach’s lover Zulma is also there to sing in his new rural one-act play “Jeanne qui pleure et Jean qui rit”.

With the leading role in “La Belle Hélène”, Zulma also wants to make a big breakthrough in Paris, but the other singers as well as Halévy, who was sent on the trail by Herminie, and finally the director of the Variétés, Cogniard, talk Offenbach out of it, initially to his annoyance. Only one singer really seems to be up to the role and to guarantee success: Hortense Schneider. But the diva has finished with Parisian theatre life and is already sitting on packed suitcases in her flat. The authors call on her, and by playing her entrance song on her piano, they convince Hortense—at an admittedly enormous fee. The disappointed Zulma angrily breaks up with Offenbach.

In the following, the development of the piece is shown in varying scenes, with a rehearsal dispute between the two leading actresses, the tenor’s struggle to have a good entrance song, preliminary reports launched in the press and a setback on the part of the stately board of censors, which, however, can be averted by Offenbach’s influential patron, the Duc de Morny. In between, one experiences Offenbach at work, at the doctor’s, in his family circle and at one of the legendary, exuberant artist evenings, the “Vendredis de Jacques”, in his small flat.

The premiere on 17 December 1864 becomes the longed-for success: the audience immediately responds to Offenbach’s melodies, to the performance of the ensemble, to the wit and the parodistic and also erotically daring moments of the text.

In an epilogue during a photographic session at his friend Nadar’s atelier, Offenbach nevertheless expresses his feeling of emptiness after the premiere, no matter how successful it was. He is in poor health and prematurely aged, fearing that he will no longer be able to realise all his plans and dreams. To lift his spirits, Nadar takes him to the performance of an older drama that Offenbach has always been interested in: “The Tales of Hoffmann”. Offenbach sees the scenery as if through a veil, shreds of other music such as the Elves’ song from the “Rheinnixen”, later used as the Barcarolle, resound inside him, and the characters seem to take on faces of his life’s acquaintances.

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