

SAN FRANCISCO
SILENT
FILM FESTIVAL



A DAY OF SILENTS | DECEMBER 5, 2015 | CASTRO THEATRE

A DAY *of* SILENTS

DECEMBER 5, 2015

11:00 AM THE BLACK PIRATE

Live Musical Accompaniment by Alloy Orchestra
Introduction by Tracey Goessel

1:00 PM AROUND CHINA WITH A MOVIE CAMERA

Live Musical Accompaniment by Donald Sosin

3:00 PM THE GRIM GAME

Live Musical Accompaniment by Donald Sosin
Introduction by Rick Schmidlin

6:30 PM THE INHUMAN WOMAN (L'INHUMAINE)

Live Musical Accompaniment by Alloy Orchestra

9:15 PM PICCADILLY

Live Musical Accompaniment by Donald Sosin

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MUSICIANS



ALLOY ORCHESTRA

Working with an outrageous assemblage of peculiar objects, Alloy Orchestra thrashes and grinds soulful music from unlikely sources. Founded twenty-five years ago, the three-man musical ensemble performs live accompaniment its members have written expressly for classic silent films. Alloy has helped revive some of the great masterpieces of the silent era by touring extensively, commissioning new prints, and collaborating with archives, collectors, and curators. At today's event, the orchestra performs its original scores for *The Black Pirate* and *The Inhuman Woman*.



DONALD SOSIN

Pianist Donald Sosin has been creating and performing scores for silent films, both live and for DVD releases, for more than forty years. He is the current resident accompanist at New York's Film Society of Lincoln Center, the Museum of the Moving Image, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music and has received commissions to create works for the San Francisco Chamber Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Chorus, Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, Turner Classic Movies, among others. Since 2007 he has performed at the San Francisco Silent Film Festival, where today he plays for the actuality program *Around China with a Movie Camera*, as well as for *The Grim Game* and *Piccadilly*.



THE BLACK PIRATE

LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY ALLOY ORCHESTRA

Directed by Albert Parker, USA, 1926

Cast Douglas Fairbanks, Billie Dove, Sam De Grasse, Anders Randolph, Donald Crisp, and Tempe Pigott

Production The Elton Corporation **Print Source** Cohen Film Collection

The Black Pirate is the epitome of motion picture art and science in the Hollywood of the 1920s. Whereas previous Douglas Fairbanks productions such as *Douglas Fairbanks in Robin Hood* (1922) and *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) employed size and scope to push the limits of cinema production, *The Black Pirate* used the nascent technology of two-color Technicolor, demonstrating Fairbanks's leadership within the movie industry. He alone at the time possessed the artistry, vision, and financial resources to shepherd to completion a feature-length silent film designed entirely for color cinematography.

Technicolor's red and green process gave the Fairbanks swash-buckler an added dimension and proved to be a vital step in the development of this burgeoning technology. In addition, Technicolor's inherent limitations and high cost had the effect of unfettering the picture from pageantry and visual effects, resulting in a straightforward action-adventure film. The picture was a refreshing return to form for Fairbanks and a dazzling new showcase for the actor-producer's favorite production value: himself. The actor is resplendent as the title's bold buccaneer, buoyed by a production brimming with rip-roaring adventure and exceptional stunts and swordplay, including the celebrated "sliding down the sails" sequence, arguably the most famous set piece of the entire Fairbanks treasure chest.

As a child, Fairbanks had been interested in pirate lore and played pirate, most often relishing the role of Captain Kidd. He had first contemplated a film involving pirates in 1922 for his sequel to *The Mark*

of Zorro (1920). However, in the back of his mind, he felt that to do a pirate story justice necessitated color cinematography rather than the standard practice of applying tints and tones to black-and-white film. "Personally," he wrote in 1925, "I could not imagine piracy without color."

Two-color Technicolor was still a novelty and had appeared only in sequences of big-budget films such as *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), and *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925)—sequences that Fairbanks thought garish.

The Black Pirate was the first major Hollywood film designed totally for color in which the experimental process was first carefully tested. Even though

the Technicolor aspect of the production was a questionable selling point with audiences, Fairbanks was confident that his compositions—created in an almost painterly fashion—would win over the public to color motion pictures.

Because of Technicolor's expense, the production had to keep the running time short and simplify the story line. Drawn from all the buccaneer stories Fairbanks had read in his youth, the script borrowed material from a scenario written in 1923 by Eugene W. Presbrey as well as ideas from Johnston McCulley's "The Further Adventures of Zorro," including the heroine being captured by pirates, the hero swinging through the rigging of a pirate ship, and a race to the rescue by the hero's confederates in a pursuing vessel. It also has elements clearly influenced by Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and James M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. Fairbanks wanted the film's

"I could not imagine piracy without color."

visual design to be akin to the illustrated *Book of Pirates* by Howard Pyle and N.C. Wyeth's illustrations for a 1911 edition of *Treasure Island*.

Fairbanks and his crew went to Santa Catalina Island for location tests but decided that they needed complete control, so nearly all the exteriors were filmed at the Pickford-Fairbanks Studios. They made several tests and discovered that the two-color process did not reproduce color accurately; blues registered as green and yellows as orange. Fairbanks disliked the bright hues and sought a more subdued approach. The film's director, Albert Parker, later said that their aim had been to "take color out of color," and that it was Fairbanks's idea "to make a pirate picture that would seem to spectators as something that had been down in the cellars for 300 years, and looked as if it has been cleaned and varnished for theater showing." By the time the testing phase was completed, more than fifty thousand feet of negative had been exposed.

The vagaries of the color cinematography required two sets of costumes and two sets of makeup because there was a disparity between how they photographed in natural light versus artificial light. Fairbanks himself is wonderfully clad in black to further distinguish him from the colorful cutthroats inhabiting the film. As a costume, it was one of his most inspired. Gene Kelly—whose childhood idol was Fairbanks—virtually replicated the costume for the magnificent "Pirate Ballet" sequence in Vincente Minnelli's *The Pirate* (1948).

Principal photography for *The Black Pirate* was accomplished in nine weeks, five of which were spent on exteriors. The production successfully integrated brilliant miniature ships with the full-scale ships. A huge tank, reportedly holding seventy thousand gallons of water, was constructed, with

airplane propellers creating the waves. Sections of the Pickford-Fairbanks Studios back lot looked like a shipyard, with five "fighting sets," complete with sections of seventeenth-century galleons built under the supervision of the art director, Swedish-born painter Carl Oscar Borg. The climactic rescue sequence was filmed off Santa Catalina Island and also incorporated long shots involving miniature ships.

The most celebrated sequence of the film, and perhaps of Fairbanks's entire career, is the moment in which the Black Pirate slashes a line with his knife, catches the end of the mizzen, and swings upward with the wayward sail to the main topsail. He then plunges his knife into the (pre-sliced) canvas of the topsail and slides down the sail, supported by the hilt

of his knife as it severs the canvas in half. He rends the mainsail in the same manner. Airplane propellers behind the canvas provided the billowing effect for the sails. The feat is so spectacular that Fairbanks repeats it once more with the fore-topsail. Wearing a wire

harness, with his arms and legs taped to prevent friction burns, the forty-three-year-old showman is in top physical form, and the appearance of effortlessness, the breathtaking arcs of movements, and the sheer joy with which he accomplishes the impossible are ample demonstrations of Fairbanks's kinetic genius.

Mordaunt Hall of the *New York Times* described the film's U.S. premiere in March 1926 in New York City: "The audience was ushered into the realm of piracy by the singing of 'Fifteen Men on a Dead Man's Chest' and afterward by a ghost-like voice that asked everyone to go back to the days of bloodthirsty sea robbers. With its excellent titles and wondrous colored scenes this picture seems to have a Barresque motif that has been aged in Stevensonian wood." *Photoplay* reported, "Nothing has ever been done in colors on the screen that approaches it in beauty and uniformity ... Mr. Fairbanks, for the first time in

motion pictures, has secured the beautiful effect of mural paintings."

Fairbanks never attempted a feature-length Technicolor film again, although he filmed a Technicolor sequence for his next film, *Douglas Fairbanks as the Gaucho* (1927). Color was expensive (exhibition prints for *The Black Pirate* cost a staggering \$170,122.14) and in itself not a sufficient draw at the box office, but Fairbanks may have sold the exhibitor rights too cheaply. United Artists chief Joseph M. Schenck recalled a dazed Fairbanks handing him a letter from an exhibitor who had enclosed a check explaining that he had made such an enormous profit on a one-week engagement of the film that his conscience troubled him. *The Black Pirate* ultimately grossed \$1.8 million domestically.

For many years, the film was available only in black-and-white versions. Just a portion of the cut original camera negative survived, and all the original Technicolor prints had faded. Nevertheless,

at Douglas Fairbanks Jr.'s urging, the British Film Institute National Archive reconstructed the picture in the early 1970s with Technicolor providing new separation masters in its long obsolete two-color process. Film historian Rudy Behlmer noted that the project was an ambitious undertaking for 1970 when film restoration—let alone a full-scale 1926 two-color or Technicolor reconstruction—was not the routine activity it is today.

The Black Pirate remains a landmark achievement in the advancement of cinema as an art form and the definitive pirate film of the silent era. The film is also a wonderful showcase for Fairbanks as a leader in the film industry and one of the most creative producers Hollywood has ever known.

—JEFFREY VANCE

adapted from his book *Douglas Fairbanks* (UC Press, 2008)



Douglas Fairbanks in *The Black Pirate*. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Vance

HEROES V VILLAINS

A HERO IS ONLY AS GOOD AS THE VILLAIN HE OR SHE HAS TO DEFEAT AND THE SILENT ERA WAS FULL OF DYNAMIC RIVALRIES. SOME WERE SO DYNAMIC, IN FACT, THAT THEY CALLED FOR A REMATCH.

DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS V. SAM DE GRASSE

No silent leading man could boast of more pep than Douglas Fairbanks and not many villains stood a chance against his energetic brand of heroism, but Sam De Grasse played antagonists who very nearly defeated the human tornado. The two actors had appeared together in Fairbanks's early western/wilderness films but they were most famously paired in swashbucklers.

What was the secret to their success? Contrast. Fairbanks was all about stunts, speed, and enthusiasm. De Grasse took things slower, satisfied to observe his foe under heavily lidded eyes and wait for a chance to stab him in the back. As Prince John in *Robin Hood*, De Grasse doesn't break a sweat; that's what his lackeys are for. He very nearly uses Robin for his archers' target practice but gets thwarted at the last minute. In *The Black Pirate*, De Grasse's tactics are even more covert. The first mate of a particularly brutal pirate band, he watches as Fairbanks's mysterious interloper wins the hearts of the crew. Fairbanks improvises his way out of some tight scrapes but soon finds that De Grasse had been one step ahead of him all along and our hero is forced to walk the plank.

Ultimately, De Grasse's villains knew that they couldn't compete with Fairbanks physically so they relied on cunning schemes and superior numbers. De Grasse never won, of course, but it was touch and go on more than one occasion.

BEBE DANIELS V. WILLIAM POWELL

Before William Powell's smooth voice and sharp comedic timing made him a matinee idol, he was typecast as a villain, a despoiler of Gishes and an all-around louse. Meanwhile, Bebe Daniels had made a name for herself as Harold Lloyd's leading lady and as a rival to Gloria Swanson in a few Cecil B. DeMille films.

As a solo star in the mid- to late-1920s, Daniels's shtick was remaking and spoofing popular films with the added twist of reversing the genders of the romantic leads. She squanders a million dollars in *Miss Brewster's Millions*, dons a Zorro-like black costume in *Senorita*, and abducts Richard Arlen across the desert sands in *She's a Sheik*. Powell reenters the narrative here as her nemesis in these last two titles, but he proved to be no match for her sword in either.

In a subsequent pairing, Daniels plays an heiress whose claims of mortal illness prove to be all in her head in *Feel My Pulse*, one of a subgenre of hypochondriac comedies, usually with male leads, that enjoyed a very minor vogue in the silent era. Arlen once again appears as the love interest, with Powell as the bootlegging

BY FRITZI KRAMER

villain. Instead of vanquishing her nemesis with a sword, Daniels turns Powell's own booze against him, hurling bottles and barrels at him and his gang after they take Arlen prisoner. The scene concludes with Daniels throwing a magnum-sized bottle of chloroform. Needless to say, by the end, Powell is feeling no pain, leaving Daniels to triumphantly rescue Arlen's gentleman-in-distress.

WILLIAM S. HART V. LOUISE GLAUM

William S. Hart's grim and gritty westerns took the box office by storm in the mid-1910s. Now, they may seem old-fashioned, but they also feature what was then the latest fad in villainesses: the vamp. In 1915 and 1916, Hart collaborated a half-dozen times with Louise Glaum, probably most famous for slinking her way through the provocatively titled 1920 film *Sex*, but her Wild West vampires are worth a look as they come equipped with schemes, seductions, and hidden daggers. Her campy antics and "Curses, foiled again!" performances were an ideal counterbalance to Hart's stern-faced heroes.

Glaum is memorably wicked in *Hell's Hinges* when she is given the task of seducing the town's minister, but she is the mastermind in *The Return of Draw Egan*, providing both impetus and nerve to the local ne'er-do-wells on their mission to drive Hart out of town. The closest Glaum came to victory was in *Keno Bates, Liar* when she goads leading lady Margaret Thompson into pumping Hart full of lead. Glaum's attacks earned her Hart's scorn and she often ended up thrown across the room, but she lived to vamp another day.

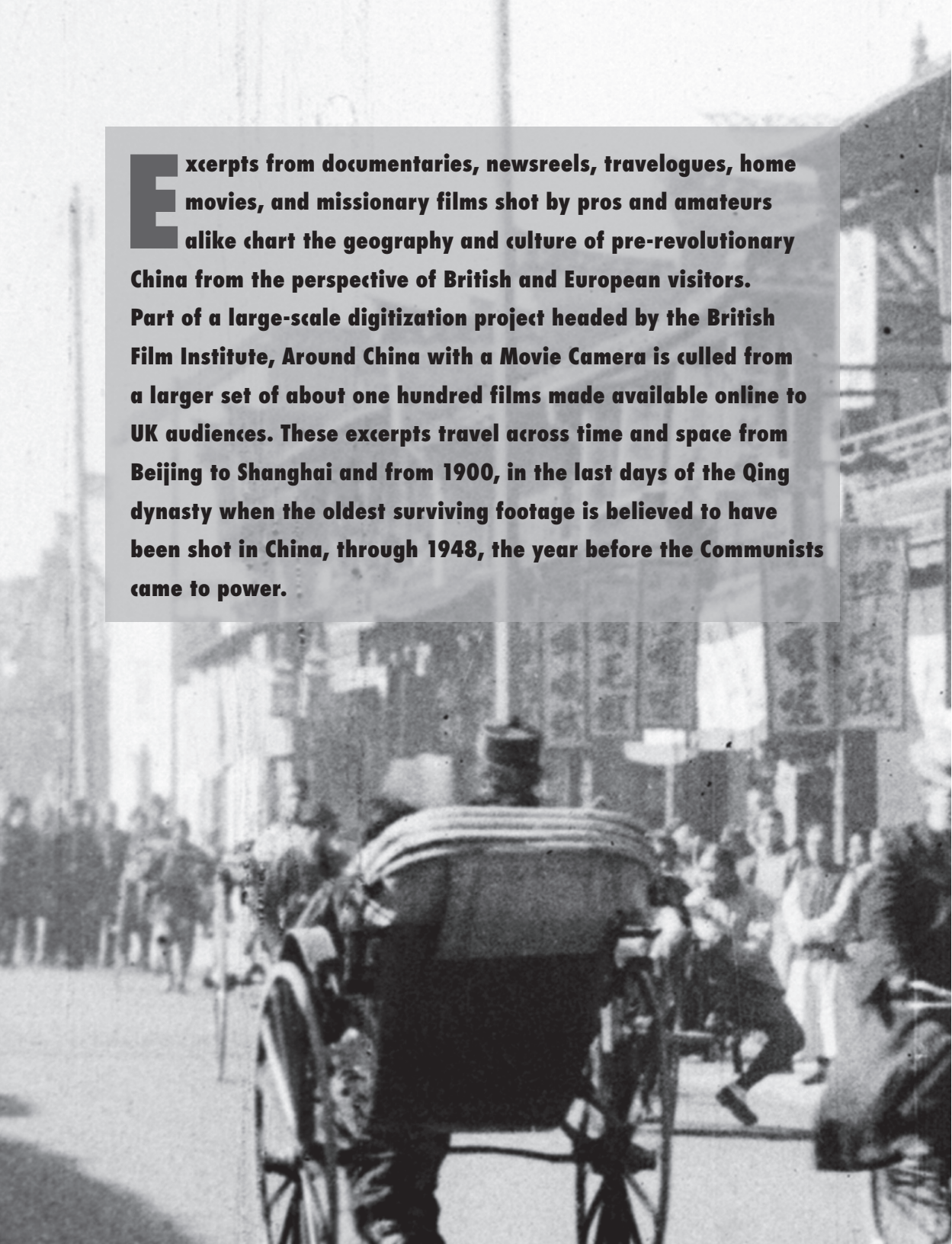
JOHN BARRYMORE V. GUSTAV VON SEYFFERTITZ

Gustav von Seyffertitz was an ominous fixture of silent features, menacing everyone from Mary Pickford to Lionel Barrymore to Pola Negri. His resemblance to another star, John Barrymore, resulted in one of silent-era cinema's iconic defeats.

He had already played Moriarty to John Barrymore's Sherlock Holmes in 1922, but the similarity of their sharp profiles had not been exploited. Barrymore and von Seyffertitz more than made up for that omission in *Don Juan* (1926). Von Seyffertitz has a small role as Neri, the Borgia's torturer. Neri has Mary Astor lashed to the wheel in the accepted villainous manner and Barrymore's Don Juan arrives to save the day. He hurls himself on Neri but the outcome of the fight is momentarily ambiguous. The audience sees a robed figure looking very von Seyffertitz-like. It is only when Barrymore relaxes his face that both the audience and Astor understand that the hero has triumphed. Their resemblance is cleverly played to the hilt for suspense and gives Barrymore a chance to show off his knack for rearranging his own face.



Illustration by Wayne Shellabarger



Excerpts from documentaries, newsreels, travelogues, home movies, and missionary films shot by pros and amateurs alike chart the geography and culture of pre-revolutionary China from the perspective of British and European visitors. Part of a large-scale digitization project headed by the British Film Institute, *Around China with a Movie Camera* is culled from a larger set of about one hundred films made available online to UK audiences. These excerpts travel across time and space from Beijing to Shanghai and from 1900, in the last days of the Qing dynasty when the oldest surviving footage is believed to have been shot in China, through 1948, the year before the Communists came to power.

AROUND CHINA WITH A MOVIE CAMERA

A Journey from Beijing to Shanghai (1900–1948)

LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY DONALD SOSIN

MODERN CHINA | 1910

The only surviving part of an epic—but unrealized—travelogue filmed for the Charles Urban Trading Company before the 1911 Xinhai Revolution overthrew imperial rule, this tinted and toned fragment captures the city's vibrant street culture.

STREET SCENES IN CHINA | c.1925

Chinese city life traditionally converged at the foot of city walls or wooden archways and these excerpts from a Methodist Missionary Society film show the bustling markets, street peddlers, and tradesmen of Dongsì (marked by its pair of wooden archways) and Chongwenmen (with its city gate).

FORBIDDEN CITY | c.1933

Amateur cameraman Reginald S. Clay ventures only fleetingly inside the Forbidden City, by 1933 empty of its emperor and turned into a museum for Chinese national treasures. The outer gateways are relaxed, social places, without the teeming tourists that throng there today.

WANDERINGS IN PEKING | 1939

Trams jostle with camels and motorcars, a herd of sheep gather by the Qianmen gate, lantern shops cater to tourists, vendors peddle hot snacks, and acrobats perform outside the Forbidden City in this amateur footage shot by young visiting scholar Sidney Howard Hansford.

ENG PERSONAL FILMS | c.1933

These excerpts of S.K. Eng's trip back to China show Beihai Park and the Temple of Heaven and are part of the only footage known to have been made by a Chinese-British family in the 1930s.

CHINA | c.1928

An unknown British couple filmed their honeymoon to Southeast Asia and China, what must have been an incredibly exciting (and expensive) trip. Among the views of the palaces and pagodas of the Forbidden City and the Great Wall at Badaling are striking images of local people and customs. The film wasn't edited, instead each shot is separated by a white flash marking when the photographer stopped and started the camera.

PEKING AND ITS SURROUNDINGS | 1910

Scenes of the cargo-laden beasts snorting plumes of hot breath into the mountain air evoke a centuries-old way of life on the Silk Road as this Pathé Frères newsreel traces a caravan traveling from the Great Wall to Beijing.

A TRIP ON THE IMPERIAL CANAL | 1908

A Pathé Frères newsreel captures sights along the world's longest man-made waterway, including a water-buffalo-powered system for irrigating the paddy fields and the arduous loading of a ship with salt, basket by basket.

CHINESE SCENE | c.1920

Often dubbed the "Venice of China," Suzhou (Su-chow in the film) is popular with tourists for its network of canals and gardens. Excerpts from Stockwell Cine Short and Williams and Ivey Films travelogues document a gentler pace of life: the elaborate irrigation systems used in surrounding rice and lily fields, the ancient practice of fishing with cormorants, and a glimpse of some of the city's famous bridges, temples, and pagodas.

AN ORIENTAL VENICE | c.1925

Some deftly applied stencil-coloring adds to the extraordinary beauty and naturalism of these scenes of a canal cruise beginning at the Gong Chen bridge in the eastern city of Hangzhou. Watch for curious onlookers along the way, including one man taking shade under an archway.

TRAVEL SCENES IN HUNAN | c.1935

One of six films shot by J. G. Pearson for the Methodist Missionary Society, it paints an unromantic picture of peasant hardships in Hunan Province, along with some delightfully unexpected moments, including a fleeting segment filmed aboard a moving litter.

CHINA II | 1930

Shot from a riverboat, probably on the Yangtze, during a Quaker mission, this amateur film makes for slightly haphazard viewing, but the reward is a wealth of fascinating imagery, such as the strenuous action of standing rowers urged on by a singing coxswain. It is believed to have been photographed by John Cuthbert Wigham, a retired businessman and active member of the Friends Service Council who accompanied missions to Syria, Palestine, India, and Madagascar.

CHONGQING (A STILTED CITY) | 1928

Stripped of its original intertitles, which spun a fictitious story about the taxi porters threatening to tip non-paying passengers down the steps, this British Screen Tatler footage shows an unrecognizable Chongqing (known as Chungking), then an ancient city with precarious dwellings jutting out of the mountainside.

AMONG THE TRIBES IN SOUTH-WEST CHINA | c.1948

R.E. Kendall shot this spectacular trek by a Western missionary and his armed guides through the remote mountains of Yunnan Province to the isolated villages of the Miao tribes, where the party bears witness to a vanishing rural culture.

SCENES IN CHINA | c.1902

Auguste François's position as French consul in south China between 1896 and 1904, which earned him the moniker "White Mandarin," allowed access to subjects that would have eluded other visiting cameramen. These fragments include a bustling market in Kunming, a gaggle of Miao soldiers practicing military drills, a wealthy couple dining, lounging opium smokers, and an opera performed at a private party.

A VISIT TO CANTON | 1936

Fishing boats, floating shop-fronts, and trading vessels glut the Pearl River on the way to Guangzhou, then known as Canton, which China was forced to open up to trade after its defeat in the Opium War of 1840. Amateur cameraman Edwin G. Phillips lived in Hong Kong in the 1930s.

RIVERSIDE SCENES CHINA | c.1920

Who shot this footage of the Guangzhou waterfront, when, and why remains a mystery. The film shares its long takes, wide-angle shots, fixed tripod, in-camera editing, and nautical theme with another title shot circa 1921, suggesting that the two films might be from the same unrealized project.

GUANGZHOU: WATER TRANSPORT | c.1933

Women work with babies strapped to their backs while boatmen row with bare feet on the Pearl River. The film was long misidentified as having been filmed in Shanghai.

A GATE OF CHINA | 1927

Excerpted from a nine-minute British Instructional Films documentary, this footage captures Hong Kong's surrounding verdant hills, English-style buildings and squares, the vertiginous drop down a teeming hillside street, a coal train puffing through a residential area, and typhoon damage along Causeway Bay.

HONG KONG EAST MEETS WEST | c.1940

A glorious jumble of street and river life, this amateur footage directed by S. Norman Trevan for the Meth-

odist Missionary Society captures the brisk pace of commerce along Hong Kong's thriving waterfront.

ENG PERSONAL FILMS | c.1933

Views of a changing city, from the roof of Shanghai's unfinished Broadway Mansion hotel.

NANKIN ROAD, SHANGHAI | 1901

A window onto the heart of cosmopolitan Shanghai more than a hundred years ago, it shows a Nanjing Road bustling with crowds of Chinese, Sikhs, and Europeans. It is the only known surviving example of the film reportage shot by British war correspondent Joseph Rosenthal for the Warwick Trading Company during the Boxer Rebellion in China.

MARINES ARRIVE IN SHANGHAI | 1927

Newly arrived British troops march through the rainy streets of Shanghai in this rare foray by Topical Budget (Topical Film Company's newsreel) into serious international news. Allied troops were brought in to protect European nationals and their assets from nationalist forces as China slid toward civil war.

A CITY OF CHAOS | 1927

Shot five days before the Shanghai Massacre, a brutal purge of Communists, this Topical Film Company newsreel focuses on the Chinese reaction to the threat of violence between Communist and Kuomintang forces as ordinary people flee the conflict. One man is seen carrying a traditional shoulder yoke, with one basket full of belongings and the other holding a small child.

HIGH JINKS | 1929

Topical Film Company made this lovely record of the newly opened Great World Amusement Park, often referred to as Shanghai's Coney Island (active until at least 1936). The camerawork is poetic by newsreel standards, capturing the rhythms of the Ferris wheel, waltzer, and swing carousel and lingering on a family riding the Caterpillar.

CHINA TODAY | 1936

Born to missionary parents in China and later married to a British consulate official, Lady Dorothea Hosie knew more about 1930s China than most other Britons. While researching her 1938 book *Brave New China*, she shot an hour-long film, a highly unusual length at the time for an amateur. These excerpts include Shanghai streets where shops cater to Western and Chinese tastes and cars and electric trams share the roads with rickshaws and pedestrians, as well as more intimate moments with her friends.

THE FACE OF SHANGHAI | 1937

Although largely filmed in 1937, this Cadman-Ormand production was reworked in 1940 into a two-reel sound documentary, of which only one reel survives. These excerpts, taken from the 1944 re-release, capture the Shanghai Racecourse, founded by Western expats in the nineteenth century. The land now hosts People's Park but the shape of the old track is still visible in maps. The men with captured birds are taking their pets for a walk, an old Shanghai pastime.

CHINESE MEN | c.1900

Two rolls of negative 35mm nitrate with Lumière-style perforations were found among the Mitchell and Kenyon reels discovered in milk churns in a Blackburn basement in 1995, quite possibly the oldest surviving footage shot in China. The subjects seem genuinely Chinese, but who filmed them, when, and where? Perhaps the cameraman's flying hat is a clue.

**ADAPTED FROM NOTES BY
BFI CURATOR EDWARD ANDERSON.**

HANDHELD HISTORY

AN INTERVIEW WITH BFI CURATOR EDWARD ANDERSON BY SHARI KIZIRIAN

AROUND CHINA WITH A MOVIE CAMERA CONTAINS SUCH A WIDE VARIETY OF FOOTAGE. HOW UNLIKELY IS IT THAT THESE KINDS OF FILMS SURVIVED? We are lucky that anything from this period has survived, especially pre-WWI. Be it inflammable cellulose nitrate base or more modern “safety” acetate stock—film is exceptionally fragile. What’s more, these films have spent a lifetime in circulation. They are worn through use and warped by time; they may have been buckled, bent, twisted, or torn; their splices broken, perforations ripped, images scratched. There is an enormous range of factors threatening a film’s physical survival. There’s also a cultural aspect. Film certainly had not been treasured in the same way as museum artifacts or literary works and, with new sound technologies, silent era films were rendered not only old-fashioned, but obsolete. For films never part of the commercial distribution cycle—home movies or missionary films—there’s an extra risk, as they are so often considered by their makers as mere holiday snaps or somehow too personal or private for anyone to think they could be valued by an archive.

SOME OF THE TITLE NAMES ARE SO BANAL THEY BELIE THE FASCINATING CONTENTS. WERE THE TITLES GIVEN AT THE TIME OR ASSIGNED LATER BY THE CURATORS? Newsreels, actuality films, travelogues, home movies, missionary films, and documentaries, all have their own quirks in naming conventions. Actuality films—think of *Nankin Road, Shanghai* (1901) or *Modern China* (1910)—are usually known to archivists by the titles they were advertised as in contemporary film catalogs. Only, of course, these titles weren’t fixed, they were liable

to change whenever enterprising film distributors shuffled their libraries and refreshed the titles! *Modern China* (1910) crops up in catalogs as late as 1919 under the title, *In Quaint Peking*. Same film, two names. Newsreel programs don’t strictly have titles at all, so archivists use the first intertitle introducing a story as the film’s name. Some home movies may have been lavished with intertitles by enthusiastic hobbyist amateur filmmakers but, more often than not, home movie footage comes into BFI having been kept for years in a little box with a handwritten note on it. So this note, transcribed, becomes the film’s title.

WHERE WOULD THESE KINDS OF FILMS HAVE BEEN EXHIBITED IN THEIR DAY?

The newsreels, certainly, had sizable cinema audiences. A number of the Pathé travelogues would have been seen in the UK, France, and Germany, if not wider still. The BFI National Archive’s preservation master copy of the Pathé travelogue *Pékin et ses environs* has German intertitles (about seventeen minutes in). Although they didn’t concern themselves particularly with the political upheavals happening in China during the late teens and twenties, the newsreels got stuck in whenever there was a British angle. It is possible that some of the missionary films were intended for wider viewing, but my hunch is that these works are more akin to letters home than promotional or propagandist films.

ARE THERE STILL STASHES OF THESE KINDS OF FILMS AROUND BFI WAITING TO BE CATALOGUED? There’s a bit more stashed around the Archive. Sadly, the major limitation on exploring this kind of material isn’t our ambition or audiences’ appetites, but budgets. Film digitization is



a pretty expensive business. If I ever get the chance, I’d like to explore some of our holdings documenting the extreme west of China, in Xinjiang province, around Kashgar. And, the BFI only holds a fragment of the Auguste François footage. I know there is more out there somewhere.

WAS COLOR IN BIG DEMAND BY EXHIBITORS FOR THESE TYPES OF FILMS OR, BECAUSE OF THE COST, MORE OF A RARITY?

In the early days, colored films were the rule not the exception. Mostly you see these gorgeous, rich colors being applied to films to accentuate the dramatic or emotional qualities of the images. But it’s also not unusual for tints and tones to be applied to simulate naturalistic color—greens for landscapes, blues for nighttime or watery scenes, etc. With the Pathécolor process, a method of mechanically stenciling dyes onto film prints, you reach the apogee of this kind of work. *An Oriental Venice* was made right at the end of the stencil-coloring system’s life—just before photochemical color film was invented—and you can see how successfully the colors have been applied, how realistic some of the features appear. Yet there’s also a preternatural quality to the colors: extraordinarily rich greens for the plants and a shimmering purple on some of the buildings. The colors bring a sort of paradox to the film: it’s real life, but somehow otherworldly. The difference in the image quality after restoration was just astounding. Before, the whole film was a generic brown mush.

After, new details came to light—like the chap in the boat under one of the bridges. We had no idea there was anything in the dark shadow of the archway.

HOW UNUSUAL WAS IT FOR AMATEURS TO HAVE ACCESS TO HOME MOVIE CAMERAS?

During the 1920s, small-gauge film cameras—9.5mm (after 1922) and 16mm (after 1923)—started to become affordable to Britain’s middle classes. Across the decade, people gradually began to use film to document special occasions: holidays, weddings, their children, and so on. Into the 1930s, when 8mm cameras made the hobby cheaper, suddenly all sorts of folks began picking up film cameras to document their daily lives. There’s a real connection here with the way we continue to use cameras and smartphones today. Home-movie making back then was pretty exclusive to the middle and upper ends of society but it wasn’t rare. It is rare for audiences today to be able to see these films in a cinematic context. Think of *China* (1928), here are folks on their honeymoon in the Far East—the trip of a lifetime!—and the camera lingers on the details and events that fascinated these ordinary people. In *Travel Scenes in Hunan* (c.1935), the filmmaker shoots his view out of the front of a litter chair bobbing and bouncing along narrow paths. Shaky shots and whip-pans, it doesn’t make for great cinema, but I can’t think of another moment in any of these films that manages to convey the filmmaker’s own exhilaration so beautifully.



THE GRIM GAME

LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY DONALD SOSIN

Directed by Irvin Willat, USA, 1919

Cast Harry Houdini, Thomas Jefferson, Ann Forrest, Jane Wolf, Augustus Phillips, Arthur Hoyt, and Tully Marshall

Production Famous Players-Lasky Print Source Park Circus

An inspired, indefatigable, and shameless self-promoter and, not coincidentally, one of the most famous people in the world in the early decades of the twentieth century, Harry Houdini was a natural for the movies. Both he and the new medium trafficked in illusions. Sometimes that worked in Houdini's favor while on other occasions cinema's sleight of hand undermined the verisimilitude and power of his feats. In either case, Houdini's movies reached crowds of people who had read of his tricks and death-defying exploits but would never see the flamboyant entertainer in person.

Houdini originally embraced the silver screen with "actualities," or nonfiction shorts, that documented his derring-do. He pioneered (along with George Méliès) the use of film in his stage performances with the twin goals of enhancing the audience's appreciation for his endeavors and luring their eyes away from him when it served his purposes.

The erstwhile magician found his niche as an escape artist then cannily extended his successful vaudeville act into sensational public performances "on location," for which he escaped from handcuffs and other constraints while suspended upside down above city streets or tossed into rivers. *The Grim Game* (1919), a carefully constructed story of a clever reporter named Harvey Hanford who arranges to frame himself for murder only to get double-crossed in the bargain, cheerfully exploited Houdini's reputation and flair for fearless high-altitude getaways. The public didn't need to know that the filmmakers employed

a stunt double now and again, and Houdini even went so far as to brazenly fuel the perception that he was onboard for the airplane crash that provides the film's climax. (The More Things Change Dept.: A hundred years on, with CGI the norm, Tom Cruise and other action stars go to great lengths—and heights—to convince audiences they don't simply exert and emote in front of a green screen and an industrial fan.)

Both Houdini and the new medium trafficked in illusions.

Houdini was always on the lookout to expand his fame and fortune, and Hollywood was equally eager to find vehicles for a charismatic celebrity. Producers working for Universal came calling in 1915 with an adapta-

tion of Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, but the forty-one-year-old Houdini made outlandish salary demands to play Captain Nemo, compelling them to cast another actor.

However, the various parties were able to agree on a submarine picture to be shot in the Bahamas. Alas, the project, entitled *Houdini and the Miracle* or *The Marvelous Adventures of Houdini* per different film historians, ran aground after the United States entered World War I. The star arranged to film the attention-grabbing opening sequence, in which he leapt off the Atlantic City pier in chains and freed himself underwater, but that was the lone adventure enacted before a camera. (Decades later, of course, the Bond pictures made the dangerous, adrenalized first reel de rigueur. And, as long as we're acknowledging Houdini's advances, his gift for high-risk pub-

lic spectacles was inherited by the Flying Wallendas and Evel Knievel.)

The illusionist's film career finally broke its bonds in 1918 with *The Master Mystery*, a fifteen-episode serial starring Houdini as a Justice Department flatfoot on the trail of a nefarious cartel guarded by the first robot in movie history. Each segment ends with our hero tied up or shackled in mortal danger, and each succeeding episode depicts his escape in real time without cuts. It was shot while Houdini was enjoying a long run at the mammoth Hippodrome Theatre in New York and the star supported its release with countless in-theater appearances.

The writers of the popular serial *Perils of Pauline*, Arthur Reeve and Charles Logue, were hired to pen *The Master Mystery*.

As was his way, Houdini was a keen collaborator. "Houdini has an inborn gift," Reeve said at the time, "and, with it all, is one of the deepest students I have met. Everything he does is figured out from a logical beginning [and] is the result of years of work and study."

To be sure, the allure of *The Master Mystery* as well as the first film he made after moving to Hollywood, *The Grim Game*, was watching Houdini's skillful disposal of handcuffs, chains, et al. His ability to escape any form of imprisonment (and to break in, on occasion) was the equivalent of a contemporary superhero's unique power and reassured viewers that good triumphs over evil, at least for the picture's running time.

But Houdini was an impressive screen presence even when he wasn't engaged in his specialty. A barrel-chested bantamweight, he exudes strength (even in a three-piece suit and boater) and strides with confidence and purpose. He gives off an attractive aura of pent-up energy yet is utterly patient

and comfortable in his scenes with love interest Ann Forrest. The man was not remotely intimidated by the camera, professional actors, or the looming audience; indeed, he seemed to revel in the whole enterprise of being watched.

The reviewer for the *New York Herald* declared, "Houdini has stepped to the front as a film star." That was the consensus of the Big Apple papers, with the *New York Mail* critic effusing, "There is more excitement in one reel of *The Grim Game* than in any five reels of celluloid I have ever watched."

Dapper, dexterous, and agile, Harry Houdini wasn't just an escape artist onscreen: He was, self-evidently, an action hero. All he needed to do was cut back on the eye makeup a bit.

His ability to escape any form of imprisonment was the equivalent of a contemporary superhero's unique power.

This revelation is only the result of another revelation. Long presumed lost, along with eighty percent of silent features, *The Grim Game* survives courtesy of Brooklyn juggler Larry Weeks, who acquired the sole extant print from Houdini's heirs in 1947. Weeks screened the film a mere

handful of times to friends and fellow performers over the years and had consistently declined any and all offers to sell it. Until the spring of 2014, that is, when film scholar and preservationist Rick Schmidlin paid the ninety-five-year-old Weeks a visit with a persuasive offer from Turner Classic Movies (TCM).

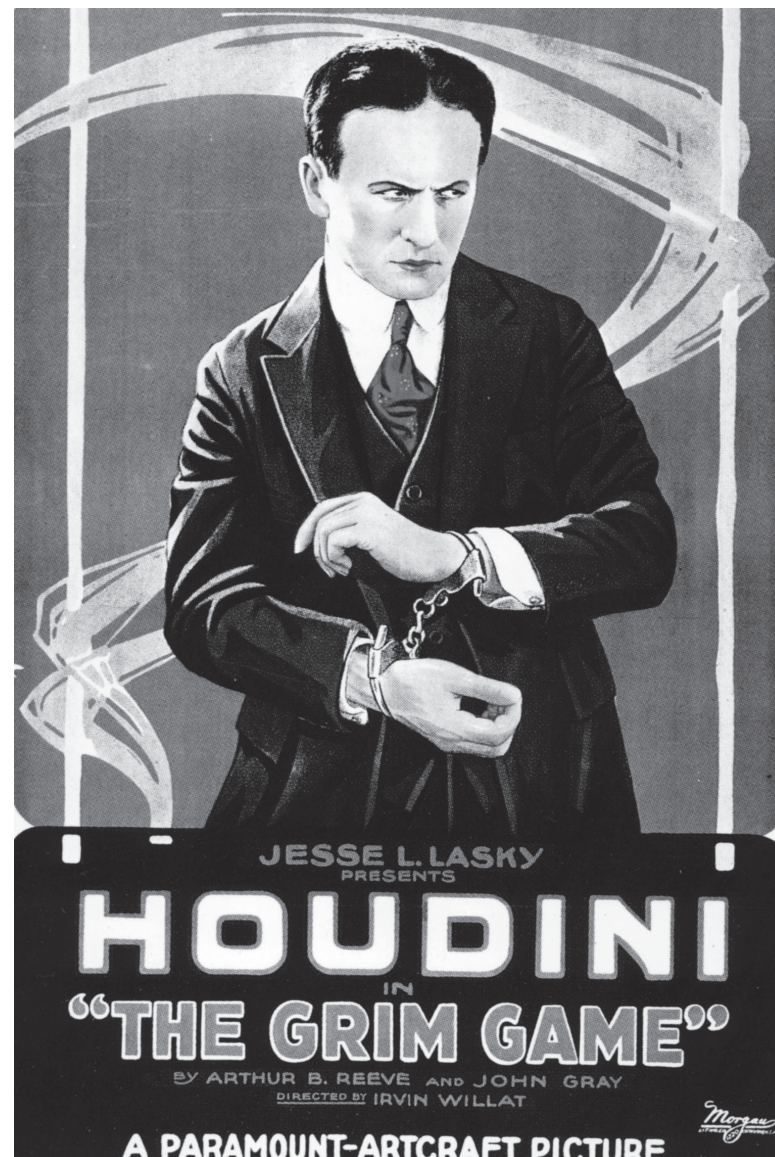
After Schmidlin received the print and other materials from Weeks, he was elated to discover that he was in possession of all five-and-a-half reels of *The Grim Game*. He and his team wasted no time restoring the film, and the first public screening took place at the TCM Classic Film Festival this past March.

With his enthusiasm for live performance fading and his fervor for moviemaking never higher, Houdini

made three more features playing characters with the initials H.H. After the critics tossed brickbats at *Terror Island* (1920) for its implausible script, the star assumed complete creative control on *The Man from Beyond* (1922) and *Haldane of the Secret Service* (1923). "Serial melodrama and screen uplift won't mix," sniffed *Variety* about the former, while *Haldane* suffered from a paucity of escapes (only one).

On the eve of his fiftieth birthday and in financial straits, with audiences gripped by epic spectacles from Cecil B. DeMille and in love with new stars like Ramon Navarro, Harry Houdini accepted the end of his film career. He died less than three years later of peritonitis from a ruptured appendix on Halloween, 1926.

—MICHAEL FOX



Poster courtesy of Rick Schmidlin

Half-an-hour with Houdini

THE EXPERT OF EXTRICATION

"Danger does not mean anything to me; I was just born without the ingredient of fear. Apart from the many risks I have taken in the course of my professional career, I have saved lives any number of times, and I have simply taken it all as a matter of course. People talk of being afraid to die; on the contrary, I am so well prepared for such an emergency that not only is my will drawn up, but I have a bronze memorial bust all ready, because, I thought it better to have one that was really like me!"

THE HANDCUFF KING

Thus spoke Houdini, the "handcuff king," the great magician and genius of escape on a certain sunny morning a few weeks ago. He sat with his back to the light, but though his face was in shadow the compelling blue grey eyes and strong, bronzed features glowed with an intensity and vitality such as one rarely meets.

"Tell me," I begged, "are the feats you do on the screen different to those you do enact before the foot-lights?"

"Entirely different," was the reply.

"In fact, some of the biggest critics have said that I am more wonderful on the screen than on the stage. That, I consider is one of the greatest compliments ever paid me. But it has taken years of training to produce the tricks, or problems, I do in my films."

Houdini has made to date, three pictures. The first of these, "The Master Mystery," a serial, is now enjoying enormous popularity all over the country. The remaining two, "The Grim Game" and "Terror Island," are feature pictures and are still unreleased by Paramount Artcraft though this year will see the first-named on our screens. In the making of "The Master Mystery," Houdini sustained seven black eyes and a broken wrist. He also broke his wrist whilst making "The Grim Game."

A TENSE MOMENT

"During the screening of this picture I thought at one time in the course of the action, that my end had

come," he told me. "I was 3,000 feet up in an aeroplane, circling over another machine. The plan was for me to drop from my 'plane into the cockpit of the other by means of a rope. I was dangling from the rope-end ready for the leap. Suddenly a strong wind turned the lower plane upwards, the two machines crashed together—nearly amputating my limbs—the propellers locked in a deadly embrace, and we were spun round and round and round." Houdini pronounced the latter words with a peculiarly apt "whirring" intonation, graphically illustrating them by the circular action of the arms. "But," he continued, "by a miracle, the planes were righted into a half-glide, and though they were smashed into splinters by their terrific impact, I managed to escape unhurt. As usual, Houdini became undone!" concluded the narrator with a laugh.

HIS GREATEST STUNT

"What do you consider the greatest stunt you have done for the screen?" I asked, when I had recovered my breath.

"Another incident in the same picture," answered Houdini. "I stood in the archway of a prison, thus." Here he took up a crouching position in the corner of the room, and enacted the whole thing for my benefit. "A heavily loaded lorry, going at twenty-two or -four miles an hour rolled by me. I threw myself on the ground, completely rolling over between the fast revolving fore and hind wheels, over and over, till I caught the transmission bar, and hung there for very dear life! Thus was I carried to the aid of the heroine. Though my words may not convey very much, this was my greatest stunt. It allowed for no rehearsals—I said to the camera-man, 'Get this now or never!' And had I made the slightest false move, I should have been crippled for life, if not killed."

In spite of the risks he has taken before the camera, Houdini has a profound love and admiration for the "movies."

"I think the film profession is the greatest," he told

me, "and that the moving picture is the most wonderful thing in the world. One reason why I love the screen is because it has use for the derelicts of life, and gives employment to the old as well as the young. I entered the profession myself because I knew I should eventually be losing my strength, and before that happened I wanted to perpetuate my feats, and by so doing everyone, in all parts of the world, can see them. Pictures have increased my drawing power two-hundred fold."

Houdini, as related at the commencement of this chat, had one of his greatest compliments paid him by critics of his film work, but before I left him he confessed that what he considers the very greatest tribute ever made to his unique achievements is recorded in a dictionary! Turn to Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary, and there you will find it:

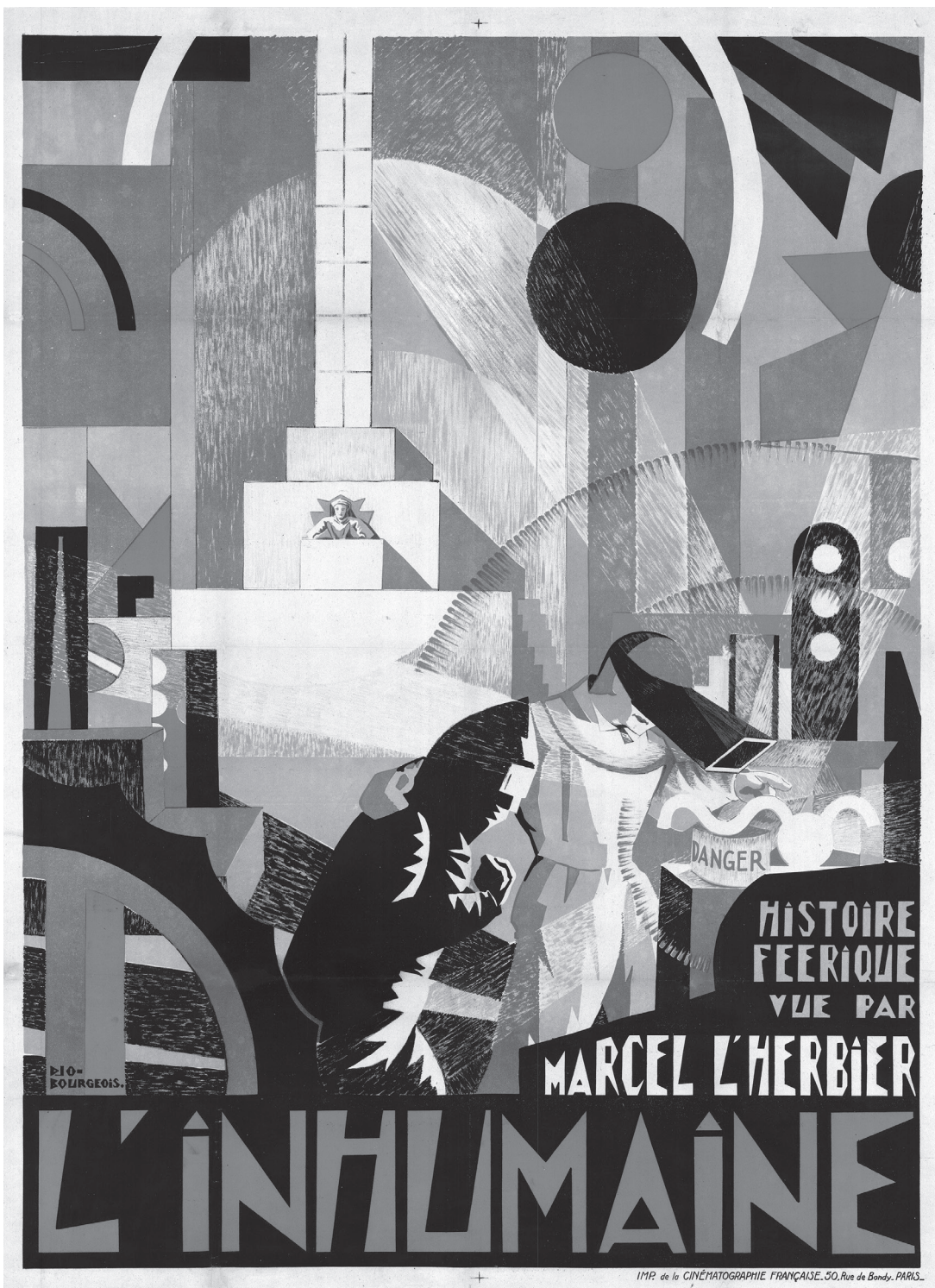
"HOU'DI-NI. I, hn'di-ni;
2, hn'di-ni, HARRY (4-6, 1874).
American mystericist, wizard, and
expert in extrication and self-re-
lease HOU'DI-NIZE vt. To re-
lease or extricate oneself from
(confinement, bonds, or the like),
as by wriggling out."

So, taking Houdini all in all, I may consider the fact that this wonder-man, this "expert in extrication" made no effort to escape from at least one thing, this interview!

by May Herschel Clarke

Reprinted from the March 20, 1920, edition of
The Picture Show, which began publication
in May 1919.





THE INHUMAN WOMAN

LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY ALLOY ORCHESTRA

Directed by Marcel L'Herbier, France, 1924

Cast Georgette Leblanc, Jaque Catelain, Léonid Walter de Malte, Fred Kellerman, Philippe Hériat, and Marcelle Pradot

Production Cinégraphic Print Source Lobster Films

When film historians sketch the genesis of Marcel L'Herbier's *L'Inhumaine* (*The Inhuman Woman*), readers are typically treated to a familiar show biz story: brilliant young director attempts ambitious, boundary-pushing film, which is botched by the egotistic star (Georgette Leblanc) who controls the purse strings. The film bombs at the box office and is thenceforward dismissed as an interesting failure. Jean Mitry called the film "nothing short of ridiculous," in his *Histoire du Cinema*. Richard Abel, in *French Cinema: The First Wave*, chimed in, "as outdated as it is avant-garde."

So the standard-issue summary; the full story, of course, is more complex.

In 1922 Marcel L'Herbier, one of avant-garde cinema's most energetic promoters, left Gaumont to found his own studio, Cinégraphic. There he nurtured the budding talents of future directors Claude Autant-Lara and Alberto Cavalcanti and produced Louis Delluc's last film, *Inondation* (1924), all the while working to get an ambitious slate of projects off the ground—everything from adaptations of Racine's *Phèdre* to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. L'Herbier, who blended artistic idealism with a businesslike pragmatism during the course of his long career, had set his sights on breaking into the American market. He thought he'd done the trick when Paramount agreed to distribute his partially shot adaptation of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. Then Universal announced its own version of the Tolstoy novel and Paramount reneged on the deal.

Out of the ashes of *Resurrection* rose *La Femme de glace* (*The Ice Woman*), as *The Inhuman Woman* was originally called. L'Herbier's new ticket to America was Georgette Leblanc, internationally famous as a singer and equally notorious as the companion of playwright Maurice Maeterlinck. Under the terms of their deal Leblanc provided half the financing, took charge of the film's American distribution, and also played the lead role. L'Herbier and coscenarist Pierre Mac Orlan adjusted the script to fit their star, creating a character who in many respects mirrors Leblanc. In this futurist fantasy Claire Lescot is a famous singer pursued by a host of suitors whom she treats with imperious disdain. The utter opposite of

the virginal innocents who usually occupied the screen, Claire revels in her power, defies public opinion, and is more intrigued by her inventor-suitor's sci-fi "television" invention than by his masculine charm.

...THE FULL STORY,
OF COURSE, IS
MORE COMPLEX

Autant-Lara, who worked as a set decorator on the film, sneered at Leblanc as "la dame aux dollars," but she was much more than that. Leblanc and L'Herbier were old friends whose ideas about art, music, and cinema coincided in many respects. The pair had first met in 1912 when L'Herbier was eighteen and Leblanc almost forty. L'Herbier was then a young aesthete and self-described "Willean," an aspiring poet who was dazzled by the sophisticated singer. Leblanc was a veteran of the opera and theater, a friend to Oscar Wilde in his exile and, as Maeterlinck's companion, a frequent hostess to the artistic and literary names of her day. Both

were fascinated by the new medium of film, particularly its ability to capture "life." One of Cinégraphic's first proposed projects was *Un Garden-party chez Maeterlinck* (never produced).

When the director and singer joined forces for *The Inhuman Woman* in 1923 circumstances had changed. L'Herbier's star was rising while Leblanc's career was in flux. Now fifty-one, the singer's diva days were dwindling to a close. She had recently broken with Maeterlinck, her creative partner as well as lover, and embarked on an even more scandalous relationship with Margaret Anderson, cofounder of *The Little Review*. According to film historian Maureen Shanahan, Leblanc looked to filmmaking as a possible second act and had already explored projects with Abel Gance when she approached L'Herbier about working together.

Why then, given this mutually beneficial partnership, did Leblanc end up bearing much of the blame for the film's problems? Shanahan writes that L'Herbier's other collaborators resented Leblanc's influence. Costar Jaque Catelain called her "a superwoman" whose power over L'Herbier led to "a disaster." Autant-Lara also considered the director a victim of "the woman who pays" and ridiculed Leblanc as "an old doll playing a femme fatale." One contemporary critic wrote of her performance that Leblanc "has authority—too much. Authority should not be so evident." Certainly the unabashed misogyny of the time fueled much of the discomfort with Leblanc and Claire. Both were too powerful and too old for the era's ideas of how an actress and her character should look and behave. When coscenarist Pierre Mac Orlan rewrote the story as a novel the following year he turned Claire into a flirtatious ingénue. Gone is the woman who declares, "I am only interested in what I can conquer!"

Interviewed in 1968, L'Herbier had a more nuanced take on the film's production. On the question of

story development he says, "I wasn't totally free to the extent that Georgette Leblanc was a big international star who was opening doors for us in America," then adds that the story was "pure pretext" for what really interested him: playing with the film medium. "I used [the scenario] as composers use the bass clef. On this bass clef I constructed chords ... what was important to me was not the horizontal parade of events but the vertical plastic harmonies." When the interviewer cites the oft-repeated complaint that Leblanc was too old for her role, L'Herbier defends his choice: "She was a remarkable woman, quite intelligent. And it is not outside the realm of possibility that a woman like her, even having passed the age of fifty, could play the role of a femme fatale." In the end *The Inhuman Woman* was Leblanc's only role. After the film's poor reception Leblanc seems

to have cut her losses and turned to other occupations—immersing herself in the teachings of Gurdjieff and writing several volumes of memoirs.

Much of the negative reaction to *The Inhuman Woman* seems to stem from disappointed expectations. A ball-busting heroine and a plot that mixes old-fashioned melodrama with science-fiction settings were not blockbuster material, even in 1924. Yet it is this wacky combi-

nation, especially when decked out with L'Herbier's avant-garde pyrotechnics, that makes the film such a pleasure, once we brush away the cobwebs of past biases that cling to it. It has everything—spurned lovers, suicide, and poisonous snakes; speeding cars and a fantastical lab (designed by painter Fernand Léger) with incomprehensible equipment labeled "Danger of Death!"

L'Herbier strikes his "chords" with frenetic cutting, inventive framing, and a series of spectacular modern decors by not only Léger and Autant-Lara but also architects Robert Mallet-Stevens and Alberto Cavalcanti. Claire's living room is worthy of a James Bond villain and her guests are served by

footmen wearing pumpkin-sized fake heads with painted smiles. Leblanc makes her entrance in a Poiret gown, bristling with black ostrich feathers as if warning her suitors, "stand back!" David Cairns provided a nice corrective to earlier critical dismissals when he wrote in *Sight and Sound* in 2013, "L'Herbier created unmatched worlds of elegance and passion, co-mingling High Seriousness and High Camp in an ecstatic personal vision."

At its Paris premiere the audience greeted the film with a near riot, destroying theater seats to express their displeasure. It fared somewhat better in its American release (as *The New Enchantment*) in 1926. Leblanc organized a gala screening at New York's Klaw Theatre, attended by, wrote L'Herbier, the crème de la crème, with seats going for \$2.

Margaret Anderson, not surprisingly, gave it a plug in *The Little Review*, calling it "the most important contribution France has made to the seventh art." In *Motion Picture*, Matthew Johnson, a presumably less biased reviewer, described it as "a fake on a detective thriller and built along the crazy lines of *Dr. Caligari*." He found it inferior to German films but concluded, "American directors ... can derive some new ideas for their own work."

—MONICA NOLAN



THE COLOR OF SILENTS

BY SHARI KIZIRIAN

The moment in 1939 when Dorothy Gale steps out of her monochromatic, tornado-tossed house into Oz's richly saturated Technicolor world, her jumper transformed from checkered drab to blue gingham, her pigtails, cheeks, and lips taking on shades of red, is the moment most moviegoers associate with the beginning of color in the movies. But they are off—by four decades.

For the first color in a film you have to travel back into the silent era, pass by 1922's *The Toll of the Sea* (starring Anna May Wong), for which the six-year-old Technicolor Corporation had licked a projection problem, but not the "blue" problem. Then further still, past 1919's gel-lighting projection system patented by D.W. Griffith for *Broken Blossoms* and the Handschiegl coloring process, which debuted in 1917 with the burning-at-the stake scene in Cecil B. DeMille's *Joan the Woman*.

For color's cinematic debut, you have to go all the way back to that famous night when the Lumière brothers demonstrated their Cinématographe at the Grand Café in December 1895. Among the actualities on the program, at least one, *The Blacksmiths*, is known to have been hand-colored, frame by frame, for its brief but entire duration. Whether or not it was in color that night is unknown, but some films surely were, as according to one account: "[Y]ou see them again natural size,

in color, with perspective, distance, skies, houses, with a perfect illusion of real life."

Less than a year later, in May 1896, actors May Irwin and John Rice appeared on a New York screen courtesy of Thomas Edison's competing invention, to re-create the intimate kiss from their current stage play *The Widow Jones*, she wearing pink, he sporting a deep-blue suit jacket. The *New York Times* reported in its next edition: "Edison's Vitascope has made a sensation at Koster and Bial's, and promises to remain for a long time on the bill. It showed its pictures in colors last night, and was applauded vigorously...."

That more of us aren't aware of cinema's colorful origins is the result of a pragmatic approach to film preservation. In the introduction to Joshua Yumibe's *Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism*, Paolo Cherchi Usai explains: "The cost of color film stock was prohibitive, and there was not enough money to deal with the staggering amount of nitrate prints to be saved. Moreover, there was an acute awareness that modern color negatives and prints were subject to irreversible fading, while black and white preservation material had a better chance to remain relatively intact ... Make no mistake: if early films hadn't been saved without color, there wouldn't be so many of them available."

It's hard to find a better example of what we've been missing than Georges Méliès's iconic *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), restored to glorious color in 2010 thanks to digital technologies. The columns in the grand hall of the debating scientists are gilt in gold and each man wears a suit of a different color, making differences in fabric visible, helping to transform the mass of old men into distinctive characters. The mushrooms are more alluring, the lunar demons more menacing in red, and the celebration at the end is much more celebratory with multicolored banners. Consider also what happens to the poor Moon when the spaceship makes its squishy landing. In black and white, that ooze was always a kind of soft-cheese joke to me. But in color, these men have hurt the Moon; they've drawn blood.

During production Méliès found that he could only shoot on sets in shades of gray, which paints a drab picture of life inside his glass studio. "Colored sets come out very badly. Blue becomes white, reds, greens and yellows become black; a complete destruction of the effect ensues," the pioneer explained in a 1907 article. He outsourced the tedious work of adding color to his films, in part, to Elisabeth Thuillier whose thriving Paris business employed two hundred workers and, when the area was small enough, used paintbrushes of a single horse hair.

French studio Pathé, through technical wizard Segundo de Chomón, had refined a more industrial but no less painstaking method by cutting stencils for each color to be applied. But, by 1912, films were getting longer, rendering hand- and stencil-coloring unfeasible. Tinting and toning prints became the norm, like the sepia-saturated parts of *Wizard of Oz*—the early scenes on the farm,

the singing of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," and the tornado sequence. Toning is color added to the darker parts of a print's emulsion and was often done in combination with tinting, dousing sections of a print in a bath of browns, reds, blues, greens, or yellows. While a film like *Sir Arne's Treasure* (1919) would certainly still be effective in black and white, Mauritz Stiller's ice-entombed world seems somehow colder and more forbidding in blue. From the short puppet film *The Cameraman's Revenge* (1912) to the feature-length narrative *The Birth of a Nation* and from Louis Feuillade's spooky serial *Fantômas* to the 1927 mystery thriller *The Cat and the Canary*, color had become so standard that manufacturers marketed pre-tinted film stocks. Yet the holy grail for color was always what is called "natural" photography—capturing a full palette of color in-camera like Technicolor first used in 1932's *Flowers and Trees* and made indelible in *The Wizard of Oz*.

The American company was not the only one experimenting and a recent discovery reveals how close movies came to having color cinematography all along. Surviving footage from a set of 1902 films by London photographer Edward Raymond Turner shows Turner's three children in the garden of their home in Hounslow, jousting with sunflowers, goldfish swimming in a fishbowl, in all their four-color glory. In 2013, archivists uncovered the footage (and notes for the process) and proved Turner's system, patented in 1899, would have worked at the time had he lived long enough to see it through.

This article is condensed from the original published in 2013 by Keyframe, Fandor's online movie magazine.



PICCADILLY

LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY DONALD SOSIN

Directed by E.A. Dupont, UK/Germany, 1929

Cast Gilda Gray, Jameson Thomas, Anna May Wong, Cyril Ritchard, King Ho Chang, Hannah Jones, and Charles Laughton

Production British International Pictures Print Source Milestone Films

Like Josephine Baker and Louise Brooks, Anna May Wong was an American woman who had to cross the Atlantic to find her greatest roles. In *Piccadilly*, Wong seems to be sporting Brooks's bangs and Baker's sinuous hips, but her knowing look—wary, sultry, and intense—is all her own. Her entrance is a knockout: in the bowels of a London nightclub, amid the steamy chaos of the scullery, she is dancing on top of a table for the amusement of her fellow dishwashers. Peering up at her, the camera lingers on her stunningly long and shapely legs, clad in stockings "laddered," as the British say, almost to shreds. Her swaying hips are all the more mischievous and provocative because it is obvious that this Chinese scullery girl is mimicking and mocking the nightclub's blonde star dancer.

Still in her early twenties but already a veteran of more than thirty films, Los Angeles-born Anna May Wong left America in 1928, fed up with typecasting as a dragon lady and with the ingrained racism that made it impossible for her to share a love scene with a white actor. In Germany and Britain she got starring roles that made her into the kind of icon Louise Brooks became in G.W. Pabst's films—sexy, complex, modern, tragic—but her ethnicity still formed a barrier to romantic happy endings. *Piccadilly*, her first British film, is surprisingly forthright, if somewhat ambivalent, in its treatment of interracial relationships. Midway through, the protagonists go slumming in a seedy, smoky dive. Amid the tough-looking couples

jostling on the dance floor, a black man in a battered top hat starts dancing with a white woman, and for a few moments they look perfectly happy, kicking up their heels together. Then the bar's owner throws them both out, and the crowd spews contempt on them as they go. Wong's character, Shosho, watches silently. By now she has risen from dishwashing to become a popular sensation for her nightclub perfor-

mances, but her hard, hurt expression shows that she understands exactly what this humiliating scene means for her romantic pursuit of her English boss, Valentine Wilmot (Jameson Thomas).

Dance is not harmless entertainment: it is dangerous, seductive, rule-breaking. Mabel, Shosho's rival

both professionally and personally, is played by Gilda Gray. Born Marianna Michalska in Poland, Gray was raised in the United States and earned a place in history as the popularizer of the scandalous shimmy, so-called because the dancer "shakes her chemise." A plump, fluffy blonde decked in spangles and ostrich feathers, Mabel is a perfect foil for Shosho, and Gray's mannered, emotional performance sets off Wong's subtle expressiveness and dignified naturalism. Tall and slim, in a black beret and striped polo shirt, Shosho is neat and dark and shiny as a loaded revolver.

Piccadilly is a prime example of the internationalism that flourished during the silent era, when accents and languages were irrelevant. The Chinese-American Wong and Polish-American Gray are integrated

...but her knowing look—wary, sultry, and intense—is all her own.

into a British cast that includes Cyril Ritchard, best known for playing Captain Hook to Mary Martin's Peter Pan, and Charles Laughton in one of his earliest appearances, stealing his one scene as a nightclub patron far more interested in his dinner than in Mabel's shimmy. The screenplay was written by Arnold Bennett, the best-selling Edwardian novelist whom Virginia Woolf, in her 1924 essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," turned into a derided symbol of pre-modernist conventionality. Bennett was unabashedly commercial, but his best work, like his novel *The Old Wives' Tale*, was acutely sensitive to the way historical and social developments—class and money, fashions and material culture—imprint themselves on the lives of ordinary men and women. Visually, *Piccadilly* is accented by a largely German creative team. Director Ewald André Dupont was an émigré from the influential Berlin studio Ufa, where he was admired for innovative expressionist camera-work and stories (he was also a screenwriter) about crime and the sordid side of show business. After an unsuccessful foray to Hollywood, Dupont signed in 1928 with the recently formed British International Pictures, a company best known for producing Alfred Hitchcock's earliest films. *Piccadilly*, Dupont's second English film, was BIP's most expensive and ambitious production to date.

The jazzy burst of urban nightlife that opens the movie has the flavor of Weimar-era *strassefilme*, or "street films," in which the glitter and glamour of the modern city merged with the squalor and despair of urban poverty. *Piccadilly* follows this pattern, moving between the fashionable, luxurious nightclub of the title and the drab alleys and tenements of Limehouse, the waterfront neighborhood where Shosho lives. In the nightclub, the camera darts and glides dizzily through whoopee-making crowds; rapid editing imparts a nervous, jittering energy. Electric signs blink and dazzle, couples foxtrot under sweeping art deco stairways, the ladies' cloakroom is a swirling mosaic of twenties fashions. Dupont

and German cinematographer Werner Brandes fill the movie with throwaway moments of visual excitement, as when the turning of a glass doorknob scatters light in a strobe effect, echoing the lighting of the nightclub's floor show.

Rooms and costumes tell us more about people than the sparing intertitles. Art direction was by Alfred Junge, another German émigré who later became an important figure in the British film industry. He collaborated with Hitchcock in the 1930s and was production designer for the most visually striking British films of the forties: the masterpieces of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, including *A Matter of Life and Death* and *Black Narcissus*. The witty opening credits for *Piccadilly*, appearing on the sides of London omnibuses, show a humorous flair worthy of Hitchcock or *The Archers*. Here, Junge creates settings that are at once pungently real—you can all but smell the sweaty, bustling kitchen and the cheap chop suey joints—and fancifully expressive, culminating in the apartment Shosho moves into after her success: a Chinese fantasy of wall-hangings, beaded drapes, ornate daggers, and shimmering goldfish.

This gorgeous but clichéd decor underlines something disturbing about Shosho's character, the way she seems more and more to be deliberately inhabiting the persona of an Oriental temptress. From the working girl in a beret and ripped stockings, whose sassy attitude makes us root for her, she becomes a couture-draped diva who callously tosses aside her Chinese boyfriend Joe (King Ho Chang) to pursue a rich white man. But the film is far more complicated and subtle in its treatment, not only of Shosho, but of all its characters—including the jealous, desperate Joe and Mabel.

Piccadilly is a noirish take on the classic "rise and fall" saga, laying bare the dark side of ambition and success. Shosho remains deeply ambiguous: if she becomes hard and cruel, is this because the film harbors racist sentiments, or because she has to confront a racist world? Anna May Wong was angry and disappointed when an onscreen kiss with her costar Jameson Thomas was excised—the abrupt cut as they start to embrace feels like a panicked denial. The film's understated ending matches the wit of its opening, but with a surprisingly cynical wallop. This downbeat mood was sadly prophetic for several

of the players. E.A. Dupont's career began to founder with the coming of sound; he eventually returned to Hollywood where he directed some B pictures, including his own script for one of the most bizarrely offbeat noir films ever made, *The Scarf* (1951). Anna May Wong also went back to America in the 1930s, where she, too, was largely relegated to B movies and stereotyped roles—even her best known, as Hui Fei in von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express*, is the distillation of inscrutable Oriental glamour. But her place in the pantheon of movie stars is not defined by her ethnicity; she is, in any language and in the best possible sense, a fatal woman.

—IMOGEN SARA SMITH

Left to right: Anna May Wong and King Ho Chang, Anna May Wong, Gilda Gray



THE CURSE OF THE DRAGON LADY: ANNA MAY WONG IN HOLLYWOOD

BY MARGARITA LANDAZURI

She has been called “the first Chinese American movie star,” but that is an oversimplification of the unique place Anna May Wong holds in film history. She was never a bankable leading lady. Few Hollywood films, in fact, even featured Asians as the leading characters, and those roles that existed were mostly played by Caucasians. *The Red Lantern* (1919), in which Wong made her film debut as an extra, starred Russian actress Alla Nazimova as a Eurasian woman. In 1932, when Wong, with an impressive body of work already behind her, tested for the female lead in MGM’s *The Son-Daughter* she told a friend she’d heard that the studio considered her “too Chinese to play Chinese.” The role went instead to Helen Hayes. Her bitterest professional disappointment came when MGM refused to consider her for the leading role in the 1935 film version of Pearl Buck’s novel, *The Good Earth*, and gave the part to the Austrian actress Luise Rainer. In a career that spanned four decades and five countries, the gifted, intelligent, and striking actress was never allowed to break free of typecasting and the racial attitudes of her era.

From a large third-generation California family, Wong scored her first leading role in an early Technicolor film, *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), a Madame Butterfly story by Frances Marion. Impressed by her performance, Douglas Fairbanks cast her as the deceitful “Mongol slave” in his Arabian Nights fantasy, *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924). At nineteen, after five years as an extra, bit, and supporting player, it was her first “dragon lady” role. Wong was sleek and glamorous, and moviegoers around the world took notice. In China, however, the response was less than favorable,

with one reviewer writing that “she does not respect her identity.”

Thief’s success gave Wong’s career a boost but a parade of undistinguished roles followed, harem girl and prostitutes among them. Most of her film appearances were brief. Her characters rarely had romances, and if her love interest was played by a Caucasian actor, even if his character was Chinese, it had to end tragically. When Wong was offered a film role in Germany, she decided to try her luck there. In an interview shortly after her arrival in Europe in 1928, she bemoaned the tragic love stories of her American films. “I think I left America because I died so often. Pathetic dying seemed to be the best thing I did.”

Wong died again in her first German film, playing a carnival performer in *Song*, but she was the undisputed star of the film. It was one of three pictures Wong made with director Richard Eichberg, and they served as excellent showcases for her star power. She became the toast of Berlin, socializing with Leni Riefenstahl and Marlene Dietrich, with whom, it was rumored, she was having an affair. She hobnobbed with the intelligentsia, such as philosopher Walter Benjamin who rhapsodized about her, “Everything that is heart is reflected in her eyes.” Then it was on to London to make *Piccadilly*, in a star-making performance directed by E.A. Dupont.

Back home with a Paramount contract, Wong made her first American sound picture, *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), as the daughter of Fu Manchu, the evil criminal genius. In spite of excellent production values and top billing, the film was the ultimate

dragon lady movie, and everything that she had left Hollywood to escape. Paramount did better by Wong with her next film, Josef von Sternberg’s *Shanghai Express*. She and costar Marlene Dietrich shared a subtle chemistry as sisters in sin, the picture had superb production values, and it was a hit. However, Wong’s role was still a stereotype and the reception in China was understandably negative. One headline in the Chinese press read, “Paramount Uses Anna May Wong to Embarrass China Again.” When China banned the film, she responded, “It’s a pretty sad situation to be rejected by the Chinese because I am too American.”

Her career stalled once again. Wong left for New York and then traveled throughout Europe, performing in stage shows. In London, she found film work, but the pictures weren’t very good. Back in Hollywood, local newspapers mounted a publicity campaign touting her for the lead in *The Good Earth*. MGM only considered her for the lesser role of a concubine in the film, but Wong either refused it or was rejected by the studio. Instead, she announced that she would fulfill a lifelong dream to visit China. She left in early 1936 and spent a year studying Chinese customs, language, and culture, as well as visiting her family’s ancestral home.

In the years that followed, she worked in films only sporadically. She died in 1961, at fifty-six. In 2005, one hundred years after her birth, film critic Richard Corliss wrote, “The magnitude of Wong’s achievement is not that she was Hollywood’s first star actress of Chinese blood. It is that, for her entire, 40-plus years in movies, and for decades after, she was the only one ... We can be startled and impressed by the success she, alone, attained. And still we ask: Who knows what Anna May Wong could have been allowed to achieve if she had been Anna May White?”



PROGRAM BOOK CONTRIBUTORS

Edward Anderson is a curator at the BFI National Archive specializing in amateur film.

Michael Fox is a San Francisco film critic and journalist for kqed.org/arts and Keyframe, as well as a teacher and programmer.

Shari Kizirian is a freelance editor and writer based in Rio de Janeiro. She is coeditor of the San Francisco Silent Film Festival program book.

Fritzi Kramer writes about the stars and films of the silent era at Movies Silently. She lives in central California.

Margarita Landazuri writes for Turner Classic Movies, International Documentary, and the Mill Valley Film Festival, among other outlets. She is coeditor of the San Francisco Silent Film Festival program book.

Monica Nolan is a novelist who has written about film and culture for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Release Print*, *Bitch* magazine, *Frameline*, and the San Francisco Film Society.

Imogen Sara Smith is the author of *In Lonely Places: Film Noir Beyond the City* and *Buster Keaton: The Persistence of Comedy*. Her writing has been published by the Criterion Collection, *Sight and Sound*, and *Reverse Shot*.

Jeffrey Vance is a film historian and author of *Douglas Fairbanks*, *Chaplin: Genius of the Cinema*, and *Harold Lloyd: Master Comedian*. He is currently writing a biography of Mary Pickford for the Mary Pickford Foundation.

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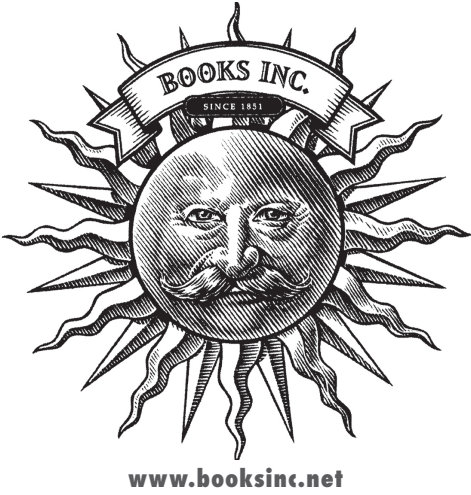
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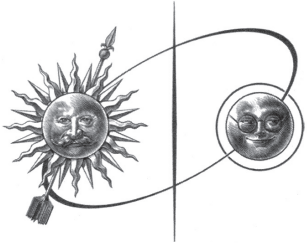
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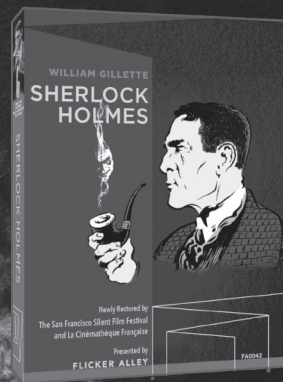
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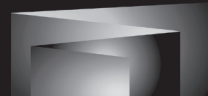
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