

SAN FRANCISCO
SILENT
FILM FESTIVAL



A DAY OF SILENTS | DECEMBER 2, 2017 | CASTRO THEATRE

A DAY of SILENTS

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10:00AM **THE ADVENTURES OF PRINCE ACHMED**
Music by Philip Carli

12:00NOON **THE LAST MAN ON EARTH**
Music by Philip Carli

2:00PM **TOL'ABLE DAVID**
Music by Frederick Hodges

4:30PM **THE RAT**
Music by Sascha Jacobsen and the Musical Art Quintet

7:00PM **LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN**
Music by Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra

9:15PM **SEX IN CHAINS**
Music by Philip Carli

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MUSICIANS

PHILIP CARLI

Pianist and music scholar Philip Carli has performed for silent films throughout North America and Europe, playing solo or with an orchestra at venues ranging from Lincoln Center to the Berlin International Film Festival. He is the staff accompanist for George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York, and performs annually at Italy's Giornate del Cinema Muto.

FREDERICK HODGES

Classically trained as a concert pianist, Frederick Hodges accompanies silent films with a repertoire of ragtime, stride, and novelty piano pieces. He has performed live with the California Pops Orchestra and Don Neely's Royal Society Jazz Orchestra and is the regular accompanist at the Niles Essanay Silent Film Museum in Fremont, California.

SASCHA JACOBSEN and the MUSICAL ART QUINTET

Founded by bassist and composer Sascha Jacobsen, the Musical Art Quintet also features Matthew Szemela and Michele Walther on violin, Keith Lawrence on viola, and Lewis Patzner on cello. For his original compositions, Jacobsen draws on a wealth of musical styles from classical to jazz and Argentine tango.

MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA

A chamber ensemble that revives the tradition of silent-film orchestras, Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra has recorded and toured widely, creating vibrant, historically appropriate musical scores for more than 125 films. Regular players Rodney Sauer, David Short, and Brian Collins are joined by guest musicians Cami Kidwell-Dodge and Emily Lewis.



THE ADVENTURES OF PRINCE ACHMED

LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY PHILIP CARLI

DIRECTED BY LOTTE REINIGER, GERMANY, 1926

PRODUCTION COMPANY Comenius-Film PRINT SOURCE Milestone Films

At ninety-one years of age, Lotte Reiniger's *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* still has all the ebullience and self-evident pride of a prototype unveiling itself. In retrospect it's no wonder that Reiniger's stop-motion synthesis of *Arabian Nights*, whose most fantastical elements the filmmaker deliberately chose for their live-action infeasibility, became a benchmark of cutout animation. Here we always will see a radiantly novel approach to aged traditions, in which fable, illustrated shadow-play, and silent film coalesce for the first time.

Of course today *Prince Achmed* (*Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed*) has the aura of the antiquated, and no doubt that's part of its charm, but what exhilaration in how a dense, five-act tale of sorcery, shape-shifting, and operatic royal courtship even now zips along with the momentum of its forward leap in form. As the first movie of its type, its length is in itself remarkable, not just for the labor required—some 250,000 individual images—but for upending the widely held expectation in 1926 that animated films should consist mostly of trifles clocking in at ten or fewer minutes. Released more than a decade before Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Reiniger's hour-long epic looked as clearly into the medium's future as into its past.

With the Hollywood studio system still in its infancy, and talkies officially still a year away, world cinema between the wars proved fertile ground for a wide range of narrative and aesthetic experiments. A product of its time, the German-made *Prince Achmed* exemplifies a European yearning to plumb the firmament of Middle Eastern folklore, complete with double-edged exoticism and now-discomfiting

ideas about race and gender. It's to Reiniger's great credit that none of these problematic elements go wholly unexamined. One of the film's most exquisite sequences, in which Achmed spies Pari Banu and her handmaidens bathing in a lake, amounts to establishing our hero as a Peeping Tom. But then, as cinema and its antecedents have time and again insisted, aren't we all? At least partially mitigated by the implicit discretion of silhouettes, voyeurism here does not preclude empathy.

As mechanical entities, Reiniger's silhouettes manifest the intrinsic modernism of exalted folk art: It's perpetually bracing to encounter archetypal characters reconstituted as faceless fragmented bodies, wired together at every joint. What's more, these figures celebrate negative space, born first by way of extraction from a formless void of cardboard, then again by the carefully controlled absence of light. Though the backgrounds change color, the figures and foreground landscape details do not. So there's an indirection, an art of suggestion, always at play. Yet the effect concentrates rather than attenuates the characters' essential humanity. Sure, the renderings of architectural ornaments, of fronds and scimitars and feather dresses, are jewel-like in their precision, but the universality of the figures' gestures—a swoon, a tiptoe, a tender caress—is what really gets to us. Like hieroglyphs, with flatness being of the essence, these images were among the first to show us how to dance on a tightrope between sincerity and whimsy. (Early in Act 4, to take but one memorable example, Aladdin makes his entrance by fending off a sort of saber-toothed Snuffleupagus.) The figures catch just the right balance of grandeur and intimacy, plus an extra frisson for being a hair's breadth from absolute abstraction.

This was Reiniger's robust pictorial talent for the duration of her fifty-eight-year career, prompted as much by the shadow-play Shakespeare she put on in her parents' living room as by a formative apprenticeship in the wings of Max Reinhardt's stage plays, where her privileged view of backlit actors drove home the fundamentals of expressive silhouettes. In *Prince Achmed*, made while Reiniger was in her twenties, the integrity of her technique fortified by frugality shines through; one clear benefit of attempting a collage epic was that it could be done with a crew of only five, including background artists Walter Ruttmann and Berthold Bartosch, filmmakers in their own right. Surely no one involved foresaw the ad hoc camera rig—with her cinematographer (and husband) Carl Koch shooting frame by frame straight down into a table made from tiered planes of backlit glass—later becoming the foundation of every animator's toolkit.

In spite or maybe because of being made by hand over the course of three years with scant resources, the project still exudes a certain humility. In keeping with the self-apparent frugality of handmade puppets, the film's special effects were often utterly quotidian, as in starlit skies made from holes poked in a translucent backdrop, or sometimes literally earthy, as in a molten genie made of shifting

sand. Reiniger was known to describe herself as a "primitive caveman artist" or "that silhouette girl," somehow without seeming coy, and in *Prince Achmed* we sense an aspiration toward durable entertainment rather than lasting contribution to an art form; naturally the latter is what she—and we—wound up with. Now digital imagery has made anything possible, and one unfortunate result is a strain for wonderment. By obvious contrast to 21st-century animated marvels, with their conspicuous outlay and hyperactive technical bravura, their bloodlessly over-determined story arcs, Reiniger's clearly inspired way of transcending limitations, or at least seizing them as opportunities, reveals itself as the most vital essence of the craft.

As promised by its title, the film delivers ample adventures—its battle scenes staged with great clarity of space and action, but also the blunt and jubilant choreography of kids playing with their action figures. The simplicity is deceptive, or expansive: Flowing from one mythic tableau to the next, it has the scope of a symphonic work. It's no surprise to learn that Reiniger timed her figures' movement to the swells of strings and woodwinds of Wolfgang Zeller's enthralling, nimbly calibrated score. Today's blockbuster hacks can and should go to school on this stuff.

In other words, it isn't merely ingratiating to say this particular ninety-one-year-old movie, forged from the very basic materials of willpower and imagination and paper and light, doesn't look a day over brand new.

"I believe more in the truth of fairy tales than that found in the newspapers," Reiniger once said, and while the endorsement of this creed by politicians

can prove disastrous, it should always remain any artist's prerogative. The key in Reiniger's case was a sense, however casually worn, of responsibility. In *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* we get the impression of a precocious artist indulging her creative whims, but never without an audience in mind. The result isn't just a work of enduring beauty, but also and always a shining aesthetic lodestar.

— JONATHAN KIEFER



HOW MUSIC MAKES, AND SAVES, A MOVIE

Lotte Reiniger brought composer and Volksbühne house conductor Wolfgang Zeller onto *THE ADVENTURES OF PRINCE ACHMED* early in the animation process. She later described in "The Silent Picture" how they worked together: "We were anxious to provide our picture every support to ensure its coming over well to its audience. So we had the musician Wolfgang Zeller collaborating with us throughout this time, composing the score. When for instance a procession was wanted he composed a march, we measured with stop watches and tried to move the figures according to its beat. Or a Glockenspiel was executed to measures. In this period the better theatres employed an orchestra and for the more ambitious films special music was composed." Zeller also conducted his own orchestra for the film's preview screening in May 1926 and later by invitation for its premiere in London and Paris. To aid in conducting, Zeller's score had illustrated cues pasted onto it, images from the film marking when a certain instrument or effect was called for. Years later, when restoring *PRINCE ACHMED* (based on an English-language nitrate copy housed at the British Film Institute), Zeller's performance copy was found preserved at the Library of Congress, which helped archivists verify that the film unfolds in its proper sequence. Originally a violinist, Zeller went on to compose scores for many features, including Walter Ruttmann's symphony film *MELODY OF THE WORLD* (1929), Carl Th. Dreyer's *VAMPYR* (1932), G.W. Pabst's *L'ATLANTIDE* (1932), and the 1959 Oscar-winning documentary *SERENGETI SHALL NOT DIE*, by Bernhard and Michael Grzimek.



DIRECTOR LOTTE REINIGER

ON THE MAKING OF THE ADVENTURES OF PRINCE ACHMED

Interview by Alfio Bastiancich

How did you begin with silhouettes?

When I was at school, all the children used to do paper cut-outs, silhouettes, and I loved it. Later, I got the theater bug and used to put on shows. When other children were out playing, I was "animating" my silhouettes. When cinema appeared, I was bowled over. What I remember being most excited by were the fantasy films of Georges Méliès.

How did you move from the miniature puppet theater to the cinema?

I was lucky. I went to a lecture given by Paul Wegener, who'd made *The Golem*. He was talking about the technical side and special effects, which I found fascinating. I was fifteen. I said to myself, this is a man I must meet. I enrolled at the Reinhardt Theater School but it was simply a ruse to get to meet Wegener. I pestered him so much that he ended up giving me small parts in his films. In 1918, Wegener introduced me to a group of young people who had just started a studio for scientific and experimental films, and he suggested they take me on. The people involved were Professor [Erwin] Hanslik, Hans Curlis, Karl Witte, and Carl Koch.

Let's talk about Prince Achmed. How did you meet the producer Hagen?

[Louis] Hagen came to the institute one day with some other people. He was a banker, but he was also very interested in educational films. My husband [Carl Koch] was making a film for him, about Egypt. He saw my films and the way I worked and suggested I make a feature film, something that had never been done before. It was an offer I couldn't turn down. That was in 1923. We rigged out a studio in his country house, in Potsdam, above the garage, but then we left, as it was too difficult to work so far from Berlin. It took three years' work.

The story was inspired by *A Thousand and One Nights*. I read the whole book until I found a story that would lend itself to animation ... everything I liked about "Prince Achmed" went into the film: the horse, the magician ... I started drawing, did sketches. The film was done scene by scene. Ruttmann built the background sets.

It was quite rare to see such entirely different temperaments working together, since Ruttmann was a lot older than I and was considered a great artist, whereas I was only a novice. I was very scared of him but he seemed quite at ease doing the movements for the backgrounds whilst I worked on the characters' movements in the foreground. The result was two negatives which we then put together.

Your husband worked as a cameraman on the film?

He wasn't simply a cameraman; he had a great understanding of cinematic language, truly extraordinary. He was the brains, I was the crazy one.

Bartosch made the Aladdin voyage sequence. What was Ruttmann's contribution?

He did the sequence in which the Magician makes the flying horse appear. It was a very complicated thing to do, using thin sheets of wax underneath a machine he invented. Then he did the lamps and all the effects in the final battle between the Magician and the Witch. For the sequence in which Wak Wak's devil fights the white spirits, we all worked together.

How was the preview at the Volksbühne?

Hagen was exhausted and having problems with the film, as no cinema would take it, they didn't dare. He was furious. Since we only had the cinema for a Sunday morning, we wrote postcards to everyone we knew, and all our friends, inviting them to come. The press were [also] there, for which we had to thank Bert [Brecht] who knew who to invite ... he was very astute.

How was the film received?

We were all very anxious since it was a Sunday morning in May and nobody went to the cinema in spring, but in fact there were a lot of people. The cinema was bursting at the seams. I was in the lightening box and saw all of these people waiting for my film, Fritz Lang among them.

And did the audience like the film?

I've never seen anything like it. They clapped at every effect, after every scene.

Was the first version of the film in color?

Yes, all of it. We shot it in black-and-white and on the negative indicated the colors we wanted for each scene. It was very time-consuming. We tried with Technicolor but the colors were too dense and corroded the silhouettes. At Filmagie, on the other hand, they did the backgrounds in color and projected the silhouettes in black. We were very pleased with it. That way, I found the colors didn't overimpose, indeed, shooting the film in black-and-white with a range of greys, the colors lose a lot of their liveliness and that gives the film a greater sense of movement.

The original negative was destroyed in the war. But the British Film Institute had had a negative made. When I went to London I met a person who'd been working on the [restoration]. It was the son of the banker from Potsdam who'd financed the film. As a child he used to sit and watch us working in the make-shift studio above the garage. He saw it as a kind of family affair and had worked like mad to reconstitute the colors and tinting in the film.

Excerpted from a
1980 interview
with Lotte Reiniger,
conducted a year
before her death.
Reprinted with
the permission of
Alfio Bastiancich.





THE LAST MAN ON EARTH

LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY PHILIP CARLI

DIRECTED BY J.G. BLYSTONE, USA, 1924

CAST Earle Foxe, Grace Cunard, and Derelys Perdue **PRODUCTION** Fox Film Corp.

PRINT SOURCE Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)

When looking back on the silent films released by Fox Film Corporation, we tend to gravitate toward the early efforts of directors who went on to long and prominent careers: John Ford (*The Iron Horse*, *Four Sons*), Frank Borzage (*7th Heaven*, *Street Angel*), Howard Hawks (*Fazil*, *A Girl in Every Port*), or Raoul Walsh (*What Price Glory?*). All these men made important contributions to the studio, but the typical Fox release was generally cheaper, less ambitious, and destined for obscurity.

Consider the studio's 1924–1925 release schedule. It's headlined by prestigious literary adaptations like *Dante's Inferno* and *The Man Who Came Back*, but the bread-and-butter product offers a very different impression: suggestively titled fare like *Troubles of a Bride* and *Everyman's Wife*, a horse-racing picture called *Golden Heels*, and no less than seven westerns apiece from Tom Mix and Buck Jones. Scarcely remembered today, Fox's silent comedy output was also a prominent part of the studio's brand. "They please the majority!" Fox boasted (with a smidgen of shame?) in *Moving Picture World*, paraphrasing the unnamed exhibitors who had begged the studio to keep sending more product like the Monkey Comedies, a series of short films featuring trained chimpanzees Max, Moritz, and Pep. (These were not to be confused with *Darwin Was Right*, a feature-length comedy about natural selection that Fox also released that season, which also starred monkeys.)

When placed beside the run-of-the-mill Fox comedy of the mid-1920s, *The Last Man on Earth* stood out. Most every contemporary review in the trade press

concentrated on the picture's novelty and predicted that the premise alone would be sufficient to hook the audience and overcome the film's occasionally pedestrian execution. Almost a century later, the outlandish setup—a planet without men, victims of the deadly "masculinitis" epidemic—remains more than enough.

The Last Man on Earth was not the first film to imagine a distinctly feminine polity. Alice Guy's 1912 Solax short *In the Year 2000* (sadly, presumed lost) prophesied women running society in the new millennium; a similar premise underlay Universal's 1914 short *In the Year 2014* with Louise Fazenda. The 1917 melodrama *Mothers of Men* envisions the political fallout of the Women's Party gubernatorial candidate assuming power in a post-suffrage world. But *The Last Man on Earth* is neither a progressive plea nor a reactionary rebuke; it's simply a comedy that tries as gamely as it can to imagine a world without gender roles.

The Last Man on Earth was adapted from a short story of the same name by John D. Swain that appeared in the November 1923 issue of *Munsey's Magazine*; the film version arrived twelve months later. Swain's story reads like a science-fiction goof taken a step too far, with the narrative often set aside to ruminate on the surprising dividends and unexpected consequences of a society without men. (Swain's story has more speculative asides than the film, though the latter does add an extended womano-a-womano boxing match.) Among the effects of masculinitis: the real estate market evaporates and the surviving women have their choice of the poshest mansions; Prohibition



remains on the books out of inertia, though alcohol abuse has plummeted in the absence of men; church attendance crumbles despite a new class of "frenzied female evangelists," for "a manless religion was doomed to atrophy." Football ceases to be played and literature loses its luster. "With love, fighting, sex jealousy, double-living, bootlegging, bohemianism, villains, missing heirs, and faithless lovers and guardians removed, what was the poor novelist to do?" wondered Swain.

Both the short story and the film solve the problem of matriarchal and narrative stasis by introducing a hitherto forgotten man into the equation, a biological game-changer discovered in a remote forest by a clique of hard-edged femme gangsters. In this credulity-straining moment we are reminded that this female-only planet was thoroughly the product

of the limited imaginations of a roster of studio men. As Farran Smith Nehme observes in *Film Comment*, "If a woman were to create a cinematic world where a mysterious epidemic had killed all but one man on earth, you better believe the leftover would be Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, Gilbert Roland—the list goes on, but in any event, it sure wouldn't be the 1924 film's Earle Foxe." A tree-dwelling, emaciated Rip van Winkle blissfully ignorant of the new status quo, Foxe cannot help but present the least compelling justification for his sorry gender.

If *The Last Man on Earth* never tries to inflate Foxe to the status of a sex symbol, that's largely because the film is oddly indifferent to sex altogether. Though advertised as "A Fabulous Novelty with 1,000 Beautiful Girls," the film gives those girls precious little to do. Helmed by Fox comedy specialist John

G. Blystone, recently returned from a loan-out codirecting Buster Keaton's *Our Hospitality*, *The Last Man on Earth* never really works through the rich implications of its premise, often content to mine the next gag. Why contemplate what women would do for pleasure in a manless world when the sight of a woman president or a woman street sweeper would be enough to generate a nervous chortle from an audience still coming to the terms with the new social order in the wake of the 19th Amendment? (Even years later, with universal suffrage an established part of the fabric of American life, the idea of a gynocracy proved too fantastic to resist, with Fox remaking the story in 1933 as a pre-Code musical, *It's Great to Be Alive*.)

State and local censors followed the story to its logical conclusion, even if the filmmakers did not. In

Virginia, the censorship board blanched at "women of various ages contending in the most shameless fashion for the possession of a young man" and complained that "little if any attempt is made to conceal the fact that they are impelled by the sex impulse." (So much for propagating the species after a near-extinction level event; alas, the film drops Swain's jab at the evangelical brigade obnoxiously preaching monogamy while the planet is tasked with an industrial-scale repopulation project.) Between the "salacious or smutty titles" and "the lessening of the respect which men should have for the other sex," *The Last Man on Earth* was rejected for exhibition in the state. A University of Pennsylvania sociologist even cited the film as an example of the popular fare offered to "our low-brow public" in a 1926 paper published in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*.

The comparatively worldly trade press found *The Last Man on Earth* rather tame. "With opportunities to be quite risqué," noted *Moving Picture World*, "there is nothing at all objectionable in the handling of this story." *Variety* spent more space lamenting the obvious exploitation opportunities upon which the studio had failed to capitalize: "Suppose there had been a shot of every main street of every main city in the country showing how it would look in the day when there are no men on earth? That would have put in a local touch for every one of the key cities." As it was, *The Last Man on Earth* was just another audience-friendly comedy from Fox, buoyed by its premise but not accorded the budget to present a fully fleshed-out slice of science fiction. "In fact," intoned the industry's paper of record, "the picture is just a super bathing-girl comedy and would prove a great attraction for the average burlesque houses."

— KYLE WESTPHAL

The Last Man on Earth was preserved by the Museum of Modern Art with support from the National Film Preservation Foundation.

Grace Cunard

Master Pen and Serial Heroine

by Jennifer M. Bean

Known to her fans as a daring jewel thief, an athletic reporter with a nose for news, and a circus tamer of rather ferocious cats, Grace Cunard (née Harriet Milfred Jeffries) performed in more than a hundred silent-era films, including five of Universal Studio's most popular adventure serials in the 1910s. She was also known as "The Master Pen," a thinly veiled pseudonym that graced announcements and title cards for her first serial story and star vehicle, *Lucille Love, The Girl of Mystery* (1914). Although the exact number of screenplays, stories, and scenarios for which she received credit is unknown (the likely number tallies around fifty films), the publicity surrounding her seven-year career at Universal stressed her capacity to "write everything" in which she appeared.

Cunard's potent celebrity status in the 1910s cannot be considered outside of her partnership with Francis Ford (elder brother of director John Ford), whom she met in 1912. Cunard's acting and writing talents, as well as her unerring taste for the popular, merged well with Ford's directorial experience, and in 1913 the duo joined Universal Pictures. Their collaboration occasionally extended to directorial duties, especially during periods of acutely hectic production schedules. *Moving Picture Weekly* describes their method of working: "When Mr. Ford is in a scene Miss Cunard directs, and when she appears without her virile costar, Mr. Ford takes charge." Of the team's relatively few extant films, Cunard received codirectorial screen credit for *Unmasked* (1917) and for four episodes of the serial chapter-play *The Purple Mask* (1917), in which she plays a female heiress with a knack for thievery and a heart of gold who capers about Paris in cape and hood.

Lauded as making the most popular of films, Cunard's stories tend toward the fantastic, and her

female characters tend toward the fantastically unconventional. In 1914 Cunard created "My Lady Raffles," a jewel thief with a delightfully reckless charm who first appeared in short films like *The Mysterious Leopard Lady* (1914) and *The Mystery of the White Car* (1914). Cunard costarred in the Raffles films with Ford and then joined him in directing and starring in *The Twins' Double* series (1914), described by *Photoplay* as "remarkable photoplay successes" in which "Miss Cunard not only takes the part of twin sisters, but of an adventuress who impersonates them as well, and she appears in several scenes as all three at once." The disarming nature of Cunard's role as "at once" twin sisters as well as their impersonation reveals her fascination with stories of split, hypnotized, or double personalities. *The Adventures of Peg o' the Ring* (1916), for instance, Cunard's fourth serial for Universal, tells the story of a young woman who is subject to mad impulses and begins to scratch and tear at everything in sight. The opening episode explains that Peg's psychological distress was inherited from her mother who was infected while she was pregnant.

It is hardly coincidental then that Kitty Gray, the ace reporter of Cunard's 1915 serial *The Broken Coin*, exhibits many of the offscreen talents of Cunard herself, who was known at the time as a "star" writer with an eye for a "good story." When Kitty remembers "an old article of hers ... regarding the kingdom of Gretzhoffen," the audience would have remembered a short film Cunard wrote, released just six months earlier, in which she played both the title role of *The Madcap Queen of Gredshoffen* as well as a girl who "looked like" the queen.

The intrepid behavior of Grace Cunard's zany characters made her a favorite among audiences, whose numbers reportedly stretched across Australia, Czechoslovakia, Mexico, Japan, and India, where

Moving Picture Weekly reported in 1916 that *The Broken Coin* was enjoying huge popularity. The stunt work demanded by the scenarios Cunard wrote took its toll, however, and the numerous physical injuries that she sustained on set required several production breaks during the late 1910s. Meanwhile, *Moving Picture Weekly* circulated upbeat Universal studio publicity assuring fans that "rope climbing keeps her fit."

Around this time, Universal head Carl Laemmle reportedly found the Ford-Cunard team increasingly difficult to work with, and, in 1919, Cunard was instead paired with muscleman Elmo Lincoln in a jungle-adventure serial, *Elmo the Mighty* (1919). Although Cunard and Ford united on several more projects in the 1920s, their stardom faded quickly. Ford kept busy in the ensuing three decades, appearing as secondary characters in a variety of films ranging from *Charley Chan at the Circus* (1936) to *The Quiet Man* (1952). Cunard largely left behind writing and directing, garnering few starring roles in the 1920s, most memorably as Gertie the Gangster, the kidnapping mastermind in *The Last Man on Earth* (1924). She played uncredited bit parts throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, including her appearance as one of the villagers in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). The industry's transition to synchronized sound and a new generation of female celebrities "crowded" her "out of stardom," as she put it for readers of *New Movie Magazine* in 1932. Even so she confessed, "some weeks the postman brings me a thousand inquiries from the fans who remember Grace Cunard and her hair-raising adventures."



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TOL'ABLE DAVID

LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY FREDERICK HODGES

DIRECTED BY HENRY KING, USA, 1921

CAST Richard Barthelmess, Gladys Hulette, Warner Richmond, and Ernest Torrence

PRODUCTION Inspiration Pictures PRINT SOURCE Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)

Tol'able *David* was released on the last day of 1921, on the eve of the year marking modernism's breakthrough, the year of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's "The Waste Land." Despite being a product of that most modern art, cinema, *Tol'able David* seems like an unspoiled fragment of pre-industrialized America, magically projected forward through time. Free of the flowery, creaking Victorianism that garlands Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920), it is still a film of such wholesomeness and ingenuous embrace of traditional values that it evokes not just an earlier century but a lost world. At the same time, the film's freshness and warmth make it instantly accessible and curiously ageless. In 1924, Mary Pickford cited it as one of her favorite movies, saying, "When I first saw this picture I felt I was not looking at a photoplay but was really witnessing the tragedy of a family I had known all my life."

Director Henry King said that he "relived the days of my boyhood" in making *Tol'able David*, for which exteriors were shot on location near King's hometown of Christiansburg, Virginia. He insisted on details that would capture the authentic atmosphere of mountain life: the split-rail fences, the weathered boards of mills and barns, the muddy roads running through fords, the way the family kneels down to pray together before going to bed (at eight o'clock!) and the women do not sit down to eat with the men but stand by the table brushing flies away with whisks made of newspaper strips. The film is a pastoral, set against beautifully smoky Appalachian vistas, but its plot—adapted from a short story by Joseph Hergesheimer that recasts the tale of David and

Goliath—follows a boy's singularly harsh and tragic passage into manhood.

At twenty-seven, Richard Barthelmess is convincingly youthful as David Kinemon, a barefoot boy running through the fields, skinny-dipping in a sparkling river (his troublesome dog Rocket runs off with his pants), playing the harmonica and dancing a jig to impress the girl next door, Esther Hatburn (Gladys Hulette). He is eager to be considered a man and dreams of driving the mail hack like his big brother Allan (Warner Richmond) but has a brutal initiation into adulthood when, in a single day, three outlaws kill his dog and cripple his brother, and his father dies of a heart attack from the shock. In probably his greatest role, Barthelmess combines rustic charm and unaffected sweetness—he is almost Keatonesque in a scene where he pines wistfully outside a community dance and begins waltzing by himself—with intense grief and bitterness, and ferocious grit in a legendarily savage brawl.

Lillian Gish famously wrote in her memoir that Barthelmess had "the most beautiful face of any man who ever went before a camera," and a 1922 *Photoplay* article declared him "the idol of every American girl." He benefited greatly from his appeal to women, starting with his mother's friend, the Russian diva Alla Nazimova, who saw the photogenic potential of his large, dark eyes and clear-cut profile and encouraged him to go into movies. The Gish sisters eagerly took him up, and he paired with Dorothy in a number of comedies before achieving stardom when he was cast with Lillian in D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) and *Way Down*

Terrible things happen, and life goes on.

East (1920). On-screen he had an ideal blend of poetic sensitivity and all-American boyishness; offscreen, he was highly ambitious. In 1921, he joined with Henry King and financier Charles Duell to form Inspiration Pictures. He was not the first star to attempt to produce his own movies, but he became, for a time, one of the few to succeed. *Tol'able David*, Inspiration's first effort, was an enormous critical and commercial success, rapturously hailed around the world, admired abroad by filmmakers like Pudovkin and voted the best film of the year by readers of *Photoplay*. Griffith, who had originally acquired the property and passed it on to his protégé, embraced Barthelmess after the premiere and called it one of the best films he'd ever seen.

It established former actor Henry King as a top director, a position he held for almost five decades, making his first film in 1916 and his last in 1962. He continued to be associated with Americana (as in his delicately shaded, corn-free version of *State Fair*, 1933), with period films and old-fashioned genres like swashbucklers, westerns, and biblical epics. His best films, like *The Gunfighter* (1950), stay true to the simplicity, dramatic intensity, and unsentimental empathy that shaped his first great film. In *Tol'able David*, rural poverty is presented with detailed realism, yet without comment. Terrible things happen, and life goes on. Just before disaster strikes the Kinemon family, there is a lovely shot of David sitting in a chair holding his brother's baby, his face radiating tenderness for his home and family. After Allan has been brought home, near death, there is a shadowy, Rembrandt-like shot of his wife Rose in a dark room, rocking and nursing the baby, her face numbly set. The effect of these rhyming images is devastating.

Expressive gestures punctuate the film: the way Esther pulls her hat down over her face when David refuses to speak to her; the way the brutish Luke Hatburn (Ernest Torrence) rips an onion out of the ground and chomps on it, dirt and all. Torrence was Scottish and, if you can believe it, a conservatory-trained pianist and operatic baritone. In his film debut he is terrifying as the cretinous, depraved Luke, "whose peculiar humor it was to destroy whatever he encountered," a title card tells us. He's so scary because he is completely out of control—his face twitches spasmodically when he goes after David in the end—and because his cruelty is without any sense or motivation. He has only to see a cat to think about heaving a stone at it, and when he looks at poor Esther his eyes roll back with slaving lust. The fugitive Hatburns don't represent evil so much as barbarism: ignorance and deprivation that make them hostile to anyone who has more.

Hence Luke's theft of the mail David is supposed to deliver, which triggers the climactic fight. The notion that being entrusted with "the government mail" would be such a great honor and responsibility may seem quaint (there was a time, apparently, when rural Americans revered the government), and the virtues of duty, modesty, and selflessness seem sadly archaic. But the fight itself is anything but sepia-tinted: it looks unchoreographed, messy, desperate, and genuinely painful. The sequence is edited in the style Griffith pioneered, intercut for maximum suspense with Esther's flight for help and David's proud mother waiting obliviously for his arrival. The lingering shot in which the camera waits outside the door of the cabin to see who will emerge victorious is a moment of shameless, and peerless, cinematic drama.

Everyone involved got a boost from *Tol'able David*'s success, including its British screenwriter (and future director) Edmund Goulding. Inspiration Pictures had more successes with King's *The White Sister* (1923) and *Romola* (1925), both starring Lillian Gish,

before the company collapsed, in part because of the misdeeds of money-man Charles Duell. Barthelmess remained a major star throughout the 1920s and is often lumped with those silent stars brought down by sound: his voice was weak and his delicate face aged badly. But he made a number of excellent films in the early 1930s, playing roles that suited his tired, disappointed look: as one of a group of damaged World War I veterans drowning their shell-shock in frivolous dissipation in *The Last Flight* (1931); a martyred Depression-era everyman in *Heroes for*

Sale (1933); a pilot branded a coward in *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939). The memory of the youthful idol hovers over these parts like a reproachful ghost, suggesting a whole nation's disillusionment and loss of innocence. Seeing him as David Kinemon, grinning shyly under a Huck Finn straw hat, it's hard not to ask wistfully: were we ever really so young?

— IMOGEN SARA SMITH

Tol'able David was preserved by the Museum of Modern Art with support from the National Film Preservation Foundation and the Film Foundation.



Pictured: Richard Barthelmess and Ernest Torrence



Mary Pickford in *Sparrows*

American Pastoral's Dark Side

By Chris Edwards

“Tol’able” David Kinemon lived at the periphery of the law’s reach—upholding that law when no one else could. Rural heroes like him were a celebrated part of American silent cinema.



Tess of the Storm Country (1914)

Young, poor, and scrappy, Tessibel “Tess” Skinner was a signature role for Mary Pickford (one so popular she played her again in 1922). Tess lives in a community of seaside squatters—men and women largely invisible to the authorities charged with defending their rights. They occupy land owned by a man hostile to them, their homes and common spaces entered freely by those who would do them harm. A lawyer saves them from eviction early in the film but, when things grow worse, the squatters find a note on his door: “Away from town. Will not return for six weeks.” Fortunately, Tess

is there to help restore justice. She stands up for her people many times, including during a memorable scene late in the film, in which she brings a gravely ill infant to church to be baptized. Because of the circumstances of the child’s birth, the minister refuses. So Tess dips her hand in the water and performs the rite herself. “Be ye agoin’ to let him go to a place where God can’t find him?” she asks. Tess and her neighbors know the feeling.

The Symbol of the Unconquered (1920)

Themes of ownership loom large in this early work of Oscar Micheaux—a film made within

living memory of the U.S. slave system. Evon Mason (Iris Hall), a light-skinned African-American woman, arrives in the remote Northwest to claim a piece of property willed to her by her grandfather. Hugh Van Allen (Walker Thompson), an African-American prospector and her nearest neighbor, presents himself as her protector. Should she need his assistance, he tells her, she need only fire a pistol twice. But in the end it’s Evon who protects him. Hugh is pressured to sell his land by a clergyman turned criminal (Louis Déan) and his henchmen. When he refuses he is threatened by the Ku Klux Klan. With traditional authority figures either absent or, in the case of the clergyman, corrupted, it is Evon who rides into town, bringing reinforcements who drive off the terrorist threat, saving Hugh’s land and, probably, his life.

Wild Oranges (1924)


King Vidor’s tale of eroticism and violence (adapted from a story by “Tol’able David” author Joseph Hergesheimer) takes place in and around a dilapidated mansion near a remote stretch of Georgia coastline. Millie Stope (Virginia Valli) and her grandfather, Lichfield (Nigel De Brulier), are the mansion’s only occupants, isolated by geography and the trauma of Lichfield’s Civil War experience. They’re also at the mercy of an outsize man-child, Nicholas, who occupies their property at will, making advances to Millie and threatening her grandfather. Nicholas is a wanted man, but naturally, the police cannot find him way out there. Only the chance arrival of John Woolfolk (Frank Mayo)—a sailor fleeing his own devastating past—provides the Stopes with the hero they need. If not for his love for Millie, however, John might have kept on going.

Sparrows (1926)

Sparrows puts its heroine, Molly (Mary Pickford), in a harrowing spot: a patch of farmland

surrounded by quick mud and alligators, where children of the very poor are raised in appalling conditions. Molly, still a child herself, is their only protector. As in *Tess of the Storm Country*, the trials these children face are partly because of poverty—it is only when the child of a wealthy man is snatched that there’s hope for the rest. But the baby farm could never function in an urban area and, once again, the remote landscape proves handy for bad men. “The Law was sure it had cut off every road of escape for the kidnappers,” we are told. “But the kidnappers didn’t need roads.” Molly eventually leads the children out, but their trials don’t end there. A harbor policeman asks her who all these kids belong to, laughing incredulously when she says they’re all hers. Molly doesn’t think it’s funny, and neither do we. “Out of the swamps—,” reads another bitter card, “—and into the morass of the Law.”

Our Hospitality (1923)

Heroic archetypes were red meat for the silent clowns. *Our Hospitality* sees New York dandy Willie McKay (Buster Keaton) travel south to claim an inheritance, only to be caught up in a decades-old blood feud between his family and the Canfields. This time the themes of rural heroism are inverted. Willie’s neither idealistic nor brave—his desire to live is matched only by his desire for the Canfield daughter (Natalie Talmadge). And while the Canfields tower over Willie (just as the Hatburns are physically huge compared to David Kinemon), they do not violate his space. Instead, he violates theirs. At the beginning of a memorable sequence, the dinner at the Canfields’ home, the patriarch stops his sons from harming Willie, temporarily at least. “Wait boys!” he says. “Our code of honor prevents us from shooting him while he’s a guest—in our house.” While no one can prevent a murder in the streets, the country hearth is inviolable. 



THE RAT

**LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY SASCHA JACOBSEN
AND THE MUSICAL ART QUINTET**

DIRECTED BY GRAHAM CUTTS, UK, 1925

CAST Ivor Novello, Mae Marsh, and Isabel Jeans **PRODUCTION** Gainsborough Pictures

PRINT SOURCE British Film Institute (BFI)

Devastatingly handsome and abundantly talented, Welsh-born Ivor Novello was one of Britain's most dazzling matinee idols of the 1920s. Like his friend and contemporary Noël Coward, Novello was a writer, producer, actor, composer, a star of stage and screen—a multi-hyphenate before that term existed. The English actor and writer Simon Callow has called Novello “the most successful British musical theatre composer of the 20th century before the meteoric rise of Andrew Lloyd Weber, and one of the great figures of his time.” Today, Novello's influence is memorialized in the title of British theater's highest honor for composing and songwriting, the Novello Awards. But beginning in the silent era, Novello was a magnetic presence in the movies, with his perfect profile, soulful eyes, and cupid's bow lips, even when playing a shady character, as he does in *The Rat*. Film historian and critic Geoffrey Macnab writes that Novello's performance as Pierre Boucheron was “the role in which he best combined the dreamy, neurotic side of his screen personality with swaggering, action-hero antics.”

Based on a 1924 play by Novello and another multi-hyphenate, actress-producer-writer Constance Collier, *The Rat* is a tale of the Parisian underworld, with a deliciously juicy protagonist, which Novello first brought to life onstage. Swaggering jewel thief Pierre lives with meek, mousy Odile (Mae Marsh) and hangs out at a dive bar called the White Coffin, where he performs a sinuous dance that arouses the lust of the decadent courtesan Zelig De Chaumet (Isabel Jeans). Meanwhile, Odile is

pursued and menaced by Zelig's equally dissolute older lover. There is a killing, self-sacrifice, a trial, and an improbably happy ending, with director Graham Cutts moving the story briskly along. According to the British Film Institute, Cutts was known for daring camera movement and, at the time, was “considered the saviour of the British film industry.” One contemporary journalist called him a “sure fire maker of box office attractions,” which *The Rat* definitely was. The movie was so successful that it was followed by two sequels, *Triumph of the Rat* (1926) and *The Return of the Rat* (1929), both also starring Novello.

Born David Ivor Davies in Cardiff, Ivor Novello demonstrated his musical talent early and was just twenty-one years old in 1914 when he wrote the patriotic hit song of World War I, “Keep the Home Fires Burning.” It launched Novello's career as a songwriter and, for the next few years, he concentrated on writing scores for and performing in British stage musicals (although he usually left the singing to others in those shows, as he did not have an outstanding voice). In 1920, Swiss film director Louis Mercanton cast Novello in his screen debut, the French production *The Call of the Blood*. The film, and Novello, were box office hits, and English critics dubbed him “the New Valentino,” as he shot to immediate fame in Britain in the same way Rudolph Valentino had recently done in America.

Even though he was a major stage personality in England, Novello's hothouse appeal did not cross the Atlantic, which he discovered when he tried for Hollywood stardom—twice—but failed to make an

“Studio bosses told him he was ‘too English’ to appeal as a leading man...”



impact. The first time was in 1923, when he played the lead in D.W. Griffith's romantic melodrama *The White Rose*. But Griffith's glory days were behind him and, although one American critic called Novello “the most handsome man in England,” the film was not a success. Novello returned to London and the stage, and to new opportunities in film. Producer Michael

Balcon snagged the film rights to Novello and Collier's *The Rat* (written under the pseudonym David L'Estrange) for the recently formed Gainsborough, which made popular fare, while his Gaumont British company concentrated on “prestige” pictures. There were reports that Rudolph Valentino wanted the lead in *The Rat* and tried to acquire the rights for himself but, after Novello's Hollywood disappointment, the playwright was not about to let anyone else take over his flashy creation. After two *Rat* films, Novello displayed his versatility in a pair by Alfred Hitchcock, playing a creepy suspected killer in the atmospheric thriller *The Lodger* (1926) and a young gentleman who descends into depravity in *Downhill* (1927).

In the early 1930s, Novello made his second assault on Hollywood, with a two-year contract at MGM. According to Macnab, “Studio bosses told him he was ‘too English’ to appeal as a leading man

and fobbed him off with the occasional character part or, more often, writing assignments.” These humiliating assignments weren't even screenplays, but script “doctoring,” rewriting or fixing bits of scripts. Among the films he allegedly worked on were the Greta Garbo vehicle *Mata Hari* (1931) and, worst of all, *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932). Most film historians believe Novello was responsible for the legendarily bad dialogue, “Me Tarzan, you Jane.” Novello himself only said, “I never wrote such rubbish in my life.” Not surprisingly, he broke his contract and went back home, calling his time in Hollywood his “greatest failure.” For a writer and performer used to the rosy limelight and lavish praise, it was a lesson in humility. “I came away knowing that obscurity and I were bad companions,” he said. For fifteen years, Novello worked steadily in the movies, appearing in British, French, German, and American films. His last screen appearance was in 1934, in *Autumn Crocus*. After that, he devoted himself to music and theater. Beloved by the public and his colleagues and happily (though not publicly) gay, Novello was in a lifelong relationship with fellow actor Robert “Bobbie” Andrews.

Both of *The Rat*'s leading ladies had previously worked with Novello. American actress Mae Marsh had played Flora Cameron in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) but agreed to fewer roles after she married in 1918. In 1922, she appeared in Graham Cutts's *Flames of Passion*, the rare British release to crack the American market at the time, and then the following year opposite Novello in Griffith's *The White Rose*. Producer Herbert Wilcox and director Cutts were able to entice her back to England to play Odile in *The Rat*. The elegant British actress Isabel Jeans had played opposite Novello as Zelig on the London stage and later in Alfred Hitchcock's *Downhill*. Unlike Novello, she had no problem getting work in American films, usually in supporting roles, starting in the mid-1930s. Jeans is best known to American audiences as the retired courtesan who

educates her grandniece to follow in her footsteps in the enchanting MGM musical *Gigi* (1958).

Ivor Novello died, suddenly and too young, at age fifty-eight in 1951. According to the *Guardian*, his London funeral “provoked mass hysteria among female fans reminiscent of that at Valentino's death.” In a 2004 article, Simon Callow mused that “[h]is form of theatre has disappeared without a trace, and it is all but impossible to contemplate reviving any of his shows: apart from anything else, they make considerable musical demands for which it might be hard to find performers.” In 2005, the century-old Strand Theatre in London's West End theater district, which had survived bombings during both world wars, shut down for refurbishment. Owned by musical theater producer Cameron Mackintosh, the spiffed-up old house was renamed the Novello, in tribute to the legendary composer and star. Ivor Novello had lived for thirty-eight years in a flat over the theater in the midst of his beloved West End where his name had so often been in lights.

— MARGARITA LANDAZURI



Above: James A. Marcus, as Mr. Bumble, with Aggie Herring in "Oliver Twist" (1922). At right: James A. Marcus in "Oliver Twist"

The Picturegoer

The Law's An Ass

BY E. ELIZABETH BARRETT

failure and ignominy? Of course you haven't—and neither have we. The law's an ass!



in the audience that Horace the Hero is no more capable of committing the foul deed than an unborn babe, and it is equally obvious that Dirty Dick, the villain, is the real culprit.

In fact it is all plain as daylight to everyone but the people whose business it is to unravel the crime. They remain annoyingly obtuse until the end of the picture, when, the hero having endured imprisonment and general discomfort for the crime he has never committed—or having spent the time running from the strong arm of the law—the heroine gets hold of evidence against the real criminal and all ends happily.

Sometimes it is the heroine herself who endures the persecution of the law, and then she is always seen emerging from prison after serving her time, in a shabby navy costume and tam o'shanter, with her curls clustering round her face and a brooding bitterness in her beautiful eyes.



Usually her prison record follows her through life after, causing misunderstandings and misery galore, until the final re-establishment of her innocence—witness Norma Shearer in *Broadway After Dark*.

Edith Roberts is a film star who always appears to be falling out with the law (only on the screen, of course). In *On Thin Ice* she plays with Tom Moore, who has the role of a crook with his heart in the right place. Arrested on a charge of robbing a bank, on evidence so thin that only a police official can see it, she serves her sentence and then comes out, only to be mistaken for a noted female crook by Tom and his accomplice.

Adventures many and lurid take place before the two eventually find themselves on the right side of the law after all.

In the Paramount picture, *Big Brother*, Edith and Tom again play together, only this time it is Tom who

falls victim to the obtuseness of the law, and Edith who puts things right. There is no end to the trouble movie law will take to arrest the wrong man or perpetrate some other particularly obvious blunder. In the recently finished film *The Rat*, Ivor Novello is flung out of the court day after day when Mae Marsh is being tried for her life. Two policemen even take the trouble to see him home—instead of bringing him to the court as a witness!

Then, too, official representatives of the law are such extraordinarily tactless individuals. Their chief method of extracting information from anyone under arrest is to hector and bully, ask silly questions calculated to put anyone on their guard, and generally behave like overgrown schoolboys. A particularly good specimen of this type of man is shown in the European film *The Goose Woman*.*

"Might is Right" seems to be the slogan of movie police officials, and the way in which those brought up for judgment are handled would provide a first-class scandal for any enterprising weekly paper if they were in real life instead of reel life.

Poor Carol Dempster, in *Sally of the Sawdust*, gets hauled about by over-zealous policemen, spends a night in jail, and is bullied by a steely-eyed magistrate for



Above: Louise Dresser in "The Goose Woman" (1925)

misdeeds that she has never committed. But then, was there ever a Griffith heroine who didn't find herself accused of something?

Apparently the only upholders of the law and order who are not positively ridiculous—either intentionally or unintentionally—are those hard-bitten men of the North, the North-West Mounted, and an occasional Irish policeman of the Tom Moore type. But these, no doubt, are just the exceptions that prove the rule—that the Law's an ass and movie Law in particular is even sillier than that!

*Actually an American release from Universal Pictures, directed by Clarence Brown

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LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN

LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY
MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA

DIRECTED BY ERNST LUBITSCH, USA, 1925

CAST Ronald Colman, Irene Rich, May McAvoy, Bert Lytell, and Edward Martindel, with Carrie Daumery, Helen Dunbar, and Billie Bennett as the duchesses PRODUCTION Warner Bros. PRINT SOURCE Library of Congress

In June of 1925 *Motion Picture World* announced "Lady Windermere's Fan" Is Lubitsch's New Warner Film." Industry insiders must have marveled at the news that Rin Tin Tin, Warners' profitable pup, would soon be sharing space with the dead, gay, Irish playwright whose 1892 hit play was known for subversive epigrams like, "I can resist everything except temptation." Perhaps to explain these mismatched studio-mates, *Motion Picture World* continued: "the executors of Oscar Wilde's estate were violently opposed to a transfer of the play to the films. Consent was obtained only when the executors learned that 'Lady Windermere's Fan' would be placed in the hands of Ernst Lubitsch."

This was promotional piffle. According to film historian Charles Musser, Warner Bros. acquired rights not from Wilde's estate but from the Ideal Film Company, which had made a movie from the play in 1916. But this bit of studio make-believe does convey the reputation German-born Ernst Lubitsch had made for himself after a mere three years in Hollywood. If Rin Tin Tin was Warners' moneymaker, Lubitsch conferred prestige, a task he accomplished with a series of sophisticated comedies for the studio: *The Marriage Circle* (1924), *Three Women* (1924), and *Kiss Me Again* (1925, believed lost). But as he began work on *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and set himself the technical challenge of translating Wilde's verbal wit into a visual medium, Lubitsch's relationship with Warners was fraying. The studio had given the émigré director carte blanche, enabling him to develop the dryly suggestive comedic style that became known as

"the Lubitsch Touch," but brothers Harry and Jack never appreciated what they'd made possible. "HIS PICTURES GREAT BUT SUBTLE," Harry Warner once telegraphed brother Jack. For the Warners, "subtle" was not a compliment.

Mary Pickford brought Lubitsch from Berlin to Hollywood in 1922 on the strength of his international smash *Madame DuBarry* (1919), a sexy historical spectacle with a tragic ending released in the U.S. in 1920 as *Passion*. Pickford wanted Lubitsch for her transition to grown-up roles and 1923's *Rosita* was the result of their collaboration (after several false starts). The film is a *DuBarry*-style epic with a Hollywood happy ending, but the production was anything but happy for Lubitsch. He was greeted on his arrival by anti-German demonstrations, Louella Parsons quizzed him on his wartime activities, and the *Rosita* crew mocked his broken English. "Kommt Lubitsch nicht zurück?" ("Is Lubitsch coming back?"), asked Berlin's *Film-Kurier* in April 1923, and after *Rosita* it appeared likely.

However, Hollywood was sunny and stable after Germany's exponential inflation and political assassinations. Lubitsch enjoyed the wealth of resources Hollywood studios offered, like expert camera operators and no electricity shortages. And while he may have pioneered the path to California, fellow Germans and other continental colleagues followed—Pola Negri, Walter Laemmle, Paul Kohner, Wilhelm Dieterle—forming a community that softened the ground for the next wave of immigrants in 1933. But what probably clinched the director's decision to stay was Warners' offer of creative

control: "Lubitsch shall have the sole, complete and absolute charge of the production of each such photoplay, except ... in matters involving money," the six-picture contract read. That one exception—money—became a point of contention.

By the time he started work on *Windermere* Lubitsch had established a trusted team that included assistant and translator Henry (Heinz) Blanke, writer Hanns Kräly (a frequent Lubitsch collaborator back in Germany), and camera operator Charles Van Enger. He had established a work method, planning his pictures down to the last detail before rolling the camera. He'd also abandoned the big spectacles Hollywood—and Warner Bros.—expected of him, turning instead to the contemporary social comedies he'd made in Germany, but which had never reached U.S. audiences. He used his source material, usually obscure *Mitteuropa* plays, as a point of departure rather than a guide. Longtime Lubitsch collaborator Samson Raphaelson later told historian Herman Weinberg: "There was so incredibly little resemblance between any movie I ever made with Lubitsch and the original material, that the original material at best could be reduced to a page-and-a-half synopsis."

When the original material was written by Oscar Wilde, Lubitsch's cavalier approach attracted attention. "Epigrams on the printed page or on the stage are delightful," Lubitsch defended his strategy to the *New York Herald Tribune*, "but ... would much charm remain to long excerpts from Wilde's play if the audience had to ponder laboriously over the scintillating sentences on screen?" This quote is probably more promotional puffery—could Lubitsch, still struggling with English, have actually produced the alliterative "scintillating sentences on screen"? In fact, Wilde's play gave Lubitsch the perfect excuse to explore his favorite themes: wobbling marriages, the farcical pursuit of love, and the sexually aggressive woman who tramples on society's strictures and goes her way unpunished. Wilde's dialogue was beside the point.

In writing his play Wilde had taken a Victorian cliché—the outcast mother who reenters her daughter's life in time to save her from a fatal mistake—and shocked audiences by suggesting that the déclassé Mrs. Erlynne is actually superior to the puritanical Lady Windermere. In Lubitsch's further transformation, Mrs. Erlynne (Irene Rich) gains screen time and completely outshines the film's title character. Whether she's squeezing Lord Windermere (Bert Lytell) for money or manipulating her beau Lord Augustus (the scene-stealing Edward Martindel), Mrs. Erlynne is the film's true protagonist. Her triumphant exit with the befuddled Lord Augustus in tow is the comic punctuation that ends the film.

The critics were unanimous: "Der Herr Lubitsch has done magnificently," wrote Ted Shane in the *New Yorker*. "He has attempted and succeeded in transfilming a Wilde without the use of a single tinsel Wildean epigram." George T. Pardy in *Motion Picture News* used a musical metaphor, "It is no small feat to transpose an Oscar Wilde drama," while the *Los Angeles Times* described the film as "not a literal translation. It has instead the quality of being an impression of the original." Only Mordaunt Hall of the *New York Times* missed the point, complaining, "While Ernst Lubitsch's screen translation of Oscar Wilde's play, 'Lady Windermere's Fan,' is a worthy production ... it shrinks in importance beside the original effort." Critics singled out for praise the film's racetrack sequence, a tour-de-force montage of society gossips and lip-licking men peering at Mrs. Erlynne from every angle, during which Lubitsch wordlessly establishes the series of misinterpretations—just who is looking at whom, and why?—that drive the play's crucial misunderstanding.

Jack Warner had balked at the expense of the racetrack scene, which Lubitsch shot in Toronto for accuracy's sake (horses run clockwise in England and Canada, counterclockwise in the U.S.). Warners' deal with Lubitsch—prestige in exchange for control—was turning sour, and Lubitsch biographer

Scott Eyman charts the demise of their relationship with a flurry of archived telegrams. A month after *Windermere's* gala premiere in New York, complete with dancing girls and a giant fan in the prologue, Lubitsch asked to buy out his contract. He wanted to escape from the penny-pinching Warners and their desire for the *DuBarry*-like spectacle he'd outgrown. "DON'T ACT HASTY," Harry cabled from Europe, simultaneously cabling brother Jack, "LUBITSCH MUST MAKE MORE THRILLING PICTURE AND NOT WORRY SO MUCH ABOUT STORY." He repeated the advice in another cable to Lubitsch: "YOU HAVE PICKED YOUR OWN STORIES AND MADE YOUR OWN PICTURES WITHOUT INTERFERENCE BUT MADE THEM TOO SUBTLE THE WORLD WANTS THRILL AND EXCITEMENT STOP" to which Lubitsch replied, "YOU HAVE NO ONE BUT YOURSELF TO BLAME THAT MY TALENTS ARE WASTED THUSLY STOP" and again proposed a contract buyout. "TELL LUBITSCH

NOT TO ACT LIKE BABY," wired Harry to Jack. The wrangling continued through the production of Lubitsch's final Warner Bros. picture, *So This Is Paris* (1926), ending in August with MGM and Paramount footing the bill for Lubitsch's freedom.

As Lubitsch departed Warners, he left the ungrateful brothers one final gift: *The Jazz Singer*, which Lubitsch had asked the studio to purchase for him, sent Warners' stock soaring in 1929. Lubitsch, too, soared to new heights in the sound era, earning acclaim for a series of groundbreaking musicals starring Jeanette MacDonald, followed by a pair of ultra-urbane comedies, *Trouble in Paradise* and *Design for Living*. But all this was in the future. In 1926, a sublimely unaware Harry Warner wrote brother Abe of Lubitsch's contract: "It is a lucky star that this is off our hands."

— MONICA NOLAN



Pictured: May McAvoy and Ronald Colman

Great Adaptations

By Fritzi Kramer

"The book is always better!" Or is it? Silent cinema enjoys a close kinship with the written word and sometimes these remarkable films equal, surpass, or peacefully coexist beside their source material.

The Faithful

An adaptation that actually follows the book? Yes, it has been done in productions large and small. The 1924 version of *The Sea Hawk* makes nips and tucks but generally stays true to Rafael Sabatini's adventure novel. The 1912 one-reel Kalem adaptation of Thomas Moore's poem "You Remember Ellen" is titled exclusively with quotations from its source material.

The Forty-First (1927) is based on Boris Lavrenyov's haunting 1924 novella and tells the story of a sniper in the Russian revolutionary army and her prisoner, a tsarist officer. The Yakov Protazanov film successfully translates the dry humor and melancholy romance of the book, giving equal weight to both the violence and banality of war.

Jules Verne's whopping 1876 novel *Michel Strogoff* follows the hero's three-thousand-mile journey from St. Petersburg to Siberia. The screenplay for the 1926 epic, directed by Viktor Tourjansky, slims down flabby sequences, removes a few coincidences, and fleshes out the heroine—all welcome improvements—but remains faithful to the adventure, costs be damned. Ballrooms and bear fights and invading hordes and crossing snow-capped peaks ... it's all there in a sleek, nearly three-hour package.

Pruned Down

Admittedly, this is a more common film adaption

method: slice and slash and cut some more. Ernst Lubitsch's version of *Lady Windermere's Fan* does the unthinkable: it omits Oscar Wilde's shimmering repartee and gets away with it. Lubitsch replaces banter with lingering hands, stolen kisses, and knowing smiles, creating a film unfaithful to Wilde's words but true to his spirit.

Fox's 1922 adaptation of Alexandre Dumas's twelve-hundred-page *The Count of Monte Cristo* is so slimmed down that it even cuts the first three words of the title. Rather than being based directly on the famously massive novel, it was adapted from Charles Fechter's lite stage version. The screenplay trims away almost all the subplots and strains out any moral ambiguity, but the film is surprisingly slick, trading complexity for agility.

Censorship was likely a concern when Britain's Progress Film Company made their screen version of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* in 1921. No Hardy novel was likely to have been turned into a silent film without at least a few amputations but when the plot centers on wife-selling, the screenwriters had their work cut out. Taken as its own entity, the film works as a morality play and a celebration of love between father and daughter. Hardy gave his approval to the script and visited the production, later writing about his amusement at meeting his creations in the flesh, but he felt that the film was a "burlesque" that misrepresented his novel.

John Gilbert in *Monte Cristo* (1922)

Built Up

Sometimes the source for a film is a short story, poem, or song, none of which can usually provide enough content to fill out a feature on its own.

Joseph Hergesheimer creates a bucolic coming-of-age tale in his short story "Tol'able David" but David is the sole viewpoint character and the plot is too thin for a feature. The film opens up the story with the addition of a sweetheart for David, as well as glimpses beyond his own perspective, and gives audience plenty of one-on-one time to get to know David's engaging personality.

O. Henry's short story "A Retrieved Reformation" has been brought to the screen repeatedly as a feature even as it only runs a mere dozen pages. The silent feature versions are all adapted from Paul Armstrong's four-act play, which fills in back story, establishes the main character's path to reformation, and provides a snappier title: *Alias Jimmy Valentine*. While the gritty 1915 Maurice Tourneur-directed version makes clear that Jimmy is nobody to trifle with, focusing on violence within the gang and making the most of its real Sing Sing shooting location, the jazzy 1929 MGM film (released in both silent and sound editions) leaves prison and fisticuffs far behind and embraces Jimmy the trickster and lover.

Novel? What Novel?

Tossing out a significant portion of the original source material may seem extreme but there are films that survive or even benefit from such measures.



The Woman of Knockaloe, Hall Caine's grim novel, undergoes a complete remodel with the action transferred from the Isle of Man to rural France and a suicide-pact ending swapped out for Hollywood-friendly fare. The result is *Barbed Wire*, a P.O.W. love story in which a German soldier (Clive Brook) and a French farmer (Pola Negri) walk off into the sunset. However, altered screenplays do not always seek to shine things up. Gouverneur Morris's *The Penalty* is a bonkers novel turned into a bonkers Lon Chaney vehicle, but the book's happy ending is tossed out in favor of a more satisfying dramatic death for Chaney's gangster character.

The Son of the Sheik likewise benefits from giving the novel the old heave-ho. E.M. Hull's sequel to her runaway best-seller involves the lovers of the first book having twin boys and sending one to live in England while keeping the other in the desert. This sounds like the setup to a kind of orientalist *Parent Trap* and, while the idea of Rudolph Valentino playing a father and two sons would have likely appealed to his fans, the 1926 film sensibly amputates the English twin and a subplot involving German agents in favor of focusing on the romance and derring-do.



SEX IN CHAINS

LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY PHILIP CARLI

DIRECTED BY WILHELM DIETERLE, GERMANY, 1928

CAST Wilhelm Dieterle, Mary Johnson, Gunnar Tolnæs, Paul Henckels, Hans Heinrich von Twardowski, and Carl Goetz PRODUCTION Essen Film Society PRINT SOURCE Deutsche Kinemathek

The author of *Eros im Zuchthaus*, the basis for *Sex in Chains*, wasn't going to wait around for the world to change. Karl Plättner was well known to authorities as a troublemaker from his rebellious adolescence through his years as an ironworker and political organizer. Drafted at the start of World War I, he was discharged a year later with three permanently crippled fingers and joined the antiwar effort, getting repeatedly detained for distributing leaflets. While the old order crumbled—the Ottoman, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian empires fell almost simultaneously—he simmered in prison for a year and a half awaiting trial. When Germany began to roil with revolution in 1917, he was freed in a general amnesty. Fired up by what must have seemed like a red wave of worker uprisings about to sweep Europe, Plättner cofounded a branch of the International Communist Party and did battle in the streets against proto-fascist militia called *Freikorps*. When the November Revolution failed, Plättner became a man on the run, leading a Robin Hood-style gang that redistributed funds from banks, post offices, and company coffers. Caught in 1922, he was sentenced to a ten-year stretch and shuffled from institution to institution for bedeviling officials with demands to improve prison conditions. He also began gathering the research on the sexual life of inmates that resulted in his book describing the distress caused by prolonged denial of a basic human need, sex. Released in 1928 as the result of another amnesty, Plättner finished *Eros im Zuchthaus* with the help of Magnus Hirschfeld's Sex Institute, known for its advocacy of homosexual rights but which also provided health services like birth control advice in poor communities. Hirschfeld

himself wrote the preface for the book when the institute published it in 1929, complete with a set of form letters for taking action.

Scholar Christian Rogowski surmises that director Wilhelm Dieterle obtained a pre-publication copy of Plättner's book (through Austrian writer Franz Höllering) to make *Geschlecht in Fesseln*, or *Sex in Chains*. Already an accomplished actor and director by this time, Dieterle caught the acting bug at sixteen while apprenticing as a carpenter. Supporting himself working as a stagehand, he eventually excelled enough as an actor to join Max Reinhardt's famous Deutsche Theatre where intimate *kammerspiel* productions were revolutionizing theater. He earned praise for his expressive and commanding performances in films by some of the most innovative directors working in Germany, Richard Oswald, Paul Leni, and E.A. Dupont among them. Of his role as Valentin in F.W. Murnau's *Faust*, set designer Robert Herlth later said, "[the] mother's room became merely a frame for the robust present of Dieterle." In 1923, he self-financed his directing debut, *Der Mensch am Wege*, which he also wrote and starred in, a trend he maintained throughout his German career. By 1928, Dieterle had set up an independent production company with actress and writer Charlotte Hagenbruch, to whom he had been married since 1921.

For *Sex in Chains*, Plättner's research was streamlined into a single story of a man and a woman forced to endure a long separation. Dieterle had learned well how to transfer the intimacy of *kammerspiel* to the screen, creating a tender portrayal of the young married couple struggling in



the Weimar-era economy. The husband (played by Dieterle) suffers the subtle indignities of someone no longer able to provide and the wife (halo-haired Swedish actress Mary Johnson) tries to maintain appearances with neighbors and disapproving family. Moviegoers in postwar Germany would have been able to relate to the couple's fall from middle-class grace and Dieterle makes it easy for audiences to care.

Suddenly, their story takes a much darker turn. A cigarette girl at a nighttime beer garden to help make ends meet, the wife is sexually harassed by a violent customer, and her husband, waiting to escort her home, defends her in an escalating confrontation. From the coziness of home to a cramped cell of prison, the husband now faces the deprivations of incarceration, and his wife the absence of a breadwinner and lover. Prisoners are depicted as repressing sexual desire in increasingly

destructive ways, going mad doing so, or resigning themselves to homosexuality for the duration. As with the couple, Dieterle wants us to regard these men with compassion, showing one frustrated inmate sculpting a female figure from his bread ration, an incident preserved from Plättner's book. Dieterle's young lover, the fresh-faced Hans Heinrich von Twardowski, is portrayed with almost as much tenderness as the wife, the men's first assignation represented by a lingering shot of their fingers beginning to intertwine across bedposts. Even as the film is billed as gay-themed today, it falls far short of endorsing homosexuality especially as Twardowski's character reappears as a threat in the latter part of the film.

Dieterle's goal was to advocate for prison reform, specifically conjugal visits for inmates, so he tried hard to avoid arousing the outrage of moralists. He left out the more graphic elements in Plättner's

book and fleshed out the wife's storyline, giving her situation equal time on-screen. Critics deemed the effort a success. *Film-Kurier's* reviewer noted that the audience met it with "strong applause" and praised it as both entertaining and persuasive. *Reichsfilmblatt* reported that Dieterle "raises a delicate subject with seriousness." Still, many cuts were made by censors, in particular to the scene of the wife as she pounds on the prison door desperate to be reunited with her husband (Germany's "new woman" could not be so liberated that she actually wanted sex). There was no pleasing rightwing quarters, however, and Dieterle wrote a passionate article defending *Sex in Chains* against accusations as *Tendenzfilm*, or propaganda, a charge that threatened the film's tax status: "Tendentiousness as art! Tendentiousness toward making the subject matter come alive, not to bore, but to go ahead and entertain, to stimulate thinking." When a dry bureaucratic letter dismissed a last-ditch effort to ban the film—because it used government facilities in the production—it must have felt like vindication.

A Weimar citizen could have easily presumed that individual civil liberties would simply continue to advance. The interwar era saw plenty of volatility and despair but also openness to improving the lives and conditions of working people, increased independence of and respect for women (the Weimar constitution outlawed discrimination against women in the civil service), tolerance (in the big cities at least) toward new gender identities and the thriving Jewish population then stamping its enormous mark on the country's cultural life. But it took only ten years—from the beer-hall putsch in 1923 to the National Socialists victory in 1933—for Hitler to go from a fringe figure of ridicule to absolute dictator. The very year the Nazis seized power, *Sex in Chains* was permanently banned. That life could turn ugly all of a sudden was not merely a melodramatic device for movies.

Dieterle had already left for the U.S., accepting a studio offer to direct German-language versions

of talkies in 1930. He went on to become an A-list director in Hollywood, compiling a sizable and eclectic body of work, including a series of acclaimed biopics, one of which, 1937's *The Life of Emile Zola*, garnered him an Oscar nomination. He hadn't left his politics behind and directed the early antifascist film *Blockade* in 1938 and, in 1939, cofounded the antifascist publication *The Hollywood Tribune* with Hagenbruch and another German émigré director E.A. Dupont. His efforts got him "graylisted" during Hollywood's Red Scare and he eventually returned to Germany.

Karl Plättner had stayed. He came to prefer writing to street-fighting and distanced himself from International Communism with the rise of Stalin, but the Nazis already had him on their lists. He was sent to concentration camps in 1933, 1937, and, in 1939, was condemned to a long tortuous shuffle among the deadliest, Buchenwald included. He was miraculously alive when American troops arrived in 1945, and he and another prisoner cut through the fence to free themselves. Trying to make his way home, the fifty-two-year-old succumbed at a hospital in Freising a month after Victory in Europe was declared. We don't know what hopes, if any, Plättner still harbored for changing the world when he died.

— SHARI KIZIRIAN

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