

SAN FRANCISCO SILENT FILM FESTIVAL

A DAY OF SILENTS

DECEMBER 3, 2022 | CASTRO THEATRE



ADoS SCHEDULE

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2022

- 11 AM **BUSTER'S MECHANIZED MAYHEM**
Music by Wayne Barker
- 1 PM **FORBIDDEN PARADISE**
Music by Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra
- 3 PM **POUR DON CARLOS**
Music by the Sascha Jacobsen Ensemble
- 5 PM **THE CHEAT**
Music by Wayne Barker
- 7 PM **SHOW PEOPLE**
Music by Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra
- 9 PM **THE TOLL OF THE SEA**
Music by the Sascha Jacobsen Ensemble

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 2 BUSTER'S MECHANIZED MAYHEM**
Essay by Lea Stans
- 6 FORBIDDEN PARADISE**
Essay by Joseph McBride
- 10 IN THEIR OWN WORDS**
by Kate Saccone
- 12 POUR DON CARLOS**
Essay by Monica Nolan
- 16 THE CHEAT**
Essay by Daisuke Miyao
- 20 COLETTE'S CINEMA: THE CHEAT**
Reprint from the Parisian daily *Excelsior*
- 22 SHOW PEOPLE**
Essay by Lara Gabrielle
- 26 CUSTARD PIES AND LIVE ROUNDS**
by Fritz Kramer
- 28 THE TOLL OF THE SEA**
Essay by Katie Gee Salisbury
- 32 CONTRIBUTORS / ABOUT SFSFF**
- 34 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

MUSICIANS

WAYNE BARKER

Wayne Barker has garnered acclaim both for his original compositions and live performances in theater, most notably a Tony nomination for best original score on *Peter and the Starcatcher*. His numerous credits include composing piano music for Dame Edna Everage and appearing onstage for six years as Master of the Dame's Music.

MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA

As the Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra Rodney Sauer (piano), Britt Swenson (violin), David Short (cello), Brian Collins (clarinet), and Dawn Kramer (trumpet) revive the tradition of silent-film orchestras by culling historical libraries of sheet music for their accompaniments. The ensemble has recorded and toured widely, combining precision playing with expert musical selections to bring silent-era films to life.

SASCHA JACOBSEN ENSEMBLE

Primarily a bassist Sascha Jacobsen draws on a variety of musical styles from classical to jazz and Argentine Tango for his silent-film accompaniments. He has played with musicians as varied as the Kronos Quartet, Rita Moreno, and Randy Newman and has had his work commissioned by San Jose Chamber Orchestra, Berkeley Youth Symphony, and the San Francisco Arts Council, among others. Jacobsen has assembled two ensembles and will lead and play bass in both. For *Pour Don Carlos* he is joined by Carlos Caminos (guitar), Michele Walther (violin), and Sheldon Brown (flute/clarinet); and for *The Toll of the Sea* he is joined by Ken Cook (piano), Michele Walther (violin), and Sheldon Brown (flute/clarinet).



BUSTER'S MECHANIZED MAYHEM

MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY WAYNE BARKER

THE HIGH SIGN (1921) Directed by Buster Keaton. With Bartine Burkett, Ingram B. Pickett, and Al St. John **THE ELECTRIC HOUSE** (1922) Directed by Buster Keaton and Eddie Cline. With Virginia Fox and Joe Roberts **THE COAT** (1921) Directed by Buster Keaton and Malcolm St. Clair. With Virginia Fox and Joe Roberts **PRODUCTION** Buster Keaton Productions **PRINT SOURCE** Lobster Films

What a magical place Buster Keaton's mind must have been. Most people might be tempted to regard a chair as merely a chair, or an automobile as simply an automobile. Keaton looked at them and beheld endless comic possibilities. And not only possibilities for the objects themselves, but also for the spaces around them and any tantalizing proximities to other objects. For this born comedian, who started performing in his parents' vaudeville act at the age of three, such an elastic imagination came naturally to him.

His imagination was never more engaged than when it came to designing gags involving machinery. Keaton had a natural affinity for all things mechanical and by his teens was creating his own Rube Goldberg-esque contraptions. During his idyllic summers at Lake Muskegon—the Keaton family home in Michigan during vaudeville's off-season—his playful concoctions became the stuff of legend. To trick gullible passersby Keaton set up a fishing pole whose line ran underwater to a nearby clubhouse so friends could tug it like a fish was on the hook. At a neighbor's house he set up an "alarm clock" using a system of weights, counterweights, and a motor to snatch off blankets and make the bed rock like an amusement park ride. Young

Keaton's crowning achievement was rigging that same neighbor's outhouse so each of the four walls would collapse outwards—a practical joke on the strangers who used it without permission.

His inventiveness was very much in the spirit of the early 20th century, when the old horse-and-buggy way of life was rapidly transforming into the modern era of speeding automobiles and electric conveniences. The flood of new technologies—the brightening of city blocks with incandescent lamps, the astonishing sight of an occasional airplane overhead—was greeted with excitement by many and head-scratching by some. These changes were quickly reflected in popular culture, in songs like "Live Wires Rag" and "Come, Josephine in My Flying Machine" and in comic strips such as Frank Crane's *Willie Westinghouse Edison Smith, The Boy Inventor*. It crept into vaudeville acts like "The Graphophone Girl," for which Adelaide Francis recorded her own voice and then interacted charmingly with the recordings onstage, while "Johnny's New Car" showcased future silent comedy star Harry Langdon's frustrations with an ornery automobile. And moving pictures, of course, quickly rose from their humble origins in traveling shows to become a worldwide craze, delivering a form of entertainment only possible through newfangled machinery.



An admirer of moving pictures—he recalled seeing the 1914 landmark comedy *Tillie’s Punctured Romance* four times—Keaton was the most intrigued by the movie camera itself, longing to know precisely how the extraordinary apparatus worked. Opportunity finally came in 1917 when he was invited to the set where Roscoe Arbuckle was making a two-reeler, *The Butcher Boy*. Keaton immediately expressed interest in the technical side of filmmaking and the genial Arbuckle obliged, taking apart one of his costly movie cameras for him piece by piece. It’s said that Keaton practically climbed inside it. Already enthralled by what it

could capture on screen—“Nothing you could stand on, feel, or see was beyond the range of the camera,” he later said in his autobiography—the practical side of how a shutter turned static images into life was what made Keaton fall hard for movies.

That same visit not only resulted in Keaton’s first scene on film, a gooey sequence involving a bucket of molasses, but also his decision to leave the stage for motion pictures. The gleeful, slapstick-infused world of Comique (as Arbuckle’s studio was called) was an ideal environment for the creative ex-vaudevillian, especially since Arbuckle welcomed all his players’ ideas. At times, suspiciously Keaton-esque inventions show up in the Arbuckle shorts, like the star on the dressing room door in 1918’s *Back Stage* that moves from door to door as a passive-aggressive punishment to vain actors deemed unworthy of it. But when Keaton got his own studio two years later, his creative powers in engineering were truly unleashed.

His first solo short, *The High Sign* (filmed in early 1920 but not released until 1921), didn’t waste time integrating humorous contraptions into the plot. Hired to work at a shooting gallery without any shooting experience, Buster is informed by his new boss, “I want to hear the bell ring every time you shoot.” Unfazed, he secretly rigs up a series of levers and pulleys with a string attached to a little dog’s collar. Stepping on a lever lowers a bone, the dog lunges for it, and the movement rings a bell. Keaton’s apparent shooting prowess leads to another gig as a bodyguard for a hotly-pursued client whose house is outfitted with numerous trapdoors for quick getaways. The film’s biggest set piece features a long shot of an acrobatic chase scene where Buster and the villains

tumble from room to room and floor to floor like a violent dollhouse come to life.

Such contraptions, while cartoony, are still anchored in the real world. Keaton would occasionally indulge in surreal gags for his short films, such as drawing a hook on the wall to hang his hat in *The High Sign*. In *The Goat* he indulged a bit more. After spending the bulk of the film being thoroughly in the wrong place at the wrong time, Keaton is chased by an angry police chief through an apartment building. Repeatedly trying to escape on the elevator, he simply moves the arrow that indicates each floor and *voilà*, instant arrival. In a final touch of Looney Tunes logic, he lures the police chief into the elevator and cranks the arrow past the top floor, launching it through the building’s roof.

Keaton abandoned this type of surreal comedy when he started making features. “We had to stop doing impossible gags,” he later explained. “They had to be believable or your story wouldn’t hold up.” *The Electric House*, his seventeenth short, is much in the spirit of those future features, showing his ability to run amok with zany machinery without violating the laws of physics. After Buster the botany major accidentally winds up with a diploma for electrical engineering, he’s hired to equip a home with electricity. Naturally he fills the house with all manner of gadgetry, from an escalator to an elaborate dishwasher to a tiny train track that delivers meals from the kitchen to the table. It’s all greeted with delight by the owner ... until someone starts messing with the wires.

Keaton was far from alone in using mechanical devices for on-screen gags. They show up frequently in silent films, from 1904’s bizarre *Dog Factory*, where sausages fed into a “Patent Dog Transformer” turn into live dogs, to 1926’s

He Done His Best, in which Charley Bowers as a put-upon dishwasher invents a bulky machine that singlehandedly runs the entire restaurant. But it’s Keaton we associate with machines the most. Perhaps it’s the contrast between his stoic face and the chaos of malfunctioning escalators or racing trains, or perhaps it’s because his affection for these things often shines through.

Some have tried to analyze Keaton’s relationship with the mechanical from the grittier viewpoint of early 20th century man being pushed rather unwillingly into a strange, machine-dominated world. Critic James Agee wrote of Keaton in 1949: “As he ran afoul of locomotives, steamships, prefabricated and over-electrified houses, he put himself through some of the hardest and cleverest punishments ever designed for laughs.” Curator Iris Barry, writing that same year, put it another way: “... Keaton moves in a mechanized world of today like the inhabitant of another planet. He gazes with frozen bewilderment at a nightmare reality. Inventions and contrivances like deck-chairs and railroad engines seem insuperably animate to him ...” It’s worth noting that when Keaton was asked about the Barry quote, he blithely sidestepped any pretentiousness and answered simply, “Well, I guess I found out that I get my best material working with something like that.”

— LEA STANS



FORBIDDEN PARADISE

MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA

DIRECTED BY ERNST LUBITSCH, USA, 1924

CAST Pola Negri, Rod La Rocque, Adolphe Menjou, Pauline Stark, Nick De Ruiz, and Fred Malatesta

PRODUCTION Famous Players-Lasky Corp. PRINT SOURCE Museum of Modern Art

IT'S nothing short of scandalous how poorly treated Ernst Lubitsch's American silent period has been. Fortunately that has begun to change with the Museum of Modern Art's recent restorations of *Rosita* (1923) and *Forbidden Paradise* (1924), the fourth film he made in Hollywood. Lubitsch came to America in 1922, imported from Germany by Mary Pickford, with his exalted reputation earned largely through his historical spectacles. Those grandly opulent and racy films managed to rival Hollywood's spectacles in scope while outdoing them with a wider range and depth and more truthful depiction of human behavior. But he was not all about spectacles, as Europe already knew and Hollywood soon learned. As Jean Renoir wrote of Lubitsch in 1967, "His films were loaded with a kind of wit which was specifically the essence of the intellectual Berlin in those days. This man was so strong that when he was asked by Hollywood to work there, he not only didn't lose his Berlin style, but he converted the Hollywood industry to his own way of expression." Lubitsch had developed his talents in Germany over a diverse display of cinematic material that provided a bounteous foundation for the new developments his style underwent in America, including more intimate comedy-dramas and a send-up of the spectacle genre with *Forbidden Paradise*.

A loose, loopy comedy set in a mythical kingdom straddling the modern day and what seems like

the 18th century, Paramount's *Forbidden Paradise* is an experimental film that plays daringly with genre expectations. It's a playful riff on some of the legends about Russian Czarina Catherine the Great. *Forbidden Paradise* was adapted by Hans Kräly and Agnes Christine Johnston from the play *The Czarina* by Lajos Biró and Melchior Lengyel (Lengyel later provided the story material for Lubitsch's *Angel*, *Ninotchka*, and *To Be or Not to Be*).

Pola Negri, who made several films in Germany with Lubitsch, including their landmark 1919 spectacle *Madame DuBarry*, had come to Hollywood a little before him. She reunites with the director as "Queen Catherine," providing one of the film's numerous points of connections with his German spectacles. But *Forbidden Paradise* seems positively surreal in its approach to "history." The queen wears dazzling modern gowns and sports a bobbed 1920s hairdo, and her suave, cynical chamberlain (Adolphe Menjou) rides through the countryside in an open automobile to defeat a threatened rebellion by brandishing a checkbook as his very modern weapon of choice. Lubitsch is indulging his stylistic and narrative whims with abandon in this delightful film. Negri is much more relaxed and natural than in the German spectacles, bringing a sense of modernity and spontaneity to her sexually liberated character, and the film's light tone and playful style make the mood infectious.

Before its restoration by MoMA, *Forbidden Paradise* could be seen only in poor dupe prints of a condensed version missing more than a fifth of its original length. This lavish Paramount production was neglected by the studio, as happened with most silent films. It survived in Czechoslovakian and Russian archives as well as at the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York, and in the American Film Institute collection at the Library of Congress. Some scenes are still missing (about ten percent of the original), but the seventy-three-minute MoMA version is much fuller than the choppy, blurry versions available for viewing in recent years. The film's most incisive Lubitsch Touch has the rebel general (Nick De Ruiz) clutching his sword when confronted by the chamberlain but relaxing his grip when Menjou's cigar-holding hand, also in close-up, pulls his checkbook from a coat pocket. In some dupe copies, the scene went by so quickly

that it was barely intelligible. But in this restoration, the rhythm of those intercut close-ups is graceful, and the Touch makes its point as wittily as one might expect from Lubitsch at his best.

The vaguely Russian (or Balkan) sets by Hans Dreier are at once impressive and bizarre—Catherine's castle is decorated with elaborate conical set pieces that look like giant artichokes. Late in the film, Catherine dashes around desperately, a tiny figure in huge empty halls, as her rebellious army masses outside, joined by the mutinous palace guards. But the rebellion is quickly and humorously dispelled when Menjou returns from the rebel headquarters to report that he's bought them off, and they all declare renewed fealty to the queen. Until that point, most of the action, so to speak, takes place in the queen's intimate, relatively modest private quarters, mostly her boudoir, office, and antechamber.

Unlike in his German spectacles, which sometimes draw comedy from history but still are essentially dramas, the political level of *Forbidden Paradise* is a deliberate joke. The queen does not seem unduly despotic (at least we don't see much of her effect on the common people), but her troops are whipped into rebellion by a male chauvinist soldier who objects to their being commanded by a woman, an attitude the film treats as absurd. Many of Catherine's soldiers didn't seem to object to her rule earlier, especially since she rewards her sexual conquests with the "Order of the Star," pinning large medals in the shape of a starburst on their tunics. The doltish young leading man, Alexei (Rod La Rocque), a lieutenant promoted to head of the palace guard because the queen has the hots for him, is so proud of his star that his chest actually swells, bursting a button (Josef von Sternberg borrowed the medal gag for his kinky 1934 film about Catherine, *The Scarlet Empress*). There's a charming comic Touch in *Forbidden Paradise* of the diminutive queen pulling a stool over with her foot so she can stand on it when she kisses Alexei. His mood is soon deflated when he attends a banquet filled entirely with officers wearing identical medals. The young officer already is wrestling with conflicted emotions over Catherine's seductive tactics, since he is engaged to one of her ladies-in-waiting.

Lubitsch's mischievous mixing of periods in *Forbidden Paradise* is his way of comically illustrating the saying *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Nevertheless, in *Forbidden Paradise*, he is dealing with a country that evokes elements of his father's ancestral homeland, the site of the recent Bolshevik revolution. Lubitsch presented that land as ruled by barbaric methods of varying political ideologies not only in *Ninotchka*, his occasionally stinging 1939 satire of Stalinism, but also in *The Patriot* (1928), his last historical

spectacle, whose storyline justifies the assassination of the mad Czar Paul I, Catherine's son. The mockery of the political goings-on in *Forbidden Paradise* reflects some of Lubitsch's skepticism about his ancestral land, whose anti-Semitism and despotism had caused his father to flee to Germany, but it conveys the director's views in a more lightly satirical vein than *The Patriot*. Catherine may be a tyrant by profession, but an oddly sympathetic one, devoted primarily to her own pleasure and amusement in toying with men. When one (Alexei) finally denies her, she simply turns, with the encouragement of his pimpish chamberlain, to a new sex object, the Spanish ambassador (Fred Malatesta). The film ends with a Lubitsch door gag as the ambassador leaves her chambers wearing the ubiquitous star.

Lubitsch was scheduled to direct a 1945 remake of *Forbidden Paradise*, *A Royal Scandal*, but he proved too ill to do more than supervise (Otto Preminger took over directorial duties). Talk-heavy, ponderous in its humor, *A Royal Scandal* shines a spotlight on the contrasting virtues of the silent version and its romping, insouciant style. The world-weary Tallulah Bankhead gives a campy performance as Catherine the Great that pales in contrast to the genuinely sexy jollity of Pola Negri's spirited characterization of Catherine's hybrid reincarnation.

— JOSEPH McBRIDE

Adapted from *How Did Lubitsch Do It?* by Joseph McBride.

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IN THEIR OWN WORDS

An Imaginary Roundtable with Three Scenarists

Moderated by KATE SACCONI

It's impossible to divorce scriptwriting in the silent era from the many women all over the world who contributed to its development. Women, in the words of film historian Donna R. Casella, "did not struggle to be a part of the growing industry of scenario writing in its early days, for women dominated the industry," especially in the United States. Today's program features four films written or cowritten by three of the era's most successful American scenarists: Agnes Christine Johnston (*Forbidden Paradise*, *Show People*), Jeanie Macpherson (*The Cheat*), and Frances Marion (*The Toll of the Sea*). What follows is an imaginary conversation with these women, for which I selectively pulled from their articles and screenwriting manuals in order to provide a glimpse onto their attitudes and personalities, but which by no means exhaustively represents their opinions.

KATE SACCONI: Agnes Christine Johnston wrote four comedies specifically for Marion Davies. What is it like to write or adapt comedies compared to dramas?

AGNES CHRISTINE JOHNSTON: Comedy is harder to write than drama, because it is more true to life, because it is simpler. And because it is harder, it is more fun, just as tennis is lots jollier than croquet. After writing a tragic drama I'm as gay as a lark, but nothing sobers me like the composition of a side-splitting comedy. I guess it's what James or some psychologist or other calls "reaction."

SACCONI: The tension between comedy and drama is parodied in *Show People*. Peggy sees dramatic acting as the artistically meaningful end goal professionally, while Billy believes that if you make the audience laugh, you make them happy, and that's more important.

JOHNSTON: Aside from the fact that people want light entertainment now more than ever, because there is so much darkness in the world, is the element that humor has in all success. [But actually] the comedy-drama is particularly adapted to the photoplay. For lacking the spoken word, the picture

must be ever-changing, must be vital. It must have light and shade.

SACCONI: *Forbidden Paradise* definitely has both light and shade, as you say.

JOHNSTON: Another device, which is just beginning to have its place in the moving picture, is the comedy climax. The transition from tragedy to comedy, that surprises your audience. It's sweet music to mine ears, when I sit watching an audience watching one of my pictures and hear that sudden startled gasp, which breaks into a chuckle and ends in a roar of laughter.

SACCONI: *The Cheat*, which follows Edith's myriad selfish acts, certainly doesn't end in a roar of laughter. But while it deals with more dramatic issues of deceit and possessiveness, it isn't preachy.

JEANIE MACPHERSON: A photoplay may instruct, may elevate, may inspire, and at the same time entertain. But the writer who sets out to put a sermon into a play is apt to make a sorry mess of it. When he finishes, he is unlikely to have either a good sermon or an entertaining photoplay.

SACCONI: *The Cheat* is also a good example of economic storytelling. Scenes don't feel superfluous.



FRANCES MARION



AGNES CHRISTINE JOHNSTON



JEANIE MACPHERSON



MACPHERSON: The simple plot has the advantage of clarity and directness in presenting its message. I find in a great many pictures that the writers deviate from their main theme—they have two or three themes wandering through the story, which necessarily makes it complicated and hard to follow. If the writer will take a simple single theme, then work up the detail, decorate it with embroidery and lace, every little bit different from the last, but have each bit of trimming pertain directly to the main theme, he will have a much better story. Instead of that, writers branch off with a counterplot or sub-plot which is upsetting and makes the story hard to follow.

FRANCES MARION: There seems to be considerable misunderstanding among amateur writers as to what a theme is. A theme is not a plot. *The theme is the underlying idea, the aim, the implication of the plot; it is the truth that the story proves. It helps to give that logical coherence that makes the story a whole.*

SACCONI: How do you define plot in screenwriting? *The Toll of the Sea*, which follows the *Madame Butterfly* story rather closely, shows the tragic repercussions of a Chinese woman's affair with an American man.

MARION: *Plot is the design, pattern or outline of the story action.* It is a string of relevant and

dramatic situations, preferably rising out of character and affecting it, and woven together in such sequence and ascending strength as to make an interesting story.

SACCONI: All three of you had prolific writing careers that extended into the sound era. In closing, do you have any thoughts on what it means to be a screenwriter?

MARION: You are preparing the story for visual presentation, and it is necessary to visualize your material as it will appear on the screen. Although you must first present the story in words, it eventually will be seen, not read; and whatever is in it that cannot be expressed on the screen is useless.

MACPHERSON: View life from the eye of the aviator, not from the eye of the caterpillar. The photodrama, above all other forms that the world has ever known, is the drama of the masses. It is a vast audience, indeed, this audience of the photodramatist.

JOHNSTON: It does give you a kind of thrill when you think that the situations you devise cause laughter or tears or excitement for millions of people all over the world, and influence them, too, from styles in clothes, interior decorations and love making to ideals and standards. I can't explain it all myself. All I know is that once you've been in the game, you can't stay away from it.



POUR DON CARLOS

MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY THE SASCHA JACOBSEN ENSEMBLE

DIRECTED BY MUSIDORA, FRANCE, 1921

CAST Musidora, Stephen Weber, Abel Tarride, and Chrysius PRODUCTION Films Musidora PRINT

SOURCE SFSFF Collection

■ In 1920, when Musidora, beloved worldwide as the villainous Irma Vep, announced her plans to adapt the popular novel *Pour Don Carlos* and play its heroine Allegria, she took pains to assure her fans that she would deliver the thrills they'd come to expect. "I promise you that Allegria will kill at least one person and cause the suffering of quite a few others." The actress-turned-director was embarking on her biggest film production yet and cannily aligned her starring role with the fictional character that had made her famous. At the same time, she downplayed her role as the film's writer-producer-director; on its release its direction was credited to Jacques Lasseyne, an ex-soldier with no film experience who had been imposed on her as part of the production deal. This counterpoint of flaunting then minimizing her power was a persistent rhythm in Musidora's career, illustrating both the strength of her acting persona and its limitations. For a long time, Musidora's reputation as an actress has overshadowed her achievements as a director, visual artist, author, satirist, and, later, film archivist. *Pour Don Carlos*, initially believed lost and now restored, opens our eyes to the full range of Musidora's significance to silent-era film.

Musidora's appearance in Feuillade's *Les Vampires* made her rich and famous, adored by the Surrealists, and forever remembered as cinema's first vamp. But this stratospheric success was a double-edged sword that freed her to pursue her

many creative ambitions while simultaneously constricting her as surely as the scandalously snug black bodysuit she wore in her iconic role. Exactly when the actress moved behind the camera and the extent of her directorial contributions is still being deciphered. She was credited as director for only two films initially, but scholars have speculated that she began directing as early as 1918's *La Flamme Cachée* (believed lost), a collaboration with her longtime friend, the writer Colette. Later in life Musidora said that the film with Colette led her to make *Pour Don Carlos*, whose scenario "took a year of work and 500,000 francs." Musidora acquired the rights to Pierre Benoît's novel before it was even published. Her production came hot on the heels of Jacques Feyder's adaptation of Benoît's first novel, the colonial fantasia *L'Atlantide*; Feyder reputedly wanted to cast Musidora as *L'Atlantide's* femme fatale but she was busy making her own film.

Benoît's exotic adventure stories typically featured titillating man-eaters and *Pour Don Carlos* is no exception. Critics agreed that the role of Allegria was made for Musidora—her character, whose fate is foretold in the opening credits, kidnaps, blackmails, and murders her way to a violent death. Allegria Petchart is a fervent Spanish Carlist, a supporter of the pretender to the Spanish throne, Don Carlos. The story begins when Allegria entangles an unsuspecting French couple in the Carlist cause. Olivier de Préneste (Stephen Weber) is initially charged by the foreign minister with

pushing the rebels back over the border into Spain, an effort Allegria quickly short circuits. Her strategy is to abduct, befriend, then convert his fiancée Lucile (Chrysiás) to the Carlist cause, and in so doing gain the upper hand over Olivier. Her plan works like a charm and before audiences can say “what’s a Carlist?” Olivier has abandoned his safe bureaucratic job to fight shoulder to shoulder with the insurgents. Meanwhile, Allegria watches over ingenu Lucile whose ruffles and flounces are a telling contrast to Allegria’s mannish garb.

The irony of “Captain” Allegria’s prominent role in the Carlist army is that Carlism was essentially a conservative movement whose origins lie in the rejection of female royal succession in general and Queen Isabella II (who ascended the throne at age three in 1833) in particular. The movement persisted as a rural, reactionary force against liberal attempts to modernize Spain throughout the 19th and 20th centuries; the Don Carlos of this film (who appears in a brief, wordless flashback) was actually the fourth in a series of pretenders who hung around Europe waiting for the next uprising. Even before the book and film, Carlism had a history as entertainment for Spain’s bemused French neighbor. In a 1921 article on the film, Benoît recounts how French Basque families in the 1870s rewarded their children’s good behavior by taking them to the Spanish border to watch the Carlist skirmishes. Jacques Lasseyné, the film’s titular director, was actually Jaime de Lasuen, Italian-born scion of a distinguished Carlist family who had made France his home. After he helped Benoît with the novel’s historical background, Benoît insisted Musidora hire him, although his actual role seems limited to location scout and history consultant.

Viewers are advised to let the Carlism blur into soft focus; the war functions primarily as a tense

background for the adventures of Allegria, Olivier, and Lucile. Instead, audiences can drink up the stunning use of the Basque locations and Musidora’s powerhouse performance as Allegria. We first meet the character in male drag, tough and unflinching as she confronts her prisoner Olivier; next she is cheek to cheek with Lucile, both of them in Grecian style gowns. By the end, she is a fugitive, her costume now a shabby skirt and tunic with a borrowed shawl that keeps slipping off her shoulders. “Ladies don’t run around without socks,” a Spanish general sneers at her. He soon learns that shod or sockless, Allegria is still calling the shots. He is her prey, as she flirts and flashes a little skin, embarking on a deadly seduction in the bloody tradition of Biblical heroine Judith.

The film’s style evolves as well, from interior scenes heavy with exposition to stunning battles, retreats, and escapes, which pull the viewer into a narrative that seems to diverge from the tale told by the intertitles. Although we’re informed that Allegria is torn between her love for Olivier and her friendship with Lucile, what we see is a woman who embraces danger while ensuring her French friends make it to safety. The final scenes intercut Olivier and Lucile now reunited in Biarritz with Allegria hiding out on a cliff overlooking the sea as the soldiers close in. While they lounge in a rose garden, Allegria grabs a rifle and points it at her pursuers, a slight smile playing over her face. Her energetic defiance in the face of death seems somehow preferable to the idleness of the pallid pair she’s saved.

This is a drastic change from the novel, which ends with Olivier waiting for the uncertain return of Allegria and Lucile, last seen sailing away together to an unknown future. Musidora explained in a 1948 interview that this ending was “too Parisian,” strongly hinting at Allegria’s bisexuality. She also

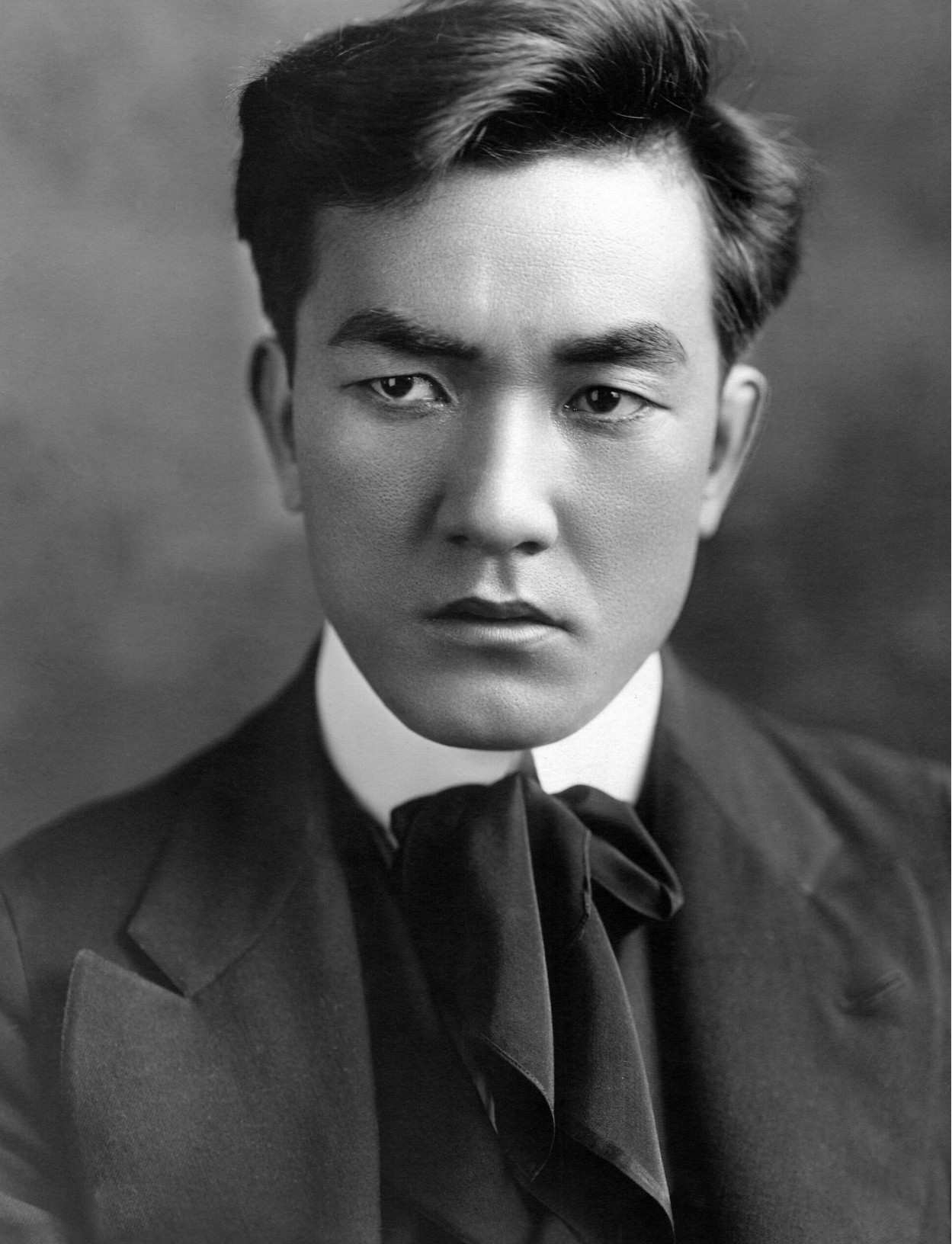
wanted a showstopper to rival Feyder’s *L’Atlantide*, which beat Musi’s film to theaters by a few months and features a fabulous death scene for its star Stacia Napierkowska. Musidora described filming Allegria’s burial in a letter to Pierre Benoît, which shows her enthusiasm for this acting-directing tour de force: “I wanted my face to be covered like my body, so that the impression of getting buried would be genuine. I took another deep breath, and searched for total immobility. And I gave the sign: ‘Action ...’ The first scoop of ground fell on my chin and cheeks ... The second covered my eyes. The third left only the tip of my nose free. The ultimate, heavy one, hid my face completely.”

Critics universally praised Musidora’s performance, but *Pour Don Carlos* left Films Musidora in a financial hole; she had not skimmed on the

production costs and she was forced to shorten her three-hour film for its Paris and Madrid premieres in December of 1921, more than a year after the shooting had wrapped. But even truncated, and with the last close-up on Musi’s buried face sadly lost to us, *Pour Don Carlos* is a triumph. With it Musidora stretched both her acting and directing chops, creating a more complex character than her earlier bad girls, completing Allegria’s transformation from villainess to heroine by the time of the powerful burial scene. Friend and critic Colette enthused in 1921, “You are absolutely remarkable in it; the final part, which belongs to you, is truly, as far as you’re concerned, flawless ... did you hear the spontaneous applause at your death?”

— MONICA NOLAN





THE CHEAT

MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY WAYNE BARKER

DIRECTED BY CECIL B. DEMILLE, USA, 1915

CAST Sessue Hayakawa, Fannie Ward, Jack Dean, and Judge James Neill **PRODUCTION** Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company **PRINT SOURCE** Lobster Films

On December 13, 1915, *The Cheat*, produced at the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company, directed by acclaimed theater director Cecil B. DeMille, and starring Fannie Ward, renowned actress from the London and New York stages, made its debut in the United States. Depicting an interracial relationship between a white middle-class woman and a Japanese art dealer that ends tragically, the film was a hit. Surprisingly, Fannie Ward was not the one who captured the audiences' imaginations.

Meanwhile back at home, *The Cheat* stirred up a considerable amount of negative controversy. From the white patriarchal perspective of the time, the sexual and economic transgressions of Fannie Ward's character, who abandons Protestant ethics with her reckless spending, not to mention cavorting with a foreigner, represent the alarming consequences of the suffrage and reform movements of the early 20th century. As a result, women and immigrants were now more visible not only in the workplace but also in spheres of

SURPRISINGLY, FANNIE WARD WAS NOT THE ONE WHO CAPTURED THE AUDIENCES' IMAGINATIONS.

It was supporting actor Sessue Hayakawa, originally from Japan, who became an overnight sensation—and not only in the U.S. When *The Cheat* opened at the Cinéma Omnia-Pathé in Paris in the summer of 1916, the French were bowled over by Hayakawa, including the writer Colette, then contributing to a Paris daily. She praised him effusively in her short review of the film, going so far as to recommend his performance as a kind of master class for actors: "As their first model, I offer this Asiatic artist whose powerful immobility can express everything. Let our aspiring cineastes see how, while his face is still, his hand continues the thought begun."

commercialized leisure. (For instance, in *The Cheat*, Hayakawa's character hosts an evening ball for the Red Cross Bazaar of Long Island where Ward's character works as a treasurer.) Such developments appeared to be loosening white masculinity's privileged grip on political legitimacy, cultural authority, and social control. But by the end of *The Cheat* all is well is their world. The white woman is ultimately protected under the wing of her husband, and the non-white character is excluded from society. The film's overarching story is an attempt to coerce the audience into accepting this racist and patriarchal stance as the natural order of things.

Some audiences recognized *The Cheat* for what it was and when it opened at the Tally Theater in Los Angeles in late December 1915, the Japanese American newspaper *Rafu Shimpo* started a protest campaign against it. Their hope was to prevent any further escalation of the racial prejudice their community already faced. *Rafu Shimpo* was particularly severe on the Japanese character played by Hayakawa. One anonymous report stated in an emotional tone:

No Japanese has ever put a burning branding iron on the neck of a beautiful white woman in the frenzy of disappointed love. Sessue Hayakawa did. None among the sixty million people of the Japanese race has ever been lynched miserably by white people ... Sessue Hayakawa, who do you think you are? Don't you have any blood of the Japanese race? Being used as a tool by anti-Japanese exhibitors and leaving a brutal impression on Japanese people, you are either foolish or insane. I have no idea what to think of you, you traitor to your country!

In response to the criticism, Hayakawa published a note of apology in *Rafu Shimpo* on December 29: "Sincere Notice: It is regrettable that the film *The Cheat*, which was exhibited at the Tally Theater on Broadway in Los Angeles, unintentionally offended the feelings of the Japanese people in the United States. From now on, I will be very careful not to harm Japanese communities."

The *Rafu Shimpo* reporters had good reason to believe that the savage depiction of *The Cheat's* Japanese art dealer would worsen anti-Japanese sentiment, especially on the West Coast where anti-Japanese movements had been concentrated since the early 1900s. While the American people

largely admired Japan's fast-paced modernization since welcoming Western trade in the 1850s, racism against the Japanese ramped up after Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, which put the country's growing military power on display for the whole world. Anxiety built at the prospect of Japanese imperialist expansion into China, the Philippines, Hawaii, and the U.S. mainland. The press stoked fears of a "yellow peril," a term popularized in 1898 when Kaiser Wilhelm called for European colonization of China, and spread a negative image of Japanese immigrants as ruthless agents sent by Tokyo set on economic domination of the West.

Labor unions in particular latched onto the lie. The Union Labor Party in San Francisco, which had a strong influence on city policymaking, insisted that Japanese immigrants achieved their working opportunities "unfairly" or "dishonorably." In February 1905, a series of articles that regarded Japanese immigration as the "problem of the day" appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* claiming that Japanese immigrants posed "a threat to American working men, American women, schoolchildren and the white race in general" because they were unable or unwilling to assimilate to the Anglo-American way of life. Valentine Stuart McClatchy, owner of the *Sacramento Bee* and an anti-Japanese agitator based in San Francisco, referred to Japanese immigrants as an "incoming yellow tide" and formed the Asiatic Exclusion League in May 1905 to influence policy. The organization changed its name in 1920 to the Japanese Exclusion League of California and lobbied against immigration, and for worse, through World War II.

The *Rafu Shimpo* reporters' fears became a reality right away. Only a few days after the release of *The Cheat*, *Rafu Shimpo* reported an incident: "Bad

boys, who were crowded in front of the Tally Theater and crying out anti-Japanese words, lynched a Japanese noodle shop owner, who came out of the theater as Hayakawa was lynched in the courtroom scene." Its campaign against *The Cheat* continued after Hayakawa's apology and news of it reached across the Pacific to Japan where the actor became introduced to his countrymen as someone recklessly enhancing anti-Japanese sentiment. When *The Cheat* was re-released in the United States in 1918, Hayakawa's character was changed from Japanese to Burmese via intertitle in order not to upset the alliance formed between the United States and Japan during World War I.

For a long time the only version that circulated had the revised intertitles and murky imagery. In 2008 I was able to see George Eastman Museum's 35mm restoration, with crisper images and Hayakawa's character as a Japanese art dealer again. While the festival is showing a version by Lobster Films that retains the 1918 intertitles, it is derived from DeMille's personal 16mm copy, the same source material used for the Eastman print. Both versions offer the opportunity to see the qualities that made the film such a revelation to French and American movie reviewers at the time, including the innovative Rembrandt-like low-key lighting, achieved by cinematographer Alvin Wyckoff, which bathes characters in stunning darkness but for a single source of illumination from the side. In the opening shot, this lighting technique is used to ominous effect, enhancing the villainy of the Hayakawa character.



Both versions also reveal the details of DeMille's careful set design. The Japanesque *shoji* room where Hayakawa seduces a white woman is decorated with many Japanese goods. On the back wall is a painting of *Fūjin*, the Japanese god of the wind, which I first noticed watching the Eastman print and recognized again in Lobster's version. While I can't identify it conclusively, the style of the painting resembles the work of Toshio Aoki, a Japanese American artist who had adopted a seven-year-old Japanese girl in San Francisco in 1899. This girl, Aoki Tsuruko, later became the first ever Japanese motion picture actress and star. Aoki had studied at the Egan Dramatic School in Los Angeles before starting her film career in supporting roles in Fred Mace's comedy films of the early 1910s. As Tsuruko Aoki she played the lead in Majestic Motion Picture Company's *The Oath of O Tsuru San* (1913). After the film's success, she starred in numerous films about Japan made by Thomas H. Ince for the New York Motion Picture Company. There, she met her future husband, Sessue Hayakawa.

— DAISUKE MIYAO

Colette's Cinema

THE CHEAT

In Paris this week a movie theater is giving art lessons. A film and two of its principal performers teach us what can be added—in terms of striking originality, emotion, hard or soft lighting—to the cinematic novel. Every evening writers, painters, composers and playwrights return again and again to sit, watch, and discuss in whispers, like school children.

The genius of an Asian actor is joined by that of a director probably unequalled; the leading lady, lively, radiant, intelligent, is only occasionally guilty of a sudden startle, an over-expressiveness that's still theatrical. There's a fine extravagance of lace, silks, precious furs—not to mention the final melee of flesh and limbs, when the bit-players wallop each other wholeheartedly. A miracle! we cry, here we have multimillionaires who haven't rented their tailcoats by the week, we have characters followed on screen by their shadow, their own shadow, whether tragic or ridiculous, which the pointless quantity of arc lights has, until now, kept from us! Here a monochrome drapery, a gleaming trinket suffice to give us the impression of old and established luxury! Here is an elegant interior from which has been banished—is it to be believed?—the bed in the middle of the room with its padded satin upholstery, and the carved sideboard!

Now, since our French filmmaking companies do not hesitate to run special trains, hire crowds, dam rivers and interrupt railway traffic, purchase

villas, and dynamite ships, I would like their generosity extended to furnishings, to dresses, to masculine attire, to expensive props, everything complete, flawless, to all that the faithful attendance of the public entitles them to expect.

Is this fortunate convergence of efforts what attracts us and holds us the length of the film? Or is it rather the pleasure, more profound and murkier, of seeing the rough-hewn "flicks" set their sights on perfection, the pleasure of predicting what future filmmaking will be like, when that attempt is at last made; when music finally becomes its inevitable collaborator and interpreter; when the same slow waltz or the same comic-opera overture no longer accompanies, while indifferently betraying, the sports film, the tragic film, the couple in love or the murder attempt ...

You think the time is not yet right for such frivolous things? Forgive me. America is building drama schools reserved solely for movie actors who will work on their craft there for two years. French trade, French art, French fortunes will have reason to worry and will suffer, after the war, from the cinematic advancement achieved over there. A particular miming style, the secret of walking for the screen, of dancing for the screen, all that is going to be essential in classes for young pupils, here at home as elsewhere.

As their first model, I offer this Asiatic artist whose powerful immobility can express everything.

Let our aspiring cineastes see how, while his face is still, his hand continues the thought begun. Let them learn how much menace and contempt are contained in the movement of his eyebrow, and how, at the moment he's wounded, he simulates his life draining away with his blood, without a tremor, without a convulsive grimace, nothing but the progressive petrification of his Buddha's mask and the ecstatic dulling of his gaze.

Published in the Parisian daily *Excelsior* on August 7, 1916, and translated here by Monica Nolan.



About Colette

After being denied credit and recompense for her wildly popular and entirely suggestive coming-of-age stories published under her first husband's name, the newly single and sexually adventurous Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette rebounded, spectacularly, by flinging herself into the center of the Belle Époque and continuing to mine her life experiences for art (and income). She took to the stage, performing in risqué revues of her own devising, bringing down the house once by kissing a woman directly on the mouth in "Rêve d'Égypte." She contributed to the Parisian dailies, like her regular column in *Le Matin* titled, "A Thousand and One Mornings," one of which she devoted to championing the Robert Falcon Scott expedition film, *The Great White Silence*, then floundering at the box office. In addition to her film reviews for the *Excelsior*, where this piece comes from, she also contributed to Henri Diamant-Berger's journal *Le Film* in a brief three-month stint but the longest of her journalistic career. Her pieces included not only film reviews but discussions of the experience of cinema, sometimes taking the form of playful dialogues, like the hilarious interaction between her and her chatty three-year-old daughter during a matinee. Another of her dialogues took up the subject of Sessue Hayakawa again when she learned that an opera was being adapted from *The Cheat* and she winds around to asking why bother when it was done so perfectly, without any singing, the first time. She wrote film scenarios, including an adaptation of her novel *La Vagabonde*, and got her close friend and former music-hall colleague Musidora to play the title role. She published her diaries from that experience in what might be the first in the genre of screenwriter laments, later compiled as "Backstage at the Studio." She was already a literary lion, long known for her script-ready turns of phrase, when the adaptation of her most famous novel earned her a new place in cinema history, the beloved Hollywood musical *Gigi*. — Editor

SHOW PEOPLE

MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA

DIRECTED BY KING VIDOR, USA, 1928

CAST Marion Davies, William Haines, Polly Moran, and Del Henderson **PRODUCTION** MGM

PRINT SOURCE Library of Congress

1928 WAS A FRIGHTENING YEAR FOR the film industry. The first feature with synchronized dialogue, *The Jazz Singer*, had premiered the previous October, casting doubt on the ability of silent films to endure as an art form. Stars feared for their careers while studio bosses worried about their bottom line. The career of Marion Davies, however, was soaring. After a long fight to create her own persona, she had established herself as a top-tier comedienne. Three exceptional comedies—*The Patsy*, *The Cardboard Lover*, and *Show People*—were released within seven months of each other, and all met with great acclaim. *Show People* was the cap on Davies's glorious year of 1928, and her swan song to the silent era.

By the time she made *Show People*, Davies had been making films for over a decade. Her first feature, *Runaway Romany* in 1917, had attracted the attention of William Randolph Hearst, the press baron who harnessed the power of the motion pictures to further his journalistic interests. He fell in love with Davies, on screen and off, and signed her to his New York-based Cosmopolitan Productions. Hearst put Davies in roles that reflected the way he saw her—as an ethereal, angelic beauty, dressing her in elaborate costumes and surrounding her with imposing sets.

Davies was a vivacious, ebullient personality who delighted in fun and playful pranks, and felt stifled in her roles. She longed to play a “modern

girl,” and when Cosmopolitan moved west and partnered with the newly-formed Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Davies began an active campaign to change her image. Nearly everyone saw Davies's natural gift for comedy; director King Vidor, a frequent guest at Hearst's San Simeon ranch, witnessed her exceptional talent for mimicry. “We saw Marion doing all these imitations at the ranch,” Vidor said later, “and we would laugh at her performances.” Vidor's dramatic direction of *The Big Parade* attracted Hearst to Vidor as a director for Davies, and Vidor agreed on one condition: the film would have to be a comedy.

Hearst agreed to let Vidor try, and the result was *The Patsy*, a raucous film that allowed Davies, in Vidor's recollection, to “just be herself all the time.” The film was met with triumphant reviews, and Vidor found Davies “a joy to direct.” Davies hired a full quartet to play mood music during scenes, which Vidor found relaxing, and the atmosphere was laid back and fun. He was eager to work with her on another project, and fortunately there was a perfect script ready for production.

The scenario that ultimately became *Show People* was an early MGM acquisition. Originally entitled *Polly Preferred*, MGM had purchased it in 1925 and the script department spent three years fine-tuning the story, including changing its name to *Show World* before settling on the final title. The film follows Peggy Pepper, a young actress from



Georgia who arrives in Hollywood eager to make it in the movies. She befriends Billy Boone (William Haines), a young comedic actor who helps her rise through the ranks of the studio. She quickly becomes a big star, which goes to her head until Billy playfully brings her back down to earth.

The version of *Show People* that made it to the screen is loosely based on the early career of Gloria Swanson, who had her start at Mack Sennett's Keystone. Davies knew Swanson well. She was an occasional guest at Davies's parties and by this time having an affair with Joseph P. Kennedy, another member of the Hearst/Davies circle. Swanson's tendency to take herself too seriously led Davies to craft a devilish impersonation of the actress, played to perfection throughout the film.

Show People is delightfully self-aware, and the cameos and in-jokes are as fun as the film itself. Marion Davies's quartet plays Peggy Pepper's on-set musicians. Charlie Chaplin makes a cameo as an autograph seeker, and Davies herself plays "Marion Davies," much to Peggy's disdain. Fans of silent film will delight in a pan of the commissary where Peggy (transformed into "Patricia Pepoire") eats lunch with a who's-who of MGM stars.



On the set, Vidor found the same relaxed atmosphere that he had enjoyed on *The Patsy*. But not all went smoothly on the production. Leading man James Murray, whom Vidor had recently directed in *The Crowd*, had sunk deeper into alcoholism and could not be found when production began. Vidor wanted to give him work, but after three days of no leading man, he was forced to pull Murray from the production.

William "Billy" Haines was a brilliant replacement. He was a big star in light comedies, good friends with Davies, and a frequent guest at Hearst's ranch. The chemistry between Haines and Davies is evident from the start, and Haines's star power helped the production enormously. Haines also had a particular bond with Hearst. His interest and eye for antiques had endeared him to the ardent collector, who became something of a mentor. Haines was openly gay, and when Louis B. Mayer pushed him out of MGM for it in the early 1930s, he created a lucrative interior design business at Hearst's suggestion.

Vidor, Davies, and Haines all got along exceptionally well, personally and artistically. Hearst, however, disliked lowbrow humor and kept an eye on every aspect of the production. He objected to a scene in the script where Davies took a pie in the face. "I'm not going to allow Marion to be hit in the face with a pie," he insisted. When it became clear that the scene could not be shot with Hearst on set, a plan was devised to have the *Los Angeles Examiner* call Hearst to the office for an urgent conference. While he was out, they filmed the scene—using water from a siphon bottle instead of a pie.

Show People was released in October of 1928 to spectacular reviews. The critics were impressed with the charming story and the nuanced performances. "So clever is the comedy in *Show People*," the *New*

William Haines, Polly Moran, Marion Davies, and director King Vidor on set

York Times wrote, "that it would not be at all surprising to hear that many in the audiences had sat through it twice ... While there are one or two instances here where the fun boils over, most of the time it simmers in a delightful fashion." Several newspapers were amused by Davies's cameo in her own film, including the *Pasadena Post*, which quipped, "Marion Davies arranged for Marion Davies to appear in a Marion Davies production."

The premiere coincided, almost to the day, with the anniversary of *The Jazz Singer*'s first public showing. Though Davies made one more silent film, *Marianne* (shot twice, once as a silent feature and again as a sound film), *Show People* was her last silent release without a sound counterpart.

Davies struggled more than others with the coming of sound. She had a persistent stutter, present since childhood, that she was convinced would ruin her career if talkies should become industry standard. "Not only was I appalled at the idea," she said later, "but ... I wished the earth would open up, because I said 'I cannot do sound pictures.'"

Following several shelved films, hours of voice work and bouts of anger and frustration, Davies completed the sound version of *Marianne* and arrived at the premiere feeling tense. When the film started, she couldn't bear to watch or listen to herself. She began to cry. But through her tears, she noticed that the audience was reacting to the funny spots with uproarious laughter. Davies's anxieties slowly disappeared, and by the end of the film, she felt talkies might work for her after all.



This experience was a poignant mirroring of Peggy Pepper watching her first film in *Show People*.

Indeed, despite her stutter, Davies became one of a handful of silent stars to survive the transition to sound. It was a testament to her grit, stamina, and hard work. In recent decades, Davies's reputation has been sullied by *Citizen Kane* and the comparisons to Susan Alexander, the talentless opera singer pushed by Kane in the film. Orson Welles himself acknowledged the harm the film has done to Davies and how wrong the comparison is. "Marion Davies was one of the most delightfully accomplished comedienne in the whole history of the screen," he wrote in the foreword to 1975's *The Times We Had*, marketed as her memoir.

Show People is a perfect example of these gifts. Not only is it a masterpiece of Hollywood self-examination, featuring two stars and a director all at the top of their game, but it remains the crowning achievement of Marion Davies's career, and a bittersweet farewell to the silent era.

— LARA GABRIELLE

CUSTARD PIES AND LIVE ROUNDS: HOW HOLLYWOOD PLAYS ITSELF BY FRITZI KRAMER

Movies about movies have been around since the dawn of cinema and the silent era mined the topic for belly laughs, from Chaplin's *Behind the Screen* to King Vidor's *Show People*. In one of the earliest examples, James Williamson portrayed an unwilling film subject eating both camera and cameraman in *The Big Swallow* (1901), a comedy that gave audiences a foregleam of the dark turn waiting in the wings for the genre.

Confusion between the real world and the reel world quickly became a staple plot, particularly well-suited to humor. In *Mabel's Dramatic Career* (1913), a decidedly violent slapstick short made for the Keystone brand, Mabel Normand is unceremoniously dumped by her lover and thrown out. She stumbles into a film audition, becomes an overnight sensation, and marries her cinematic nemesis, Ford Sterling. Her ex-boyfriend (played by Mack Sennett) sees her name in lights but mistakes her melodramatic on-screen danger for reality and unloads a pistol at the film before resolving to shoot the villain too. He is only thwarted in his assassination attempt by a well-timed bucket of water dumped from a high window.

A Girl's Folly (1917) is famous for its rare behind-the-scenes footage of the World Film Company studio in Fort Lee, New Jersey, one of the holdouts as the rest of the industry relocated west. The backstage details earned praised at the time and have only become more intriguing. Entire sets change at breakneck speed, rotating for the perfect angle, and the director shouts instructions into a megaphone as the camera rolls ... "Now DIE!" reads

a particularly memorable title card. Doris Kenyon plays a rural flibbertigibbet who misinterprets a western chase shot on location for real danger and ruins the take. She catches the eye of the picture's star (Robert Warwick) and he encourages her to take a screen test. The scene that follows needs no title cards as the camera cuts to the reactions of the small audience: she stinks.

There were other ways to live well in a film town. The nature of Kenyon's folly is crystal clear when the film shows her set up in a plush New York apartment and Warwick not only has a key but can also enter without knocking. Screenwriter Frances Marion may have teased the audience with censorable hints, but they remained hints. Kenyon is saved from her folly by the arrival of her mother and a reminder of her country sweetheart back home.

Stumbling into success was another cinema staple but most film careers were built on shoe leather and long waits in casting offices. The applicants who flooded film studios hoping for a big break would sometimes prepare for their dream careers with correspondence courses. Screenwriting, cinematography, directing, acting ... a dreamer could learn the entire craft of movies from afar. All for a fee, of course. "Anyone can get into pictures," one such text, "Screen Acting: Its Requirements and Rewards," assured its readers. All they needed were "personality, pluck, and perseverance."

The novel *Merton of the Movies* by Harry Leon Wilson featured a title character with straight As in his mail-order acting courses. What could possibly

go wrong? The book was adapted as a smash hit stage production—Buster Keaton played the lead in a 1957 revival—and Hollywood took both script and leading man Glenn Hunter for the 1924 Paramount adaptation. No copy of this film is known to survive but the picture enjoyed raves when it came out.

In the story, poor humorless Merton believes he has been cast in a throbbing melodrama when he is actually the unwitting punchline of a knockabout comedy. Worse, he has been set up for mockery by the woman he loves, a stuntwoman aptly named Flips (Viola Dana). He realizes the truth at the premiere of his debut but he is such a hit with moviegoers that his success as a film star is assured, even if he never understood the gag. Merton is left trapped in his dream-come-true, an ostensibly happy ending with a poisoned center.

Surely Anthony Asquith's *Shooting Stars* (1928) had the darkest take since *The Big Swallow*. Director Asquith's mid-decade visit to Hollywood inspired him to spoof

the tropes—a virginal heroine symbolically kissing a bird on screen was a movieland cliché but here, it ends in disaster when the bird bites and the heroine's response makes for colorful lipreading, indeed. That not-so-sweet lass is Mae Feather, a scheming British leading lady with a lover on the side, Hollywood ambitions, a strict morals clause in her contract, and an inconvenient husband. She plans to eliminate her spouse, a fellow

actor, with a shooting accident on the set. How did those live shells get into that shotgun anyway? Spoof turns to inky black comedy as her plans for murder become reality but, of course, nothing goes quite as planned. The fatal shotgun is borrowed for a chase scene on her lover's burlesque comedy film set and he is the one who ends up dead.

Mae's patsy husband figures out the truth, the scandal wrecks her career, and she suffers the worst possible fate for a major film star, one that was sadly familiar even in the silent era: from idol of millions to an extra begging for any small part. *Shooting Stars* leaves her there, a harsh sentence compared to other 1928 behind-the-scenes releases. Peggy Pepper of *Show People* manages to come to her senses in time to save her stardom from her own pomposity and Josef von Sternberg's *The Last Command* offers its general-turned-extra some dignity in death, but Mae has to stay alive to swallow her medicine with no end in sight.





THE TOLL OF THE SEA

MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY THE SASCHA JACOBSEN ENSEMBLE

DIRECTED BY CHESTER M. FRANKLIN, USA, 1922

CAST Anna May Wong, Kenneth Harlan, Beatrice Bentley, Priscilla "Baby" Moran, Etta Lee, and Ming Young **PRODUCTION** Technicolor Motion Picture Company **PRINT SOURCE** UCLA Film & Television Archive

The greatest depiction of a woman crying on the silver screen is one you've likely never seen. You may be tempted to call up the image of Renée Jeanne Falconetti's stoic tears in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, or the mesmeric power of the saline streams down Anna Karina's face in *Vivre Sa Vie*. Both scenes, iconic in their own right, hark back to an earlier acting triumph: that of the delicate, pink-hued face of Anna May Wong, only seventeen and virtually unknown at the time, framed in dramatic chiaroscuro, her eyes glistening pools of feeling.

The film, *The Toll of the Sea*, a gem of the silent era that turns one hundred this year, was made in Hollywood under unusual circumstances. The inspiration for it didn't come from a director or screenwriter but from "two great scientists," as a 1922 advertisement declared. Herbert Kalmus and Daniel Comstock, graduates of MIT, were the men behind Technicolor, a company cofounded in 1915 with engineer W. Burton Wescott in order to develop a process for photographing motion pictures in color.

By 1922, Technicolor had mastered a new two-color system but the problem they now faced was getting filmmakers to use it. With \$1.2 million in funding raised from backers in New York and the support of Marcus Loew and Joseph Schenck, who offered up their facilities at Metro Pictures along with a director and lead actor at no cost, Technicolor set

out to make a film that would impress audiences and thereby convince studio heads to adopt the new color film technology on a mass scale.

Frances Marion, the most sought-after and highly paid screenwriter in the industry, was brought on to write a scenario that would "best exploit the variable color tones." Freed from commercial pressures, Marion envisioned a rich and sumptuous "Oriental background" and set about writing a tragic love story with a familiar ring. "It was practically the step-daughter of *Madame Butterfly*," Marion later said. Only the setting changed from Japan to China.

Matinee idol Kenneth Harlan was cast as Allen Carver, the American cad who washes up on the rocky shores of Hong Kong in the opening scenes and is discovered by a young Chinese girl who marshals a group of fishermen to pull him to safety. The girl, called Lotus Flower, was played by Anna May Wong in her first starring role. In contrast to many who landed in motion pictures, Wong was a homegrown talent. She was born in Los Angeles in 1905 to a Chinese laundryman and grew up in and around Chinatown, where movie studios like Selig and Bioscope set up shop in the early days. As a child she stalked their makeshift outdoor sets, pushing her way through the crowds of onlookers to get a peek at the action. By eleven she decided she was going to be an actress and at thirteen she started doing extra work. Within a few years,



already had enough challenges. Because of the color film's slower speed, high-intensity lighting was required, even outside. The actors were practically melting under the bright klieg lights, not to mention the southern California sunshine beating down on them. When the cameras ran out of film, all work stopped for weeks at a time until more of Technicolor's special film stock could be manufactured and then shipped out from Boston. If any of this affected Anna May Wong's enthusiasm for her part as Lotus Flower, she didn't show it in front of the cameras.

Wong was garnering modest roles in films directed by the likes of Marshall Neilan, a Mary Pickford regular at the time.

Although yellowface, like blackface, was alive and well in the 1920s, Anna May Wong and the other Chinese actors who appear in *Toll of the Sea*, including Etta Lee and Ming Young, were cast seemingly without objection. The prevailing wisdom that favored white actors playing Asian characters in makeup and taped eyes didn't apply in this instance. The more authentic the film's look and feel, the better to demonstrate its vibrant realism. Technicolor's stated aim, after all, was to make motion pictures in "natural color."

Production began in May of 1922, but according to Comstock's reports, some of the actors didn't take the job seriously. The outright failure of Technicolor's first film effort in 1917, the hour-long *The Gulf Between*, was fresh in their minds. It was anyone's guess whether *Toll of the Sea* would meet a similar fate. The unconventional production

In the film, Lotus Flower predictably falls in love with the handsome foreigner she's rescued and he in turn becomes enchanted with her exotic beauty. She strikes a pact with the ocean that has brought her this gift, vowing: "Ask of me anything in return, O Sea!" Their courtship ensues among the cherry blossoms until Carver is called back home to the United States. In his absence, Lotus Flower, who believes Carver to be her rightful husband, gives birth to a son. Several years pass before she spots him again from the shore, but she soon discovers he has returned with an American wife. Grasping the truth of her situation, Lotus Flower selflessly gives her son over to the care of Carver and his new bride so that the boy might live a better life. Then she relinquishes herself to the sea.

No one was enthusiastic about yet another version of the hackneyed *Madame Butterfly* saga (Mary Pickford and Norma Talmadge had already done renditions in 1915 and 1918, respectively). Upon learning of the script, Kalmus later recalled taking "a rather a dim view of the choice. It seemed a

depressing story." But all that changed once Anna May Wong entered the picture. "When I saw the early rushes," he continued, "I realized that she was radiant in color as the girl who drowns herself in the sea." Wong could cry buckets without the aid of glycerin tears. Plus, her bouts of emotion looked genuine.

Critics responded similarly, affronted at first by the paltry story, then swept off their feet by the young actress's heartrending performance and the luminous, pigmented world surrounding her. "We had not dreamed that the old, old story of Mme. Butterfly could ever again wring tears from us," Harriette Underhill wrote in her column for the *New York Tribune*. "The people who have made this new colored picture have done something so beautiful that it is rather awe inspiring and criticizing it is like dissecting a butterfly."

One hundred years later, *Toll of the Sea* holds up as one of the silent era's treasures. The film's simple yet beautifully rendered mise-en-scène coupled with director Chester M. Franklin's judicious use of close shots allow the acting to speak for itself, and when given this opportunity, Wong stuns with a virtuoso performance. Her depth of feeling is especially apparent in scenes where she, then still a child herself, embodies the loving mother with her toddler son played by child actor Baby Moran. "Miss Wong stirs in the spectator all the sympathy her part calls for, and she never repels one by an excess of theatrical 'feeling,'" wrote Mordaunt Hall in the *New York Times*. "She has a difficult role, a role that is botched nine times out of ten, but hers is the tenth performance ... She should be seen again and often on the screen."

To nearly everyone's surprise, the film was a huge critical and commercial success. Technicolor couldn't make prints fast enough and the film didn't circulate to theaters following its December 1922 premiere until well into 1923. Letters of praise arrived from renowned artists Maxfield Parrish and Charles Dana Gibson. According to Kalmus, the film grossed an astounding \$250,000 (\$4.4 million today).

Then came the call from Douglas Fairbanks, one of the industry's biggest stars and producers. He liked what he saw of Technicolor's process and was interested in making a color picture (which he eventually did with 1926's *The Black Pirate*). What's more, the Chinese American actress with three credits to her name had left an impression he couldn't shake. Fairbanks decided to cast Wong in his 1924 blockbuster hit *The Thief of Bagdad*, catapulting her to international fame. Despite these successes and relatively steady work, Wong had to wait another six years and sail across the Atlantic to win her next starring role in the German production *Song*. Hollywood, it turned out, wasn't quite ready to see things in living color.

— KATIE GEE SALISBURY



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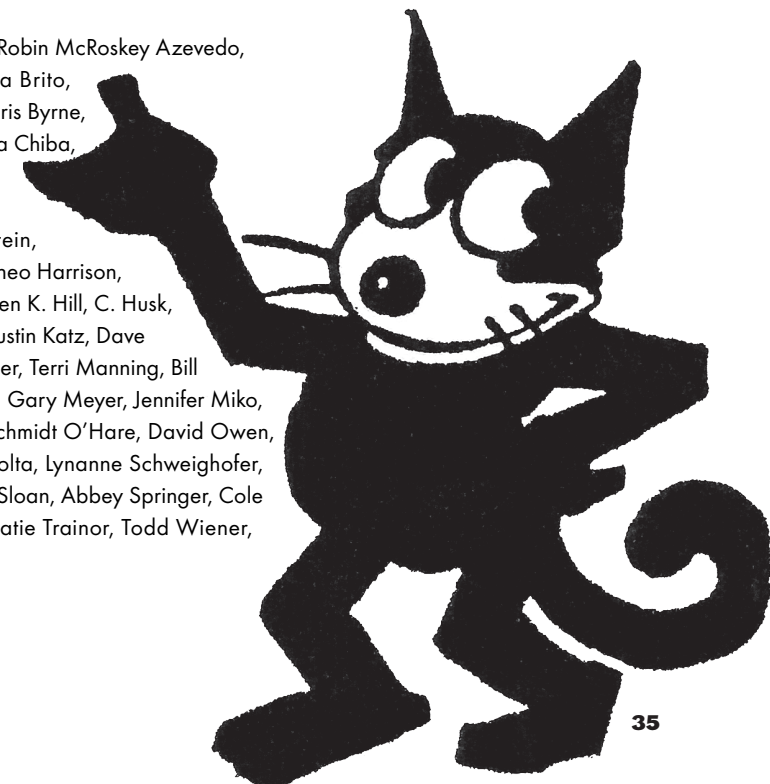
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