



**SAN FRANCISCO  
SILENT  
FILM FESTIVAL**

**APRIL 10-14, 2024 | PALACE OF FINE ARTS THEATRE**



# W

## elcome to the San Francisco Silent Film Festival!

We are very excited to bring you another stellar array of treasures from the first decades of cinema—whether recently uncovered, restored, or perennial favorites—presented on the big screen, with live musical accompaniment by the foremost practitioners of the art, and shared with a live audience.

A nonprofit organization, SFSFF remains committed to educating the public about silent cinema as a valuable historical and cultural record as well as an art form with enduring relevance. In a remarkably short time after the birth of moving pictures, filmmakers developed all the techniques that make cinema the powerful medium it is today—everything except for the ability to marry sound to the film print. Yet these films can be breathtakingly modern. They have influenced every subsequent generation of filmmakers and still have the power to amaze and delight audiences a century after they were made.

We are also continually learning new things about silent cinema, as films are rediscovered, reexamined, and restored. We play our small part through our ongoing preservation program, which this year presents the premieres of three new restorations, one of which is also an astonishing rediscovery.

Amid the films and music at our festival are many of the people who make all this possible. Archivists, researchers, preservation specialists, musicians, and authors who gather from all over the world to enrich our experience of these gems and to tease more treasures to come.

We are thrilled to share all of this with you at one of San Francisco's most beloved landmarks, the Palace of Fine Arts, a treasure all its own with deep roots in our city's history that stretch back to 1915, by which time cinema was already knitted into the fabric of our lives.

Enjoy the festival!

## WEDNESDAY APRIL 10

7:30 PM **THE BLACK PIRATE**  
Musical accompaniment by the Donald Sosin Ensemble

## THURSDAY APRIL 11

11:00 AM **AMAZING TALES FROM THE ARCHIVES**  
Musical accompaniment by Stephen Horne

2:00 PM **DANCING MOTHERS**  
with **THE PILL POUNDER**  
Musical accompaniment by Wayne Barker

4:15 PM **OH! WHAT A NURSE!**  
Musical accompaniment by Donald Sosin

6:00 PM **THE LADY**  
Musical accompaniment Stephen Horne

8:15 PM **THE SEA HAWK**  
Musical accompaniment by Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra

## FRIDAY APRIL 12

11:00 AM **THE OPPORTUNIST**  
Musical accompaniment by Utsav Lal

1:00 PM **EAST SIDE, WEST SIDE**  
Musical accompaniment by Wayne Barker

3:15 PM **POIL DE CAROTTE**  
Musical accompaniment by Stephen Horne and Frank Bockius

6:00 PM **POKER FACES**  
Musical accompaniment by the Guenter Buchwald Quartet

8:15 PM **HÄXAN**  
Musical accompaniment by the Matti Bye Ensemble

## SATURDAY APRIL 13

10:00 AM **THE LAUREL AND HARDY SHOW!**  
Musical accompaniment by Donald Sosin and Frank Bockius

12:00 PM **HELL'S HEROES**  
Musical accompaniment by the Guenter Buchwald Trio

2:00 PM **I WAS BORN, BUT...**  
Musical accompaniment by Utsav Lal  
☛ SFSFF Award presentation to Hisashi Okajima

5:00 PM **THE STREET**  
Musical accompaniment by Guenter Buchwald and Frank Bockius

7:00 PM **SHERLOCK JR.**  
with **ONE WEEK**  
Musical accompaniment by Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra

8:45 PM **THE JOKER**  
Musical accompaniment by Stephen Horne and Frank Bockius

## SUNDAY APRIL 14

10:00 AM **THE GORILLA**  
Musical accompaniment by Stephen Horne and Frank Bockius

12:15 PM **THE KID BROTHER**  
Musical accompaniment by Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra

2:30 PM **THE PHANTOM CARRIAGE**  
Musical accompaniment by the Matti Bye Ensemble

5:00 PM **THE DEVIOUS PATH**  
Musical accompaniment by Guenter Buchwald and Frank Bockius

8:00 PM **THE RED MARK**  
Musical accompaniment by Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra

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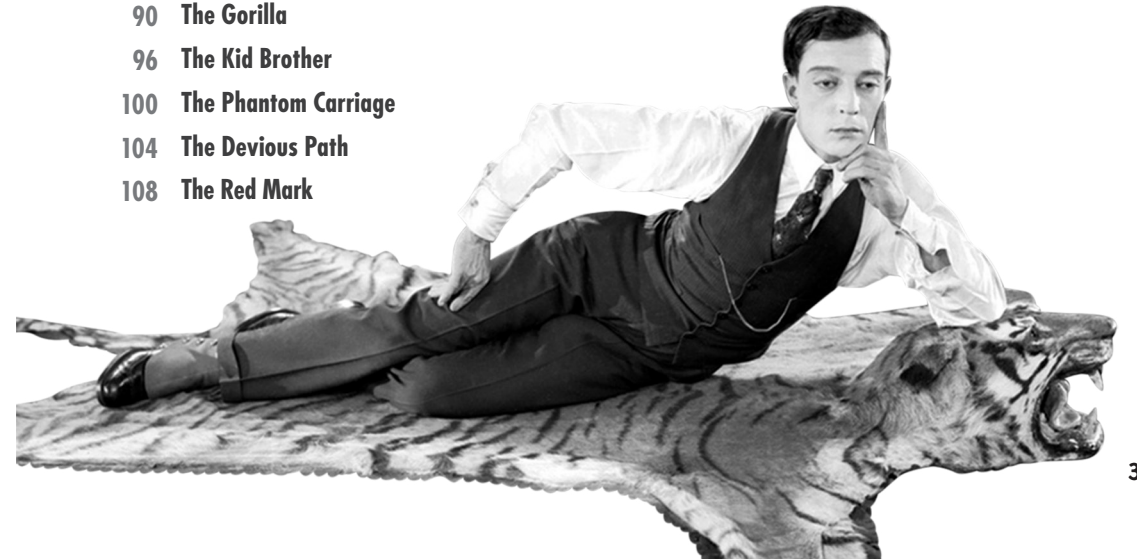
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# MUSICIANS



**WAYNE BARKER** has garnered acclaim both for his original compositions and live performances in the theater, most notably a Tony nomination for best original score on *Peter and the Starcatcher*. His numerous credits include piano scores for Beth Henley's *Laugh* and Joe DiPietro's *Hollywood*, centered around the William Desmond Taylor murder mystery. He composed for Dame Edna Everage and appeared on stage for six years as Master of the Dame's Music.

Versatile jazz percussionist **FRANK BOCKIUS** specializes in jazz and is versed in a wide variety of musical styles, from medieval to flamenco. He has performed for dance and theater companies as well as with his own bands, including the jazz quintet *Whisper Hot* and the percussion ensemble *Timpanicks*. Since joining Guenter Buchwald's Silent Movie Company, he has performed for silent films at festivals in Kyoto, Bonn, Pordenone, and Sodankylä.

# AT THE FESTIVAL

Conductor, composer, pianist, and violinist **GUENTER BUCHWALD** is a pioneer of the renaissance in silent film music. A soloist known for his virtuoso improvisation he has performed with a repertoire of more than three thousand silent-era titles and conducted orchestras worldwide. Cofounder of the Silent Movie Music Company, Buchwald is also resident conductor of the Freiburg Philharmonic Orchestra for Silent Film in Concert.

Based at London's BFI Southbank, **STEPHEN HORNE** is considered one of the leading silent film accompanists working today and his music has met with international acclaim. Principally a pianist, he often incorporates other instruments into his performances, sometimes playing them simultaneously. He has recorded music for DVD releases and television broadcasts of silent films.

Bassist **SASCHA JACOBSEN** draws on a variety of musical styles, including classical, jazz, and Argentine tango, and has played with musicians as varied as the Kronos Quartet, Rita Moreno, and Randy Newman. He is founder of the Musical Art Quintet, which regularly performs his original compositions. He has done commissions for the San Jose Chamber Orchestra, Berkeley Youth Symphony, and San Francisco Arts Council, among others.

Award-winning saxophonist **MAS KOGA** was born in Chiba, Japan, and grew up in numerous cities around the world, a multicultural upbringing that deeply informs his music. Primarily a jazz musician, he draws on a wide range of interests, influences, and skills, having also trained on the trumpet, traditional Japanese end-blown flutes, and Brazilian samba percussion. Koga previously spent fifteen years in the San Francisco Bay Area and now calls New York City his home.

Steinway's Young Artist of 2010, **UTSAV LAL** made his professional debut at the age of eighteen with

his rendition of Indian ragas on the piano, stunning the world with his innovative handling of Hindustani classical music on a Western instrument. Often referred to as the "Raga Pianist," he is much more, incorporating improvisational jazz, blues, as well as Irish and Celtic folk traditions in his music, garnering acclaim everywhere from Ireland to Singapore, Germany to Kuwait, and beyond.

The **MATTI BYE ENSEMBLE** seeks that magical, emotional alchemy between music and images and performs using a wide variety of instruments, including piano, glockenspiel, violin, musical saw, and percussion. It is led by award-winning film composer Matti Bye, who has accompanied silent movies at the Swedish Film Institute since 1989. In addition to Bye, the ensemble includes fellow musicians Kristian Holmgren, Lotta Johansson, and Laura Naukkarinen.

Now celebrating its thirtieth year, **MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA** revives the tradition of silent-film orchestras, scouring 1920s-era music libraries to create their signature witty, vibrant, and historically appropriate scores. Since their first performance in 1994, Mont Alto has recorded and toured widely and, all told, has compiled scores for more than 144 films. Led by composer and pianist Rodney Sauer, recipient of the Denver Film Festival's 2023 David Shepard Career Achievement Award, the ensemble also includes Britt Swenson (violin), Brian Collins (clarinet), Yoriko Morita (cello), Bruce Barrie (cornet), and Nancy Sauer (guest Foley artist).

Pianist **DONALD SOSIN** has been creating and performing scores for silent film for more than fifty years, playing at major festivals, for archives, and on DVD recordings. He has been resident accompanist at New York's Film Society of Lincoln Center, the Museum of the Moving Image, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. His scores are heard regularly on Turner Classic Movies and his music accompanies silent films on dozens of releases.



# THE BLACK PIRATE

## MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY THE DONALD SOSIN ENSEMBLE

**DIRECTED BY ALBERT PARKER, USA, 1926**

**CAST** Douglas Fairbanks, Billie Dove, Anders Randolph, Sam De Grasse, and Donald Crisp **PRODUCTION** Elton Corp. **PRINT SOURCE** Museum of Modern Art

**"T**his is in. It has Doug," trumpeted *Film Daily* in March 1926, "its pirates are as terrible as anyone ever pictured and it is the finest specimen of the all-color feature yet produced." Which is pretty much all you needed to know to get you to the box office to see *The Black Pirate*: a star (the super-athletic Douglas Fairbanks), a spectacle (full-size pirate ships), action (sword fights and dazzling stunts), romance, and, of course, color!

Filmmakers knew from the very early days the powerful effect that childhood literature and illustration, particularly if it was in color, had on audiences. It's no coincidence that in 1903 Cecil Hepworth in England offered his *Alice in Wonderland* in tints and tones, or that in France, Méliès, Pathé, and Gaumont began to specialize in beautiful jewel-like stencil-color renderings of fantasy tales. The first pirate stories on film began to emerge at the end of that decade. Pirate stories were ubiquitous, based on popular sources from Walter Scott's *The Pirate* and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Red Rover* to spoofs such as Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance* and more child-friendly works like *Treasure Island* and *Peter Pan*. Cheaper novels and magazines spread the swashbuckling adventure tales of Emilio Salgari and of the king of the pirate novel, Rafael Sabatini. Then, in 1924, MGM's *Ben Hur* and First National's *The Sea Hawk* were released, demonstrating the attractions of dramatic sea battles on full-size

ships. The time seemed ripe for a full Technicolor pirate story. And who would make a more dashing hero than Douglas Fairbanks?

Also around that time, the gorgeously illustrated *Book of Pirates* (1921) by Howard Pyle, founder of the Brandywine School of painting, was posthumously published and a young Jackie Coogan apparently introduced Douglas Fairbanks to it. It certainly appears to have had an influence on the design of *The Black Pirate* and its famously subtle color palette.

*The Black Pirate*, of all Fairbanks's films, demonstrated his ambition for the cinema. As Jeffrey Vance has written in his 2008 biography of Fairbanks, he was instrumental in pushing the boundaries of cinema and what we now call the Hollywood blockbuster. The complexity of making a full feature in two-strip Technicolor was prodigious, requiring real creativity from a whole raft of experts in the handling of sets, costumes, and locations—but what a triumph! The story is perhaps a little simple but the stunts have become iconic: the ascent, as Doug is handed up the side of a galleon by his shipmates, the swinging around on ropes in the rigging—now *de rigueur* in every pirate film—and the famous descent, slicing down the sail with a knife, which is now one of a handful of shots representing the glory days of Hollywood's silent era. Along with this are the performances, of Doug himself, still pretty bouncy



at forty-three, a villainous Sam De Grasse, and Donald Crisp, upstaging everyone as the light relief in the form of a comedy Scottish pirate.

It is ironic perhaps that the bloodthirsty genre of 18th century piracy should be the focus of so many children's stories and "family" films, and *The Black Pirate* is good and gory. One of the great joys for me of seeing this Technicolor restoration was the vividness of the red on the bloody blade of the pirate who has been asked by his captain to "retrieve" a gold ring, unwisely swallowed by a captured nobleman. Gore is a feature notably lacking in most silent films. In Britain, the censorship guidelines could result in cuts for the "exhibition of profuse bleeding," but there is no evidence *The Black Pirate* was seen as problematic. Iris Barry, a London-based film critic, cofounder of the super-intellectual Film Society, and, later, first curator of the film department at New York's Museum of Modern Art, could hardly praise the film enough in her March 1926 review for *The Spectator*:

A really fine film does so much good not only to the people who enjoy it, but to the cinema

as a whole, to its status, that its arrival makes one wish to compel those who do not, for various reasons, usually, enter picture-palaces to go in and see for themselves what films at their best can be. *The Black Pirate*, Douglas Fairbanks' new picture at the Tivoli, Strand is such a film. I should like all those who judge the cinema on poor films seen casually, those who condemn it unseen, and those who attribute the peccadillos of small boys as well as the turpitude of the lower classes to the "pernicious influence of the cinema," to see *The Black Pirate* ... [it] out-tops even R.L. Stevenson for delight in bad, bold buccaneers. It crowds in with subtle harmony majestic sailing ships, bright swordsmanship, the clear green seas and golden sands of the tropics of our dreams. For the film is in colour, the first in which photographic tone and colour have worked together successfully. Blood is blood in this picture! ... *The Black Pirate* is wholly—to steal a phrase from *Juno and the Paycock*—a darling film. There is no ostentation, no mock morality, no cheap love-making, no error of taste, and, above all, no stupidity in it.

*The Black Pirate* was one of Barry's early acquisitions for the MoMA collection but, at some point, several nitrate reels were sent to the British Film Institute (BFI) in London for specialist storage and these reels have been a crucial part of MoMA's new restoration. Like many others, I have waited many years to see it in its fully restored glory—and am thrilled that the BFI National Archive could help with some of the preserved materials that contributed to its return to the big screen.

*The Black Pirate* has been accessible to audiences over the years, but most copies in circulation have failed to do justice to the film's delicate color palette or exist in a version without its original intertitles. The film used an early Technicolor process that captured a limited part of the spectrum in red and green color records; an obsolete technology with an aesthetic that was impossible to recreate authentically in the pre-digital era.

This new restoration by MoMA in cooperation with Martin Scorsese's Film Foundation returned to the original two-color Technicolor camera negatives for the first time in half a century to be able to faithfully and respectfully reconstruct the film's original color scheme using modern digital restoration techniques.

James Layton, manager of MoMA's Celeste Bartos Film Preservation Center, explains the complex process of bringing the film back to audiences as near as possible to the original version:

Restoring the film was a huge undertaking due to the sheer amount of material that survives, albeit in varying forms of completeness. *The Black Pirate* was originally shot with five cameras simultaneously, exposing four separate color negatives and one back-up black-and-white copy. The master A negative was not

known to exist, but the B, C and D negatives have all been conserved by the BFI National Archive, although they mostly consist of unedited raw footage across hundreds of film cans. These cans were shipped to the United States for careful review at MoMA. Amazingly, several missing or incomplete shots were located across these negatives that had not been seen in previous reissues of the film. Most surprising was the discovery of three cans of the edited master A negative—previously misidentified—containing Fairbanks's preferred camera angles and takes. These became central to the restoration, with the remainder of the film ultimately sourced from the secondary B negative, along with a few previously missing shots from the C and D negatives. Several missing intertitles were also digitally recreated. After the film was pieced back together, and the original red and green color records were carefully realigned, the film went through a full 4K digital restoration.

One reel of miscellaneous shots surfaced that was printed using an early version of Technicolor's famous dye-transfer process. These shots contained the film's original colors, unfaded, and, along with original documentation and correspondence in Technicolor's archives, were essential in restoring the film's original look.

As *Film Daily* noted at the time "The photography is superb. Technicolor was used throughout. Some of the shots are like the paintings of the old masters in the beauty and splendor of their composition." Now with this new restoration we can see just what they meant!

— BRYONY DIXON

Restored by The Museum of Modern Art and The Film Foundation in cooperation with the British Film Institute. Funding provided by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association. Special thanks to Alexander Payne.

# THE PUBLIC'S PLEASURE

by Iris Barry

**N**ow one thing never to be lost sight of in considering the cinema is that it exists for the purpose of pleasing women. Three out of every four of all cinema audiences are women. I suppose all successful novels and plays are also designed to please the female sex too. At any rate the overwhelming, apparently meaningless, and immensely conventional love interest in the bulk of films is certainly made for them. Disguise it how they may, practically every film pretends to be "about a man and a woman." This is true of farces (remember Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd, who all have their pretty young women companions), true of big spectacles like *The Sea Beast*, *The Covered Wagon*, as well as the plainly amatory picture. Somebody must marry somebody before the piece is through, or must fall into somebody's arms.



We might as well, then, do something about persuading the film producers not to drop treacle into our mouths any more. It is bad for us. If one out ten of all the women who go to the movies here and in America would write a nice little letter to the manager of their pet cinema and tell them they're tired of just nothing but unreal love-stuff, they'd get something else. They certainly would. If one out of ten of them asked for more films like: *Abraham Lincoln*; *Her Sister from Paris*; *Forbidden Paradise*; *Pearls and Savages*; *The Woman of Paris*; *College Days*; *The Marriage Circle*; *The Last Laugh*; *Don Q*; *The Black Pirate*; *Stella Dallas*; *Skinner's Dress Suit*; *The Monkey's Paw*; *The Tower of Lies*; *Vaudeville*; *The Unholy Three*; *Nell Gwyn*; *Dr. Mabuse*; *Her Big Night*—they'd get them.



Also, the cinema must develop or die, and it is remarkable that all the best films are the ones with little or no conventional sentiment in them. The best that the enlightened public can do is to boost the non-sentimental, the experimental films, the ones that cause new blood to come into the unwieldy carcass of cinematography. The cinema runs after the public: it does not spring from the public.



This is the great strength of the cinema, that it caters for daydreams—surface sentiment, riches, travel, splendour and wild excitement—more thoroughly, more generously, more convincingly than any other known form of entertainment, and offers it in the most effortless way, under the best circumstances, to music, in a twilight solitude, with no mental effort demanded of those for whom it caters.

Howls of dismay are always rending the air in Los Angeles because the public tire of first one thing then another. The howls generally show, not the fickleness of the public, but the density of film producers who are really so stupid that they imagine, if one film about the Argentine is a success, that they are perfectly safe in turning out a dozen more films set in the Argentine, quite forgetting that: (1) it may not have been the setting at all but some other peculiarity of the film which made it enjoyable, and (2) that their Argentine imitations will not necessarily be equally successful, even if the setting was the *bonne bouche* of the original picture, if stupid stories, particularly improbable Spanish castes, bad continuity, poor psychology



## ABOUT IRIS BARRY

*The Spectator's* first movie reviewer who ran with the Bloomsbury crowd in mid-1920s London, Iris Barry did her part in preserving *The Black Pirate*, having cajoled Douglas Fairbanks along with Mary Pickford, D.W. Griffith, and studio heads like Walt Disney and Samuel Goldwyn into depositing their collections at the film library she'd helped to start at New York's Museum of Modern Art in the early 1930s. She also later convinced the U.S. Secretary of State that archiving European titles had value and then brought over films by F.W. Murnau, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, G.W. Pabst, and Robert Wiene at a crucial time in history. Her screening series at MoMA helped establish a canon of silent cinema that had ripple effects on American movies. As *New Yorker* critic Richard Brody observed in 2014: "In the early nineteen-sixties, retrospectives of the films of Orson Welles, Howard Hawks, and Alfred Hitchcock—programmed by Peter Bogdanovich, who was in his early twenties—inspired a new generation of critics and filmmakers."

and a half-dozen other common faults drown the one merit of colourful scenes. They behave, in fact, like manufacturers who think a trade mark is all that is sufficient to ensure the sale of their goods, and neglect to make their goods saleable.

The public is not fickle. It is the most ridiculously faithful of animals, as every innovator knows. It has, for instance, enjoyed low comedy, universal satires (I mean satires on the foibles of humanity, not those of some clique) and the heart-rending melodrama since, at least, the sixteenth century. And it still likes all these things. But the fact that it may love one low comedy in which a dog steals some sausages does not mean that you have only to show a dog stealing sausages in any low comedy in order for it to be successful. This simple fact eludes the somewhat extraordinary brain of many who make films.

But I wish the public could, in the midst of its pleasures, see how blatantly it is being spoonfed, and ask for slightly better dreams.

**Excerpted from Iris Barry's *Let's Go to the Pictures* published in London in 1926.**

# AMAZING TALES FROM THE ARCHIVES

## WHERE IN THE WORLD IS CICERO SIMP?

While making *The Garden of Allah* in France, the company's stills photographer, Henry Lachman, determined to gain a foothold in the industry, gathered some of those working on the Rex Ingram production, then shooting on the Riviera, to make a series of comedy shorts called *Travelaugh*s. Ostensible tours of the attractions from Cannes to Menton, the cast includes a twenty-two-year-old Michael Powell as Cicero Simp, "naturalist and nuisance," an accident-prone Brit sporting a pith helmet. **BRYONY DIXON**, curator of silent film for the BFI National Archive, brings a tale of how the future half of the legendary Powell-Pressburger team (*Black Narcissus*, *The Red Shoes*) first got into movies, complete with snippets of Powell's letters home to his Mum.

## L.A. INDEPENDENTS

*The Oath of the Sword* is a 1914 drama about two lovers separated by an ocean after an ambitious young man leaves his beloved in Japan to study abroad at the University of California. The earliest known surviving film made by Asian Americans, this three-reeler was produced by a Los Angeles-based company of Japanese immigrants, using locations on the Berkeley campus. It also marks the first on-screen appearance of Abe Yutaka, who played Sessue Hayakawa's valet the following year in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat* and continued to appear in Hollywood pictures before returning home in 1925 to forge a notable career as a writer, producer, and director. Scholar and author of *Transpacific Convergences: Race, Migration, and Japanese American Film Culture before World War II*, **DENISE KHOR** discusses this title, recently restored by George Eastman Museum and the Japanese American National Museum.

## BEYOND BLACK AND WHITE

Silent-era filmmakers used color to help create fantastical worlds, heighten emotions, and add a touch of magic to their storytelling. Delicate tinting and toning processes bathed scenes in subtle hues, stencils could apply an overlay of affective color on a black-and-white image, spot color processes could add color to parts of an image, and natural color processes could approximate the look of the real world. **DAVID PIERCE**, coauthor of *The Dawn of Technicolor: 1915–1935*, traces the history that led to the breakthrough in color film that is Douglas Fairbanks's *The Black Pirate* (1926) and what it took for filmmakers to go beyond black-and-white on screen: the aesthetics of color application, why it took so long for Technicolor to succeed, and why sound turned out to be the missing element needed for color to be commercially successful.

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY STEPHEN HORNE**



*The Oath of the Sword* (image courtesy of George Eastman Museum)



# Palace of Fine Arts: An Origin Story

**T**he Palace of Fine Arts lay just west of the central block of eight primary exhibition palaces built for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE), which was held in 1915—about six months into the Great War in Europe and a mere nine years after the city’s devastating earthquake and fires of 1906.

Architect-in-charge Willis Polk could not envision a palace in the “mudhole” where it was supposed to rise and called in his friend Bernard Maybeck who had designed Berkeley’s First Church of Christ, Scientist.

“This thing you call a mudhole,” Maybeck told Polk, “that’s your opportunity. You can make a reflecting mirror of that.” Maybeck’s charcoal rendering was so striking it was unanimously accepted for the Palace design—once Polk offered to pay the architect’s fee out of his own pocket.

Maybeck’s drawing evoked an ancient ruin. Among his inspirations were Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s 18th-century etchings of decaying Roman buildings and an 1880 Arnold Böcklin painting set in moonlight, *Island of the Dead*, which also famously inspired composer Sergei Rachmaninoff and painter Salvador Dalí.

Maybeck used Chief of Landscape Gardening John McLaren’s wizardry to achieve an effect akin to a mossy, centuries-old building. McLaren’s panels of mesembryanthemum (ice plant) that had been grown flat in boxes were

tilted vertically to simulate thick, solid hedges of flower-studded greenery.

Sculptor Ulric Ellerhusen’s statues of women atop the colonnade were meant to be weeping over trailing vines growing from the boxes against which they leaned, but budget cutbacks meant no more plants. Without them, visitor and etiquette expert Emily Post complained they resembled wives of a fat Mormon crying over his coffin.

Painter Jules Guérin was PPIE’s official color consultant who specified a palette of ivory, gray, golden orange, oxidized-copper green, cerulean blue, and Pompeiian reds for the palace block. The Palace colonnade had echoes of the Roman Temple of the Sun, and, unlike its current monochromatic incarnation, its short columns were painted pale green, the tall ones a shade of terra cotta.

Meant as a respite from the hubbub of the Exposition, the Palace was surrounded by water, walkways, and green spaces dotted with violets. Its lagoon hosted many nighttime events, such as a Venice Carnival celebration and, on Kamehameha Day in June, a floating bandshell with Oahu native and mezzo-soprano Marion Dowsett singing traditional Hawaiian ballads accompanied by strings.

Inside were 148 art galleries showcasing more than eleven thousand works by artists from all over the world—including forty-five hundred American artists—from Winslow Homer, James

McNeill Whistler, and Mary Cassatt to Laura Knight, Edvard Munch, and Utagawa Hiroshige. It was the first major international art show on the West Coast. Half of PPIE attendees reportedly made their way through its galleries.

While the Palace was devoted to traditional arts, PPIE was “the first great exposition since the popularization of moving pictures.” An estimated one million feet of film was exposed for the event and about two dozen small theaters screened “nearly a hundred little picture shows,” sometimes accompanied by live narration.

The Motion Picture Exhibitors Association held a conference at the PPIE. Matinee idol Francis X. Bushman accepted an award on Metro Day. Movie fans could take to the dance floor with the likes of Cecil B. DeMille, Geraldine Farrar, Mae Marsh, Beatriz Michelena, Owen Moore, or Mack Sennett. Chaplin visited, riding a giraffe on the carousel and taking in the panoramic view from the 265-foot high Aeroscope. Fatty Arbuckle and Mabel Normand starred in a short film touring the Exposition that showed them, among other things, meeting famous opera contralto Ernestine Schumann-Heink and exploring a notorious Australian convict ship on display.

None of the structures at the PPIE were built to last, but the Palace of Fine Arts was so popular plans were afoot almost immediately to make it permanent. The Exposition’s Palace of Fine Arts Preservation Day alone raised \$8,000. Part of the entertainment that October day was

“Butterfly Dancer” Loïe Fuller’s *Parisian Muses*, who fluttered about inside the rotunda.

After PPIE closed, Phoebe Apperson Hearst (prodigious art collector and mother to newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst) was instrumental in the effort to save the Palace. Her death from the so-called Spanish flu in 1919 ended plans to turn it into a permanent gallery. Meanwhile, an *Architectural Review* article that year reported the structure “grows more beautiful as weather and plant life give it added interest.”

Over the years, it might have stood unkempt but it was not unused, serving as storage for the Parks Department and the U.S. military. At one time it housed tennis courts and a telephone book distribution center. During the Great Depression select artists of the W.P.A. created new murals to replace the decaying ones in the rotunda. In 1962, a nonprofit was established to maintain it and it was rebuilt with more durable materials, reopening in 1967. In 1970, its theater was unveiled and has been in use ever since. The Palace’s most recent refurbishing, completed in 2010, included a seismic retrofit. The Palace and the Marina Green are the only remnants of the PPIE still on site. — *Editor*

With invaluable contributions by Laura A. Ackley, author of *San Francisco’s Jewel City: The Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915*.



# DANCING MOTHERS

## MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY WAYNE BARKER

**DIRECTED BY** HERBERT BRENON, USA, 1926

**CAST** Alice Joyce, Clara Bow, Conway Tearle, Norman Trevor, Dorothy Cumming, and Elsie Lawson

**PRODUCTION** Famous Players-Lasky **PRINT SOURCE** SFSFF Collection

**Preceded by** SFSFF's restoration of Gregory La Cava's **THE PILL POUNDER** (1923), starring Charlie Murray and featuring Clara Bow

**N**o matter what they may say, there is such a thing as an overnight star—or close to it—but that wasn't Clara Bow. When the legendary B.P. Schulberg made a deal that included an associate producer gig at Paramount in 1925, aided by the fact that he had Clara under contract, she'd been acting in films since 1921. She had been the subject of numerous "watch out for this one!" press items and was named the "most successful" of the 1924 Wampas Baby Stars. When, at the end of 1925, Bow replaced Betty Bronson in what was called "the juvenile lead" in *Dancing Mothers*, Clara had been in at least two dozen movies, including *Down to the Sea in Ships* (1922), the hit *The Plastic Age* (1925), and many small gems such as the recently rediscovered short *The Pill Pounder*, from 1923.

Clara Bow was on the verge of stardom. Everyone knew it. Her standout work in Herbert Brenon's *Dancing Mothers* was one of the last supporting roles she played. In April, just after its release, "Paramount ranked Clara thirty-eighth in its *Galaxy of Stars*," writes David Stenn in *Clara Bow: Runnin' Wild*. "One year later, she would be beyond numerical ranking."

Bow plays Catherine "Kittens" Westcourt, the spoiled flapper daughter (seemingly about

eighteen years old, although it's never spelled out) of rich Hugh Westcourt (Norman Trevor) and his wife, the former Broadway actress Ethel (Alice Joyce) and the movie's main character. Joyce was thirty-six at this point and had been acting in films since about 1910. In the Hollywood of the time, Joyce's age meant that despite her nearly unchanged looks, she was easing, or being eased, into "mother" roles. In fact, she had done superlative work the year before as the gentle second wife in Henry King's version of *Stella Dallas*. *Dancing Mothers*, based on a hit Broadway play by future film directors Edmund Goulding and Edgar Selwyn, offered her another appealing role that made it clear Joyce was still a beautiful woman. There was something ineffably patrician about Joyce's face that made Hollywood cast her as a society lady—which was somewhat ironic as Joyce's father was a smelter and her mother a seamstress. This gave Joyce something in common with Bow, whose Brooklyn background was a great deal rougher than that, and who was also finding herself cast more than once as part of the carefree rich.

The plot manages to put some twists on a familiar tale. Kittens is in pursuit of the much older rake Jerry Naughton (naughty, get it?), played by the serviceable Conway Tearle. Her father, Hugh

(Norman Trevor), is playing sugar daddy to gold-digging Irma (Elsie Lawson). And poor Ethel is stuck at home, flipping through the scrapbook she's kept from her acting days. Neither father nor daughter thinks twice about Ethel's loneliness or even cares much about being caught themselves. In one speakeasy scene, Kittens's callow former boyfriend becomes enraged that she is dancing all night with Jerry. When the discarded suitor tells Kittens he's going to tattletale to her father, she says breezily, "Go ahead, he's right over there." And so he is, slipping cash into Irma's evening bag.

There's not much fun in this arrangement for Ethel and one night her best friend, Mrs. Mazzarene (Dorothy Cumming), points that out. "I used to do what you do," she says. "Sit home night after night alone. Then one day, I looked in the mirror and was vain enough to think there was still years of life before me, and now I'm living."

The penny drops for Ethel. She dresses up and sashays out to a club—where she meets and fascinates Jerry. Ethel knows this is the cad who's leading Kittens astray, so she fakes a French accent and another identity in an attempt to protect her daughter from heartbreak. But, in the way of movies like this one, Jerry and Ethel end up falling in love.

Although Clara Bow's sparkling presence remains the most appealing thing about *Dancing Mothers*, seeing it now from a distance of almost a hundred years, the movie has plenty of other things to recommend it. Under the direction of Herbert Brenon, it has marvelous Jazz Age atmosphere, including rebellious youth, rebellious parents, all-night dancing, bathtub gin, pocket flasks, and Spencer Charters billed as a "Butter and Egg Man"—an out-of-town businessman who's rich, unwary, and very, very drunk. The movie's high style, even

then a characteristic of Paramount releases, went over well with fans. Magazines like *Picture-Play* suggested that readers copy the dress that Bow wears in the climactic confrontation scene, terming it a "typical flapper frock," though adding, "it by no means needs to be confined to that type, as it is a sport dress which is practical in style and could be worn by almost anyone." *Exhibitors Herald* noted the two big nightlife scenes, one in "The Pirate's Ship," which it called "a bizarre cabaret in Greenwich Village" (bizarre is right), and the other at "a fashionable night club in the Roaring Forties along the Gay White Way." *Motion Picture News* suggested "staging a Charleston contest" as a promotional gimmick for *Dancing Mothers*.

Clara Bow, with her instinctual approach to her roles, decided to reinterpret Kittens from the rather brittle way she'd been played on stage. Bow opted to make the girl merely heedless and out for fun instead. This is obvious from the opening set on a liner returning from Europe. We meet Kittens on deck, wrapped up against the wind and reading, or at any rate holding, a weighty book that she flings aside for the first cute fluffy dog she sees (which, of course, is in the care of Tearle's Jerry Naughton). Kittens offers the pup a treat off her tea tray and begins to play. Suddenly the dog scampers toward the ship's side, and Kittens jumps up to save it, without a thought for the elegant tray in her lap. Cups, plates, and tray clatter to the ground as she barrels after the imperiled animal. Thus does Kittens charm the audience, and she will retain that sympathy even as her behavior gets less charming. Not only is this a girl that dogs like—always a good sign—she puts the pup's welfare first.

After a while, you feel a little sorry for Alice Joyce. Although it's not considered nice to say so, mothers can feel outshined by a vivacious young daughter. In this case, when the daughter

is Clara Bow, at times "outshined" is more like "obliterated." Still, Joyce brings her characteristic intelligence to the film; Ethel is no doormat. Discovered at a club by Hugh and ordered to go home, she gives her hypocritical spouse a radiant smile and dances away with a younger man. And while reviewers at the time were not particularly happy with how *Dancing Mothers* ends, nowadays Ethel's final decision about what to do with her life comes as a pleasant shock. In his biography of Bow, Stenn quips that "one wonders what genetic mutation made Ethel bear Kittens," but the final scene may make it more apparent. It was a good part for Joyce and that same year she had an important role in the immortal *Beau Geste*. But she retired from the screen in 1930, and her later years were not happy ones. Divorcing director Clarence Brown in 1945, Joyce claimed he was cold and often left her alone, a sad irony for anyone who might still have remembered *Dancing Mothers*.

Clara Bow, on the other hand, "was absolutely a sensation in *Dancing Mothers*," Louise Brooks recalled many years later. "Clara was so marvelous; she just swept the country! I thought she was oh, so wonderful; everybody did. She became a star overnight with nobody's help." Overnight—well, no. But wonderful, absolutely. As Bow stops a canine from drowning, dances the night away, back-talks her stuffy father, and makes sure the cocktail shaker is full, *Dancing Mothers* is a brilliant preview for the career of one of Hollywood's greatest legends.

— FARRAN SMITH NEHME



Alice Joyce and Clara Bow (image courtesy of BAMPFA)

# JOYCE UNCONFINED

by NORA FIORE

"I haven't enjoyed myself so much in years as I have recently, grandly rejecting parts," Alice Joyce declared in 1924. After marrying the affluent James Regan Jr., Joyce could choose her roles carefully. Informed by more than a decade of screen experience and a keen self-awareness, Joyce's selections were, as Anthony Slide notes, "remarkably intelligent," reflecting her insight and finesse as an actor.

## GENTLEWOMEN IN JEOPARDY

In two of her best remembered pictures, Joyce portrays Englishwomen trapped by painful dilemmas. Amid the Orientalist hokum of *The Green Goddess*, Joyce grounds extreme situations with understated credibility, yet still delivers the juicy pleasures we crave from far-fetched melodrama. Much of the film's suspense derives from tense interplay between Joyce as Lucilla and a beturbaned George Arliss as the Rajah, who presents a cruel choice to her: succumb to his advances or die. During one engrossing scene, Lucilla's dignified wariness collapses when the Rajah offers to reunite her with her children. But then hope hardens into resolve and contempt for his manipulations. She gathers herself for a sublime refusal and makes a grand exit.

Joyce balances *Beau Geste's* conspicuous theme of masculine devotion with some feminine strength. Watching Lady Patricia preside over a happy household, the audience, like Beau, cannot help but condone, even admire, her secret sale of a purloined sapphire. She embodies the caring determination that holds families together. The last reel depends on Joyce to convey both the dear price and the glory of Beau's sacrifice. As Lady Patricia

reads his final letter, we can almost hear the throb in her voice. In the closing shot, her faraway gaze transfigures grief into spiritual uplift.

## BEYOND MOTHERHOOD

Joyce's off-screen status as a high-society mother shaped her public image, as researcher Greta de Groat has noted. However, the star's more daring characterizations on-screen defy the notion that motherhood defines a woman's identity. Ethel Westcourt flouts convention in *Dancing Mothers* by charting her own course instead of settling for a selfish family. At the beginning of *The Home Maker*, Joyce commits to a fearlessly unlikeable portrait of domestic dissatisfaction. As Eva Knapp scrubs floors and disciplines her unruly youngest child, her hard, glaring eyes and the bitter set of her mouth reveal her contagious misery. Later, finding fulfillment as a breadwinner, she carries herself with relaxed assurance and is able to repair her homelife.

Joyce also explored the sorrows of working mothers. Edith in *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting* supports herself and her daughter so that her husband can paint abroad, but he tramples on her love by returning a callous bohemian. Under the direction of Frank Borzage, whom Joyce praised for coaching natural performances, she goes from bruised dismay to tearful despair to shocked humiliation, all with an affecting poignancy. When we first see journalist Phyllis Dale in *Headlines*, she's at ease in a bustling newsroom. Her eyes fixed on her typewriter, she grabs a cigarette, then searches for a match, as if she had done so a thousand times. Though comfortable in her career, Phyllis fears her fiancé

will shift his affections to her teenage daughter. Her insecurity captures a realist's recognition of her diminishing social value as she ages.

## COMPASSIONATE LADIES

Whether playing a blueblood or a commoner, Joyce excelled at suggesting innate nobility. Tempted though the viewer may be to resent the patrician Helen Morrison in *Stella Dallas*, Joyce imbues the second Mrs. Dallas with kindness and tact. In *Sorrell and Son*, compassionate housekeeper Fanny Garland helps sustain the overburdened Sorrell, steadfast father of the title, with her discreet but enduring affection.

Sometimes Joyce reveals her characters' warmth through the artful use of her hands. As Mrs. Morrison, she tenderly lays her hands over Stella Dallas's clasped fingers, highlighting a kinship between mothers that transcends class barriers. When Mrs. Morrison invites the young Laurel to live with her, Joyce takes the girl's hand in both of her own, enfolding the step-daughter in a mother's love with an elegant gesture. Sensing the hero's troubles in *Sorrell and Son*, Fanny lets her hand slide down his forearm. The movement, casually done but ripe with meaning, signifies a union worthy of, though not formalized by, marriage.

## GRANDE DAMES WITH A TWIST

Joyce proved adept at putting a comic twist on her aristocratic poise. In *So's Your Old Man*, Princess Lescaboura elevates W.C. Fields's Mr. Bisbee from persona non grata to local bigwig. A repeated joke arises from a friendly misunderstanding: Bisbee continues to believe that his benefactress is a char-



latan. When he congratulates her on the deceit, Joyce's wink and smile communicate their jovial bond. This princess relishes the conspiracy, though she really has nothing to hide. Besides, she is too well-bred to embarrass him with the truth.

At the opposite end of the snob spectrum, Mrs. De Peyster of *13 Washington Square* leads with a formidable hauteur that renders her misadventures all the more delicious. Wielding the Social Register like a Bible, Mrs. De Peyster attempts to thwart her son's elopement with a grocer's daughter. Her schemes precipitate a series of inconveniences and perils, as well as an unlikely rapport with a burglar that prompts the grande dame to reevaluate her convictions. Like the sun emerging from behind a cloud, Joyce's radiance after her character's change of heart makes us believe that the events of a single night could melt this mighty ice queen.

# CHARLIE MURRAY

## “THE FAMOUS IRISH COMEDIAN”

BY STEVE MASSA

Although overlooked today, Charlie Murray appeared in a touch fewer than three hundred films from 1912 to 1940, making one- and two-reel comedies at Biograph, Keystone, and elsewhere over the course of his first ten years, not to mention his later starring and major supporting roles in more than sixty features. Like many silent-era performers, Murray came from the stage, and it was during those days that he created and honed a professional “Irishman” persona that later became his claim to fame in movies. Here are some highlights of his very impressive career.

### THE BIG TOP AND OTHER STAGES

Born in Indiana in 1872, Murray began performing at age ten in traveling medicine shows. Making his way through various tent and pony shows, he did time with circuses before ending up in vaudeville. He hit the big time when he teamed up with Ollie Mack and they became the Irish equivalent of the popular “Dutch” comedy duo Weber and Fields. After working together for more than twenty years in hit shows like *Shooting the Chutes* and *The Sunny Side*, Murray and Mack went their separate ways in 1910.

### BIOGRAPH DAYS

D.W. Griffith saw Murray on stage and recruited him to join Biograph. Under the direction of Del Henderson and Edward Dillon, Murray became one of the leading comics of the company, which also boasted Gus Pixley, Sylvia Ashton, David Morris, and Gus Alexander. At first, Murray played all types of roles—tramps, bogus counts, Jewish sweatshop owners, even appearing in drag for *Getting Rid of Trouble* (1912) as a strapping Irish cook who’s used by “her” diminutive employer to get rid of pesky door-to-door salesmen. Eventually he focused on a single character, an always lazy, yet conniving Irishman named Skelley in shorts like

*Skelley’s Birthday* and *Skelley and the Turkey* (both 1914). The best of the bunch may be *Skelley’s Skeleton*, also from 1914, where he sells his skeleton in advance to the local sawbones. This works out fine, except the doctor watches him like a hawk and won’t let him do anything that might compromise his future property.

### THE CALL OF THE WEST

On a trip to California for Biograph, Charlie liked it and decided he wanted to stay, so he migrated to Keystone, bringing Skelley with him. The character was renamed Hogan and continued to get into trouble in shorts like *Hogan Out West* and *Hogan’s Wild Oat* (both 1915). As Murray became better known the Hogan name was dropped, but whether it was as Riley, McFadden, or Cassidy, he essentially played this wily Irishman for the rest of his career. With support from Louise Fazenda, Slim Summerville, and Polly Moran, Charlie starred in shorts like *The Feathered Nest* (1916), *A Bedroom Blunder* (1917), and *Hard Knocks and Love Taps* (1921). He also starred in the Mack Sennett-produced features *Love, Honor and Behave* (1920) and *A Small Town Idol* (1921), maintaining his status as one of Sennett’s top stars until 1922. Behind the scenes, Murray was a paternal figure on the

Sennett lot. In interviews from the 1910s, he talked with pride about helping to teach the new, younger players how to perform for the camera and, when Keystone character actor Gene Rogers died penniless in 1919, Murray spearheaded a collection to give him a proper burial.

### IRISHMAN FOR HIRE

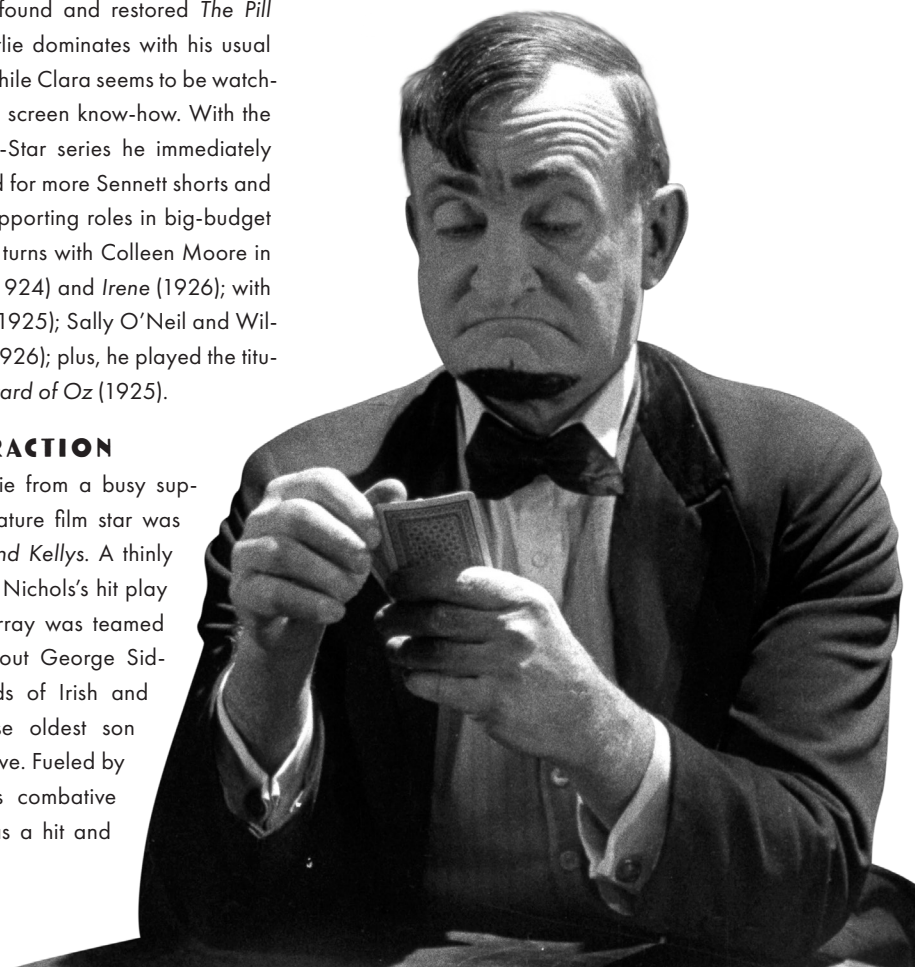
In 1922 Murray accepted an offer from Long Island-based producer C.C. Burr and moved back to New York for a series of thirteen All-Star Comedy two-reelers built around his well-known and, by this time, well-seasoned, screen persona. Directed by Gregory La Cava, later of *My Man Godfrey* (1936) fame, Murray was supported by Raymond McKee, Mary Anderson, and a very young Clara Bow. In the recently found and restored *The Pill Pounder* (1923), Charlie dominates with his usual performance savvy, while Clara seems to be watching and absorbing his screen know-how. With the completion of the All-Star series he immediately returned to Hollywood for more Sennett shorts and a busy schedule of supporting roles in big-budget features that included turns with Colleen Moore in both *Painted People* (1924) and *Irene* (1926); with Charles Ray in *Percy* (1925); Sally O’Neil and William Haines in *Mike* (1926); plus, he played the titular Wizard in *The Wizard of Oz* (1925).

### THE MAIN ATTRACTION

What changed Charlie from a busy supporting actor to a feature film star was 1926’s *The Cohens and Kellys*. A thinly veiled rip-off of Anne Nichols’s hit play *Abie’s Irish Rose*, Murray was teamed with the short and stout George Sidney as battling heads of Irish and Jewish families whose oldest son and daughter fall in love. Fueled by Murray and Sidney’s combative chemistry, the film was a hit and

the team continued their feuding in four additional features at First National Pictures, from 1926’s *Sweet Daddies* through 1928’s *Flying Romeos*. At the same time Charlie starred on his own in pictures like *McFadden’s Flats* (1927), *The Gorilla* (1927), *Vamping Venus* (1928), and *The Head Man* (1928). With the arrival of sound Charlie returned to work with George Sidney in shorts and six additional *Cohens and Kellys* features. His last appearance was in the Eddie Cline-directed *Breaking the Ice* (1938).

**See Charlie Murray in *The Pill Pounder* and *The Gorilla*, both recently restored and returned to the big screen after nearly a hundred-year absence.**



*The Pill Pounder*



# OH! WHAT A NURSE!

**LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY DONALD SOSIN**

**DIRECTED BY CHARLES REISNER, USA, 1926**

**CAST** Syd Chaplin, Patsy Ruth Miller, Edgar Kennedy, and Matthew Betz **PRODUCTION** Warner Bros.

**PRINT SOURCE** FPA Classics

**R**ecently, the mystery surrounding the biological father of Sydney Chaplin, Charlie's older half-brother, has been solved. Researcher Barry Anthony has finally identified the apocryphal Sidney John Hawke, wealthy London businessman, as just this individual, lending credence to Sydney's perpetual insistence that at some point, he had a legacy coming to him. That legacy took the form of a signet ring, presented to young Sydney by an anonymous stranger on a trip back home to London in 1919, but nothing else. What Sydney did inherit from his father, however, as suggested by Anthony's description of the man, included a certain paranoia toward his fellow man and a misogyny toward his fellow woman, one that pervaded his relationships and abruptly ended his thirty-one film career in 1929. This misogyny was manifest not only in his persistent predatory behavior toward women and girls, but also in his on-screen female impersonations, of which *Oh! What a Nurse!* is essentially the last and arguably the best.

Syd Chaplin, as he came to be called by the onset of his five-picture contract with Warner Bros. in 1925, had been loath to come to the United States. When he finally did in 1915, it was to replace Charlie who had just left Mack Sennett's Keystone Studios for a contract with Essanay. Syd was loath because by 1913 he already had a lucrative music hall career as a noted headliner with Karno's London Comedians, an outfit Charlie

had left in 1910. Syd was the first brother to take up with Fred Karno, in 1906, but took a lot longer than Charlie to catch fire. When he did, it was probably because he started to participate in writing as well as performing in his shows, including one called *Skating*, which featured a young Minnie Gilbert, whom Syd brought to America as his common-law spouse and remained with, off and on, until her death in 1936.

Syd stayed with Keystone a year, ending his run with a huge hit, *A Submarine Pirate*, which featured actual American naval technology never before shown on film. No one could understand why Sennett would sever ties with Syd after this success, but their relationship had deteriorated long before, given Syd's unpredictable behavior with both directors and stars. In his Keystone films Syd played a character based on his music hall persona, Archibald Binks, that came to be known as Gussle. Unfortunately, it was misinterpreted as a knock-off of his brother's character, the Little Tramp, and was never really appreciated for its subtleties.

Finding himself at the Lone Star Studio as his brother's business manager, Syd spent the next few years behind the scenes as Charlie was experiencing the peak of his popularity. By 1919, Syd made a move and launched himself into the inchoate aeronautics business with the Syd Chaplin Aircraft Corporation. Even though it initially flew only

from San Pedro to Santa Catalina and back, it made the history books as the first ever domestic American airline. At the same time, Syd somehow achieved a promising five-picture deal with Paramount Artcraft that began with *King, Queen, Joker*, which wasn't released until 1921. The ambitious period piece revealed Syd's deficiencies in multitasking, as he was unable to competently wear the many hats—actor, producer, director, writer—that Charlie donned so effortlessly. Over budget, poorly edited, and negatively reviewed, *King, Queen, Joker* ended up the only film made under his Paramount contract. In addition, his airline had gone bankrupt in 1920, so it was back to the Chaplin Studios once again, where Charlie was battling through the First National contract Syd had negotiated for him.

Having regained some of his confidence in supporting parts in Charlie's *Pay Day* (1922) and *The Pilgrim* (1923), Syd began to rebuild his reputation by taking other significant character roles in films such as Colleen Moore's *The Perfect Flapper* (1924) and Mickey Neilan's *The Rendezvous* (1923). But it was Charlie who worked to get Syd the role of a lifetime, as Sir Fancourt "Babs" Babberly in *Charley's Aunt* (1925), the first film adaptation of a very successful stage play by Brandon Thomas and the first Anglo-American production, not only for producer Al Christie but for the film industry itself. Syd's on-screen female impersonations began with this role.

With Charlie's *The Gold Rush* coming out the same year, many critics took up the debate about which film was funnier, with Syd's winning out. "Funnier" was the operative word, for *Charley's Aunt* was no *Gold Rush* in terms of artistic mastery. Still, its great success led Syd to his deal with Warner Bros. as a leading man (complete with a new on-screen

look), earning him both the money and notoriety he had always desired. A writer at Warner at this time, Darryl Zanuck later noted in his memoir that Syd was "better read and handsomer than his younger half-brother, and that "if a shrewd director had only taken him in hand, probed his real character, soothed his resentments, [and] calmed his phobias," his career might have been different. Director Chuck Reisner filled that role for the contracted five films but was unable to take him any further.

His second Warner film, *Oh! What a Nurse!* is loosely based on a story by noted critic Robert E. Sherwood and playwright Bertram Bloch. The story was worked into shape by Syd, Zanuck, and director Chuck Reisner during July and August 1925 at Camp Curry in Yosemite. By the third week of September, filming began with Patsy Ruth Miller playing a damsel in distress named June Harrison. Syd plays Jerry Clark, a reporter who, after taking over a column for the lovelorn when a vacancy suddenly opened up, uncovers a plot in which June would be forced to marry a certain Clive Hunt who only wants her money, and he decides to act. His efforts to save her forces him to inhabit two female personae, a widow's and a nurse's, to great effect. Syd's style of impersonation obliquely reveals his inherent disdain for women, even though his wife Minnie and his mother Hannah had inspired his performance. The type he embodied was a Victorian woman trying to appear as if she is well-versed in the modern fashions. She sashays about, hand on hip, batting her eyes and moving her body like she's always on the make. Syd's female characterizations are in keeping with something he once told Zanuck, that "all women are whores," for seemingly every movement is made in hopes of winning some sexual conquest.



Critics' responses to the film were overwhelmingly positive, although some urged Syd to stop impersonating women. *Picture-Play's* Sally Benson wrote for the June 1926 review that "ever since *Charley's Aunt*, Sydney Chaplin has found it difficult to keep out of skirts. Having provoked laughter once in them, he seems to feel that he will be three times as funny the third time he wears them. Unfortunately, this isn't so." Still, this opinion was in the minority. San Francisco's new Pantages Theatre chose the film as its opening day feature and gushed about the wisdom of their choice shortly thereafter, noting that "the House completely sold out two days in advance of opening despite the fact that the opening night prices were \$5 a seat." C.S. Sewell in *Moving Picture World* argued the more frequently voiced opinion that "Syd's the whole show" and that the film was a "hilarious, rapid-fire farce comedy, with a new laugh starting before the old one is hardly finished."

With this film, Syd effectively burnished his growing reputation as a solid comedy actor, a status he hoped to strengthen with his next project, *The Better 'Ole* (1926), based on British cartoonist Bruce Bairnsfather's strip *Fragments from France* about a World War I Tommy named Old Bill. Ever since Bairnsfather's cartoons caught on during the war, Syd had wanted to play him. It marked the acme of his film career. His last two Warner pictures were not as successful and Syd appeared in his final film, *A Little Bit of Fluff* (1928), made at John Maxwell's Elstree Studios in London with his other half-brother, Wheeler Dryden. That next year, the Female achieved a bit of revenge when bit player Molly Wright sued Syd, Maxwell, British International, and several other parties for an assault that sent the elder Chaplin into exile for the next ten years and effectively blacklisted him from the industry for life.

— LISA STEIN HAVEN



# THE LADY

## MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY STEPHEN HORNE

**DIRECTED BY FRANK BORZAGE, USA, 1925**

**CAST** Norma Talmadge, Wallace MacDonald, Brandon Hurst, Alf Goulding, and Emily Fitzroy

**PRODUCTION** Norma Talmadge Productions **PRINT SOURCE** Library of Congress

**T**he 1920s was a time of great upheaval with people shaken and shattered by the Great War trying to forget and move on. Excess was the byword of the day, and women especially were experimenting with free love, free-flowing booze, and more economic freedom as the workforce absorbed them in large numbers. At the same time, an older generation raised with Victorian values continued to find comfort in the virtues of the past. The film industry, then as now, tried to please both audiences with films that spoke to their attitudes and concerns. Alongside movies with bobbed-haired flappers dancing the Charleston were self-sacrificing mothers willing to compromise their own happiness for the sake of their children.

The most famous of the maternal melodramas of the silent era was 1925's *Stella Dallas*, in which a lower-class woman hoping for better things for her child steps out of her daughter's life. That film was adapted from the endlessly adapted Olive Higgins Prouty 1923 novel of the same name by screenwriter Frances Marion, whose script for *The Lady* tackles essentially the same storyline but was based on Martin Brown's 1923 Broadway play. Marion was well versed in creating challenged, but sympathetic female characters from her long collaboration with "America's Sweetheart," Mary Pickford. As perhaps the most famous, well-regarded, and prolific woman in screenwriting at the

time, Marion was the natural choice to write *The Lady*, a star vehicle for Norma Talmadge.

Talmadge, whose younger sisters Constance and Natalie also made their mark in motion pictures, was one of the shining lights of the silent era. She started her career in 1910 with the Vitagraph Company in Flatbush, New York, moving quickly from bit parts to leading roles. Following a brief, unhappy flirtation with Hollywood in 1915–1916, she returned to New York, where she met and married Joseph M. Schenck, a partner in the movie theater chain owned by Marcus Loew, who later founded the studio that became Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

In 1917, the couple founded the Norma Talmadge Film Corporation on East 48th Street in Manhattan with the express purpose of making Norma the greatest star in motion pictures. Schenck spared no expense to showcase his actress wife, from employing the best casts and crews to building the most lavish sets and choosing the most distinguished directors to work with her. Schenck's ambition for her only grew when he closed the New York studio and re-established it in the warmer climes of southern California in 1922. The buildup worked. By 1923, movie exhibitors voted Norma Talmadge as their number one box office star.

When the studio decided to take on *The Lady*, they were dealing with a melodramatic and somewhat





formulaic story. A popular show girl named Polly Pearl marries a British aristocrat and is discarded by him when he grows impatient with her working-class friends and ways. Penniless and with a baby on the way, she finds refuge as a waitress in a brothel. When her former father-in-law comes to claim the baby, Polly gives her son to a kindly pastor and his wife to prevent him being “ruined” like his faithless father. After fruitless searches to find the boy, she gives up, but never stops wondering what kind of man he has become.

Such a plot could become mawkish in the wrong hands, but Talmadge and Schenck chose the perfect director for the task: Frank Borzage. The American director, popular in his time, is revered today as a supreme crafter of humanist, emotional dramas that often focused on society’s demi-monde. His 1927 love story *7th Heaven*, starring

the magnetic acting team of Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell, earned Borzage the first Academy Award for Best Director ever presented. His touch, as unique and special as Ernst Lubitsch’s comic portrayals of café society, is evident throughout *The Lady*. He is especially good with his cast, perhaps as a result of the five years he spent as an actor while simultaneously earning his chops as a director.

The film’s opening says so much with so little. The first intertitle reads, “The lady,” followed by the first image—a woman’s hand wiping beer off a bar with a rag. We don’t see her face, careworn and framed in a loose coil of gray, until it has been splattered with soda water by a drunken British officer who has been making a nuisance of himself. “That’s a ‘ell of a way to treat a lady,” she scolds. At the time, “lady” was a title reserved for aris-

tocratic women, and people in the pub jeer her. Polly wanted to be a lady, she tells a sympathetic patron, but fate was against her. From that point, the film unfolds largely in flashback as Polly tells him the story of her life.

The scenario and the way Borzage films Talmadge lend dignity to an ordinary working woman. The director captures a certain glow in her unadorned face that hints at her past as a vivacious London performer who attracted a flock of stage-door Johnnies and captured the heart of handsome, ardent gentleman Leonard St. Aubyns, played by Wallace MacDonald. As might be expected, Borzage encourages a display of love from both actors that feels wholly genuine and that accentuates the misery of their parting. So, too, does Borzage help the supporting cast to full-bodied performances. Bit players, like the young usher who guards Polly from her stage-door admirers, make small, but indelible impressions with their gestures and actions.

The lively backstage world of the dance hall where Polly works, the posh casino of Monte Carlo where Leonard rejects Polly, and the brothel in Marseille where the abandoned and pregnant Polly throws herself on the mercy of the hard-nosed Madame Blanche, played by Emily Fitzroy, showcase the talents of art director William Cameron Menzies. From the sign outside Polly’s pub (“Brixton Bar Café Franco-Anglais”) to the foggy London street where Polly scrapes together a living as a flower seller while she searches for her son, Menzies’s carefully crafted sets greatly enhance the atmosphere in which the audience is immersed.

Menzies continued a partnership with Schenck into the talkie era and eventually won an honorary Oscar for his production design, including for his re-creation of the burning of Atlanta in *Gone with the Wind*.

Borzage and his cinematographer Antonio Gaudio also know how to structure a complex sequence. A particular standout is the scene in which Polly tries to stall St. Aubyns Sr. and his lawyer as the pastor’s wife escapes with her baby. Madame Blanche watches the street through a narrow window as Polly distracts the men with a rousing song. The camera cuts back and forth, revealing the impatience of the men and Polly’s barely masked anxiety and sorrow. A simple nod from Madame Blanche confirms that the baby is gone. The emotions that play across Talmadge’s face attest to her skill as an actor.

The film provides Polly with a grace note at the end, when she sees her son once more. He has become an honorable young man, giving the audience the satisfaction of knowing that his mother was a lady after all.

— MARILYN FERDINAND



# BECOMING NORMA

by Greta de Groat

**I**n an era when the movie industry churned through stars, Norma Talmadge had remarkable staying power. Beginning at the time of nickelodeons, she later rose to stardom in the late 1910s and then superstardom in the early 1920s, sailing through the rest of the decade before talkies finally put a close to her career.

## THE BEGINNING

In 1910 the Brooklyn-raised teenager took the streetcar to apply for work at Vitagraph's Flatbush studio. Her only experience had been posing for song slides. Soon she was busy playing parts from bit and extra work to leads, all the while learning her craft. Some of these early Vitagraph shorts survive. A nice example is *Father's Hatband* from 1913, where she and her boyfriend try to pass notes unnoticed by her father. Here we see her natural baby-faced grin and raucous laugh, not yet the poised actress but a performer of undeniable charm and charisma.

## A TURNING POINT

Stranded in California in 1916 after a false start with an underfunded company, she sought work with D.W. Griffith at Triangle. He instead took a shine to her younger sister Constance, but Norma found steady work in a string of routine melodramas and in one comedy/drama, *The Social Secretary*, written by future *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* scribe Anita Loos. Tired of fending off advances by her male bosses, Talmadge's character dresses down to apply for a job for a woman who specifies that she wants an unattractive secretary. She leans into the prim, bespectacled character, as well as dressing back up to vamp a cad pursuing her boss's daughter. It's a nice showcase for her versatility.

## THE PARTNERSHIP

Later that year she partnered with future mogul Joseph M. Schenck for what turned out to be a stunningly profitable relationship for both. In their New York studio they turned out hit after hit of mostly society dramas, with gowns by leading designers, steadily building her reputation as a star and actress. She often played a misunderstood wife, or an inexperienced woman who makes bad decisions or came from a problematic background. Or both at once, when she played double roles in the same film. A fine example of her burgeoning acting skills is 1918's *The Safety Curtain* as an abused wife of a vaudeville performer who, thinking her husband dead, marries a British officer in India but remains afraid of intimacy. Or even better, 1921's *The Sign on the Door*, one of three Talmadge pictures directed by Herbert Brenon. She has a bravura scene locked in a room with the man her husband shot, going from shock to panic, to taking action to save her family.

## THE BLOCKBUSTER

By the early 1920s, Talmadge was at the pinnacle of her success. Between 1923 and 1925 she was number one at the box office. The press extolled her as "womanly," indeed as a "modern woman." Not a vamp or an innocent, her characters had a woman's challenges. She began to make grander,



more prestigious films. *Smilin' Through* (1922) was so popular it spawned two remakes, one of which was also directed by Sidney Franklin, a Talmadge favorite. It is her last dual role. As the doomed 19th century bride she expires soulfully in her fiancé's arms, while as the modern woman she has a lovely scene at a train station, politely greeting a chatty soldier while realizing that her lover has not returned. She shows tremendous emotional responsiveness, her quicksilver expressions playing across her face, while making it seem natural and spontaneous. She had become a virtuoso of silent-film acting technique.

## POSTERITY

Talmadge's two greatest films came from teaming with director Frank Borzage: *Secrets* (1924) and *The Lady* (1925). Both take Talmadge from youth to middle or old age, suffering through but meeting the setbacks in her life. *Secrets*, the more popular of the two, shows scenes from a marriage, framed

by her character as an old woman. Beginning with a comic elopement in a hoop skirt, it proceeds through the hardships of pioneer life, through infidelity in middle age. In both films, her performances are masterful, and unashamed in wringing every tear from the audience. But as the decade worn on, flappers became the embodiment of the modern woman, and Talmadge became something of a legacy star. At the end of the 1920s, she (or her ghostwriter) penned stories about the old days at Vitagraph. This association with movie history didn't do her any favors when talkies came in and even stars more recent than Talmadge were rapidly considered obsolete. Contrary to histories that claim she spoke an intractable Brooklynese, her voice was perfectly adequate. But her time had come and gone. After one modestly successful talkie (*New York Nights*) and one bloated failure (*Du Barry, Woman of Passion*), she retired from movies to live on her considerable fortune.



# THE SEA HAWK

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA**

**DIRECTED BY FRANK LLOYD, USA, 1924**

**CAST** Milton Sills, Wallace Beery, Enid Bennett, and Lloyd Hughes **PRODUCTION** Frank Lloyd Productions

**PRINT SOURCE** UCLA Film and Television Archive

**W**hat connection could there possibly have been between Rafael Sabatini and Buster Keaton? Sabatini was hailed as a brilliant writer of popular fare and, for the adaptation of his 1915 novel about a 16th century English nobleman who takes on a new identity as a fearsome corsair, Buster Keaton loaned out his much-valued man-of-all-skills, Fred Gabourie, to design and build the ships. The regular art director was the great Stephen Goosson, who later designed Shangri-La for Frank Capra's *Lost Horizon* in 1937.

Although the British trade magazine, *The Bioscope*, described the film as a "swift-sailing pageant-play of piratical adventure," they also called it "lengthy and elaborate." Indeed, it lasts more than two hours—too long for most children and too complicated, what with Sabatini's revenge plot and much romantic intrigue. So, the rest of us can sit back, happy to enjoy the perfectly chosen English locations recognizable from many a summer holiday, although they never actually left California.

When I first saw *The Sea Hawk*, I heard muttering about the impossibility of Moorish galleons sailing from North Africa to Britain fueled only by sails and the muscle-power of slaves. But not so long ago, I visited Baltimore, a town in Ireland's County Cork, which displays a memorial to the ancestral villagers "who were forcibly removed from their

homes by Algerian pirates on the 21st June 1631 and sold into the slave markets of Algiers."

As one of the founders of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, director Frank Lloyd had a high reputation, having made epics such as *A Tale of Two Cities* (1917) and *Les Miserables* (1918). Lloyd was born in 1886 in Scotland but had left as a child with his family. He became a stage actor before immigrating to Canada and quickly realized his lack of ability: "I was so bad at acting that they had to put me on directing in self-defense."

He made many pictures set in Britain, such as *Oliver Twist* (1922), with Jackie Coogan, and the much-loved talkies *Cavalcade* and *Berkeley Square* (both 1933). He followed *Sea Hawk* with another epic, this one set in the Alaskan Gold Rush, *Winds of Chance* (1925), which his loyal descendants, Antonia Guerrero and Christopher Gray, spent months restoring and presented in Los Angeles this winter to a standing ovation.

While I was interviewing movie veterans in California and elsewhere, I came across enormous warmth and admiration for Lloyd. Percy Marmont called him "Christ-like." Gary Cooper: "He was a prince." Clive Brook: "A great director with people."

Bessie Love recalled that despite all this, his directing could sometimes be unorthodox. For 1924's *The Silent Watcher* with Glenn Hunter, both actors



were feeling skittish before a scene in which, as newlyweds, they were gradually to make up after a row. "Frank Lloyd did a most extraordinary thing," Love says, "and had the bed wired up and [gave] Hunter a shock ... We had all our excitement and laughs for the day. We could now settle down to doing some weeping."

Anthony Slide's 2009 biography of Lloyd points out that he was the first British-born director to be nominated for an Academy Award and the only Scotsman to have won the coveted prize for directing, with 1929's *The Divine Lady*, about Admiral Horatio Nelson's affair with Lady Hamilton during the Napoleonic Wars. Slide writes: "Frank Lloyd had loved anything to do with the sea since childhood, but it was not until *The Sea Hawk* that he was given the opportunity to transfer that affection, in truly awe-inspiring style, to the screen."

Slide describes the film as the first American production to deal with Moorish history, going on to say that "it was claimed that months of research were necessary to ensure the accuracy of historical details for the scenes in Algiers." Lloyd was also determined his production "would contain no shots of miniatures floating in a tank," according to

Slide's account, so "four 16th century ships were built to scale under the supervision of Fred Gabourie and transported to Catalina from a dry dock in San Pedro. For the Spanish galleon, a 172 feet long sailing ship was refurbished, with room for a crew of one hundred. An old ferryboat was used as the foundation for the Moorish galleon, with a length of 175 feet." To show they'd done their research, Gabourie and his team distinguished between galleons and a three-masted vessel with heavier fire-power called a galleass, introduced in the 16th century to answer the increasing threat from Barbary pirates.

The casting began in January 1924 and was unusually skillful. Milton Sills, whom Slide correctly describes as "much under-rated," had been a fellow in philosophy at the University of Chicago before becoming an actor. He worked on the stage until he met the great French émigré director Maurice Tourneur, who gave him a leading role in 1914's *The Pit*.

Sills declared *The Sea Hawk* to be his favorite film, yet the fan magazines made repeated remarks about his alleged miscasting as a tough "he-man." The campaign was led by the editor of *Photoplay*

who eventually relented and claimed Sills "a great friend with a great mind." Sills went on to hold his brawny own in films like 1926's *Men of Steel*. Sills's character in *The Sea Hawk* was inspired by actual historical figures like Dutchman Jan Jansen, who escaped the galleys, "turned Turk," and joined the Barbary pirates in the early 17th century as Morat Rais (often anglicized to Matthew Rice), and the one responsible for that 1631 sacking of Baltimore.

Enid Bennett, who was born in Australia in 1895, appeared on the U.S. stage and later played the heroine in a number of Thomas Ince pictures. She was Maid Marion to Douglas Fairbanks's *Robin Hood* (1922). She married Fred Niblo in 1919 and accompanied him to Italy for the shooting of *Ben-Hur* (1925). In 1963, she married another outstanding director, Sidney Franklin, whose great 1922 film, *Smilin' Through*, was a silent-era hit.

*Sea Hawk*'s master of the sword was a former instructor in the Belgian army, Fred Cavens, who taught the art of fencing to nearly all the screen's major swashbucklers: Douglas Fairbanks, John Barrymore, Basil Rathbone, and Errol Flynn. The role of captain of the guard was taken by a genuine western outlaw turned film actor, Al Jennings.

First cameraman was Frank Lloyd's favorite, Norbert F. Brodin. Lloyd's publicity man, J.L. Johnston, contributed a piece to *American Cinematographer* detailing Brodin's work on *The Sea Hawk*, whose photography had already been garnering high praise among critics. The article discusses the day-for-night shooting of a battle off Catalina Island, calling the resulting lighting effects "truly uncanny," and describes perilous camera positions atop a thirty-five-foot mast as well as on the edge of a cliff. The article ends on a roundup of laudatory quotes culled from Los Angeles-area reviews, in-

cluding Guy Price's in the *Herald*, which quipped: "I could sit and look at the sea scenes by Norbert Brodin until the Democrats get together on their candidate."

Perhaps the most interesting comments were made by *Variety* critic Fred Schader. His review, signed as "Fred," contained the phrase that every filmmaker quietly prays for, then and now: "There isn't a thing lacking in this picture that any picture fan could want. That is a lot to say about a costume picture, but nevertheless, this one is 100 per cent."

Schader goes on to tell the story of the film's production in unusual detail for a trade paper review and his summation must have brought profound satisfaction to Frank Lloyd and his company: "That is the story, but its handling is a work of art that will go down in screen history as a really great picture."

Frank Lloyd continued a colorful and productive career, which included yet another successful seafaring film, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, with Charles Laughton and Clark Gable, winner of the Best Picture Oscar for 1935 and so popular MGM reissued it in 1939. (There have been multiple versions throughout cinema's history, from 1916's made in Australia through 1984's, called *The Bounty* and shot in New Zealand and French Polynesia.)

Although *The Sea Hawk* was extremely successful, the subject of Barbary pirates was not tackled again until James Cruze, with his epic masterpiece *Old Ironsides* (1926). Let us hope that rarely shown and outstanding film will also appear again on our screens before long.

— KEVIN BROWNLOW

# GENTLEMEN GONE ROGUE

by Fritzi Kramer

Few characters are more beloved in adventure films than the aristocrat taking a walk on the wild side. As W.S. Gilbert put it, "They are no members of the common throng; They are all noblemen who have gone wrong." But why exactly they chose to take that walk depends on the film.

## FOR REVENGE

*The Black Pirate* was a showcase for cutting-edge natural color but the expensive technology was in support of a picture designed to appeal to nostalgia, lovers of childhood tales and fans of illustrator N.C. Wyeth. Audiences were invited via studio copy to "come and dare with this rollicking prince of pirates." Douglas Fairbanks wrote himself a plum title role as a Spanish aristocrat going undercover as a buccaneer. Marketing and Fairbanksian charm aside, it's a bloody tale of revenge—they killed his father, prepare to die—complete with stabbings, slashings, double-crossings, and walking the plank.

Milton Sills as Sir Oliver in *The Sea Hawk* plays a longer game, living with and raiding alongside Barbary corsairs. Hardly what would be expected of an Elizabethan gentleman but when that gentleman is framed for murder, he must improvise. Sir Oliver's "Sir" was a reward for his work as a privateer under the command of Queen Elizabeth, so his turn to full piracy does not surprise his former friends in England. However, privateer or not, scenes in which he wields a bloodstained chain against his enemies were thrilling to moviegoers.

René Creste, assisted by Eduard Mathé as his tweedy brother, sought his revenge in a doz-



en serial chapters as the proto-superhero Judex. Nobody can argue with his commitment, converting his chateau into a high-tech hideout bristling with surveillance, donning a cape, stalking both criminals and their victims, kidnapping his worst enemy, and, when necessary, delivering threats against his foes via trained poodle. Judex's target is a wealthy banker but his mission is nearly derailed by the machinations of Musidora's adventuress, who matches him in both guile and style.

## FOR DUTY AND HONOR

The Foreign Legion was especially attractive to gentry needing to leave their homes in a hurry and the most famous legionnaire story, *Beau Geste*, includes not one, not two, but three well-bred young men who join up in order to frame themselves for the theft of the Blue Water jewel. The stolen gem in their possession is actually paste, the original sold for money by their bankrupt patroness. Ronald Colman as Beau knows that it is a fake, but this fact

is a secret worth facing sand, sun, and a military uprising to protect.

*Ashes of Vengeance* can be seen as director Frank Lloyd's dry run for *The Sea Hawk*. The film features a claustrophobic tower battle, a priest rappelling down the walls to fetch help, trunk hose in abundance, and Wallace Beery swallowing the scenery whole. The lavish Norma Talmadge vehicle splashes out a fortune to recreate Parisian splendor in full scale, but the action mostly takes place in the French countryside. Conway Tearle plays a nobleman obliged to enter the service of his enemy thanks to a misjudged vow and is employed as Miss Talmadge's bodyguard.

When Henry Claremont discovers that his uncle was poisoned, his cousin Elda kidnapped and sold to the circus, and his family's grand ancestral estate now in the hands of the perpetrator, he transforms himself into the Jockey of Death. Henry slips into a skeleton body stocking and joins the circus troupe, using his equestrian skills to perform

death-defying stunts while he attempts to track down his missing cousin. Elda matches his acrobatic prowess and saves both herself and her rescuer with her tightrope bicycle riding.

## FOR THE HELL OF IT

And there was no gentleman more roguish than A.J. Raffles, the posh and polished cricketer by day and amateur thief by night. His sporting celebrity gives him access to the best homes, allowing him to make off with all manner of valuables, aided by his doting partner and biographer, Bunny. The Raffles character was adapted to the silent screen several times, most notably *Raffles, the Amateur Cracksman* (1917) with John Barrymore in the title role and Frank Morgan as the devoted Bunny. Barrymore plays Raffles as a gleeful thief, delighted by his own cleverness and the beauty of the loot that passes through his hands. House Peters took the role eight years later, battling the machinations of Hedda Hopper in a film simply titled *Raffles*. In both cases, the sportsman-thief is not nearly as incorrigible as his print counterpart and ends up abandoning crime, cricket, and Bunny for a refined maiden. Raffles of the E.W. Hornung novels kept his crime wave going for several sequels.

However, just because a gentleman turns to a life of crime doesn't mean he has to actually commit any thefts. Richard Barthelmess took on the lead role in *Ranson's Folly*, playing an officer and a gentleman who is horrified when peace breaks out and he is forced to sit around a western fort with nothing to do but picnics and teas. So, he decides to hold up a few stagecoaches for the adrenaline rush, as one does. Not to actually steal anything, mind, just for the excitement. It's all fun and games until a real robbery takes place and playing bandit turns out not to be the best alibi at a court martial.



# THE OPPORTUNIST

## MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY UTSAV LAL

**DIRECTED BY** MYKOLA SHPYKOVSKYI, SOVIET UKRAINE, 1929

**ORIGINAL LANGUAGE TITLE** *Shkurnyk* **CAST** Ivan Sadovskyi, Luka Liashenko, Dora Feller, Dmytro Kapka, and S. Vlasenko **PRODUCTION** VUFKU **PRINT SOURCE** Dovzhenko National Film Centre

**L**ike most filmmakers of his time, Mykola Shpykovskyi did not attend film school. He was born in Bila Tserkva, Ukraine, and studied in Odesa, where he earned a law degree in 1917. Despite this unlikely start to a film career, he eventually became a respected colleague of upstart Soviet filmmakers, poets, and artists, including Vsevolod Pudovkin, Vladimir Mayakovsky (born in Georgia of Ukrainian parents), and Oleksandr Dovzhenko.

In the early days of the Bolshevik Revolution, Shpykovskyi lived in Russia and began writing for film publications, including *Kino-Gazeta*, later becoming editor-in-chief of *Soviet Screen*. His first film was the half-hour comedy *Chess Fever*, co-directed with Pudovkin and filmed in 1925 under the auspices of the legendary Mezhrabpom-Rus in Moscow. The studio produced some of the USSR's most popular films of the 1920s and 1930s by encouraging innovative story ideas and experimental cinematography.

*Chess Fever* chronicles a Moscow chess tournament where a young man becomes completely obsessed with the game. His girlfriend is not equally enchanted, until she meets the handsome Cuban world champion José Raúl Capablanca. The film was highly popular, giving Shpykovskyi the opportunity to continue in his new career.

Having directed another comedy, *A Cup of Tea* (1927), again at Mezhrabpom, Shpykovskyi returned to Ukraine where he began a short tenure at VUFKU, Ukraine's state studio. He first directed *Three Rooms with a Kitchen* (1928), a comedy about the everyday struggles in the lives of the petty bourgeoisie, scripted by Solomon Lazurin, who had been inspired by a Vladimir Mayakovsky script titled, *How Are You?*

In 1929, Shpykovskyi started to work on a screen version of the satirical short novel *Tsybala* by the Ukrainian writer Vadym Okhremenko. The resulting film was titled *Shkurnyk, The Opportunist* in English. It is set during the 1918–21 Civil War between the Reds (Bolshevik revolutionaries) and the Whites (those who wished to restore the old order), with some unaligned bandits thrown in for good measure. The picaresque farce takes place in a part of southern Ukraine where no single element has full control.

The central character, Apollon Shmyguiev, is a portly dumpling of a man, always smiling, always poised to take advantage of any situation to make a ruble. The intertitles scornfully refer to him as "the philistine," someone with no political beliefs. His station in life is that of a cockroach who prospers by feeding on the crumbs that others let fall off the table. Shpykovskyi shows this graphically at the opening of the film, as a small horse cart

transporting food crashes, the horse runs off and the groceries spill out into the street. Apollon just happens to be nearby and gets down on hands and knees to scoop up cans of sugar.

In an absurd touch that becomes characteristic of the film, a camel wanders by from out of nowhere and Apollon grabs it to pull the cart. Then a contingent of Reds arrives and commandeers the cart, the camel, Apollon, and the groceries threatening dire consequences for stealing food. "I'm Red!" says Apollon. Now he's in trouble, but still somehow manages to sell the contraband sugar under the noses of his captors, as well as get officially recruited into the Red Army unit.

Next he is stopped by a group of Cossacks, who don't support either side in the war. Still their leader says he's going to hang all the "comrades." "I'm neutral!" says Apollon. After he talks his way out of that predicament, he is captured by a White military unit. "I'm White!" says Apollon. Not only

does he talk his way out of another hanging, but he ends up as an officer for the Whites! His bag of tricks is bottomless. In a true-to-life touch, hanging on the wall in the offices of the Whites is an anti-Semitic poster depicting their *bête noire*, Trotsky, commander of the Red Army.

*The Opportunist* was never able to reach much of an audience when it was made, despite strong praise from renowned poet Osip Mandelstam, who called it "an achievement of very high quality." After the death of Lenin in 1924, a growing conservative bureaucracy, with Stalin as its leader, gradually choked off all expressions of the open-minded cultural activities that thrived in the early days of the Revolution. *The Opportunist*, with the farcical world it depicted where all sides are mocked, was rejected for distribution. Stalin was not noted for his sense of humor.

The main target of the absurdist humor of the film, however, was not the Reds or the Whites or the

bandits, but rather the category of capitalists that was created by the New Economic Policy of the Revolution. Proposed by Lenin, the NEP was an attempt to let merchants ("NEPmen") make a profit to jump start the economy after the devastation of the Civil War had left it in shambles. NEPmen were tolerated but disdained. Profiteers like Apollon were a caricature of NEPmen writ small.

The Revolution was an inspiration especially to Ukrainians, because for the first time in its history Ukraine was freed from tsarist absolutism, the "prisonhouse of nations" that was the Russian Empire. Ukrainians had been forbidden to speak their own language or to read their own history. The Bolsheviks recognized Ukraine as an autonomous republic within the Soviet Union, with language and cultural freedom and the unconditional right to secede at any time. Ukraine opened its first national art institute and its state film studio invited all manner of artists to try their hand at filmmaking.

Even as the conservative Stalin regime consolidated its power, the independence of Ukraine made it a haven for artists whose work might not find acceptance in Moscow. VUFKU invited the poet Mayakovsky to write ten scripts, three of which were produced. When Dziga Vertov was fired from Sovkino in 1927 for making a film—*A Sixth Part of the World*—that was considered politically unacceptable, VUFKU welcomed him and it became where he made his masterpiece, *The Man with a Movie Camera*. (Vertov, who had been born David Abelevich Kaufman, changed his name to the Ukrainian words meaning "spinning top.")

After *The Opportunist*, Shpykovskiy tried to avoid the ideological condemnation incurred by his previous film, so he made the propaganda film *Bread*, the story of a demobilized Red Army soldier who

returns to his village inspired by the spirit of collectivism and ready to do something about it. The film, which has been compared to Dovzhenko's lyrical *Earth*, was released, but it was not well-received by audiences and did not screen outside of Ukraine. The Russian Main Repertory Committee squelched the film as "a typical specimen of abstract and speculative cinema," bureaucratic lingo meaning, "avant-garde films we are too dense to understand or appreciate."

By the time of Shpykovskiy's *Hegemon* (1931), VUFKU had been reorganized as Ukrainfilm and made subservient to Moscow. The film's premiere marked the opening of the Kyiv movie theater, Zhovten (or "October"), but also was his last film as director. He returned to Moscow to focus on scriptwriting instead. During World War II, he worked as an editor of the frontline department of the Central Newsreel Studio.

In 1939, reflecting on the heady early days of the October Revolution, Dovzhenko wrote something that might have applied to most of the directors who found some temporary refuge in Ukraine: "I was as happy as a dog let off a chain, sincerely believing that now all men were brothers ...; that the peasants had the land, the workers had the factories, the teachers had the schools, the doctors had the hospitals, the Ukrainians had Ukraine ... To my way of thinking this proved the complete noncomplicity of Ukrainians with the overthrown [tsarist] regime. This was nationalism. At that time all Ukrainians seemed to me to be especially nice people. It was easy to complain about the years (300!) we had suffered from the damn Russians."

— MIGUEL PENDÁS



# Piano Man

## Utsav Lal lends his virtuosity to live cinema

Interview by Shari Kizirian

Utsav Lal has crossed many borders, some of which you can hear in his voice. Speaking the Indian-accented English of his native Delhi, flecked with Americanisms from his adopted hometown of New York City, he occasionally drifts into a slight lilt, having spent his teenage years in Ireland and Scotland. The cultures that converge in him, however, are a mere sampling of the musical styles in which he is versed. Trained in Eastern classical from a tender age, he first performed solo at nine, on the piano, playing scores from Indian films of the 1950s and '60s that he'd taught himself by ear. By the time he turned professional, he was winning awards for pioneering a musical frontier, combining the piano, an instrument long associated with Western music, with the ragas of his first musical education. But he was just getting started. Soon, he was crossing all manner of borders, mixing in experimental jazz and raw blues laments, Irish and Celtic traditionals for a unique sound that has been described as having "its own vocabulary."

He made his SFSFF debut in 2019, accompanying the German-Indian coproduction, *Shiraz*, an epic reimagining of the history behind the building of the Taj Mahal, and has since returned to play for an eclectic range of films: *Flowing Gold*, a mythologization of the early Texas oil-boom era, Paul Leni's spooky/

silly *The Cat and the Canary*, and one of Yasujiro Ozu's humanist gangster pictures, *Walk Cheerfully*. This year he continues to cross yet more borders to accompany Ozu's endearingly melancholy *I Was Born, But...* about growing up in a rapidly changing Japan, and Mykola Shpykovskiy's *The Opportunist*, a sharp satire set against the Bolshevik scramble for control of Ukraine. Between recording sessions and concert hall soundchecks, Lal took some time to answer a few questions about what it has been like to marry his eclectic musical style with live cinema.

### What was the first silent movie you played for?

The first movie was *Shiraz*, which I've gotten to perform now at least five or six times. Jonny Best from the Yorkshire Silent Film Festival (now Northern Silents) reached out after hearing about my work with raga music on the piano, asking if this was something I would consider doing. It seemed like an interesting offer for something different and that prompted me to really investigate the world of silent film, where I discovered such a vibrant community of artists. Both Jonny and Donald Sosin were a big help, offering me an introduction to this world, and some really invaluable guidance. When I arrived in Yorkshire to play for *Shiraz*, I had pages and pages of written material, but Jonny nudged me towards leaving it behind to just interact with film while performing—which was

great advice. I was encouraged by the reception of my score in Yorkshire, Denver, and San Francisco. Since then, I've loved exploring other films and, so far, I've gotten to play for different genres and styles of films each year.

### What about accompanying silent films appeals to you?

I like composing and performing in service of something bigger than the music, being completely subservient to the world of each particular film. I feel like there is less ego involved than when the music has to stand up on its own.

My musical life ranges from performing and developing Indian classical music on the piano, jazz, and experimental improvisation and composition as well as Irish traditional music and everything that those things intersect. I always find when writing for silent film, all these areas converse unintentionally and those connections end up informing my other solo performances and writing. A lot of the different musical worlds I explore all end up coming together in a way that's pretty interesting for me.

I'm still relatively new to this world so I really love watching and getting to know these films and also have a deep appreciation of the community behind the scene. It's so great coming to places like SFSFF and seeing the passion behind not just the musicians but also the presenters, archivists, restorers, and others. The community aspect of silent film, which is so integral to any artistic universe, is rich, diverse, supportive, and exciting and that makes doing this work even more gratifying.

### What is your particular approach to accompanying silent films?

There is a huge canvas of possibilities for accompaniment but, in the end, I pick whatever best serves

the emotional needs of a particular scene. The first time I watch a film, I sit at the piano and improvise the whole way without pausing. After that, every film so far has been different, I guess. Sometimes I just watch it many times, making notes of very specific scenes and timestamps or of mini personal reflections about emotional content and character development, semiotics of expression. The balance between composed and improvised is something that's fun to play with. I prepare with a strong idea of what each section needs, but I often leave space for improvisation, finding different paths through every performance of the film. The deeper I can connect with and meditate on a film, the cleaner and more streamlined the score can be. It's always interesting to me how I write a lot of music in the first few drafts and then mostly just end up taking things away.

### Have you ever scored or considered scoring for a contemporary film?

It's something I've been contemplating more and more and there are some exciting plans in the works. I've recently enjoyed working with installation artists and was honored to write for Amar Kanwar's new work, *A Peacock's Graveyard*, commissioned for the 2023 Sharjah Biennial and currently installed at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York. Amar created this incredibly rich and beautiful existential work for seven screens. I also got to work on Amirtha Kidambi's score for Suneil Sanzgiri's video installation *Two Refusals*, which is now part of his solo show at the Brooklyn Museum. I'm also planning to score my first feature-length independent film later this year, early next year, which I'm very excited about. Details will probably be released in a few months.



Photo by Pamela Gentile





# EAST SIDE, WEST SIDE

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY WAYNE BARKER**

**DIRECTED BY ALLAN DWAN, USA, 1927**

**CAST** George O'Brien, Virginia Valli, J. Farrell MacDonald, June Collyer, and Holmes Herbert

**PRODUCTION** Fox Film Corp. **PRINT SOURCE** Disney Studios

**W**hen you're in New York, you're in the whole world. There's nothing you can't find in New York," Allan Dwan told interviewer Joe Adamson in 1979. "I always had a great respect for it. It's a dirty place, it's this and that, but it's the place."

*East Side, West Side* was Dwan's valedictory ode to the city where for five years he had made most of his films, reveling in a degree of unsupervised independence that came with being three thousand miles from Hollywood. He captured New York in a moment of vaulting optimism and feverish growth two years before the Wall Street crash, when it had "all the iridescence of the beginning of the world," as F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in his achingly elegiac 1932 essay "My Lost City." The film's introductory shot panning across the Brooklyn Bridge is familiar from the stock openings of countless movies set in the Big Apple, but Dwan swiftly embeds us in a real place, with a fresh wind blowing, rail floats churning up the river, and pennants of steam fluttering from the tops of skyscrapers.

In 1922, using his clout as one of the industry's top directors, Dwan had persuaded Famous Players-Lasky to let him work at their East Coast studio in Astoria, New York. Having cut his teeth as a director turning out hundreds of one- and two-reel westerns starting in 1911, he always remained nostalgic for the freedom of those pioneer days,

when as he later told Kevin Brownlow there was no interference from above and directors were in full control of their companies. Gloria Swanson, with whom Dwan made a string of zesty comedies like *Manhandled* (1924) and *Stage Struck* (1925), described the Astoria studio in its heyday as "full of free spirits, defectors, refugees" fleeing Hollywood's studio-bound regimentation. Dwan gleefully used the city as his backlot, later boasting of recruiting real gangsters as extras for an underworld ball in *Big Brother* (1923) and shooting at nightclubs and theaters using only available light for scenes in *Night Life of New York* (1925). Sadly, both are considered lost films.

In 1926, Dwan signed with Fox Film Productions, and shortly afterward it was announced that Fox would reopen its New York studio at Tenth Avenue and 55th Street, allowing him to continue working on the East Coast. *East Side, West Side* was the director's fourth and last film for Fox under this contract, and the studio subsequently shuttered their New York operations. Dwan himself adapted a best-selling novel by Felix Riesenberg, a seafaring man whose background in the Merchant Marine, nautical education, and engineering color the story. Fox's studio was taken over by an enormous, detailed set representing a Lower East Side "ghetto" street, but other scenes were filmed on locations ranging from South Street Seaport to a construction site for the IND subway being built under 8th Avenue, to the swanky Warwick



Hotel on 54th Street, built by William Randolph Hearst in 1926 with a specially-designed suite for Marion Davies. A studio publicity sheet trumpeted the fact that the humble South Street birthplace of New York Governor Al Smith could be seen in the film. Smith's campaign song for his three failed presidential bids was the lilting waltz, "The Sidewalks of New York" ("East side, west side, all around the town ....")

Manhattan with its shimmering spires and roiling slums is not merely a setting in the film, nor is it simply, as the cliché goes, a character. Dwan had a way of mapping his stories onto physical spaces, merging two meanings of "plot": a narrative and a diagram of an area. With its title, *East Side, West Side* introduces a geographic split between the two cities of the rich and the poor, and through-

out the film symmetries and binaries abound: two shipwrecks, two families, two fiancées. The film opens and closes with John Breen (George O'Brien) facing the bristling skyline, but he starts as an outsider gazing from a river barge at the fortress-like city from which he is shut out, and he ends up surveying his domain from a penthouse terrace in the heart of the metropolis. In between, he pinballs through the city: a wild child washed up on the shores of Manhattan, he hides in a Lower East Side basement and perches on the floating walkway of the Brooklyn Bridge; descends to the netherworld of a subway tunnel, and leans from a high window to watch a tickertape parade for Charles Lindbergh. (Dwan incorporated newsreel footage of the parade celebrating the pilot's transatlantic "hop," which took place in June 1927, the same month that *East Side, West Side* was filmed.)

The giddy excitement of the new jazzes up an essentially Victorian story. Dwan handles all the melodramatic twists and tonal jumps of this pocket epic—mysterious parentage! noble sacrifice! romantic betrayal! sexual assault! drug raids! brawls! tunnel cave-ins! icebergs!—with the swift pace and focused energy of a jockey leaping hurdles. Skirting sentimentality, he is always warm-hearted. The early scenes in which John, after literally falling off the back of a truck and being promptly set upon by a gang of local toughs, is taken in by the kindly Lipvitch family, are buoyed by some charming rag-trade comedy and a soupçon of sex, as the shy young man is bewitched by the attractive daughter of the house, Becka (Virginia Valli). George O'Brien, fresh from his role in F.W. Murnau's masterpiece *Sunrise*, said that making *East Side, West Side* was "one of the greatest experiences I ever had." A one-time boxing champion in the Navy, O'Brien is persuasive as a boy in a man's body, a musclebound innocent whose wits move more slowly than his fists or his feet. Valli, who made a staggering seven films released in 1927, is appealingly natural and sharply intelligent as the working-class girl persuaded to step aside so as not to hinder her beloved's social ascent.

If the narrative sometimes creaks, it never bogs down. Each scene is enlivened by the pungent realism of the settings: you can smell the stale beer in a Bowery dive, the thick smoke in the sinister Poppy Club with its Art Deco murals, the mud and sweat of the sandhogs toiling below the streets. Dwan believed in "artistic efficiency." Along with the simplicity and directness of his compositions and camera movements, this approach extended to the ideal casting of stock types, like the patrician Holmes Herbert as the wealthy Gilbert Van Horn, the beloved Irish mug J. Farrell MacDonald as

boxing promoter Pug Malone, and Yiddish theater actor Dore Davidson as head of the Lipvitch family. Using images to telegraph thoughts, he establishes John's dreamy, aspiring nature with visual touches like when he looks at a brick in his hand and sees a skyscraper, or gazes into the window of a bridal store and sees the mannequin transform into Becka.

John's lofty speech about building the perfect city may sound naïve almost a century later. He makes it while looking north to the tower of the Sherry-Netherland Hotel, still under construction, and the showpieces of Central Park South from a terrace at the Warwick Hotel. Today, this view is blocked by bigger, newer buildings, verifying Becka's words: "we tear down and build up. Where is it going to end?" Though he was happy to make use of a thrilling backdrop, Dwan himself was never enthralled by sheer scale, telling Kevin Brownlow many years later, "You go to New York to see the tall buildings—and once you've seen them, you're satisfied." He insisted that "size will never move people. They may gasp—and that's it. It's over." What's needed is "an intimate story." Dwan had more than fifty years of film directing ahead of him when he completed *East Side, West Side*. He would never change his mind about what mattered most.

— IMOGEN SARA SMITH



# POIL DE CAROTTE

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY STEPHEN HORNE AND FRANK BOCKIUS**

**DIRECTED BY JULIEN DUVIVIER, FRANCE, 1925**

**CAST** André Heuzé, Henri Krauss, Charlotte-Barbier Krauss, and Lydia Zarena **PRODUCTION** Majestic Films **PRINT SOURCE** FPA Classics

**P**recious few intertitles in the silent era, and just a handful of lines of dialogue across a near-century of “talkies,” are more portentous and heartrending than this: “François, the youngest son of the Lepic family, was born after the parents stopped loving each other.”

And so we are introduced to the titular character of Julien Duvivier’s *Poil de Carotte* (“Carrot Top”), an earnest farm boy whose derisive nickname was coined by none other than his mother. Erasing any question at the outset about where our sympathies should lie in this “dramatic comedy in five parts,” Madame Lepic is described as “a disagreeable gossip and hypocrite.” Monsieur Lepic, meanwhile, is presented as “indifferent and self-absorbed,” which is practically a compliment by comparison.

François, played with verve and bonhomie by freckle-faced André Heuzé (the son of a screenwriter and director) in his lone principal performance, absorbs four hundred blows, give or take, from his abrasive mother. The villainy of Madame Lepic is underscored, unnecessarily to contemporary viewers, by her grotesque mustache. It may have been designed to suggest who wears the pants in the family, but the air of misogyny occasionally overwhelms the familial power dynamics.

This is the sole misstep in *Poil de Carotte* by Duvivier, who had already directed a dozen films and was yet to reach his thirtieth birthday. Duvivier had originally dropped out of college to become an actor, but a bad case of stage fright one night drove him to the other side of the footlights. He became experimental director André Antoine’s assistant before working under Louis Feuillade and Marcel L’Herbier. He embraced and extended his first mentor’s ideas about naturalistic acting and a strong sense of physical place when he began making his own films in 1919.

Duvivier was something of a prodigy, and his craftsmanship and talent were recognized by producers who gave him the resources to work nonstop in a wide array of genres throughout the 1920s. His output in the silent era, in fact, exceeded that of his peers Jacques Feyder, Jean Renoir, and René Clair.

Duvivier’s skill and reliability played a significant role, one presumes, in nabbing the assignment to direct a plum property like *Poil de Carotte* (originally intended for Jacques Feyder). Jules Renard’s autobiographical 1894 novel, based on his cruelly loveless childhood, was such a popular success that six years later the author adapted his piercingly astringent and darkly humorous tale for the stage with, coincidentally, André Antoine. To this day, *Poil de Carotte* remains Renard’s best-known work.



Duvivier's contributions in translating the material to the screen are profound and apparent. He takes a series of episodes and subtly and gracefully smooths them into a seductive narrative arc. Making the very most of the picturesque countryside around Guillestre in the High Alps, Duvivier contrasts the never-ending jibes that François endures in the claustrophobic chez Lepic with the peacefulness and sun-dappled majesty of the landscape. Those foundational elements, combined with a lilting sense of time and Duvivier's mastery of tone, helped shape and define the quintessential French style known as poetic realism.

We've come to view this kind of filmmaking as both classical (i.e., old-fashioned) and classic (innocent, and impossible to duplicate today). But let's not overlook Duvivier's innovative techniques,

in particular his zeal for superimpositions, which he employs to illustrate the passage of time as well as to evoke a character's solitary thoughts. His eagerness to try resolutely modern storytelling devices, and his ability to integrate them into a small-town tale, is extraordinary.

Duvivier possessed an alacrity and proficiency with the elements of filmmaking that enabled him to glide into the sound era without a hitch. He must have been anticipating the introduction of spoken dialogue for a while, because in 1932 he directed *Poil de Carotte* again, this time with his own screenplay. Perhaps, like Renard, Duvivier was persuaded by the lure of a popular success (and its pecuniary rewards) to revisit François's bittersweet saga. More likely, he was confident that he could improve on the 1925 film. And ac-

ording to historian and critic Lenny Borger, "In a rare example of a remake surpassing its memorable original, Duvivier gave definitive form to this classic chronicle of childhood."

Duvivier made a string of critically and commercially successful films in the 1930s, among them *Pépé le Moko* and *Un Carnet de Bal*. He was one of the "Big Five"—with Renoir, Clair, Feyder, and Marcel Carné—whose works comprised the Golden Age of French cinema. Duvivier was so admired internationally that he was invited to Hollywood to make a big-budget biopic about Johann Strauss, *The Great Waltz*, in 1938.

One of the giants of French cinema—his admirers included Renoir, Orson Welles, and Ingmar Bergman—Duvivier is not well remembered these days, and he is infrequently revived. It's not because he churned out flighty, disposable entertainments, however. "I know it is much easier to make films that are poetic, sweet, charming, and beautifully photographed," he said in a 1946 interview, "but my nature pushes me towards harsh, dark and bitter material."

Duvivier's reputation suffered a hit at the hands of the passionate young rebels—François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, specifically—who took over the pages of the film journal *Cahiers du Cinema* in the early 1950s and declaimed, sometimes thoughtfully and sometimes viciously, for and against films and filmmakers they championed or reviled. As one measure of how out of favor Duvivier was with a certain strata of critics, the important film magazine *Positif* didn't review any of his movies from 1952 until his last in 1967, when the director died in an automobile accident in Paris.

Nonetheless, in 1954, Duvivier proposed writing a screenplay with Truffaut, who was strategizing how to make the leap to the director's chair. Nothing came of it, although Duvivier wrote the younger man a warm letter that ended, "Please see me as a friend who thinks highly of you and likes you."

Coincidentally, Duvivier was a member of the Cannes jury five years later when Truffaut's feature debut *The 400 Blows* premiered in competition (and Truffaut received the award for best director). In the introduction to his 1975 collection of writings, *The Films in My Life*, Truffaut shared an anecdote about his forebear: "When I met Julien Duvivier a little before his death, and after I had just shot my first film [the 1958 short *Les Mistons*], I tried to get him to admit—he was always complaining—that he had had a fine career, varied and full, and that all things considered he had achieved great success and ought to be contented. 'Sure, I would feel happy ... if there hadn't been any reviews.'"

— MICHAEL FOX



# POKER FACES

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY THE GUENTER BUCHWALD QUARTET**

**DIRECTED BY HARRY A. POLLARD, USA, 1926**

**CAST** Edward Everett Horton, Laura La Plante, George Siegmann, Tom Ricketts, Dorothy Revier, and Tom O'Brien **PRODUCTION** Universal Pictures **PRINT SOURCE** Universal Pictures

**B**y 1926, the studio system with its assembly-line like production of celluloid products was firmly in place. Critics and historians love to celebrate visionary, passionate filmmakers, but the studio system thrived for a reason, as *Poker Faces* demonstrates. It's a well-crafted, comic programmer with a strong ensemble cast, a subtly subversive storyline, and the bonus of comic genius Edward Everett Horton in the lead. Not half bad for a factory product.

One strength of the studio system was its army of veteran actors who worked like a giant stock company of types. In *Poker Faces*, Tom Ricketts is the company boss (he also did wealthy uncles, aristocrats, and sometimes butlers) while perennial heavy George Siegmann plays Dixon, the out-of-town client (his next roles included a bootlegger and Simon Legree). Even small roles are filled by top-drawer talent. Dorothy Revier, "the Queen of Poverty Row," plays the hero's wife-for-a-night, while her boxer husband is Tom O'Brien, post his success in *The Big Parade*.

Edward Everett Horton and Laura La Plante as the feuding couple were also playing types, as trade magazine *Exhibitors Herald* made plain: "Here's Laura La Plante doing the same sort of wife she's been doing for Reginald Denny, but doing it for Edward Everett Horton. Here's Horton doing the same sort of business office man and doing it at least as well." La Plante with her flapper-style

blonde bob had graduated from Universal westerns to playing adventurous madcaps and professional women in films like *Excitement* and *Dangerous Blonde*. At twenty-two years old, and newly married to director William Seiter, her star was on the rise and, in 1929, *Film Weekly* touted her as "one of the most highly paid artists in the film industry." Horton was a relative newcomer to movies, but he'd started with a bang as the lead in 1922's *Too Much Business*, three years after coming west to join the Majestic Theatre company. "I got to play all light-comedy parts in pictures," Horton remembered, while performing dramatic leads on stage.

*Poker Faces* was one in a series of light comedies Universal produced in the mid-1920s and was designed to cash in on the success of *Skinner's Dress Suit* (1926), which costarred Reginald Denny and Laura La Plante. The film takes the basic situation of the earlier hit—the wife pushing hubby to get a raise, the husband in hot water at the office, the business deal that will solve all their problems—and this time makes it about a mutinous wife and modern marriage. It starts small: Jimmy Whitmore (Horton) and wife Betty (La Plante) bicker over replacing a worn-out rug. Which leads to Betty marching out to earn her own money. Which means Jimmy has to find a substitute wife when his boss invites the couple to dinner with an important client. From there complications escalate into a frothy spun-sugar confection of misunderstandings

and mistaken identities that finally collapses of its own weight, restoring harmony at work and home.

Working wives—what a shocker! No self-respecting (white, middle-class) man in the 1920s would ever permit such a state of affairs—except when they did. Wives with jobs pop up on both sides of the camera. *Poker Faces* director Harry Pollard preferred that his wife, actress Margarita Fischer, retire from her career, but only after many years of a double-income marriage. Fischer and Pollard were married and broke when they entered films because they couldn't find "legit" acting jobs. That real-life situation is mirrored in the film by the actress Jimmy hires to play his absent wife, who, along with her husband, is waiting for work in a theatrical agent's office when Jimmy phones in his order.

Pollard was once mentioned in the same breath as King Vidor and Paul Leni and when he died of a

heart attack in 1934 the *Hollywood Reporter* described him as one of Universal's "ace" directors. By the time of *Poker Faces*, he'd already directed a number of successful comedies with Reginald Denny, who, despite the success Pollard made possible, preferred *Skinner* director William Seiter. "Pollard was all for the broad comedy," Denny told historian Kevin Brownlow, "and I was for the lighter." *Poker Faces* is filled with broad slapstick, from Jimmy's first pratfall over the worn-out rug to the beating he takes from Dixon who throttles him, forces him to strip, and locks him in his room.

Unlike Denny, Horton was not choosy about directors. Film was always secondary to Horton's work in the theater. He even confessed in an interview late in life that he couldn't take movies as seriously: "I have my own little kingdom. I do the scavenger parts no one else wants and I get well paid for it." In *Poker Faces* the future king of mug-

ging is the poker face of the title, nicknamed for his inscrutable expression—which disintegrates along with his control over events, as when La Plante gets hired by Jimmy's boss as his new, after-hours stenographer. She's no poker face either and spends much of the second half of the movie alternately glaring daggers at Horton and dimpling at Dixon. Betty refuses to back down, even if it means taking late-night dictation in Siegmann's bedroom. "She could put over this deal single-handed!" says Jimmy's boss. Is Betty the better businessman?

Costar Horton, it must be said, is *Poker Faces'* main attraction, whether he's ricocheting from one indignant woman to another like a pinball or flapping his hands to shush his hysterical boss. It's hard not to watch Horton without a sort of double vision, seeing in his performance flashes of his supporting roles for films in the '30s and '40s. There's that simpering smile accompanied by a peacocky-waggle of the head, or the alarmed, wide-eyed stare and self-protective shoulder hunch. Yet it's also possible to catch a glimpse of Horton's other abilities before he solidified into a comic fussybudget. There's real camaraderie and tenderness in Jimmy's scenes with wife Betty. In the middle of the third act, when all the parties concerned are creeping around the boss's big mansion, Jimmy worms his way into his wife's room and they share a moment of truce in this battle of the sexes. Betty gradually leans into Jimmy, who delicately wraps her in an embrace. One theater owner reported to the *Exhibitors Herald*: "When Horton first poked his hungry mug into the picture all the flappers were pouting, 'Gee! I don't like him,' and inside of five minutes they were squealing, 'Gracious, isn't he good!'"

Historian Megan Boyd describes how the shift from slapstick to light comedy made space for

female heroines who rejected the cult of Victorian domesticity that hung like a pall over the 1920s. "Rebellious types ranged from uncouth hoydens to wealthy madcaps, baby vamps, and young wives hoping to gain new rights within their marriage," she writes. *Poker Faces* reflects this shift with its deliciously complicated mix of messages and comic styles. The witty, lunchtime spat that opens the film is Lubitsch-like, while Dixon's constant manhandling of Jimmy is more like the Three Stooges, but with better lighting. The supposed motivation for all this rough and tumble is to safeguard Betty's virtue: Dixon beats up Jimmy to save the stenographer from that "depot Romeo" and Jimmy fights back to keep his wife safe from big, bad Dixon. The women find all this fuss amusing. When Jimmy virtuously forbids Dixon from compromising an innocent young girl, his wife-for-hire cracks up (she's the one with worries, trapped with a fake husband in a strange house); and Betty stops crying to burst into laughter when she sees her supposed protector wearing a fur-trimmed leopard skin coat over his underwear after his latest bout with Dixon. *Variety's* reviewer praised Pollard's "extremely clever directorial maneuvering," writing, "Pollard ... has skillfully jumped over all offensiveness without losing one whit of the suggestiveness. That's a trick."

"Remarriage plots regularly explored how couples could adapt to make their marriages more companionate," writes Boyd. *Poker Faces'* couple splits up and gets back together in a single day, snuggled together in a pre-Code bed in such companionate harmony that they deliver the final line of the film in beaming unison. Best of all, there's no breast-beating on Betty's part or promises to be a better wife. Betty's original threat after all was to return to work. The woman has experience. A paying job is still a possibility.

— MONICA NOLAN





# HÄXAN

## MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY THE MATTI BYE ENSEMBLE

DIRECTED BY BENJAMIN CHRISTENSEN, SWEDEN, 1922

CAST Maren Pedersen, Karen Winther, Aage Hertel, Clara Pontoppidan, Tora Teje, and Benjamin Christensen PRODUCTION Svensk Filmindustri PRINT SOURCE Swedish Film Institute

In the small Copenhagen suburb of Hellerup, wild rumors circulated among the townspeople. Demonic visitors had arrived and wicked deeds ensued. Ghouls fraternized with terrifying inquisitors of centuries past. Young women drifted about possessed and frantic. And a coterie of windswept witches frolicked on brooms while a strange man bellowed commands from behind a megaphone—at times he looked human, but at other times he appeared as the devil himself. All these events occurred at night, under a shroud of secrecy. Hellerup was used to a great number of odd visitors from the city, a result of housing the Astra Film studios. However, never before and never since had anything quite like *Häxan* come to town.

According to a *Häxan* intertitle, “The devil is everywhere and takes on all shapes ... he reveals himself as a nightmare, a raging demon, a seducer, a lover, and a knight ...” and, as seen in the film, as its director himself. In the canon of director cameos, Benjamin Christensen’s is one of the most brazen and conspicuous—it’s also one of the most macabre and amusing. Christensen, a persistent iconoclast and rigorous self-promoter, portrays the devil in his 1922 opus, which he called a “cultural history lecture” on witchcraft through the ages. Horned and hoofed, scaly and with a reptilian tongue, the actor turned director seems to delight in his Mephistophelian role, designing his look

after the delirious hellscapes of Hieronymus Bosch. As writer and director, Christensen bestows on *Häxan* its singularity, its unique and ambiguous blend of genres and styles, marking the Danish-born filmmaker as a proto-auteur.

Christensen came to moving pictures first as an actor, having abandoned the study of medicine, opera singing, and his place in a theater troupe after a nervous condition wreaked havoc on his vocal cords. He appeared in a dozen notable Danish productions (none extant) before taking his directorial turn inspired by Albert Capellani’s visionary adaptation of *Les Misérables* in 1912. Christensen struck gold with his behind-the-camera debut, *The Mysterious X* (1914)—a spy melodrama in which he also starred. While a routine story, it demonstrated the immense skill of its director. Stylish and brisk, it was an international hit with critics and audiences alike. As was Christensen’s sophomore effort, *Blind Justice*, two years later. These two early successes raised the profile of the Danish film industry around the world but failed to recoup their costs. Yet, despite Christensen’s reputation for extravagance, the leading Swedish film studio, Svensk Filmindustri, funded the director’s third film and his dream project, *Häxan* (“The Witch”), offering him total creative freedom. It was a decision that the studio came to regret, but one that produced—eventually—one of the silent era’s most acclaimed and notorious cult works.



Before building a single set, Christensen obsessively pored over the 15th century's *Malleus Maleficarum*, a graphically detailed Catholic treatise designed for inquisitors to identify, interrogate, and convict witches—a near physiological study of a witch's body and spirit and how to break her. For Christensen, the purpose of *Häxan* was not merely to entertain (or terrify) or to show off his advanced technical skill, it was to propose a thesis: that witch trials throughout history were instances of mass hysteria. *Häxan* is the rare horror-infused narrative with an empathetic intent.

The pages of the *Maleficarum* had provided artists, poets, and playwrights a compendium from which they could flesh out their depictions of witches—from the poetry and watercolors of William Blake and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to the fantastical paintings of Francisco Goya and John William Waterhouse as well as the late 15th-

century engravings of Albrecht Dürer, whose *Four Witches* particularly inspired Christensen. Beyond studying *Maleficarum*'s rigorous text, Christensen mimicked its narrative, guiding viewers through an illustrated, sermon-like structure. Like the German clergyman Heinrich Kramer who drafted the guide, Christensen is *Häxan*'s expert, the director as investigator whose erudition will save humanity. Whereas Kramer sought to punish and destroy witches (principally women), Christensen wants to dispel superstition in order to prevent hysteria. He combines fact with fantasy, mystical imagery with science, continually breaking the fourth wall to remind viewers of his didactic intent. There's even humor mixed in all of this. It is a formative work of surrealist horror.

To make such an elaborate film took time and money. While made in Christensen's native Denmark with a Danish crew, it was Swedish krona that

footed the bill, a total of three to four times the average budget of a Danish feature. Few, if any films, had taken four years to produce, but none had matched the sophistication of Christensen's special effects. For the sequence when witches take flight, Christensen and cameraman Johan Ankerstjerne photographed seventy-five individual witches while airplane engines blew about their clothes to mimic movement. These shots were then optically printed with the photography of 250 miniature buildings filmed on a massive rotating carousel for an unforgettable flying effect. No sequence proves Christensen's mastery over film technique more than this one. Unfortunately, it was not enough to overcome the bafflement of audiences and critics once released.

Premiering simultaneously in Stockholm, Helsingborg, Malmö, and Gothenburg in September 1922, *Häxan* was advertised as a major event in motion pictures. But critics were confounded by Christensen's combination of history lesson, morality play, and artistically made spectacle. Not even the bibliography of the director's research sources, which was handed out to moviegoers, helped. *Häxan*'s genre-bending format meant audiences had nothing to compare it to, little criteria to form a response. What Christensen had created was a kind of personal essay film—anticipating the works of Chris Marker and the French New Wave to come. While ecclesiastical and educational illustrated lectures had existed for decades, nothing on this scale had been attempted. When it finally opened in Copenhagen that November, the fifty-piece orchestra accompanying the film could not appease angry critics. *Häxan*'s fate was sealed. Writing in Denmark's national newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*, one critic took great offense. "It is not this nudity which is most offensive about the picture," the reviewer claimed. "It is the

satanic, perverted cruelty that blazes out of it, the cruelty we all know has stalked the ages like an evil shaggy beast, the chimera of mankind." Christensen had portrayed the devil in his film and now he was being compared to the devil.

Its disastrous returns put Svensk Filmindustri in financial crisis and destroyed Christensen's reputation. Upon its American release in 1923, *Variety* celebrated the film's unique vision and noted the Scandinavian penchant for "morbid realism." Yet, while the reviewer seemed to have enjoyed many of the film's horrors, he concluded that "it is absolutely unfit for public exhibition." Simply put, audiences were not ready—even when the film was censored and cut, as it was in North America. Christensen's planned follow-ups to the film—*The Saints* and *The Spirits*—were nixed. A few short years later, he sought work in Hollywood as his colleagues Sjöström and Stiller had done. Christensen helmed his first picture for MGM in 1926—the Norma Shearer-starring *The Devil's Circus*, a very on-brand sounding film. After two productions with MGM, he moved to First National making similar gothic fare. The director lamented his own typecasting years later: "I never managed to escape the stamp that *Häxan* put on me." He returned to Denmark at the start of World War II, and after making several sound films settled into life as a cinema manager. But *Häxan* survived the initial revulsion it provoked to become his trademark work, proving that some of Christensen's black magic paid off, it just took some time.

— ALICIA FLETCHER





# THE LAUREL AND HARDY SHOW!

**MUSIC BY DONALD SOSIN AND FRANK BOCKIUS**

**PRODUCTION** Hal Roach **PRINT SOURCE** FPA Classics

**T**he year 1927 was a pivotal time for Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. Both were seasoned comedy veterans, each with more than a decade's experience in films and (in Laurel's case) the vaudeville stage. Both were now ensconced at the celebrated Hal Roach studio. But 1927 was the year they were first costarred as a duo and almost immediately crystallized as one of the great comedy teams of all time. By year's end they were turning out classic gems of comedy, and 1928 saw a rich outpouring of Laurel and Hardy artistry.

The Roach studio was (and is) regarded as a premier film comedy studio, for good reason. From the beginning, and especially during the 1920s, the studio was home to a staff of directors, writers, and performers who meticulously refined and polished the craft of comedy filmmaking. Slapstick comedy had long since become a staple of silent films, but the Roach team brought a new level of technique to their slapstick, introducing nuances of timing and psychology. Roach films were not simply nonstop marathons of knockabout humor; the gags were carefully structured for effect and, often, rooted in character. The artists responsible for this aesthetic included the great Leo McCarey, who supervised the early Laurel and Hardy shorts, and Stan Laurel himself, who was recognized as much for his writing and directing skills as for his performing talent. During the 1920s he had vacillated between these roles, working alternately

before and behind the camera—sometimes in the same film.

Among latter-day viewers, the complaint most often heard about the films of Laurel and Hardy is that they seem excruciatingly slow. This is the complaint of a viewer who has watched the films alone, or on television, a circumstance that the films' creators never imagined or intended. Thankfully, we will see these films today as they were meant to be seen: on a theater screen, to the laughter of a large audience. This was the setting for which the Roach team planned their films, and the pace of the comedy was painstakingly timed to accommodate the audience's laughs. After completing a rough cut, the filmmakers routinely previewed the film in a theater and actually timed the laughs with a stopwatch. The film was then taken back to the cutting room and, not infrequently, reedited to the reactions of the preview audience. Nearly a century later, this timing still works its uncanny magic in theatrical showings.

## **THE FINISHING TOUCH**

**Directed by Clyde Bruckman, USA, 1928**  
**With Edgar Kennedy, Dorothy Coburn, and Sam Lufkin**

After a tentative beginning in the team's first films, the characters of "Stan" and "Ollie" had fallen into place very quickly, and by the time *The Finishing Touch* was filmed in November–December 1927, the two were inhabiting their familiar roles as if

they'd been doing it all their lives. Like other great comedians, from Chaplin to W.C. Fields, Laurel and Hardy starred in both silent and sound films; unlike the other great comedians, their reputation rests equally on both their silents and their talkies. *The Finishing Touch* is not an apprentice work, but a full-fledged entry in the Laurel and Hardy canon.

Their basic situation here, building a house, was a favorite setting for physical comedy, offering opportunities for falls and collisions as well as a wealth of slapstick props like ladders, hand tools, and buckets of paint. Here, of course, Laurel and Hardy put their own stamp on this tradition by overlaying it with their unique comic personae. From the opening scene, we know we're in the company of our familiar friends: vacuous, guileless Stan, innocent perpetrator of disasters; and Ollie, constantly exasperated at his friend's stupidity and forever bearing the brunt of Stan's unintentional mayhem. Both are already displaying, in late 1927, what will be their signature mannerisms in later films: Stan's "cry" when his feelings are hurt; Ollie's direct-to-camera looks, reacting to the latest disaster with a mute appeal for audience sympathy.

Perhaps more important, they and their production team have already adopted the deliberate pacing that will distinguish the best of their films. In what Walter Kerr later described as "the saving turn-around," Laurel and Hardy's films had reversed the established pattern of many slapstick comedies. Instead of rushing at breakneck speed from one gag to the next, their films telegraphed the gag to the audience in advance, then allowed us to enjoy the methodically crafted route by which they arrived at that inevitable outcome. This practice is fully in effect in *The Finishing Touch*. When Ollie prepares to work on the house's exterior by load-

ing up a large mouthful of nails, we know what's going to happen, and we also know that Stan will be utterly oblivious to the injury he has inflicted on his friend. The gag's payoff doesn't take us by surprise; rather, the pleasure is in watching how our heroes arrive at their foregone conclusion.

### **YOU'RE DARN TOOTIN'**

**Directed by Edgar Kennedy, USA, 1928**  
**With Otto Lederer, Agnes Steele, Christian Frank, and Chet Brandenburg**

Filed just over a month later, *You're Darn Tootin'* builds on these ideas. Here the boys try their hands as musicians. (Fortunately for us, we can enjoy the live musical accompaniment, and simply imagine the sounds being produced by Stan and Ollie.) As members of an orchestra, they soon drive their conductor to distraction—not intentionally, but through their earnestly well-meaning efforts—and find themselves on the street. Their joint musical career continues downhill from there, and their instruments are quickly demolished. (As any viewer of *The Music Box* can testify, musical instruments tend not to fare well in Laurel and Hardy's world.)

Two of the team's 1927 films, *Hats Off* and *The Battle of the Century*, had explored a distinctive comic device: a petty tit-for-tat altercation between Stan and Ollie spreads to other passersby on the street, then gradually engulfs more and more bystanders until an entire city block becomes a maelstrom of raging, pointless fury. In *You're Darn Tootin'* the filmmakers return to this device. We'll avoid spoilers here; suffice it to say that Laurel and Hardy and their team once again prove themselves masters of comedy construction. What could be merely an unpleasant orgy of violence becomes instead an exercise in establishing, building, timing, and topping a gag.

### **TWO TARs**

**Directed by James Parrott, USA, 1928**  
**With Edgar Kennedy, Thelma Hill, Ruby Blaine, and Charlie Hall**

Stan and Ollie are sailors on shore leave, spending an afternoon of innocent fun with two young ladies. Their misadventures with a gumball machine are enjoyable enough, but are merely an appetizer for what follows.

What follows is a return to that escalating-crowd-violence device, this time involving a long line of cars on a country road—but with a difference. Here the filmmakers refine the formula still further, slowing down the pace so that individual skirmishes build carefully and deliberately toward the climactic free-for-all. In a case of what Laurel and Hardy scholar John McCabe would call "reciprocal destruction," Stan and Ollie inflict some awful damage on their adversary's person or property while he patiently endures it—then stoically wait their turn while he retaliates. This would become a delightful recurring motif in their films, often with a single opponent. Here it serves as a nuanced buildup to a scene of mass chaos. "Just as Laurel and Hardy had slowed down all the standard old comedy routines," historian Randy Skretvedt has written, "they now slowed down their own invention. In *The Battle of the Century* and *You're Darn Tootin'*, events come quickly to a boil. In *Two Tars*, they simmer."

All three of these films have been beloved for generations by devoted comedy fans but have rarely been seen in a form that does them justice. Today we have the privilege of seeing them in beautiful new editions by our friends at FPA Classics, restoring them to the pristine image quality that audiences first enjoyed in 1928.

— J.B. KAUFMAN





# HELL'S HEROES

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY THE GUENTER BUCHWALD TRIO**

**DIRECTED BY WILLIAM WYLER, USA, 1929**

**CAST** Charles Bickford, Raymond Hatton, Fred Kohler, Fritz Ridgeway, Maria Alba, and Walter James

**PRODUCTION** Universal Pictures **PRINT SOURCE** George Eastman Museum

"See how far yuh can throw it," suggests the outlaw leader after mulling over what to do with an abandoned newborn. He and his two surviving accomplices from a bank holdup have stumbled across the infant with its dying mother in a lone covered wagon at a dry waterhole.

*Hell's Heroes* was far tougher than what audiences had come to expect of Hollywood westerns. The trade paper *Variety* labeled it "gripping and real ... something convincingly out of the ordinary ... distinctively atmosphered with genuine wasteland and arid desert ... The finish is tense because it is unsweetened." William Wyler might have savored this praise more for his "unusually well cast and directed" movie if *Variety* hadn't credited him as "Wilbur Wylans."

Evidently Wyler was not yet a familiar name, even in the industry. In his forty-five-year directing career, he was nominated for Academy Awards as best director twelve times—still a record—and won three. But before *Hell's Heroes*, he was known, if at all, only for the smallest scale westerns. After emigrating in 1920 from Alsace (then newly ceded to France from Germany) to take an entry-level job from his mother's cousin, Universal Pictures founder Carl Laemmle, Wyler worked his way up to directing many of the company's most modest products, turning out twenty-one two-reel and eight five-reel westerns by 1928.

Three of those five-reel features survive, along with part of another, an excellent percentage for Universal silents. The earliest of Wyler's surviving features, *The Stolen Ranch* (1926), already reveals a rare talent in its witty staging of a story about a PTSD-afflicted World War I veteran, tormented by the sound of gunshots when he returns stateside to save his ranch.

Among studios, Universal was slowest to convert to sound and movie houses in rural America, where westerns were popular, were the last to equip for talkies. Thus *Hell's Heroes* was released in both silent and sound versions. One surprise is just how well the story works in both. As the robbers gallop from New Jerusalem, the town minister shoots at them with a six-gun in each hand, wounding one and killing another. (The minister grabs a Bible in time to hear the dying outlaw's last words.) A sandstorm discourages the posse and stampedes the outlaws' horses. Dry and poisoned waterholes turn their escape into a question of survival.

The three central actors were universally admired: "Charles Bickford's performance stands out brilliantly" (*New York Daily Mirror*); "Charles Bickford ... is startlingly realistic ... and Raymond Hatton and Fred Kohler are equally convincing" (*Picture-Play*); the three "are so good that there is little to choose among them" (*New York Evening Journal*). Bickford had been in Hollywood only a few months but had already shed Broadway stage

mannerisms. His characteristic gruffness and physical strength (watch how he tosses the Mexican dance-hall girl) are ideal for this role as the outlaw leader. Burly Fred Kohler, playing Wild Bill, was a frequent western villain, memorably in John Ford's *The Iron Horse* (1924). Wiry Raymond Hatton, playing Barbwire, the one wounded in the escape, had every sort of role in his five-hundred-film career, including as John Wayne's comic sidekick in several later "Three Mesquiteers" movies.

*Hell's Heroes* comes by its authentic look honestly. Panamint Valley, starker than Death Valley just to its east, provides a blank slate for the desperate foot travelers. California's Red Rock Canyon envelops the central scenes with the dying mother. Exteriors for New Jerusalem were shot in Bodie, the ghost town deep in California's eastern Sierras, withering since its boomtown gold-mining heyday in the late 1870s. Considering its remoteness, rough access road, and 8,400-foot altitude, it's not so surprising that this ready-made genuine Old West town seems never to have been used previously as a movie set. (Universal's location manager, Jack Lawton, was said to have "discovered" it.) *Hell's Heroes* captures Bodie (now Bodie State Historic Park) before its catastrophic 1932 fire, which destroyed about three-quarters of its buildings, including the bank used for the robbery scene. The church, from which the fighting minister emerges and where the film's conclusion is set, still stands.

Even though *Hell's Heroes* is now recognized as one of the more inventive early sound films, it's easy to prefer the silent version, and not just because available prints of the sound version are dingier. A couple of the silent version's best scenes are missing from the sound one: the return to town of the discouraged posse and lazy sheriff, chugging mugs of water, washing, and satisfied

that the parched outlaws will be "meat for the buzzards"; and the touching sequence when Wild Bill writes his farewell note at night using a bullet's lead tip. A backward tracking shot as he trudges grimly from the camp toward his death hints at the staging in depth for which Wyler would become celebrated. Among the witty flourishes here are the way Barbwire keeps expecting a barroom foot rail when he bellies up to the bank counter, the way Fred Kohler's huge hand wraps around most of the tiny newborn, or the way a low tracking shot of footprints in the desert sand silently narrates a little story of the last surviving outlaw casting off everything he carries, except the baby.

Shot in August 1929 in scorching desert heat and completed by October, *Hell's Heroes* was held for release until Christmas week in New York City (and early 1930 elsewhere). It was the third of five authorized film adaptations of San Franciscan Peter B. Kyne's frontier Christmas story "The Three Godfathers," published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1912. (It's sometimes said that Kyne enlarged his magazine story into a novel, but the only thing enlarged for the book version was the typeface.) The story tosses together New Testament elements: the Three Wise Men at Jesus' birth, the Penitent Thief at the crucifixion, and, again from the Gospel of Matthew, the incident of two disciples borrowing or stealing a donkey and colt for the entry into Jerusalem. Kyne narrates all this with purple prose and cringeworthy pseudo-scripture.

The other adaptations are gentler than Wyler's. The first two, both starring Harry Carey, are lost: *The Three Godfathers* (1916) and *Marked Men* (1920, directed by John Ford), each have Carey's outlaw returning to town to live happily, achieving "complete reformation" (as a review of the 1916 version puts it). *Three Godfathers* of



1936 provides the lead outlaw with a romance in the frontier town and ends with close-ups of his former love cradling the fat and smiling baby. The Technicolor *3 Godfathers* of 1948 is John Ford's lightest hearted western, deaths notwithstanding. In all versions, the story is a male weepie (New York's *Morning Telegraph* labeled even Wyler's "an out-and-out sob opera") filled with self-sacrifices more typical of women's melodrama. (For the Three Godmothers version, see 1912's *The Female of the Species*, where two thirst-crazed women in the desert forgo plans to murder a third when they come across a dead Indian's newborn.)

Peter Kyne loathed Wyler's gritty adaptation, which was an immediate box-office hit: "Mr. Wyler murdered our beautiful story ... It is dreadfully directed and dreadfully played by that leading man ... I don't care how much money the picture makes, my conscience will not let me cheer for

the atrocious murder of one of the few works of art I have ever turned out." But it's less that Wyler abandoned Kyne's parable of Christian redemption than suggested it through visuals, as in deep-staged backtracking shots of a cross-shaped Joshua tree guarding over Barbwire's death, or in the resurrection of the three outlaws when they unbury themselves after the sandstorm. As reviewers noticed, not since the Death Valley climax of Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1925) had the California deserts become so stark a stage for struggles and death. But in *Hell's Heroes* we come to admire and root for the doomed outlaws. Wyler found a path between Stroheim's pitiless savagery and Kyne's painful sentimentality to leave us the last great silent western.

— SCOTT SIMMON



# I WAS BORN, BUT...

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY UTSAV LAL**

**DIRECTED BY YASUJIRO OZU, JAPAN, 1932**

**ORIGINAL LANGUAGE TITLE** *Umarete wa mita keredo* **CAST** Tatsuo Saito, Tomio Aoki, Hideo Sugawara, Mitsuko Yoshikawa, and Seiichi Kato **PRODUCTION** Shochiku **PRINT SOURCE** Janus Films

**T**here is, about two-thirds into Yasujiro Ozu's *I Was Born, But...*, a cinematic mise-en-abyme: a triangulation of gazes between a father, his two sons, and his boss and coworkers, as they watch a home movie. In the film, a family of four moves to the suburbs as the father, Yoshii (Tatsuo Saito), takes up a new office job, and the two kids, Ryoichi (Hideo Sugawara) and Keiji (Tomio Aoki, a.k.a. Tokkan Kozo), struggle to find their place among the stratified playground world of bullies and fickle friends. Until the scene with the film-within-the-film arrives, the sons' skirmishes with the other boys center on childish things—territorial fights, juvenile taunts, scuffles over food. But when Ryoichi and Keiji sneak into a gathering at their father's employer's house, they suddenly enter a world of adult inequities. The reels projected at this soirée show Yoshii currying the favor of his boss by making a fool of himself. He scowls at the camera and crosses his eyes, and the spectators laugh, while the boys look back and forth from the screen to the audience, suddenly registering what this spectacle implies about their family's status.

The relationship between cinema and class is central to Ozu's work. Released in 1932, *I Was Born, But...* was the director's twenty-fourth movie, and it demonstrates the distinctively and artfully simple style he had started to solidify by then. The film is almost exclusively composed of the "tatami shots" that became Ozu's signature—the camera

is positioned low, evoking the perspective of someone kneeling on a tatami mat—and it was while shooting *I Was Born, But...* that Ozu decided to eliminate flourishes like fades and dissolves from his movies, employing only straight cuts instead. The effect, particularly of the tatami shot, is one of humble directness. Where high-angle shots convey a feeling of godly perception, and a camera that brings us eye-to-eye with the character induces a feeling of peer-ness and immersion, the tatami shot evokes curiosity and regard: the assiduously ordinary subjects of Ozu's films, which exemplify the Japanese genre of shoshimin-eiga or the "lower-middle-class film," tower over us ever so gently, their petty concerns playing out like absorbing dramas on a proscenium stage.

The one moment in *I Was Born, But...* when the camera rises above the tatami level is within the home movie. Yoshii is framed frontally from the chest up against a dark, depthless background as he makes funny faces, flattened into something of a cartoon. The shock of this anomalous composition and its caricature effect reinforces, by contrast, the naturalistic feeling of the rest of the movie; it also makes palpable the disillusionment of Ryoichi and Keiji, who are used to looking up to their father, and now, through the intervention of the cinema, see him on eye level, no longer the big man they thought he was. If *I Was Born, But...* is "a picture book for grownups," as the opening title announces, it is because, like so many of Ozu's



films, it is about the complex social dynamics of *looking*—about the power of surfaces and appearances in middle-class life, and how movies can expose their brittleness. In *I Was Born, But...*, it's the brand-new technology of the time—16mm film—that provokes a crisis of status in the family; in *Good Morning*, Ozu's 1959 color "remake" of the film, a television set becomes the bone of contention for the young protagonists.

*I Was Born, But...* was a major success for Ozu—it was the first of his six films to top the Japanese magazine *Kinema Junpo's* annual poll, and it was declared by critics as the inaugural work of "social realism" in Japan. The movie culminated something of a trilogy that began with 1928's *I Graduated, But...* (of which only ten minutes have survived) and 1930's *I Flunked, But...*, both of which capture the economic turmoil faced by the Japanese middle class in the wake of the post-

World War I recession, the Great Kanto earthquake of 1923, and successive financial collapses in 1927 and 1929. The title of *I Graduated, But...* came from a popular lament in the late 1920s, when white-collar unemployment was at an all-time high. In the film, the only job offered to a new college graduate is as a receptionist, which he considers beneath him and declines, forcing his wife to take up even lowlier work as a bar hostess. In *I Flunked, But...*, the social order becomes even more parodic: students who fail their graduation exam realize they're better off in school than in a world without jobs, like their more successful—and now floundering—colleagues.

*I Was Born, But...* brings the perspective of children to this context, exploding the insistence on striving and status as not just pointless, but even illogical. When Yoshii explains that he has to bow to his boss because the man pays him, the boys

reply naïvely, "Why don't you pay him?" Shochiku, the studio where Ozu had been working as a director since 1927, specialized in shoshimin-eiga, but Ozu's riffs on the genre were darker than the studio's mandate of idealistic, commercially viable films. Both *I Graduated, But...* and *I Flunked, But...* close with fairly happy endings. *I Was Born, But...* ends with resignation rather than resolution: Ryoichi's declaration that he would rather not go to school—or even grow up—if his fate is to be a salaryman like his father and kowtow to his classmate, the boss's son. Shochiku reportedly hesitated to release the movie because the studio bosses thought it was too "bleak." It gets at something beyond just the financial instability of the modern, bourgeois family. The very institution of patriarchy starts to appear flimsy when we realize that the authority of the husband or the father is derived from wage labor—a system that is by design unfree and unstable.

However, leftist critics of the time found Ozu's films lacking in comparison to the keiko-ega or "tendency films" made in the late 1920s and early 1930s. For these critics, shoshimin—i.e., petty bourgeoisie—didn't merely describe the subject of Ozu's films but also the perspective of the director, whose humanist bent, penchant for humor, and focus on the domestic sphere preempted the more comprehensive social analysis of films by directors like Tomu Uchida and Kenji Mizoguchi, who depicted proletarian protagonists fighting the rich and took formal cues from Soviet cinema. The scholar Yuki Takinami made a fascinating connection between Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* and *I Was Born, But...* Vertov's film was released in Japan in March 1932—right when Ozu resumed shooting *I Was Born, But...* after an interruption of a few months because of an on-set injury. The home movie seen within *I Was Born,*

*But...* evinces some key similarities with *Man with a Movie Camera*: sped up shots of the city streets as seen from a moving tram; high-angle shots of busy crossroads; and cuts to the projectionists as they load the reels.

It is impossible to know if Ozu had seen the film by then and was responding to it. But this hypothetical connection crystallizes the director's unique approach that renders the home a microcosm of the city and the world. Where Vertov attempted to put into action the "Kino-Eye"—a cinematic vision of society that reveals its realities and structures in ways that naked perception cannot—Ozu makes cinema *itself* an element in the organization of society, a signifier of class status. The home movie, screened in a private setting, is a symbol of the boss's ownership of all that it contains, including Yoshii and the other employees' spare time. What is revelatory in *I Was Born, But...* is not what the camera sees, but how it sees—from which vantage point, and for whose pleasure—and what gets overturned when we decide to see differently. Call it *Boss with a Movie Camera*.

— DEVIKA GIRISH

# FROM GODZILLA TO GISH HISASHI OKAJIMA EMBRACES HIS FILM DESTINY

Interview by Marilyn Ferdinand

**W**hen film enthusiasts discuss their first encounter with Japanese cinema, they often name the big (really big) stars—Godzilla, Mothra, Gamera, and other menacing creatures that were staples in movie theaters in the 1950s and '60s. It is certainly true for this year's recipient of the SFSFF Award for commitment to the preservation and presentation of silent cinema, Hisashi Okajima, director of the National Film Archive of Japan (NFAJ).

Okajima, a self-described "ordinary, movie-loving boy," eagerly fed his imagination with kaijū eiga (monster movies) as well as with big American releases growing up in a suburb of Nagoya, a major urban hub about two hundred miles west of Tokyo. When it came time to choose a career, Okajima stayed true to his boyhood love and earned a degree in film studies from Tokyo's Nihon University College of Arts. By the early 1980s, he was writing criticism, including for *Kinema Junpo*, the venerable Japanese movie magazine that has published continuously since 1919.

His earliest practical experience in film curation came in 1979, when he became a research assistant at the National Film Center (NFC), a small division of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo. "The Film Center was the place I went almost three times a week for four years as a student to see classic and rare films," says Okajima. Because of the NFC's modest size, he had the chance to gain experience in film preservation, programming, research, and international cooperation. In 2005 he became its chief curator. When NFC became independent from the museum in 2018, Okajima was appointed director.

NFAJ is Japan's only national institution specializing in the preservation, research, and screening of films. Its collection of Japanese silent films exceeds six hundred works, including features, shorts, and documentaries, whether complete or incomplete. "We have divided them into themes, such as pioneering animated films, images from the Meiji era, the Great Kanto earthquake, and rare newsreels and cultural films, and we are distributing some of them online," says Okajima.

The archive also houses the invaluable Tomijiro Komiya Collection of nitrate prints, donated by the son of the private collector in 1988. It has been a crucial source for the restoration of at least five dozen European titles, including Jean Grémillon's *The Lighthouse Keepers*, which screened at SFSFF 2018, and one of Okajima's favorites from the collection, Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), preserved with its original tinting. The archive continues to acquire films on a voluntary basis from studios of all sizes, a situation that Okajima says would have been unthinkable thirty years ago. "It is gratifying to see that our work is gaining recognition and that production companies do not throw away their films as they once tended to do." Indeed, Okajima, who served as president of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP) from 2009 through 2011, championed film conservation through FIAP's groundbreaking Don't Throw Film Away! manifesto.

## What personal relationship do you have with silent film?

My earliest memory of silent film is not a film itself, but rather a series of photos of stars from American silents I saw when I was around ten years old. They

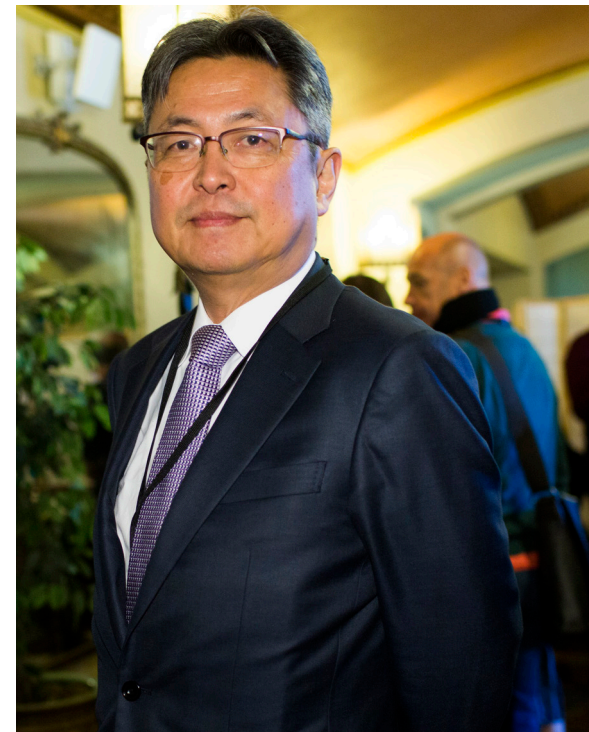
were printed on the backs of playing cards that came from my paternal great-grandfather on a visit to the United States. I was struck by the beauty of one of the actresses, whom I learned much later was Lillian Gish. She was the most beautiful person I had ever seen. I am still proud that I was able to see Gish in person from afar at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1984. That same great-grandfather also died under mysterious circumstances while in the U.S. and every time I visit SFSFF, I have a feeling of *hetu* and *prataya* (因縁)—predestination—that is very precious to me.

## How do you feel about the changes that occurred after the film archive split off from the museum?

Almost all the changes have been for the better. For example, in the old days of the Film Center, its chief was rarely able to speak with the heads of major film companies. From their perspective, the Film Center was merely a division of the National Museum and was too small to deal with. After we became independent, I began to meet directly with studio heads, talking with them about the importance of film preservation and how they could benefit from cooperating with film archives. As a result, we have seen a rapid increase in the number of major film companies depositing their original films with NFAJ. The "big four" film companies in Japan—Toho, Toei, Shochiku, and Kadokawa—also started an ongoing project to send their staff members, at their expense, to assist with our archive's work.

## Yasujiro Ozu's *I WAS BORN, BUT ...* is showing after your award ceremony. What can you tell us about his approach to this film?

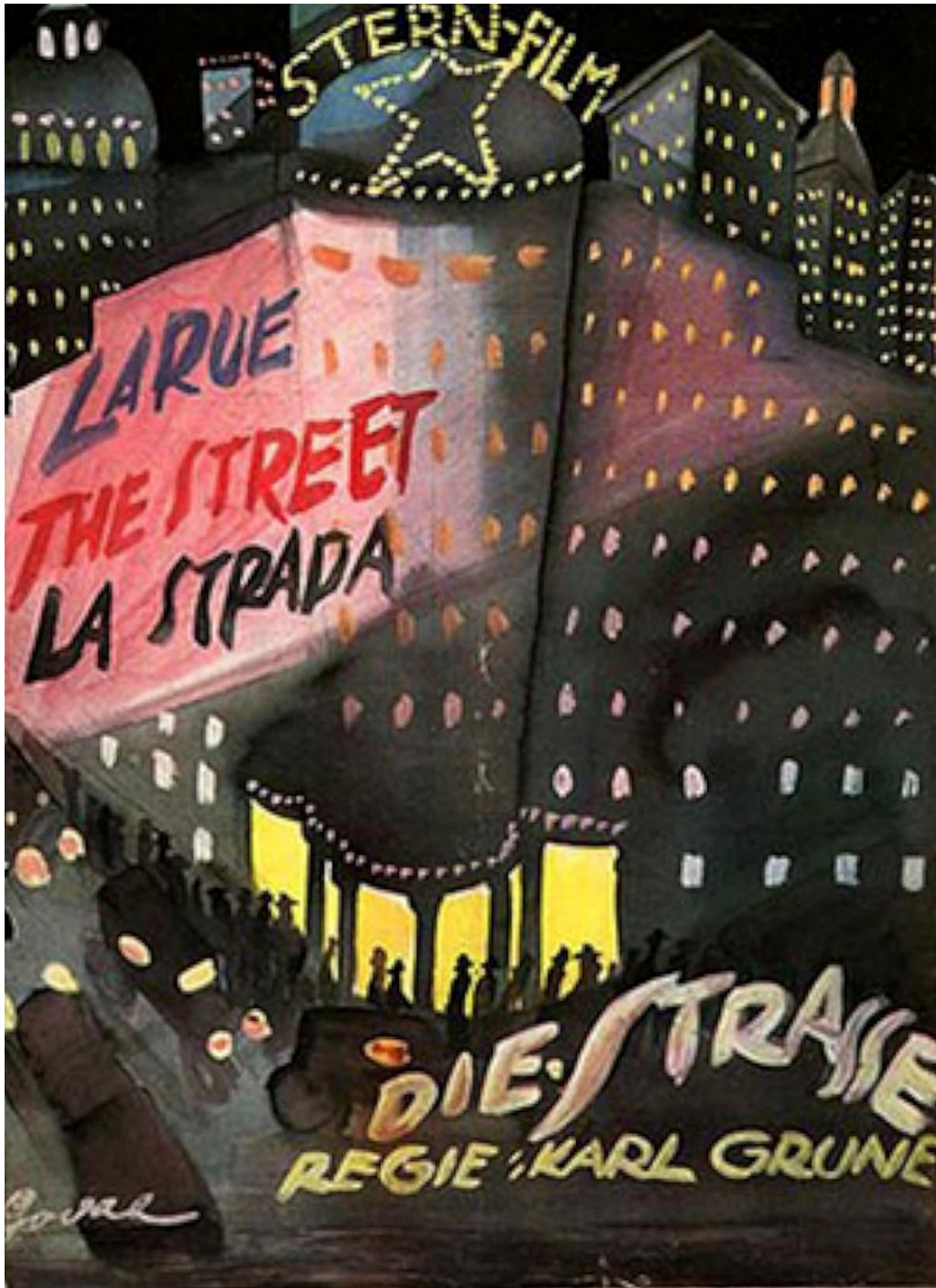
According to Ozu's recollections in a 1952 issue of *Kinema Junpo*, this is the first film in which he consciously or intentionally stopped using the fade-in/



fade-out technique and tried to have all cuts simply be spliced. I think this is notable as an example of the simplification and purification of film technique that Ozu sought. It earned Ozu his first No. 1 ranking in *Kinema Junpo*'s annual ten-best film poll. His films achieved this ranking a total of six times, a record that remains unbroken to this day.

## Are benshi, who narrated films like *I WAS BORN, BUT ...* in the silent era, still performing at screenings?

Although there are not so many opportunities for benshi to accompany films today, several excellent benshi are still active. NFAJ has strived to organize these performances whenever possible. One of the best benshi performances I ever saw was by Midori Sawato, whose narration helped make Kenji Mizoguchi's 1933 *Taki no shiraito* (*The Water Magician*) a five-handkerchief experience. However, we do not believe that all silent films should be screened with benshi. The star is the film, and the benshi and pianist are there to help illuminate the show.



# THE STREET

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY GUENTER BUCHWALD AND FRANK BOCKIUS**

**DIRECTED BY KARL GRUNE, GERMANY, 1923**

**ORIGINAL LANGUAGE TITLE** *Die Strasse* **CAST** Eugen Klöpfer, Aud Egede-Nissen, Leonhard Haskel, Anton Edthofer, and Hans Trautner **PRODUCTION** Stern-Film **PRINT SOURCE** Munich Filmmuseum

In the ongoing cataract of cultural history retrospection, ebbing and waning as it does, the silent German films of the Weimar era have come to be solely represented by the famous screaming-mimis of German Expressionist genre-film hyperbole—the *in extremis* launch of *Caligari*, the waxworks and Faustian pacts and horror stories, the Langian cellar-dwellers, the Murnauvian careenings, the midnight Pabstian hands of fate. This proto-Gothic sensationalism dominated then just as it does now, employing the darkling Ufa house style to outrageous and lurid effect, and so it's easy to see how it left other trends, like the "street film" to relative obscurity.

The so-called street film, of which Karl Grune's *The Street* was the inaugural example, is hardly anti-Expressionistic—as with so many American films noir decades later, the movie's ostensibly realistic settings are beset by the style's plague of shadows and handmade faux-ness, the psycho-social angst implied by Expressionism positively infecting what could otherwise be ordinarily built and lit urban locales. (The point is made deftly by two stills printed side by side in Lotte Eisner's famous book on silent German film, *The Haunted Screen*: a crowded and sunlit city sidewalk in D.W. Griffith's odd 1924 film about post-WWI Germany, *Isn't Life Wonderful?*, and a similar composition from Grune's film, which is architecturally arch and swathed in menacing darkness.) Expressionism, for the Germans in the interbella, was a vibrantly

flexible aesthetic tool, and "the street," as opposed to a more traditional rural road, became a locus for modern pessimism and doom—so much so that, as Siegfried Kracauer points out in his famous history of the era, *From Caligari to Hitler*, a rash of films followed that could hardly resist using the word or its synonyms in their titles: *The Joyless Street* (1925), *Street of Forgetting* (1926), *Tragedy of a Street* (1927), *The Devious Path* (1928), *Asphalt* (1929), *Beyond the Street* (1929), and so on. As a ground zero for the era, the street, often visualized as a network of crass, shadowed rat mazes conveniently providing cover for every kind of vice, obviously carried weight in the German psyche, all the way to the black maps of Lang's *M* and Pabst's *The Threepenny Opera* (both from 1931), and beyond.

Grune's film could hardly be simpler: a bored middle-class husband (Eugen Klöpfer), tempted paradigmatically by the ceiling shadows pouring into his living room from the city's nightlife outside, leaves his dutiful wife behind in a petulant huff and ventures outside, determined to taste the illicit thrills of modern urban decadence. In no time he's lassoed by a cagey prostitute (Aud Egede-Nissen), whom he seems to naïvely think is seducible; he quickly becomes the mark for her pimp (Anton Edthofer) and his slick associate (Hans Trautner), who also then set their machinations upon a geeky, pretentious "man from the provinces" (Leonhard Haskel), a clueless fool arriving on the





street flashing wads of cash and believing he's the master of his fate.

Over a single night, with action often set against a huge *Caligari*-esque painted cityscape, the crooks' net tightens, amid much deception and sexual anxiety, until our hero, unsuccessful at adultery and cleaned out by an elaborate and rigged card game (his lost wagers include his own wedding ring), is framed for murder. A parallel story involves the pimp's five-year-old daughter (Sascha) and her elderly blind grandfather (Max Schreck) who get separated in the bustle of the nightened street, and eventually intersect with our dubious hero and the criminals' plot.

There's no missing the movie's simple moralism, and the extreme dichotomy the plot draws between the underappreciated safety of domestic life and the hazards awaiting you in the city's spider web of temptation. (A key image early on is the huge eyeglasses-shaped sign over an optician's shop, which glares with watchful eyes when the

hero passes underneath.) And yet the finger-wagging piety is belied, as it so often is, by a zesty fascination with immorality, drunken revelry, the hectic mess of city life as a bedazzling pageant (an early quadruple-exposure urban montage, of dancing woman and fireworks and clowns and speeding cars, was a kaleidoscopic trope copied by both Lang in *Metropolis* and Murnau in *Sunrise*), and sex. Seen from the protagonist's besotted and selfish perspective, the film's spectacle of decadence virtually cries out, look at how much fun this is! Where do the judgements lie? Is the film really suggesting we should just never leave home, never go into the city at night, hoping for liberation and excitement?

Such was the psychosocial tension of the Weimar era—it's perhaps important to recall the heady maelstrom in which films like *The Street* were made and the social climate they struggled to express. Socially and politically, the period between wars in Germany was a crazed, brawling tumult, in which revolutionary Communist and parliamentarian

Social Democrat contingents fought it out, often simply proclaiming new governmental formations to the public without agreement being reached; riots became so prevalent in the *strassen* of Berlin that the new government had to relocate to Weimar. The Allies' blockade and the Treaty of Versailles applied economic pressure, while rightist and leftist factions battled like street gangs in Germany's populated areas. Add a major coup, several general strikes, massive Communist uprisings, an additional occupation by Allied troops, and stir.

After the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch was put down and Hitler sent to jail, entropy arrived in another form: a new burst of U.S.-aided assistance fueled a "golden" period lasting to the end of the decade, enduring a big surge in cultural renovation and a huge, generation-upsetting influx of "modern" Americanized styles and attitudes. Modernism arrived like the devil on horseback and with German society, in the very disapproving, very Catholic eyes of anyone over thirty, happily, giddily going to hell—until the stock market crash and the precipitous economic downturn that voted the big-mouthed, law-and-order-promising Nazis into Parliament.

The '20s were a sin-scarred party in most industrialized nations and parental-cum-Christian whiplash was ubiquitous, and these are good reasons why the decade is still as notorious for generational battle lines and hedonistic upheaval as the '60s came to be. But Germany was situated for a singularly potent awakening, identifying itself still with the loftiest achievements in high culture and scholarship for centuries running, coming off the dissolution of an expansive empire and the punishment meted out by the Allies for a war in part initiated by at least

three other powers, and being, for a time, without both central authority and the economic chips to propel the nation forward. So, the intoxication of decadence, criminal indulgence, and lawlessness competed on a movie-by-movie, often scene-by-scene, basis with its howlingly horrified reply, a pious call for justice and condemnation. The simple and tidy apologue of *The Street* harbors an implicit contradiction, as Kracauer points out: that the hero's ultimate choice, of domestic orthodoxy over anarchic vice, feels more than anything like punishment, a crushing self-flagellation inflicted for wanting to live at all.

It contributes to the poignancy and force of films like *The Street* to remind ourselves how this fraught cultural contest of modern liberalism vs. fearful Christian conservatism ended up—with fascism. The whole Weimar package, in fact, vibrates with what was latent under the pavement, and what was to come next. It may seem like a lot to pile onto *The Street's* simple and tidy tale, but that's German Expressionism for you—it's a visual style that gave voice to its nation's anxieties, and those anxieties became history.

— MICHAEL ATKINSON



# THE STYLE OF THE EXPORT FILM

by Joe May

Is there really a particular style that we can designate as the “style of the export film”?

Novices and amateurs in film production receive kindhearted advice from all sides: “They won’t understand that in America!” “This could be embarrassing to a Scandinavian!” “That will not relate to the French mentality!” “It would be impossible to show something like this in London!”

It could make a person anxious and afraid were one to follow all these well-meaning friends’ advice: the result would be such a colorless, conventional, boring film that even in Berlin we would have to be ashamed of it ...

No, this is not the way! Americans have no shame about showing *their* lifestyle, *their* daily habits, *their* small sorrows, and *their* pleasures on film, just as they live and experience them as Americans; the French do the same, as do the Swedes. Should we alone be ashamed to show things as we see them? Why?

Nonetheless, there is an important distinction to be made. When it comes to *external* scenery, people often take extraordinary interest in national idiosyncrasies such as folk costumes, a people’s particular way of celebrating their festivals, ceremonies for life’s festival occasions, and the customs and comforts of social life.

But the situation is quite different if we consider the central questions of film, the *basic psychological content* of the drama.

Here, however, one must always come back to universal human feelings and passions while doing everything possible to avoid a particularistic approach. A hero’s *unfamiliar emotional life* cannot grab or enthrall foreign nationals; they confront him

apathetically, at best taking a kind of cold interest in him. But such a cold interest will not suffice for a film drama to really make an impact on a foreign audience.

But are not these universal human feelings and passions precisely the deepest and truest of all? Are they not deeper and, despite their inscrutability, clearer and purer than the thousand little affects of a particular group, of which we never know whether they are truly *innate* or whether they have been superficially forced onto people by their milieu, politics, economic situation, and other elements of mass suggestion? Did our classic authors not work with these general human feelings, and *only* with them?

I would like to invoke my great and admirable colleague [D.W.] Griffith. On the occasion of his trip to London, he, too, continuously emphasized the great beauty of *those emotions common to all peoples* in film. But emotions common to all peoples are not just those that politicians call “international”; all pure, simple, deeply human stirrings of the soul are common. Lovers will always understand lovers; jealous husbands, jealous husbands; he who suffers the torments of conscience will never fail to recognize his similarly tortured brother. This is true even if this one is European and *that one*, if you like, Chinese or South Indian. The truly primal affects speak the same language—in every nation.

This way of seeing and depicting people is, in my opinion, the only method to make a film “international.” And like the path to truth more generally, the path to this international “export” style is most honorable. The film spectator will and must learn from such films how to recognize even distant



and strange people from other continents whom he sees on the screen as beings *similar to himself* and respect them accordingly; he will no longer see them as mean, aggressive beasts of inferior race who must be struck dead in order to cleanse the world of them—as the hate-mongers who surround him would so gladly convince him to do.

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Vienna-born Joe May was a well-established director in Berlin, having made popular detective series before World War I then afterward producing and directing big-budget fare, like the eight-part series, *The Mistress of the World*, and the two-part adventure epic, *The Indian Tomb*. What May is talking about here was a much disputed subject in the movie trade press, especially as Germany saw a big director like Ernst Lubitsch go to Hollywood just as the world began opening up to imports from prior Central Powers nations. The war had, of course,

devastated European production with Hollywood left the big victor. Film scholar Steven J. Ross says that in 1914 the U.S. provided “slightly more than half world’s movies; by 1919, 90 percent of the films exhibited in Europe ... were made in the United States.” How to compete? *The Street* had its eye on international markets, as archivist Stefan Drössler points out, among other things, “The original multi-color poster featured the title in four languages ... The only insert in the film is written in English.” Some critics thought this strategy was not doing German cinema any favors. “It is depressing that this wealth of German ability has to be smuggled in abroad, so to speak, down the backstairs,” wrote *Vossische Zeitung*’s critic. “No inscription on the street signs is dared, the policemen, clean-shaven, with foreign caps, deny their fatherland, just so no spectator on the Hudson or Thames turns up their noses.” May’s plea for universality, written the year prior to the release of Karl Grune’s landmark film, made an essential point that continued as part of the debate right up until the end of the Weimar era when the hate-mongers won out.



# SHERLOCK JR.

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA**

**DIRECTED BY BUSTER KEATON, USA, 1924**

**CAST** Buster Keaton, Kathryn McGuire, Ward Crane, Ford West, and Joe Keaton **PRODUCTION** Buster Keaton Productions **PRINT SOURCE** FPA Classics

Preceded by **ONE WEEK** (1920)

Directed by Buster Keaton and Edward F. Cline and costarring Sybil Seely and Joe Roberts

**W**hen *Sherlock Jr.* opened, in April 1924, it was only a modest success, and Buster Keaton regarded it as not one of his big pictures. It had no developed storyline and the impatient and dissatisfied comic kept cutting the film shorter so that his patron, Joseph Schenck, and his distributor, MGM, implored him to flesh it out to feature length. Thus *Sherlock Jr.* often feels like no more than a notebook of ideas the comedian had, without attaining the organized elegance of his masterworks. It has a casual, unconcerned air, but a hundred years later that's what makes the film sublime and modern.

So what did Keaton think he was doing?

You can say he was intrigued by the notion of a small-town movie projectionist who wants to become a master detective. But is Buster that interested in the plot in which his guy wants to woo the girl (Kathryn McGuire), gets her a box of chocolates, and becomes a rival to the lofty, dishonest Sheik (Ward Crane)? The detective jokes are pretty corny until our guy finds himself at a pool table where his dastardly foes have made the 13-ball a small bomb waiting to blow him up. It's not that we care, or not until the absent-minded Buster clears the table in a series of shots that manage never to kiss 13. The geometry of the game, and

the farcical skill suddenly command attention, as if it has a fluency so you feel the game should go on forever, and you marvel that the expertise is so offhand. As if Buster and his gagmen hadn't quite paused to appreciate what they might do beyond the pool routine.

Still, there's dull stuff that has to be forgiven—like the antique axe that may execute Buster if he sits in a certain seat, or the glass of dark poison that gets passed around like a hot potato. The girl is pretty, the Sheik is suave, and Buster is that frozen-faced pierrot whose lasting trick is to ignore any peril he faces without a glimmer of self-pity.

These routines come and go, and it's not hard to imagine Keaton trimming and cutting them until too little was left (the film is only forty-five minutes). He's not convinced by his own story. It's as if he'd reached a point in his career where he's getting bored with what he's doing. Until the revelation occurs: he gets the idea that this absent-minded projectionist could fall asleep on his job and somehow enter the screen his machinery is filling.

Keaton would say that this was the gag or the possibility that had led him into doing *Sherlock Jr.* In which case—I think—we have some reason to wish he had worked harder at it. There are moments of lovely surprise, poised questions hovering over the



nature of film and reality. Like the way, in his movie theater, he simply strolls into the screen as if it is another room ready to have him as an inmate. Or the entranced look with which he watches a romance on the screen and then copies it for his girl.

There is also his realization that a plain cut can make a magic out of film that we seldom have the time to appreciate. So Buster's pose can carry him from here to there—from a sheer ledge in the mountains to a jungle tableau where lions are too relaxed to eat him. The potential of any cut is obvious enough, and what we call the art of editing and transformation had seized on it years before *Sherlock Jr.* But Buster's calm view of every jump carries a secret wondering: aren't all of us in the age of cinema stepping from one reality into another, from actuality to fantasy, quicker than the viewer's eye can close and stop the riot? In *Battleship Potemkin*, only a year later, we are both

the brutalized citizens and the immaculate soldiers with their rifles and sabers. Life got so complicated after film.

A hundred years later, trying to surf the chaos of the TV ads at the 2024 Super Bowl, and reconcile them with not just the game, but with Travis Kelce's prowess and Taylor Swift's winsome presence, one can reel back from the Pandora's box of reality and the virtual that Buster Keaton was on to. If you think of Swift and Kelce as Juliet with Caliban you begin to see the metamorphosis lurking in mixed metaphor. It's fine to say Buster had foreshadowed the wit of films like *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. But it's more to the point that he foresaw—in his dreamy, non-censorious way—the confusion of realities that is now taking us over.

Of course, that window on the future was appreciated a while ago, not just by Woody Allen, but by *Les Carabiniers* where Jean-Luc Godard

had one of his loutish heroes trying to get into the screen so that he could join the girl in her bath. There was a threshold on offer here, one that can seem terrifying now, on how the medium that had seemed so engagingly lifelike for several decades has increasingly given up on life or nature. As if our fond companionship with reality is no more, wiped away by a hi-tech wipe.

But there is more to marvel at in *Sherlock Jr.*, and it is the affirmation of light, space, and actuality. A hundred years later, the delight of this abbreviated film are the sequences where the chase takes us out into the dozing suburbia of Los Angeles and the dusty light of southern California. This looks quaint now, but you know it felt alive and up-to-date as the 1924 camera turned. It was excited by its own Now.

You can say such scenes are matter-of-fact, part of the urge to find a few streets or dirt roads where the unit can do a chase scene in peace. But that dismissive attitude fails to match the ecstasy of Buster on the handlebars of a rogue motorbike hurtling down wide empty boulevards in the mistaken comfort that there is a driver sitting behind him. Or the rapture in distances and clear views, and the feeling for a frontier where the city drifts off into semi-desert or what was wilderness just a few years earlier. I love this dapper guy, trying to get along in life and decency but like a lost spirit in the vastness of America. This is enhanced by the speed of the tracking shots and the exhilaration of being out in this sunny open putting people and machines in frictionless motion.

By our time, in the frenzy of going from a to b in one cut, we can comprehend how the thrill of seeing life unfolding on screens lets us feel we were in the promised land, the shining on which the project of America was based. These days, in movies or screened stuff, it's quite rare to see a headlong tracking shot or the kind of light that lets you think, "Oh yes, it feels like four o'clock in the afternoon." Instead we suffer that rather aspic digital light that falls short of brightness. *Sherlock Jr.* just looks so cheery.

It's up to us whether we decide that Buster Keaton is a genius or a hard-working comic entranced by *mise-en-scène* (by constructing gags and situations in terms of camera placement). But in the chase scenes there's no room for doubt: his sad-faced guy was having fun and in love with what he was doing. To such an extent that you could consider him soaring past his real being (not the happiest life in Hollywood) and stepping into the light of romance and motion—the screen. We love Buster, but there was a demon behind his fixed gaze. Pierrot le fou.

— DAVID THOMSON





# THE JOKER

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY STEPHEN HORNE AND FRANK BOCKIUS**

**DIRECTED BY** GEORG JACOBY, DENMARK, 1928

**ORIGINAL LANGUAGE TITLE** *Jokeren* **CAST** Henry Edwards, Miles Mander, Elga Brink, Renée Héribel, and Gabriel Gabrio **PRODUCTION** Nordisk **PRINT SOURCE** Danish Film Institute

**N**ot all heroes wear capes. But when they do, few perfect the ensemble with a jester's hat trimmed in jingle bells. Still, Peter Carstairs, the debonair savior of distressed damsels played here by Henry Edwards in a pan-European production from 1928, dresses up as a court fool to carouse in Riviera nightclubs. And he wears it well. But why? "Because nobody can beat The Joker—and Peter Carstairs wins every play!"

*The Joker*, a production of the Danish Nordisk company, with a German director and two notable British leading men, was likewise conceived as a can't-lose proposition. With German and Danish money, a decadent French milieu, an attractive intercontinental cast, and a successful British play as source material, this film was played as Nordisk's trump card.

The story, taken from Noel Scott's West End hit of the same name, has Carstairs, a.k.a. The Joker, intervening when a pair of innocent aristocratic sisters fall victim to a blackmail racket, perpetrated by a villainous lawyer.

The setting has been transferred from well-heeled London to the upper-class ballrooms and casinos of Nice at Carnival time. Director Georg Jacoby crosscuts judiciously between footage of the elaborate parades or the glittering seafront, shot on location at the very last minute before the film's

premiere in March 1928, and his fast-paced narrative action. The nightclub scenes do not stint, filling the screen with glamorous gaiety and a splash of champagne-addled debauchery. While most of the interiors were shot at Nordisk in Copenhagen, the vast Savoy ballroom was recreated in a Berlin studio. A team of chorus girls in sequined top hats dance-kick their legs high while partygoers raise their glasses and allow the inevitable tangle of paper streamers to tie them closer to that night's partner in passion.

Across town, the revelers in a more sordid tavern witness a shocking accident through bleary eyes, there are street brawls in the afternoon sun, and late-night confrontations involving handguns and poisoned champagne in lavishly furnished villas. It's all such a self-consciously cinematic spectacle that it is only fitting in the end that the shyster is exposed on the nightclub dancefloor by a comedian playing a film director who dazzles him into submission with a Klieg light. *The Joker* offers such an abundance of pictorial pleasures it can legitimately claim offspring in bankable modern-day franchises such as *Mission: Impossible* and especially, James Bond.

The Bond comparison is apt. Nordisk executives were probably targeting the UK market in particular with *The Joker*, in the hopes of finding a British buyer for the ailing business. And UK film fans should have been easily persuaded.

Edwards, playing the gentleman gambler who truly is a gentleman, had been one of Britain's most popular screen stars and directors since the First World War. Audiences loved his charm, his good looks—in particular, his eyebrows—as well as his energetic style. Having acted on stage in London and New York, his first screen work was undertaken at the successful Hepworth studios and for Turner Films, the British company founded by former Vitagraph Girl Florence Turner.

A decade or more of Edwards's on-screen heroics and romantic storylines was bolstered in the public imagination by the real-life love story of his 1924 marriage to Chrissie White, another Hepworth alumna, and frequent costar. Such was their combined allure, they could genuinely

claim to be Britain's answer to Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks—but their marriage lasted, until Edwards's death in 1952. Despite their acclaim, much of their work is now lost: the couple had diligently stored copies of their films in the attic of their house, an attractive property with a traditional straw-thatched roof. Alerted to the dangers of this arrangement during the Second World War, amid fears of German bombardment, the couple just as diligently cremated their life's work in a garden bonfire. Edwards plays Carstairs as a wholesome kind of party animal: chirpy, chivalrous, confident, and always ready to buy a round of drinks for the room.

Miles Mander, however, provoked an altogether different response. Dissolute villainy was his

stock-in-trade, and audiences thrilled to see him stoop to yet lower acts of wickedness. He was, in a very literal sense, to the manor born, yet instead of converting his expensive education into the expected career as a businessman or member of Parliament (the route taken by his older brother), Mander deviated from tradition. First, he tried out aviation, which led him to serve in the RAF during WWI, and then he dabbled in sheep farming with his uncle in far-off New Zealand.

It was the early 1920s when he entered the film business, but not until the middle of the decade that he found his footing, playing increasingly dastardly, often drunken, characters. His role as the degenerate husband in Alfred Hitchcock's debut 1925 *The Pleasure Garden* set the tone. By 1928, the trade press could barely contain their excitement at the prospect of Mander playing "once again a blackmailing rake" (*The Bioscope*), reassuring readers that "he has not entirely lost his screen reputation" (*Kinematograph Weekly*). Here he is introduced sleeping off the excesses of the night before in an advanced state of dishevelment, before being humiliated when his lover Lulu abandons him for a richer man. He is shadowed on his escapades by manservant Jonny, a gruff goon who stoops to do a filthy beast's dirtiest business; it is the final silent film performance of a prolific Danish actor, Aage Hertel, most familiar to modern audiences as the Witch Judge in Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan* (1922).

This combination had a precedent. Mander and Edwards had recently collaborated, along with Jacoby, on *The Fake* (1927), a film made in London that likewise pit the two stars' contrasting personas against each other. Edwards's sincere brow versus Mander's rakish moustache. Both films shared a leading lady, German actress Elga Brink. In *The Joker* she plays the more intrepid

of the two sisters who, warily at first, falls for the irresistible charms of Edwards then proves to be fairly resourceful with a champagne cork, if not a revolver, in a crisis. Her presence is not so much of a surprise; she was married at the time to Jacoby and appeared in many of his silents. Other prominent roles were taken by French actors to broaden the film's potential appeal across the continent. Jacoby, who directed more than 150 crowd-pleasing genre films in his career, spanning the silent and sound years, makes a memorable appearance as a private detective called Pippolet, who dresses up as a woman for an undercover assignment before abruptly unmasking himself as "the blackmailers' horror!"

It's that lightness of step, the wink of good humor, that makes *The Joker* such an enduring pleasure. The more melodramatic aspects of the plot fail to weigh down a film that channels the joie de vivre of its titular hero. And yet, in the film business, just as at the casino tables, there is no such thing as a sure-fire certainty. *The Joker* was well, if not excitedly, received in Britain—but there were no takers for Nordisk, which fell into bankruptcy just a few months after the film's release, before reemerging in a new form as a producer of sound films. *The Joker* became a casualty of this transition and has proved frustratingly elusive until this 2021 restoration by the Danish Film Institute.

— PAMELA HUTCHINSON





# THE GORILLA

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY STEPHEN HORNE AND FRANK BOCKIUS**

**DIRECTED BY ALFRED SANTELL, USA, 1927**

**CAST** Charlie Murray, Fred Kelsey, Claude Gillingwater, Tully Marshall, Alice Day, Walter Pidgeon, Gaston Glass, Syd Crossley, Aggie Herring, Brooks Benedict, John Gough, and John Philip Kolb

**PRODUCTION** First National Pictures **PRINT SOURCE** Cineteca Milano

**T**hrills and chills mixed with comedy has been a cinematic staple since movies began—even before, as optical toys and magic lantern shows used ghostly specters and apparitions to startle and amuse their audiences. The first person to use macabre imagery for comic effect in a wholesale way with films was French pioneer Georges Méliès. Characters would disappear and reappear in puffs of smoke, disembodied heads grew to enormous size and exploded, and Arctic giants ate and regurgitated explorers. Méliès's films teemed with demons, dark caves, animated skeletons, ghosts, and mutilations and, while essentially comic, were grotesque, gruesome, and always surreal.

Soon gothic stories such as *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Frankenstein* were adapted for the movies with spoofs often following, adding laughs to the thrills. *Jekyll and Hyde* was a particular favorite to parody, with the funniest take-off a solo Stan Laurel playing rude tricks on innocent British bystanders in 1925's *Dr. Pyckle and Mr. Pride*.

In the mid-1920s, Hollywood embraced the horror comedy when films about mysterious doings in spooky old houses became the rage. Most were adapted from popular stage plays of the day. The prototype for this kind of show was George M. Cohan's *Seven Keys to Baldpate* in 1913, but the

1920 hit *The Bat* really jump-started the genre. The main ingredient in these plays was some creaking abode, complete with secret panels and passageways, lights flickering on and off at will, claws protruding through solid walls, and, of course, murder. Movies soon chimed in with adaptations of *The Monster* (1925) and *The Bat* (1926), and the floodgates opened.

*The Gorilla* started life on Broadway in 1925. In addition to the above mix of regular Old Dark House ingredients, playwright Ralph Spence added a killer gorilla and a pair of vaudeville-style comedy detectives. The movie version upped the artistic ante with the stylish and atmospheric cinematography of Arthur Edson. Borrowing from the bravura camerawork of German Expressionism, Edson deployed a gliding camera and looming ape shadows for a feeling of creeping dread and the hint of menace lurking around every corner.

Edson had had some practice for *The Gorilla* when he shot *The Bat* the year before and went on to photograph the horror classics, *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Invisible Man* (1933). Having begun his career in 1914, Edson was regular cameraman for Clara Kimball Young throughout the 1910s and later for Douglas Fairbanks on *The Three Musketeers* (1921), *Robin Hood* (1922), and *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924). Edson earned three Oscar nominations and accumulated an

impressive list of credits that includes *Stella Dallas* (1925), *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), *They Drive by Night* (1940), *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), and *Casablanca* (1942) before his retirement in 1949.

Director Alfred Santell began in silent comedy, first as a gagman and scenario writer at Keystone and American. After helming Ham and Bud one-reelers starring Lloyd Hamilton and Bud Duncan at Kalem, he bounced around all over, directing shorts starring Fay Tincher and the Hallroom Boys, among others. He had even directed a real simian, orangutan star Joe Martin, in a series of Universal shorts. His first feature was *Beloved Rogues* (1917) with the vaudeville team (Clarence Kolb and (Max) Dill, and by 1924 he'd graduated to star vehicles on the order of *Orchids and Ermine* (1927), with Colleen Moore at the height of her fame. With sound, he continued to direct a mix of both dramas and comedies. One of his last was an adaptation of a Eugene O'Neill class-conscious play, *The Hairy Ape* (1944).

Quite a number of *The Gorilla's* cast members came from the world of silent comedy, in particular the bumbling detectives played by headliners Charlie Murray and Fred Kelsey. Murray had been a Mack Sennett star for more than ten years and, in the 1920s, was in demand as a prototypical Irishman. Murray's teammate Fred Kelsey was the perennial flatfoot of silent and sound movies—whenever a police sergeant, chief inspector, or house dick was needed, Kelsey was your man. From 1914 to 1920, Kelsey was actually a busy director for Thanhouser and of Harry Carey westerns at Bison, but once he settled behind a badge on screen, he worked as an actor until his death in 1961. *The Gorilla* ended up the biggest role of his career, but he had been a memorable presence alongside Charley Chase, Laurel and Hardy, the

Three Stooges, and Joe McDoakes for more than thirty years.

Leading lady Alice Day plays *The Gorilla's* young heiress Alice Townsend. She was discovered by Mack Sennett (at the same time as her sister Marceline) and started as a love interest for Harry Langdon. With 1925's *Tee for Two*, she had her own series of two-reelers. Billed by Sennett publicity as “a lump of sugar in the cup of happiness,” Day spent three years in shorts like *Hotsy Totsy* (1925) and *Kitty from Killarney* (1926) before moving on to features as an all-purpose light comedy ingénue in *The Smart Set* (1928) and *Little Johnny Jones* (1929), among others. Although she made an easy transition to sound, she retired from the screen in 1932.

Syd Crossley and Aggie Herring, who play the butler and the cook at the Townsend mansion, were longtime comedy supporting players. The British-born Crossley worked frequently for Stan Laurel in shorts like *Monsieur Don't Care* (1924) and *Starvation Blues* (1925) and seemed to have the butler and valet market cornered in features like *Play Safe* (1927) and *A Perfect Gentleman* (1928). Aggie Herring was a comic foil for twenty-five years usually as a battle-axe or busybody in the films of Olive Thomas, Harold Lloyd, Mary Pickford, and Jackie Coogan. Although French-born Gaston Glass was mostly known as a leading man in dramas, he also appeared in comedies like Santell's *Sweet Daddies* and spent time at Hal Roach's Lot of Fun, supporting, for example, Max Davidson in *Jewish Prudence* (1927). He later became a steadily-working production manager.

The rest of the cast was made up of other long-lived Hollywood regulars. Walter Pidgeon is young and handsome here as Stevens, Townsend's choice of suitor for his daughter. He appeared in

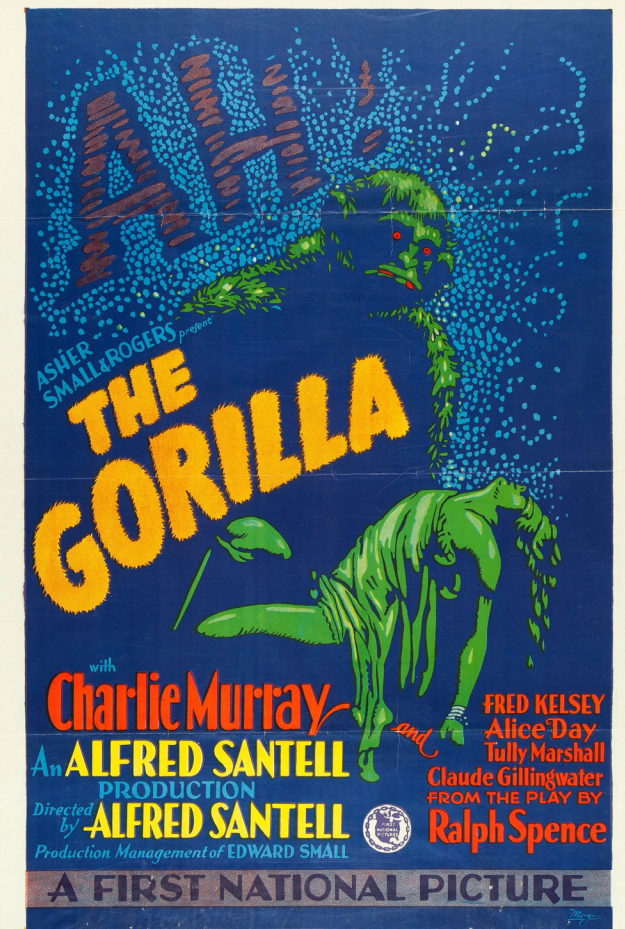
films from 1926 to 1977 and is best-remembered for his work in the 1940s: John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* (1941) and his screen partnership with Greer Garson for *Mrs. Miniver* (1942) and seven more titles. Other of his memorable roles include Dr. Morbius in *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and Florenz Ziegfeld in *Funny Girl* (1968). Character player Claude Gillingwater specialized in crusty old crabs whose heart was won over by movie tykes like Jackie Coogan and Shirley Temple. After a distinguished stage career, he made his film debut in 1918 and worked nonstop until 1939 in pictures like *My Boy* (1921), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935), and *Poor Little Rich Girl* (1936).

The miserly millionaire's brother is played by Tully Marshall, another character actor with remarkable longevity. After entering movies in 1914, he played prominent roles for a host of directors ranging from D.W. Griffith to Victor Sjöström. He was a grizzled frontiersman in James Cruze's *The Covered Wagon* and the disappearing lawyer in Universal's Old Dark House classic, *The Cat and the Canary* (1927). He worked up until his death in 1943, playing one of the well-meaning professors in *Ball of Fire* (1941) and the capitalist mastermind of *This Gun for Hire* (1942). Last, but not least, is John Philip Kolb, a generally uncredited bit player of the 1920s, who may have had his largest screen role as the titular primate.

After the popular success of *The Gorilla*, the Old Dark House films continued unabated through the end of the silent era and carried far into the talkies. *The Gorilla* itself had two sound remakes: 1930's with comics Joe Frisco and Harry Gribbon as the detective duo, which morphed into a

trio for the 1939 version starring the Ritz Brothers and directed by Allan Dwan. Laughs combined with chills have been winners at the box office ever since. Some later examples include *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), *Men in Black* (1997), and *Ghostbusters: Afterlife* (2021). Sadly, today's special effects capabilities have removed much of the atmosphere from the modern laugh thrillers. With CGI able to create almost anything imaginable, it's made obsolete the suggestive camerawork, sly wit, and sheer fun of a picture like 1927's *The Gorilla*.

— STEVE MASSA





# THE GUY IN THE GORILLA SUIT

BY LEA STANS

From acting to stunt work to selling hot dogs outside a studio gate, there was more than one way to make a living in Hollywood. So Charles Gemora reasoned: why not carve out his own super-specialized niche? Born in the Philippines in 1903, Gemora ran away from home after his father died and his brother seized the family's fortune. At age fifteen he stowed away on a ship bound for San Francisco and eventually wound up in Los Angeles. His remarkable talent for sculpting and drawing led to working in set design at Universal for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925). Yet one singular skill became his specialty: impersonating gorillas. The five-foot-four Gemora could easily wriggle into the small, hairy costumes, and his pioneering work in designing gorilla suits turned him into the most in-demand "ape man" in the industry.

## A CAREER IS BORN

Gorillas were a quirky trend in silent films and tended to pop up menacingly in haunted houses or escape from labs to chase terrified comedians. While chimps and monkeys in films were often the real deal, the demand for gorillas was frequently filled by diminutive actors in hefty fursuits. Gemora's first brush with faux primates happened during the production of *The Lost World* (1925), for which he helped design Bull Montana's "ape-man" suit. But after creating a suit for *The Gorilla* and then seeing the actor's amateurish performance, Gemora felt he should've played the role himself. Before long he was nabbing roles in films like Benjamin Christensen's *Seven Footprints to Satan* (1929), where his snarling creation is heralded with the title: "Beware! The Beast of Satan has escaped!"

## A BETTER GORILLA

Gemora's gorilla costumes evolved quickly throughout the years as he worked to make them look increasingly realistic, padding them out to authentic proportions and engineering features like movable lower jaws and curling lips. The flexible

rubber mask fit snugly and allowed his actual eyes to peer through, making the impersonation seem more alive. His daughter Diana, her father's frequent "sorcerer's apprentice" when he worked at Paramount, recalled how yak hairs were crocheted on the suits three strands at a time. Once finished, they could weigh up to sixty pounds and were stifflingly hot. Nevertheless, Gemora took acting in them very seriously, spending hours at the San Diego Zoo studying and sketching its captive mountain gorillas.

## A NATURAL COMEDIAN

Several men in Hollywood were adept at impersonating primates, but when it came to combining that talent with comedic timing, Gemora was in high demand. He appeared in a number of comedy shorts and features opposite Wheeler and Woolsey, Andy Clyde, Edward Everett Horton, Thelma Todd, Our Gang, the Marx Brothers, and Laurel and Hardy. One of his most well-known was *Swiss Miss* (1938), with Stan and Ollie attempting to haul a piano across a rickety rope-bridge—what else would they meet on that bridge but a gorilla?



## SCANDAL!

One of Gemora's trickiest feats was playing the animal star of *Ingagi*, an exploitation film about supposed encounters with "gorilla worshippers" in the Congo but actually shot in Los Angeles. Gemora's performance was mixed with stock footage of real gorillas, helping the film get passed off as a quasi-documentary. While it was a smash hit at the box office, skeptical reviews soon started pouring in. The resulting scandal over fakery got the film pulled from theaters, and Gemora ended up signing an affidavit admitting he played the gorilla. In the end the disgraced *Ingagi* did have one lasting impact on film history—its success reportedly helped pave the way for 1933's *King Kong*.

## FRANKENGORILLA

*The Monster and the Girl* (1941) is an unusual B movie about a gorilla who gets a brain transplant from a man wrongly convicted and executed—an experiment the scientist vaguely described as possibly having "infinite importance to the human race." A dramatic mixture of court drama, horror, and noir, it gave Gemora a chance to stretch his acting skills, convincingly playing an animal with a human soul. He also raised the bar for realism with this gorilla suit, which still draws admiration today.

As was the case for most of his appearances, he wasn't even listed in the screen credits—although he never seemed to mind.

## BEYOND GORILLAS

While best known for being "King of the Gorilla Men," Gemora's artistic skills were vast. Aside from creating exceptional portraits and sculptures, he frequently worked as a makeup artist and devised many techniques for "aging" actors and for better blending prosthetics with an actor's features. By the 1950s, sci-fi costumes were another specialty, his most famed creation being the Martian in *The War of the Worlds* (1953). His daughter once recalled watching him at work in his laboratory/studio: "He is always one step ahead of himself; his eye sees the process steps ahead, and he goes at it so feverishly, you'd think he was working from a blueprint." Sadly, his devotion to work affected his health, the years of acting in the hot gorilla suits eventually required him to use an oxygen tank between takes. In 1961, after decades in the business, he died from a heart attack, far too young at fifty-eight. Yet his legacy lives on in the multiple Planets of Apes, the endless riffs on King Kong, and performers like Andy Serkis who operate in the shadow of this humble, imaginative innovator.



# THE KID BROTHER

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA**

**DIRECTED BY TED WILDE, USA, 1927**

**CAST** Harold Lloyd, Jobyna Ralston, Walter James, Constantine Romanoff, and Ralph Yearsley

**PRODUCTION** Harold Lloyd Corporation **PRINT SOURCE** Harold Lloyd Entertainment

**T**o characterize Harold Lloyd as a perfectionist is to traffic in understatement. When he took up bowling, he wasn't satisfied until he rolled a perfect "300" game. He brought that same determination to the feature-length films he made in the 1920s. He previewed them to see where the laughs were (and weren't) and where the movie needed to breathe in order for a gag to pay off.

He was not alone in this pursuit: both Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton did the same; it's one reason the work of these three comedic giants still holds up so well today. None of them could have done this had they not been the masters of their fate. They had their own studios with permanent staffs on salary, so it was no big deal to reshoot a sequence. But Harold Lloyd's films have a quality all their own: they are audience-proof. I've never seen one fail to elicit the laughs that Harold built into them one hundred years ago.

Back in the 1980s I attended a film festival where his prototypical feature, *The Freshman*, was screened for a group of fourth-grade students, who probably entered the theater grumbling about this particular field trip. By the end, those same kids were cheering out loud for the underdog hero as he ran down the field to earn his team a crucial touchdown. Lloyd himself brought a print of *The Kid Brother* to a class at UCLA in 1971 and when it received a standing ovation its creator/

leading actor/owner was mildly surprised and murmured, "I always liked it."

Lloyd had little formal education but he did possess what we would call "smarts." Not unlike the indefatigable hero he played so often on screen, he was a real-life American success story. Born in Nebraska, he was attracted to the theater and prided himself on his ability to make himself up for a wide variety of character parts on the stage.

Moving to Los Angeles, he found work as an extra and became friendly with a fellow supernumerary named Hal Roach. When Roach inherited some money, he indulged his dream of becoming a producer and director; Lloyd would be his first leading actor. Chaplin had just hit it big so Lloyd devised a scruffy character with ill-fitting clothes he named Willie Work. Even he realized that this was just a pale imitation of the Little Tramp and he refined his alter ego and named him Lonesome Luke.

Somewhere in the 1910s he experimented with the notion of appearing on screen without a mustache or beard or outlandish clothing. This was the birth of "the glasses character" that earned him worldwide fame. People could relate to him because he looked just like the boy next door.

Lloyd also pursued an unusual specialty: the thrill comedy. In shorts like *High and Dizzy* and *Never Weaken* he provided audiences with scares and audible gasps as he dangled from buildings and



girders. There was no such thing as CGI back then, and he eschewed the use of stunt doubles (for the most part) so there was good reason for moviegoers to hold their breath as he daringly dodged disaster. It was the positioning of the buildings and the angle of the camera that made these moments seem more dangerous than they actually were, but no one exposed the trick back then. Even today, Harold's hijinks (or is that high-jinks?) in *Safety Last* can make an audience hold its collective breath. The picture of him dangling from a clock high

above the city streets is one of the most recognizable images in all of movie history.

But Harold was loath to repeat himself, so he plotted out his 1920s films with care: in *Grandma's Boy* he is a milquetoast. In *Why Worry?* he is a jaded millionaire. In *The Freshman* he's a would-be football player with more spirit than skill.

*The Kid Brother* presents him as an underdog again: the runt of the litter, so to speak, a mild-mannered country boy named Harold Hickory whose father

and elder siblings resemble nothing so much as cavemen. He chances to meet a winsome young lady (the virginal Jobyna Ralston) who's traveling with a medicine show and is instantly smitten ... so much so that he defies the edict of his father, the sheriff, to kick the itinerant performers out of town. Instead, he devises one ruse after another in order to court "The Girl," even climbing an enormous tree to keep sight of her when they first part company. He winds up having to battle her menacing medicine-show strong-man Sandoni (played by the imposing Constantine Romanoff) in a battle to the finish. His only helpmate is a mischievous little monkey—the same monkey, apparently, who turns the crank on Buster Keaton's movie camera in *The Cameraman* (1928) and, possibly, the same simian who bedevils Charlie Chaplin's tightrope walk in *The Circus* (1928).

For *The Kid Brother* to work as well as it does, we must believe that Harold is really besotted by Jobyna Ralston ... and we do. We also have to believe that he is in genuine danger when he is threatened by Sandoni, and again we do. This speaks to the skill of Harold's writing team, the expert casting of key characters, and Harold's underrated acting ability. It's one thing to concoct a weakling who can earn our empathy, and quite another to pull off that feat. Lloyd believed in the young men he portrayed on film and never condescended to them in any way.

Lloyd owned the rights to all his significant films and made sure that they were cared for, by his granddaughter Suzanne and her film-savvy friends like Rich Correll and Richard Symington. Thanks to them, and the follow-up work performed by the UCLA Film and Television Archives, we can enjoy the Lloyd features in superior copies, whether at home or on the big screen.

I first discovered Harold Lloyd when he released a feature film called *Harold Lloyd's World of Comedy* in 1962. It played in my local New Jersey theater on a double-bill with Peter Ustinov's *Billy Budd*. I'd read about Lloyd but his movies never played on television and weren't available on 8mm like the early shorts by Chaplin and Keaton. This was a mixed blessing: Lloyd protected his work from being chopped up and interrupted by commercials, but he also kept it out of circulation at a time when budding film buffs like me were hungry to see it. That's why I was so grateful for that compilation feature, and excited to see the man himself promoting it on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* and *The Steve Allen Show*. It meant staying up late, as he wound up on the last segments of both shows, but it was well worth a few yawns the next morning to see a living legend.

Now, in the 21st century, the majority of Harold Lloyd's library is accessible on various formats of home video, which is a boon to film scholarship. But the fact remains that these pictures were carefully crafted to play to a theater audience. That's where the San Francisco Silent Film Festival comes in. If you've never seen Lloyd at all, you're in for a great discovery. If you already know him, you're about to watch him at his very best. *The Kid Brother* is a great film as well as a great comedy. Enjoy!

— LEONARD MALTIN



# THE PHANTOM CARRIAGE

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY THE MATTI BYE ENSEMBLE**

**DIRECTED BY** VICTOR SJÖSTRÖM, SWEDEN, 1921

**ORIGINAL LANGUAGE TITLE** *Körkarlen* **CAST** Victor Sjöström, Hilda Bergström, Astrid Holm, and Tore Svennberg **PRODUCTION** Svensk Filmindustri **PRINT SOURCE** Swedish Film Institute

**T**here are constants in the work of Victor Sjöström, a major figure in film history both behind and in front of the camera. One is the seeming always present sense of death. Sometimes, death might come in the form of disease or a sudden, violent mishap; or sometimes, a character in a film might depict death, or in the case of *The Phantom Carriage*, death's servant. At the conclusion of most all his films, viewers are confronted by tragedy, some form of resignation, or noble self-sacrifice.

In many of Sjöström's films, men are isolate individuals, if not physically, then emotionally. Regret and repressed feelings mark many characters, along with those who are depicted as sensitive or sullen. There is as well a corrosive sense of both men and women at odds with themselves, fighting their internal nature or outward environment, lonely and afraid in surroundings that overwhelm them *and yet sometimes spur them to acts of courage*. Another characteristic of Sjöström's films is the strong-willed woman, singular characters who strive to overcome unfortunate circumstance and resist the near entropy that surrounds them.

The crowning glory of Sjöström's early career is *The Phantom Carriage*. Known in his native Sweden as *Körkarlen* (which translates as "the driver" or "the coachman"), the film is based on a 1912

novella by the writer Selma Lagerlöf. The film was one of five Sjöström made from the works of this Swedish writer, the first woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Sjöström wrote the script in one week and later met with the author on at least one occasion, reading her the script, quarreling over its direction, and finally taking her advice on ways to improve its cinematic presentation. Notably, some intertitles in the film come word for word from the book.

*The Phantom Carriage*, and Lagerlöf's novella, is based on a folktale in which the last person to die on New Year's Eve is doomed to take the reins of death's cart, a cart with which they must collect the souls of the newly departed over the course of the following year. The film and the book follow the story of David Holm, who is knocked down and killed in a graveyard at the stroke of midnight on December 31; his death condemns him to become the next driver of the phantom carriage.

However, for reasons suggested in the film, Holm is instead resurrected by death's servant, and made to relive the errors of his ways (à la Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*). Holm, superbly played by Sjöström himself, is a deeply flawed character, an alcoholic, abusive, brutish man who is bitter and angry at the world. He is a man in desperate need of being saved, from himself. Holm has tuberculosis

(then an incurable disease) and deliberately tries to infect others, including his own young children. In another scene, Holm tears apart his only warm coat after the Salvation Army worker who cares for him mends it. Ultimately, *The Phantom Carriage* is a story of redemption, a common theme in films of the time, including Sjöström's.

*The Phantom Carriage* can be a challenge to follow. The film's almost experimental narrative is built on four lengthy flashbacks that make up the bulk of the film. Each looks back at incidents in Holm's life. Far from a straightforward story, its challenges are compounded by the limited clues regarding time or place, especially in the form of intertitles. *The Phantom Carriage* was one of the first movies to make extensive use of the flashback technique, going as far as to employ flashbacks within flashbacks. Viewers would do well to allow themselves to float along in the churning currents of the film's disjointed narrative—one loose of time yet psychologically bound by an outward realism that explores Holm's inner being.

*The Phantom Carriage* has been described as a horror film, but it is not. If anything, it is a somber morality tale tinged with fantasy. Contributing to its unreal nature are the special effects used to depict death's servant and its ghostly cart. To do so, the film famously makes use of double exposures. While this technique, like flashbacks, was not new, in this film its use was far more advanced than anything yet seen; consisting of brilliantly rendered multiple layers—namely double, triple, and quadruple exposures—the living and the dead, and the material and the spiritual worlds are shown to exist side by side. While this technique may seem primitive or even obvious by today's standards, it astounded audiences in the early 1920s.

Sjöström was a meticulous filmmaker, and deepening his film's visual tension is its camera-work. Throughout, there is an avoidance of visual balance, with some scenes shot in to the corners of rooms. Sometimes characters stand with their backs to the camera, and in one scene, a character weirdly stands in the corner while looking into that same corner. Other scenes feature triangular compositions, suggesting characters psychologically locked by circumstance. In others, the camera was set up to form a circle around a character, suggesting an intense internal claustrophobia. While critics at the time complained about the dinginess of the film, the use of filtered light, pools of darkness, unearthly glows, and deep focus all add to a palpable sense of realistic unreality.

The person responsible for the film's impressive camerawork as well as its use of multiple exposures (achieved in camera) was cinematographer Julius Jaenzon. He and Sjöström had worked together on fourteen earlier, though very different films. Among them were *Terje Vigen*, or *A Man There Was* (1917), and *The Outlaw and His Wife* (1918). Both were groundbreaking in their use of outdoor locations, the landscape and the natural environment acting as a mirror to human emotion.

In Sweden, *The Phantom Carriage* was released on New Year's Day 1921. With the film's ghostly events having taken place on New Year's Eve, one can only imagine the effect it had on viewers of the time, especially in the first few weeks of its release. *The Phantom Carriage* went on to receive rave reviews and was successful at the box office, not only in Sweden, but elsewhere. Early on, Charlie Chaplin said it was the best movie he had ever seen.

*The Phantom Carriage* was also the film that drew the attention of executives at the newly formed



Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, who were so impressed that they invited Sjöström to work in the United States. He came, and directed nine films in seven years under the name Victor Seastrom. Among them are his best-known films, such as *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924), *The Scarlet Letter* (1926), and *The Wind* (1928). The latter two starred Lillian Gish. The great actress once said, the "Swedish school of acting is one of repression," adding Sjöström's "direction was a great education for me."

Over the years, *The Phantom Carriage* has influenced a number of filmmakers, among them Ingmar Bergman, who called it "one of the absolute masterpieces in the history of cinema." In interviews, Bergman recounted how he first saw it when he was around twelve or thirteen years old, and how deeply shaken he was by the experience of the film.

Later in life, as his own career as a director began to take shape, Bergman returned to Sjöström's masterpiece, watching it every year for years on end. In acknowledgment of his debt to *The Phantom Carriage*, Bergman used the same studio that Sjöström had used to shoot parts of his own masterpiece, *Wild Strawberries* (1957), a film in which Sjöström—in his final performance as an actor—once again portrays a man looking back on his life.

— THOMAS GLADYSZ



# THE DEVIIOUS PATH

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY GUENTER BUCHWALD AND FRANK BOCKIUS**

**DIRECTED BY G.W. PABST, GERMANY, 1928**

**ORIGINAL LANGUAGE TITLE** *Abwege* **CAST** Brigitte Helm, Gustav Diessl, Hertha von Walther, and Jack Trevor **PRODUCTION** Erda-Film **PRINT SOURCE** Munich Filmmuseum

**U**nderrated and all but forgotten by film historians, G.W. Pabst's *The Devious Path* is, on the surface, a story of marital crisis and sexual mores in Weimar Germany. Released in 1928, it is also a prime example of a post-Expressionist film that eschews distorted sets, demonic characters, and far-fetched narratives. Set in the present, it deals with contemporary social issues in a realistic way. Coming at the end of the silent era, it shows what film could do before sound came to compromise and devalue the image. Pabst, who had established himself as an audacious director with classics such as *The Joyless Street* (1925), *Secrets of a Soul* (1926), and *The Love of Jeanne Ney* (1927), imbued *The Devious Path* with a formal finesse that deserves a closer look. Together with Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau, Pabst pioneered a silent film language that was highly conscious of its visual foundation and required few intertitles.

From the outset, *The Devious Path* draws our attention to the act of seeing and being seen. The film opens with an unusual shot: a close-up of a hand putting the finishing touches on a pencil portrait of a woman in profile. We see the painter's artistic rendering before we see its subject, demonstrating silent cinema's intense sensitivity to the power of images. A quick cut to the painter (Jack Trevor) shows him looking at Irene, an elegantly dressed, blonde society woman played by Brigitte Helm. After a flirtatious pause, she

returns his longing gaze. Her friend Liane (Hertha von Walther), a modern young woman sitting by her side, engulfs her in a cloud of cigarette smoke. The film cuts back and forth between the three characters as they play a game of gazes. The spell of the intimate, tightly framed scene is abruptly broken by a wide-angle shot across the room that shows Irene's husband intruding like an ominous stranger. The contempt the husband, a wealthy lawyer played by Gustav Diessl, has for his wife's demimonde company is expressed in hostile glances and small symbolic gestures. Fluidly edited, the first few minutes introduce all four main characters and set up the field of forces in the domestic crisis to come.

The first scene leaves no doubt that *The Devious Path* is also a star vehicle for Brigitte Helm. Like the painter at the beginning of the film, Pabst creates an idealized portrait of Helm as a highly stylized icon, enhanced by exquisite costumes designed for her by the fashion label Modehaus Mahrenholz, which received its own credit line. Helm had been discovered by Fritz Lang in 1925 at the age of seventeen and, in a huge gamble, was given the female lead in *Metropolis* (1927), then the most expensive film ever made in Germany. She assumed the dual role of the virginal Maria and her cyborg clone, a destructive vamp who lasciviously gyrates before men whose ardent voyeurism is made literal by a surrealist montage of disembodied open eyes. Owing to



her portrayal, Helm gained renown as Europe's "Über-vamp," as one critic called her, and the role became her calling card.

*The Devious Path*, which opened in Berlin on September 5, 1928, was Helm's fifth film after *Metropolis*. Pabst had to negotiate with Ufa to release Helm from her ten-year contract. (He also reportedly wanted her to play Lulu in *Pandora's Box*, but Ufa refused.) Although Pabst attempted to transform her image, Helm reprised some of the vampish body movements and exalted gestures from *Metropolis*. No matter, the shimmering glamor and sheer elegance of her persona dazzled international audiences. In 1930, British film historian Paul Rotha raved about Helm in *The Devious Path*: "Her vibrant beauty, her mesh of gold hair, her slender, supple figure were caught and photographed from every angle." Theodor Sparkuhl's brilliant cinematography and lighting paint an archetypical "portrait of a lady" who, like Isabel Archer in Henry James's novel, is tormented by the loss of her freedom in marriage.

Helm's Irene dominates *The Devious Path*, driving the action and appearing in every scene. The camera keeps us at an emotional distance as she repeatedly struggles to free herself from a suffocating marriage. The editing also occasionally interrupts the continuity of the narrative with infusions of ironic details. For example, it cuts away from Irene recovering from a fainting spell to a servant cluelessly vacuuming the stairs. Such a juxtaposition undermines our empathy with the character and forces us to contemplate social difference: while the upper class sleeps, the servant works.

For Irene, the alternative to her large, sterile mansion is the crowded, smoke-filled nightclub where she carries on with Liane and her bohemian friends. The nightclub is where well-dressed and bejeweled customers rub shoulders with gigolos and sex workers. (Prostitution was decriminalized in 1927, and Berlin became known as the most permissive city in Europe.) As Jill Smith points out in her book *Berlin Coquette*, during the Weimar era the lines between professional prostitutes and respectable upper-class women were often blurred.

The nightclub also allows cinematographer Theodor Sparkuhl a chance to display panache. Joining the manic crowd on the dance floor, the camera is quickly swept up and loses its bearings; it becomes "unchained," participating in the frenzy rather than observing it objectively. Faces come in and out of focus as the unsteady handheld camera is pushed and shoved. Irene, at first confused, soon commands the dance floor. After she takes cocaine, her dancing becomes more frenetic, leading to a crash that is no less hysterical. Sparkuhl's camera captures the hothouse atmosphere and delights in depicting Berlin's "Roaring Twenties," offering a glamorized image of decadence that later inspired Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* and the recent German TV series *Babylon Berlin*.

In 1962, Theodor W. Adorno, looking back at what he called "Those Twenties" and its "imagistic world of erotic fantasy" and "romantic desire for sexual anarchy," argued that the main function of the era's "ambiguous attitude toward anarchy" was "to provide National Socialism with the slogans it later used to justify its cultural terrorism, as if this exaggerated disorder were already longing for the order Hitler later imposed on all of Europe." Pabst's film presages this fear when Irene, wasted and lost, is confronted with depravity's deadly consequences. She is told that the unnerving drug addict, who goes from table to table begging for money for a fix, was once married to a bank director who committed suicide when she left him. Seeing her own fate mirrored in the ruined life of her female counterpart, she panics and rushes home to her husband.

In the end, a postrevolutionary attitude prevails in the manner of New Objectivity, an art movement that superseded Expressionism. New Objectivity

emphasized facts over utopian ideas, rational thought over sentimentality, and the status quo over change. From this perspective, *The Devious Path* stages a rebellion against the existing state of affairs, only to demonstrate that the status quo is more "realistic." (Both Karl Grune's *The Street* and *Metropolis* have similar endings.) The wife's rebellion against her rigid but rich husband drives the plot, but (like the Expressionist revolution at the end of the war) it is bound to collide with economic reality. Her romantic and risky escapades are shown to be unreasonable. The movie concludes with a farcical divorce followed by the promise of remarriage. And yet, despite this ostensibly ironic ending, the film hints at a state of ongoing crisis beneath its dispassionate surface.

*The Devious Path* (whose German title *Abwege* means, less luridly, "Wrong Ways") had the word "crisis" as a working title (*Crisis* is also its British title). The film's central marital crisis alludes to the larger crisis of a disintegrating German value system in the wake of a lost war, political unrest, hyperinflation, and rapid Americanization. In fact, between 1928 and 1933, more than three hundred books were published in Germany with the word "crisis" in the title. Pabst's invocation of "Crisis" was part of a discourse that addressed the collapse of traditional notions of gender and sexuality and of institutions like marriage. In 1929, just a year after *The Devious Path*, Pabst directed two more crisis narratives, *Pandora's Box* and *Diary of a Lost Girl*, both silent. Taken together, *The Devious Path* can be seen as the first part of a trilogy about the precarious position of women in a society dancing on a volcano.

— ANTON KAES



# THE RED MARK

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA**

**DIRECTED BY JAMES CRUZE, USA, 1928**

**CAST** Gaston Glass, Nina Quartero, Gustav von Seyffertitz, Rose Dione, and Eugene Pallette

**PRODUCTION** James Cruze Inc. **PRINT SOURCE** SFSFF Collection

**T**he 1920s and 1930s saw a fascination with the French state's masculine extremes, with films exploring the romanticized French Foreign Legion and the notorious penal colony of Devil's Island. Both attracted society's cast-offs. Adventurers and men on the run seeking escape and anonymity were offered a haven by the Legion. In stark contrast, Devil's Island was the destination of despair, reserved for serious criminals deported from France for years of hard labor with little likelihood of return.

Devil's Island was infamous for its harsh treatment of prisoners, the staggering mortality rate from tropical diseases (half the prisoners died in their first year), and the provision of the law that required prisoners to remain on the island after release for a period equivalent to their original sentence. Beyond the cruelty, the French penal system had a strategic purpose. Modeled after Britain's transportation of convicts to Australia, it removed criminals from France and supplied the colonies with a needed workforce. For a select few survivors, there was even the distant possibility of release and a chance to settle as colonists.

Devil's Island gained worldwide notoriety because of the Dreyfus Affair. When French Army Captain Alfred Dreyfus was wrongly convicted of treason in 1894 and imprisoned on the island, the miscarriage of justice sparked an international outcry. Press coverage and campaigns by intellectuals

like Émile Zola fueled public pressure, leading to Dreyfus's return, retrial, and eventual pardon.

American awareness of Devil's Island was further amplified by the daring accounts of travel writer and explorer Blair Niles. A cofounder of the Society of Woman Geographers, Niles was granted access to all the prisons of French Guiana, leading to her exposés in the *New York Times* in 1927. Her acclaimed book, *Condemned to Devil's Island*, was released in 1928 just as *The Red Mark* reached theaters. The timing was fortuitous, as Niles's work resonated with an audience already captivated by the island's grim reputation. The following year her book was adapted into the Samuel Goldwyn film *Condemned* starring Ronald Colman.

*The Red Mark* fits comfortably within the genre of films about Devil's Island, just one part of the French penal colony in French Guiana. The original story by adventure writer John Russell takes place at the other French forced labor prison system, in the French archipelago of New Caledonia, nine hundred miles east of Australia. The film is set on the island of Koumea, mirroring the name of the actual New Caledonian capital of Nouméa and described in an intertitle as "a convict colony, where eight thousand felons—thieves, assassins—bear their daily load in bitterness and fear."



Pathé Exchange, the distributor of *The Red Mark*, also released one or two big-budget pictures each year from Cecil B. DeMille's production unit. Director James Cruze was briefly one of the most successful filmmakers in Hollywood, but along with DeMille had seen his star dim in the late 1920s. Just a few years before as a contract director at Paramount, Cruze was assigned a modest western that showed exceptional promise and emerged as the hugely successful *The Covered Wagon* (1923). The film was initially presented as a road show event, playing fifty-nine weeks in New York, and it reshaped the industry's approach to epic filmmaking.

Cruze seemed the natural choice for another Paramount epic, *Old Ironsides* (1926), and, in the summer of 1926, the footage looked so promising that Paramount signed him to a new contract at \$3,500 a week. Tragedy struck during the Catalina Island location shoot when a planned ship explosion went awry, killing two extras and injuring many more. Cruze was blamed, while the press was told that some extras were injured when a mast snapped during a heavy swell. Lawsuits followed, and Paramount suspended his contract.

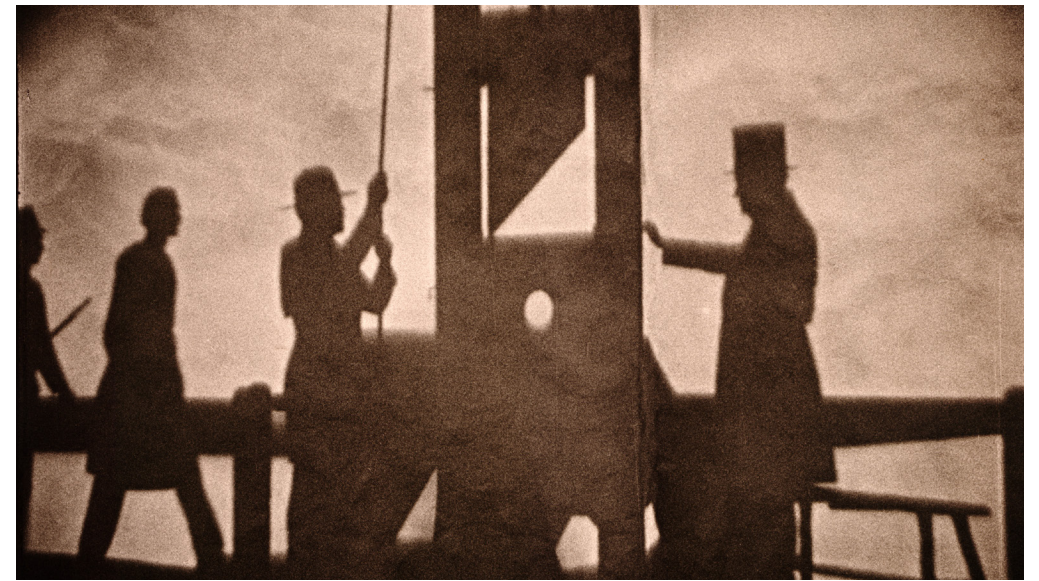
Resilient as ever, Cruze formed his own production company backed by Pathé Exchange. Eager to become a major player, Pathé had absorbed Cecil B. DeMille's Culver City studio in May 1927 and then partnered with the Keith-Albee-Orpheum chain of mostly vaudeville theaters. Unfortunately, Cruze's Pathé debut, *On to Reno* (1927), a mild comedy-drama with Marie Prevost, made little impression.

Cruze's directorial style lacked spark and originality, and his films often depended heavily on the quality of the script, his cameraman, and the experience of his actors. Louise Brooks, who worked

with him in 1927 on *The City Gone Wild*, told Kevin Brownlow that the director "almost never talked and he drank from morning till night." Thankfully, *The Red Mark* benefited from a strong foundation in John Russell's short story first published in 1919. Scriptwriter Julien Josephson skillfully adapted the dialogue-heavy story into a tighter, more visually compelling narrative. Cruze's selection of Ira Morgan, a veteran of seven features with Marion Davies and known for his adept photography of women, further enhanced the film's visual quality.

While not quite Poverty Row, Pathé's tight budgets meant *The Red Mark* was produced at half the cost of Cruze's Paramount films. To cast the lead female character of Zelig, Cruze viewed more than a hundred screen tests, choosing seventeen-year-old newcomer Nena Quartaro (in later films billed as Nina Quartero). The novice actress was given the usual publicity buildup, but *Photoplay* was not convinced: "she combines the eyes of an Olive Borden; something of the wistfulness of a Janet Gaynor; the 'IT' possibilities of Clara—but all underdeveloped." Gaston Glass, usually cast in supporting roles, was selected for the male lead of Bibi-Ri, a newly released, unreformed pick-pocket. The film's most compelling performance came from stage and screen veteran Gustav von Seyffertitz, as the penal colony's corrupt governor. His nuanced portrayal of the villain outshone the rest of the cast, throwing the final film somewhat off balance. Experienced players filled the other roles, including Rose Dione as Mother Caron, a longtime prisoner and Zelig's aunt, and Eugene Pallette as a jovial barber and Bibi-Ri's friend.

The filming of *The Red Mark* began in late October 1927 amid the bustle of DeMille's third season of independent production at the Culver City studio with six pictures in preparation, four in production, and another three in the cutting rooms.



*The Red Mark* adhered to a strict twenty-four-day schedule and a final cost of \$194,153. Cruze's salary of \$35,000 was the largest single expense, exceeding the combined cost of all other actors, extras, musicians, and animals (\$24,538).

After *The Red Mark*'s release in August 1928, *Harrison's Reports*, a publication aimed at exhibitors, wrote that the film was "excellently produced, but too gruesome." The result was too intense for general audiences, editor P.S. Harrison believed, while acknowledging "it is no doubt more suitable for little theatres, where 'odd' kinds of pictures are shown." Lack of interest in the setting and situations in *The Red Mark* proved a major hurdle in rural areas, with one Mississippi exhibitor reporting: "Well, I guess this must be a big town picture, as my patrons said to me it was out of their reach of understanding ... it may be a great picture in the right theatre." But the consensus opinion was expressed by the manager of the Palace Theatre in Malta, Montana (population: 1,342), who bluntly stated: "The steady tramp of feet toward the exit doors during this show proved that I had been slipped another lemon."

Despite the mixed reception, Cruze continued working. He made three minor films at MGM, followed by stints at near-Poverty Row studios, Sono Art-World Wide Pictures and Tiffany. He freelanced for the rest of his career, making minor films at major studios with one notable exception: Universal's costly flop *Sutter's Gold* (1936), starring Edward Arnold. Cruze finished out his career at Republic Pictures.

Pathé Exchange itself didn't last much longer after *The Red Mark*. The studio ceased production in early 1931, and its film library of negatives and stories was sold to Columbia Pictures in 1935 for \$44,000. No elements of *The Red Mark* were included in the Columbia Pictures donation of its nitrate film library to the Library of Congress (LOC) in 1971. However, the American Film Institute's fortunate acquisition of a nitrate print from collector Donald Nichol in 1972 saved the film. LOC archivists eagerly awaited the expiration of the film's copyright in January of this year to join with SFSFF to share this rediscovery with new audiences.

— DAVID PIERCE

# James Cruze

## THE SIGNATURE ABOVE THE TITLE

by Kyle Westphal

Frank Capra famously defined his aspiration as a Hollywood director to be just not another name in the opening credits but “the name above the title.” An even more rarified position was the director who literally signed his own films, asserting his authorship with a handwritten credit when all other talent took their notice in typeface. Ernst Lubitsch earned this right toward the end of his career, as did Howard Hawks and Don Siegel. And so, too, did James Cruze.

To see Cruze’s signature emblazoned on screen at the beginning of *The Red Mark* with the slightly goofy flourish of a schoolyard John Hancock, it’s hard not to wonder, what gave him the big idea?

Cruze’s trajectory to success was typical of the time, requiring constant reinvention and shameless striving. He began by touring with medicine shows, became an actor at

Thanhouser Studios, and then switched to directing. He directed dozens of feature films and, by 1926, was reportedly the highest-paid director in Hollywood.

The reasons for Cruze’s present-day obscurity are understandable. He weathered the transition to talkies poorly and ended his career making cheapies for Republic Pictures. He died in 1942, well before a subsequent generation of historians began collecting oral testimonies from the industry’s pioneers. He didn’t write treatises about his directorial technique for the fan magazines in the manner of his peers. Perhaps he simply thought his own aesthetic pontification superfluous. But when Columbia University professor Victor O. Freeburg published his tome, *Pictorial Beauty on the Screen*, in 1923, he dedicated it to Cruze.

But the biggest impediment to grasping Cruze’s enormous reputation back in his heyday is the simple fact that much of his silent work is lost. His storied epics, *The Covered Wagon* (1923) and *Old Ironsides* (1926), are still available, but they are anomalies next to the slice-of-life comedies and raucous satires that were his specialty. No one alive today has seen *One Glorious Day* (1922), *Hollywood* (1923), *Merton of the Movies* (1924), or *The Goose Hangs High* (1925), but they were highly regarded upon their release and often championed by Cruze’s contemporaries as the heart of his work. “Good as he is at outdoor stuff,” observed Iris Barry in 1926, “he is best at American domestic comedy ... Cruze practically cannot make a bad picture.”

### ONE GLORIOUS DAY (1922)

Will Rogers stars as a mild-mannered professor temporarily possessed by Ek, a Viking ghost from Valhalla, in Cruze’s satire of the twin fads of the 1920s: spiritualism and Prohibition. The National Board of Review cited the film’s “exceptional grasp of the possibilities of the screen in the realm of imagination,” and the *New York Times* raved, calling it “a skillful and ingenious piece of work.” Its critic, Mordaunt Hall, returned to praise the film again in a subsequent feature, asking, “Was there ever a more glorious motion picture?”

### THE COVERED WAGON (1923)

This large-scale western, shot largely on location, became the highest-grossing film that year and the template for all big-budget outdoor adventures for the next decade. *The Iron Horse*, *Tumbleweeds*, *3 Bad Men*, and even *The Gold Rush* were made in its shadow. And that shadow was long: in 1948, when silent films were mostly mocked as primitive entertainment, *The Covered Wagon* still had a sufficient reputation to be cited as a key predecessor in the ad campaign for *Red River!* Ironically, Cruze, who hadn’t demonstrated any prior affinity for the genre, was assigned the film largely on producer Jesse Lasky’s unverified assumption that the director had indigenous ancestry.

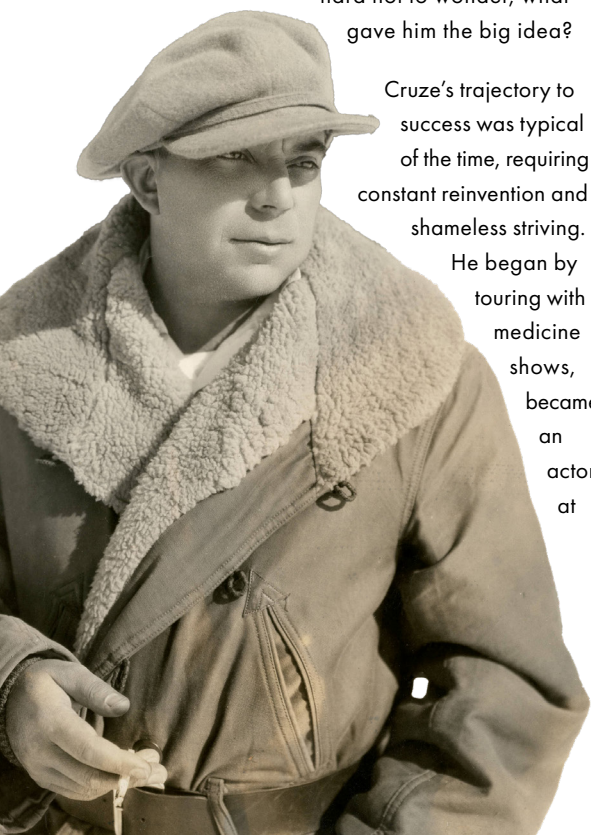
### HOLLYWOOD (1923)

Cruze’s satire of an aspiring actress who can’t catch a break as everyone around her (even her grandpa) gets cast in pictures is one of the most sought-after lost films of the silent era. Replete with dozens of cameos—from Charles Chaplin and Pola Negri to Cecil B. DeMille and exhibition impresario Sid Grauman—the film was also awash in camera tricks and absurdist flourishes. Robert E.

Sherwood’s account of a dream sequence is vivid and tantalizing: “[T]he Centerville pants presser imagined himself a knight errant who had journeyed to the Twentieth Century Babylon to rescue his girl from the clutches of that dread dragon, the Cinema. It was utter insanity. The various stars, garbed as sheiks, licentious club-men, aristocratic rouses, bathing girls, apaches, and the like, moved about in weird confusion through a distorted nightmare. There was slow motion photography, reverse action and double exposure; no sense was made at any given point.”

### THE MATING CALL (1928)

After the box-office failure of his \$2 million seafaring epic *Old Ironsides*, Cruze chased money wherever he could find it. *The Great Gabbo*, his infamous ventriloquist musical with Erich von Stroheim, was distributed by fly-by-night Sono Art-World Wide Pictures and financed by a pair of shady characters, one of whom was serving a prison sentence for usury at the time of the film’s premiere. But before that Cruze made *The Mating Call* for Howard Hughes’s Caddo Company. It’s a highly-polished work of vigorous claptrap about a war veteran who returns to find his sweetheart stolen by a local member of “The Order,” an off-brand KKK knock-off that has no racial axe to grind but does insist that local drunkards stop threatening their mothers’ financial security. This being a Hughes production, the sight of a skinny-dipping Renée Adorée, rather than a social statement against vigilante terrorism, was likely the production’s primary motivation. But it still carried Cruze’s signature in the credits, the mark of an artist in search of a project—and a patron—worthy of him.



James Cruze (image courtesy of the University of Washington)

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*Silence  
is Golden  
So is life-  
changing sleep.*



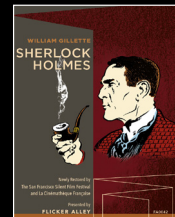
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