

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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The Eagle (1925)

Friday Night Gala: Friday 19 March 2021

Music By: Neil Brand

In 1924, Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks made Rudolph Valentino an offer he clearly couldn't refuse. The Italian heart-throb had shot to fame in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* in 1921 for one studio, and become America's number-one sex symbol with *The Sheik* the same year at another, Famous Players-Lasky. But he was far from happy in Hollywood. The following year he went on strike seeking a pay rise and more artistic control over his pictures. By the time Chaplin and Fairbanks approached him, he was under contract to yet another production company, and en route to parting ways with Famous Players-Lasky for good. The two stars offered him a chance to join them in United Artists, to appear in only pictures he wanted to make, no more than three a year, and all for \$10,000 a week.

Valentino gladly accepted, and his first project was the comedy-drama *The Eagle*, an adaptation of a Pushkin novel, to be directed by one Clarence Brown – the man who would later be known as Greta Garbo's favourite director. Brown was already known for his dramatic lighting effects and his capacity for spectacle. His first directorial credit came in 1920 for *The Last of the Mohicans*, sharing the honours with his cinematic mentor Maurice Tourneur.

If you're a Valentino fan, you'll recognise his leading lady in *The Eagle*. She's the beautiful Hungarian-American actress Vilma Banky, who would famously co-star with Valentino in his final film, *The Son of the Sheik*. Here the setting is almost as exotic: Imperial Russia. Banky plays Mascha, a young woman who falls for Valentino's dashing Lieutenant Dubrosky after he rescues her from a perilous road accident. Louise Dresser plays the Czarina, Catherine the Great, who banishes Dubrosky after he resists her attempt to seduce him.

Valentino loses no opportunity to smoulder in his fabulous costumes, and the chemistry between him and Banky is tangible (a little too tangible, according to Natacha Rambova, who was still married to him at the time). But one of the most delightful aspects of his performance here, and one that wrongfooted a few critics at the time, was the way in which Valentino is subtly sending up his own sexy persona. The screenplay, by Ernst Lubitsch's frequent collaborator Hans Kraly, helps no end. This is an appealingly tongue-in-cheek Valentino performance, and also something of an action role – his alter ego as masked outlaw The Black Eagle carries more than a trace of Fairbanks's turn in *The Mark of Zorro* (1920).

The contribution of Clarence Brown is considerable. He has been slightly overlooked by some, but his best silent dramas, including *The Goose Woman*, *The Signal Tower*, *Smouldering Fires* and *Flesh and the Devil*, rank among the era's finest. Brown had an engineering background, and that influenced his



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style, which involved complex lighting setups and camera moves. That technical brilliance is showcased particularly well in the early sequence featuring a runaway stagecoach, and in the film's most famous and influential shot: a track across a laden banquet table that lingers on the extravagant spread, and in so doing seems to comment on the decadence of the czarist regime. Josef von Sternberg seemed to pay homage when he lifted this trick in his Marlene Dietrich film *The Scarlet Empress* (1934). Brown would himself use it again in his *Anna Karenina* (1935), starring Greta Garbo and Fredric March. Brown also benefited from the assistance of an experienced cinematographer, George Barnes (who would later win an Oscar for his work on Hitchcock's *Rebecca*), and some truly lavish sets, courtesy ground-breaking Hollywood production designer William Cameron Menzies.

Brown's other great skill was his way with actors, especially stars, and he worked very happily with Valentino, who volunteered for stunt work and shared his directors' passion for motors. Perhaps a little too much. Valentino was caught speeding during the shooting of *The Eagle* and much to the production's embarrassment, appeared in court in his Cossack costume.

Valentino died, aged only 31, less than a year after *The Eagle* was released. It remains one of his best and most enjoyable films, and perhaps the most immediate example of his uniquely heady appeal.

By **Pamela Hutchinson**

Pamela Hutchinson is a freelance writer, critic and film historian who contributes regularly to *Sight & Sound*, *the Guardian*, *Empire*, *Criterion*, *Indicator* and the BBC, specialising in silent and classic cinema. Her publications include the BFI Film Classic on *Pandora's Box*.

Dir. Clarence Brown | USA | 1925 | BBFC cert U | b&w | 1h 12m | English intertitles
With: Rudolph Valentino, Vilma Bánky, Louise Dresser, James A. Marcus

Music Accompaniment: **Neil Brand**

Screening material courtesy Kino Lorber