

HIPPODROME silent film festival

Our 10th festival celebrating silent film with music

ONLINE FROM 17-21 MARCH | HIPPFEST.CO.UK



A Kiss From Mary Pickford (1927)

Potselui Meri Pikford

Sunday 21 March 2021

Music By: John Sweeney

A year ago was to have been Hippfest's tenth anniversary celebration, which was to have climaxed with a gala screening of *The Mark of Zorro* (1920) starring Douglas Fairbanks, and I was to have written the programme notes for that. Needless to say, stuff happened, and needless to say a screening of *The Mark of Zorro* to a packed auditorium at the Bo'ness Hippodrome was not among said things. So it feels really nice to be writing about *A Kiss from Mary Pickford* (1927) in which scenes from that earlier swashbuckler are prominently featured. A small step towards the resumption of normal service, so long as normal service includes putting on a mask and cape and prodding evildoers with a rapier.

Movie stars, cinema, stunts, romance, swashbuckling and celebrity: all are satirical targets in Sergey Komarov's wild, energetic, inventive and affectionate satire.

Goga Palkin, played by the great theatre/film tragedian/comedian Igor Ilyinsky, is a cinema usher with a problem. Dusya, the girl he fancies is besotted by fame, and won't date him until he's a celebrity. Poor Goga – how can he compete with Doug Fairbanks, who is handsome, athletic, world famous, and Zorro? Anyone familiar with Jerry Lewis or Norman Wisdom's later characterisations will recognise our hero's comic type: a childlike idiot with big dreams, who delights us by driving authority figures up the wall with his ineptitude, an eternal underdog who just might triumph over the odds because fortune favours fools, or if it doesn't, at least we can pretend. If it did, wouldn't that be good news for all of us?

This hymn to silent cinema is celebrated today for the filmmakers' triumph of actually getting married megastars Doug Fairbanks and Mary Pickford (America's sweetheart) to appear in a Russian film. The pair were doing a publicity tour of the USSR and are captured by documentary cameras, but then the good sports actually interact with Goga and play some scenes, a gesture of goodwill towards Russian film and filmgoers.

Comedies, particularly broad comedies – and they don't come much broader than this – were eternally popular in the USSR – well, you would need some relief from all the idealised depictions of agrarian reform – but the rest of the world hardly ever got to see Soviet slapstick. A shame, since Ilyinsky is a terrific clown, agile, monkeylike, innocent and wide-eyed, with a pugilistic thrust to his buttocks that hints at his indefatigable fighting spirit.

He's going to need it, too, since the path to stardom is unexpectedly uncomfortable. The committee of lab-coated scientists who test him for his fitness for fame put him through a program of experiments more suited to becoming a cosmonaut than a matinee idol. Life at the movie studio is no easier: when Goga takes an accidental tumble, the enormous movie mogul seizes upon him as "our Harry Piel," a reference that's obscure today but spells trouble for our hero. Piel was a German movie star celebrated, like Fairbanks, for doing his own stunts, all of which were dangerous, athletically challenging, and carried

HIPPODROME silent film festival

Our 10th festival celebrating silent film with music

ONLINE FROM 17-21 MARCH | HIPPFEST.CO.UK



out without anything we'd today recognise as a proper concern for health and safety. Goga starts to think he might prefer being a live nobody to a dead Harry Piel.

(If Piel isn't remembered today, it's probably on account of his fervent Nazism, as well as the glorious irony that a bunch of his films were destroyed in an Allied bombing raid, a loss for film history but a win for poetic justice.)

Director Komarov and his co-writer have prepared various plot wrinkles to trip Goga: fame may come from surprising directions, and then may not be as desirable as the swooning fans imagine. The image of a long queue of patrons buying tickets to peep through a keyhole at a celebrity eating his lunch tells us that the modern mania for observing famous people at play was nothing new in 1927.

As with *Chess Fever*, Komarov (who cameos in that film) combines the full-figure framing and plain filming techniques suited to slapstick comedy (especially with actors who move as well as Ilyinsky and co-star Anel Sudakevich) with more montage filmmaking of the kind Russian silent cinema is still best-known for: when a whole throng of rabid fans are knocked cold in a stairwell, Komarov serves up a quick flutter of expressive angles, showing lots of prone bodies splayed all down the steps, the kind of cinematic brio Chaplin, Lloyd or Keaton simply wouldn't have had time for. To the Russians, celebrating the moment with a zigzag set of alternating diagonal compositions was as natural as breathing.

It's kind of a shame that all the movie-making smarts and comedy skill have been overshadowed by the gimmick of the film's two celebrity guest megastars, but at least the trick is well integrated into the story, and it's fun to see the Hollywood movie legends playing themselves. Doug climbs trees and leaps fences with the grace that was his watchword, and shows off his deeply burnished tan, normally whitened by makeup and lights; Mary is unassuming and likable and becomes more so when she's the first person in the film to show any kindness to Goga, the poor goof.

By David Cairns

David is a filmmaker, writer, academic and critic who blogs at Shadowplay, dcairns.wordpress.com

Dir. Sergey Komarov | USSR | 1927 | NC U | b&w | 1h 19m | Russian intertitles with English surtitles.

With: Igor Ilyinsky, Anel Sudakevich, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Vera Malinovskaya, Nikolai Rogozhin, M. Rosenstein, Abram Room, M. Rosenberg, N. Sisova, Y. Lenz, A. Glinsky

Screening material preserved by The Library of Congress