

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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WEDNESDAY 20 MARCH - SUNDAY 24 MARCH 2019

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Forbidden Paradise (1924)

Friday Night Gala: Friday 22 March 2019

Performing live: Jane Gardner, Frank Bockius & Roddy Long

Ernst Lubitsch came to Hollywood as part of the first European exodus, what Billy Wilder called "the exodus of the talented ones." In other words, Lubitsch didn't leave Germany because he was Jewish, but because Hollywood offered him a lot of money and a set of fresh challenges. Later, he would become Wilder's mentor, teaching the director of *Some Like it Hot* much about the art of comedy.

In his native land, Lubitsch had begun as a rather broad clown, before becoming a sensitive director of historical epics which uncovered the private lives of kings and queens from Ann Boleyn to Marie Antoinette. His ability to probe these boudoir activities without ever upsetting the censor made him ideally suited to the movies' golden age: the famous "Lubitsch touch" referred to this ability to be discretely suggestive, titillating without vulgarity. He became famous for his use of closed doors (much on display here, along with the attendant keyholes), which could imply off-screen antics far filthier than anything that could be shown at the time.

In Hollywood, Lubitsch embarked on a series of more modern stories with *The Marriage Circle*, where he found star Adolphe Menjou an ideal interpreter of his sly wit. And Menjou, as the fixer to a lusty queen, is very much the star attraction in *Forbidden Paradise*, despite the presence of the stellar glamour icon Pola Negri, with whom Lubitsch had made several German films.

Negri had always wanted to play Catherine the Great, and that's more or less what she's doing here, though the story is updated and the location changed to one of those little Ruritanian films so beloved of this director. The idea of the royal lady who uses her personal guard as a male harem certainly derives from gossip about the tsarina. Here, hilariously named leading man Rod La Rocq is on hand to be seduced - something of a stiff in early talkies, his wooden demeanour is perfectly exploited by Lubitsch as he plays an upright plank of a man, astonished to find he's as corruptible as anyone else. Among Lubitsch's many gifts was an ability to find comedy gold in unlikely places, often transforming unpromising stars into effective comedians by exploiting their weaknesses (comedy is all about weakness).

Pola is tempestuous and lusty as her fans expected, but also poking fun at her own persona. Having taken royalty slightly seriously in Europe, he was waking up to the comic possibilities, which he would go on to exploit in a whole series of operetta-films and Ruritanian romances. In Lubitsch's world, power is always in the hands of people as basically ignoble and petty as the rest of us, so the contrast between the dignity of office and the indignity of basic human life is sharply expressed. "At least twice a day, the most dignified man in the world is ridiculous," he was fond of saying.

But it's the silk-hatted, mustachioed Menjou, exuding the satisfaction of a cat who's just cornered the world market in cream, who captures the attention, his smallest gesture registering as a comic tour de force. Always on top of the situation even when it seems he's sure to be flummoxed, never at a loss for words (no mean trick in a silent film), and somehow just slightly aware of our admiration (or maybe it's his own?), Menjou holds the film together, adding dry wit even to scenes he's not in.

One of Lubitsch's advantages in Hollywood was his background in European theatre: he knew of seemingly thousands of obscure but well-designed plays that could be adapted to the screen. Rivals suspected him of employing a secret roomful of Hungarians, penning all these plays especially for him to turn into films.

Lubitsch must have liked this story: he adapted it again as *A Royal Scandal* in 1945, with Tallulah Bankhead as a formidable Queen Catherine. But Pola got there first.

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

Dir. Ernst Lubitsch | US | 1924 | N/C 12A | b&w + tinted | English intertitles | 1h 13m
With: Pola Negri, Rod La Rocque, Adolphe Menjou, Pauline Starke

New restoration courtesy Museum of Modern Art, NYC

This event will be presented with BSL and electronic note-taking for D/deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences.

