

# HIPPODROME silent film festival

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WEDNESDAY 20 MARCH - SUNDAY 24 MARCH 2019

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## Moulin Rouge (1928)

HippFest commission: Sunday 24 March 2019

Performing live: Jonny Best, Günter Buchwald & Frank Bockius

“In Elstree, all the Germans speak broken English and all the English broken German.” This impression of the prolific British film studio was reported by a German journalist in 1930, but it described a trend that had started some years earlier. During the 1920s, European collaboration – the pooling of talent and resources – was seen as key to the survival of national cinemas with small domestic audiences. BIP (British International Pictures), set up in Elstree in 1927, was part of this drive to combat American dominance by creating widely exportable films with universal appeal. Keen to invest in both world-class talent and state-of-the-art technology, BIP looked to Germany – the most advanced film industry in Europe – for a powerful injection of sophisticated artistry and technical expertise.

The first German director to be lured to Elstree was Ewald André Dupont. He had already enjoyed considerable success, but it was *Variété* (1925) (HippFest 2016), his sensational circus melodrama, which brought him world renown. Unusually for a European film, it was a huge hit in the United States, and a Hollywood contract followed. But Dupont didn't adapt well to American working conditions and returned to Europe, arriving in Britain in December 1926. He would later declare himself highly impressed by the 'almost unlimited possibilities' offered by BIP, 'the British Hollywood'.

For *Moulin Rouge*, Dupont's first British film as director, two of his key German collaborators were brought on board. Cinematographer Werner Brandes, a master of atmospheric lighting and the creative use of camera movement, would go on to shoot both *Piccadilly* (Dupont, 1929) and *The Informer* (Arthur Robison, 1929) for BIP. His perfectionist approach had a lasting impact on British colleagues eager to learn all they could (the teenage Jack Cardiff was a runner on *The Informer*). Art director Alfred Junge would leave an even bigger mark on British cinema, moving permanently to Britain in 1932 and working with numerous directors, including Alfred Hitchcock and Victor Saville. His many collaborations with Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger culminated with his breath-taking work on *Black Narcissus* (1947) for which he won an Academy Award.

Lavish production values, dazzling spectacle, an international cast: these were the marketable ingredients for exportable films, and *Moulin Rouge* – reputedly the most ambitious and extravagant production ever mounted by a British company - ticked all the boxes. Like *Variété*, it's a tale of erotic intrigue set in the glamorous world of showbiz, Dupont's favourite milieu: Parysia (Olga Tschechowa), a celebrated performer at the Moulin Rouge, gets into deep waters when her daughter Margaret (Eve Gray) introduces her to André (Jean Bradin), her aristocratic fiancé.

Tschechowa, a Berlin-based Russian émigré, was a niece (by marriage) of playwright Anton Chekhov. A mere three years older than Gray who plays her daughter, her sensual allure was a major selling point, and - although clearly no dancer – her performance is charismatic and nuanced. Her subsequent career in the Third Reich involved a rumoured closeness to the Nazi elite and alleged recruitment as a Soviet spy.

Filmed between August 1927 and January 1928, *Moulin Rouge* included some location shooting at the Casino de Paris (standing in for the Moulin Rouge) where Dupont made use of the sets and cast of the 1927 'Paris-New York' revue. Back in Britain, the cafés and cobbled streets of Montmartre were elaborately constructed in the Elstree studios. The film opens with a brilliant montage of Parisian attractions that emphasises speed, mobility and modernity with all the panache of Weimar cinema – followed shortly by a theatre sequence of almost purely visual film-making (intertitles are few), in which voyeuristic pleasure is accentuated through rapid editing, close-ups and a vast variety of camera angles (one critic described the film as 'basically a leg show'). Revelling in cinema's powers of attraction, this is self-referential filmmaking: the film audience sees itself reflected in the on-screen theatre crowd avidly engaged in an orgy of ogling.

Dupont's follow-up film for BIP, *Piccadilly* (1929) (HippFest 2015), restored and re-released by the BFI in 2004, was hailed as a revelation. *Moulin Rouge*, though not without flaws, shares many of its virtues and surely deserves to be better known.

*Please note that MOULIN ROUGE contains brief 'blackface' sequences that presumably formed part of the real-life 'Paris-New York' revue filmed by Dupont at the Casino de Paris in 1927.*

**By Margaret Deriaz.** *Margaret is a freelance film programmer who contributes regularly to the Cambridge Film Festival. She is also curator of the forthcoming film season Beyond Your Wildest Dreams: Weimar Cinema 1919-1933 (BFI Southbank, London, May & June 2019).*

Dir. Ewald Andre Dupont | UK/Germany | 1928 | cert PG | b&w, tinted & toned | 2h 17m | English intertitles.

Cinematography: Werner Brandes, James Rogers

Production design: Alfred Junge

With: Olga Tschechowa, Eve Gray, Jean Bradin, Georges Tréville, Marcel Viber, Blanche Bernis

