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## The Parson's Widow (1920)

Saturday 23 March 2019

Performing Live: John Sweeney

Don't let the forbidding reputation of Carl Th. Dreyer, legendary director of films including *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *Day of Wrath*, mislead you. Dreyer didn't believe that seriousness and quality went hand in hand. "God forbid! It would be a terrible world if we only had problem films," he said. "I put, to be sure, farce and comedy just as high. Only one most note that in back of it all is love, heart, and warmth."

*The Parson's Widow* (1920) was Dreyer's first comedy and is a wonderful example of not just his humour but his humanism. In the words of film historian Eileen Bowser: "Once we have seen *The Parson's Widow*, it is easier to find a comic element in even the most serious Dreyer films, stemming from Dreyer's humanism, his acceptance of man for what he is, with all his weaknesses and strengths."

In 1920, after two critically acclaimed films for the Nordisk studio in Copenhagen, the Danish-born director looked to Sweden for a fresh challenge, and to Norwegian literature for his inspiration. Having admired films made by the great Swedish directors Mauritz Stiller and Victor Sjöström, he felt that the studio they worked for, Svensk Filmindustri, would offer him an opportunity to experiment. Not only that, but in contrast to the Nordisk's preference for modern-dress society dramas, Dreyer would finally be able to shoot a peasant story, set in the past.

The source for *The Parson's Widow* is a novel of the same name by Kristofer Janson set in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Norway. The protagonist, *Söfren* (*Einar Röd*), wins a job as a parson in a country village, but only on the condition that he marry his predecessor's widow, an elderly and formidable woman known as Dame Margarete (Hildur Carlberg). Despite the fact that he is engaged already, Söfren accepts and moves his fiancée Mari (*Greta Almroth*) into his new home, posing as his sister.

It may seem a bizarre scenario, but it has an historical basis – marrying a new parson to his forerunner's widow saved the parish from supporting two separate households. Nevertheless, the stage is set for rustic comic capers, as Söfren tries to sneak some intimate moments with Mari under Margarete's nose, and even to "encourage" his wife's demise by inventive means.

Dreyer was famously a stickler for realism and authenticity when it came to production design, but for this film he did not need to build a single set. Once the snow had thawed, the film was shot in June 1920, at Maihaugan, an open-air museum near Lillehammer. Dreyer made use of the existing wooden buildings for both exterior and interior scenes (the extra light needed

to illuminate the dark rooms damaged the actors' eyes) as well as many of the historical props. He brought a Danish and Swedish cast and crew with him to Norway, including his brilliant Danish cinematographer George Schnéevoigt (whose directorial debut – *Laila* (1929) screened at Hippfest 2019 on Thursday night). For the role of Margarete, he had chosen an actress with a remarkably lined and characterful face, which he had admired in a Sjöström film. The extras were recruited locally, with the help of local poet Olav Aukrust, who also plays one of the disappointed candidates for the job of parson.

Dreyer remembered making *The Parson's Widow* as one of the happiest times of his life, and the final product as “very successful”. Anders Sandvig, the dentist who had founded the Maihaugan museum, also looked back on the time fondly: “There was discipline, but at the same time the most pleasant atmosphere. In the restaurant ... it was like a wedding the whole time. The actors went around town with their costumes on, and almost caused a riot.”

Sadly, Dreyer's leading lady, the imperious Hildur Carlberg, was in failing health, which worried the director. He recalled: “One day she took me aside and said, ‘Don't be alarmed. I promise you I'll not die until we have finished the shooting.’” She was as good as her word, but she passed away later that summer, leaving Dreyer to regret that she never saw the film. It's a sad conclusion to the story of this warm, and humanistic film, in which sorrow and sympathy coincide with mischief and good humour.

By **Pamela Hutchinson** is a freelance writer and film critic. She edits the website [SilentLondon.co.uk](http://SilentLondon.co.uk) and her books include *Pandora's Box* and *30-Second Cinema*.

Dir. Carl Theodor Dreyer | Sweden | 1920 | N/C U | b&w, tinted & toned | Swedish intertitles with English sub-titles | 1h 34m  
With: Hildur Carlberg, Einar Röd, Greta Almroth

New restoration courtesy of the **Swedish Film Institute**