

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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WEDNESDAY 21 MARCH - SUNDAY 25 MARCH 2018

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Shiraz: A Romance of India (1928) a BFI National Archive Restoration

Performing live: John Sweeney
Sunday 25 March 2018

Shiraz: a Romance of India – an almost unique survival in the world of silent film... that is, one filmed outside the 'West'. Shot entirely in India, *Shiraz* is the second of three remarkable silent films made on the subcontinent by producer Himansu Rai (the others are *Light of Asia* and *A Throw of Dice*). They were intended by Rai to be the vanguard of an East/West partnership to bring quality films to India, to which end he set up co-productions with major British and German companies. The three films all have some basis in Indian classical legend, with an all-Indian cast and stunning use of locations.

For the modern viewer the appeal of this lavish spectacle, apart from its rarity, is the beauty of the photography, the gorgeous costumes and settings at Agra and, of course, the iconic Taj Mahal. Himansu Rai is a charismatic lead as the humble Shiraz, ably supported by Enakshi Rama Rau as Selima and Charu Roy as the prince. It is Seeta Devi (her real name was Renée Smith) who steals the show as Dalia the beautiful but deadly courtesan and rival for the prince's affections.

Shiraz is based on the background story of the commissioning of the Taj Mahal – the great monument of a Moghul prince for his dead queen. Niranjan Pal's original play creates the character of Shiraz, son of a village potter who rescues a girl of unknown lineage from an ambush. A wise man suspects the baby is special when a cobra does not strike her and an amulet the baby is wearing hints she may be of royal family. Brought up as brother and sister with Selima, Shiraz falls in love with her and when she is kidnapped by slavers and sold to Prince Khurram, he follows her to Agra where he will risk a horrible death by the elephant's foot to protect her and one day design her great memorial.

The make-up of the production team was unusual. Himansu Rai, the producer and star was the driving force behind the film, he was from a wealthy Bengali family and studied law in London where he met the playwright Niranjan Pal and acted in his play, *The Goddess*. Rai determined to set up an Indian film company with global ambitions and lobbied tirelessly for funds to make this a reality. He chose safe subjects to film, to appeal to complex mix of audiences in India and to avoid censorship by British authorities during the turbulent 1920s, and had some success with the trio of silents. As the sound era dawned he continued to build his company, Bombay Talkies. He died young at the age of only 48 as a result, it is thought, of over-work.

Franz Osten, the director, was German and brother of Peter Ostermayer the head of Emelka studios in Munich. The brothers had been in film since 1911, first touring a film show before turning to production. It was through Emelka that the co-production deal was done with



British Instructional Films and Himansu Rai's Great Eastern Indian Corporation. Osten was director for *Light of Asia*, first of the trilogy of Indian German British co-productions. He stayed on for the following two films which were picked up for distribution by UFA (Universum Film-Aktien Gesellschaft) the largest German studio and the post production work seems to have been done in Berlin. Osten continued to work with Rai at Bombay Talkies into the 1930s. British Instructional films contributed several technical staff: Henry Harris was credited as cameraman with Emil Schünemann – there is no record of how they divided the work but Harris would eventually specialise in special effects and have a long distinguished career including working with Powell and Pressburger on *A Matter of Life and Death* and *I Know Where I'm Going*, and it seems likely that the more experienced German cameraman was the main director of photography. British Victor Albert Peers was credited as assistant director. He went onto become a production manager working with Hitchcock on *Rope* and *Under Capricorn* and became General Manager of Granada Television

Restoration

The restoration is based on a negative of the only surviving British version. German and Indian versions of the film appear to be lost and other elements appear to derive solely from this British version distributed by Pro Patria. Preservation masters form the principal source for the 4k scan with some sequences supplied by a nitrate print to cover damage although this nitrate also has deterioration. It underlines the wisdom of keeping original elements for as long as possible even where preservation duplicates have been made, for even these will degrade in time. The scans underwent extensive grading and clean up before digital elements were produced for screening. New negatives have been struck on 35mm to ensure long term preservation.

Credits

Producer: Himansu Rai

Director: Franz Osten

Asst. Director: Victor A. Peers

Based on play by Niranjan Pal

Photography: Henry Harris, Emil Schünemann

Screenplay: W. Burton

Cast

Himansu Rai (Shiraz), Enakshi Rama Rau (Selima/Empress Mumtaz Mahal), Charu Roy (Prince Khurram/Emperor Shah Jahan), Seeta Devi (Dalia)

Running time: 1h 45m

Programme notes by Bryony Dixon Curator of Silent Film, BFI National Archive



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