

# THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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WEDNESDAY 16 MARCH - SUNDAY 20 MARCH 2016

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Thursday 17 March | 19:30

## Mania

Dir. Eugen Illés | Germany | 1918 | 1h 25m

With: Pola Negri, Arthur Schröder, Werner Hollman

Accompanied live by Czerwie

Sponsored by the City of Andrychów,  
Screening material and images courtesy of Filmoteka Narodowa

Pola Negri was a film star like no other, and the story of her life is a little like something from a movie. She was born Barbara Apolonia Chalupec in Lipno, Poland but took her stage name from an Italian poet she admired, Ada Negri. She liked to claim that she was born on the last day of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but her real birthday was 3 January 1897. Negri cared to embellish more than just her name and age, but in the facts create an attractive rags-to-riches tale of their own. From poverty in Eastern Europe, Negri became one of the silent era's biggest and most exciting stars.

Negri's father was a Slovak tinsmith, a revolutionary who was jailed for conspiring against the Russian regime; her mother was from an impoverished but genteel Polish family. After Negri's father was convicted, mother and daughter moved to a run-down district of Warsaw, and aged 13, Negri enrolled in the city's ballet school, where she discovered a talent for dance and a flair for performance. A bout of TB meant that Negri would never become a ballerina but did not dent her enthusiasm for the stage. It was in the sanatorium that she dreamed up her glamorous new name.

Negri did become a stage actress, and the fledgling Polish film industry soon came calling. She made a handful of films in her native Poland, and even in these first screen roles, her striking beauty and demonstrative style marked her out as special.

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It was one of her stage roles that caught the attention of a German studio though. Negri had played a dancer in Max Reinhardt's production of a play called *Sumurun*.

When director Ernst Lubitsch transferred it to the screen, Negri reprised her role and the key creative partnership of her career began. Lubitsch and Negri made many films together: his wicked imagination and her sexy, vibrant performances sparked off each other, creating films that one US critic called "throbbing, passionate symphonies".

Negri and Lubitsch's German movies were so successful that they worried Hollywood. American viewers might just prefer this hot, sophisticated material to homegrown fare. So Hollywood fought back with its chequebook. Both director and star were snapped up by Hollywood studios at the beginning of the 1920s, but by this point their relationship had gone from fiery to furious and they could only stand to work together once more.

In fact Negri the diva was too hot for Paramount to handle. She was known as much for her fashion sense (she started a trend for red-painted toenails) and her private life as her films: a studio-concocted feud with Gloria Swanson, and engagements to both Charlie Chaplin and Rudolph Valentino. Although the Czar of Russia once said she had "the most kissable hands in the world", Negri's love life was a poor shadow of her on-screen romances. Back in Poland, she had been briefly and unhappily married to a count; in Hollywood, she fell for a man who claimed to be a prince, but turned out to be a gold-digger.

She was a hit with audiences, though, excelling in tragic and romantic roles (*The Spanish Dancer*, *Hotel Imperial*) and even trying her hand at vamp-comedy, wielding a whip in *A Woman of the World*. However, nothing US-made quite suited her as well as the high-strung dramas of her time in the German film industry, and that was where she returned, in the age of the talkies, revealing a sultry singing voice to suit her come-hither looks.

*Mania* (1918) is one of Negri's earliest German films – in this "dramatisches-poem" she's young but every inch the star. Fittingly, it is the story of a young Polish girl who is thrown into the art world, and an impetuous love affair. She is directed by Hungarian Eugen Illés in a role that allows her to be passionate, sensuous and provocative. You'll see how her dance training allows her to act with her whole body, perfect for the silent screen, and her large, expressive eyes speak so much more than words. Watch out for the moment that Mania sees her portrait for the first time, and you'll see the true Negri in her sparkling eyes, fascinated by her own image and hungry for fame.

By Pamela Hutchinson - Pamela blogs about silent cinema at [silentlondon.co.uk](http://silentlondon.co.uk)

