

# THE 5TH HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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WEDNESDAY 18TH MARCH - SUNDAY 22ND MARCH 2015

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Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> March | 16:00

## Piccadilly (PG)

Dir: E.A. Dupont | UK | 1929 | 1h 48m

With: Anna May Wong, Gilda Gray, Jameson Thomas

Accompanied live by Stephen Horne

It was an afternoon television screening of 'Shanghai Express' that introduced me to Hollywood's first screen superstar, Anna May Wong. Made in 1932, and set in war-torn China, it starred Marlene Dietrich, one of the biggest movie icons in the world, and this stunning Chinese actress.

At just under five feet seven inches tall she towered over little Marlene who really should have worn higher heels. And blew all notions of Germanic racial superiority out of the water. That warm, dark voice, deep 'n' sexy, exuded quiet power that matched Dietrich to perfection. It wasn't always that melodious. Stung by critics who accused her of having a "Yankee squawk", Anna May Wong took elocution lessons when she visited Cambridge, preparing her nicely for the advent of the talkies and a new phase in her astonishing career.

Anna May Wong was a third-generation all-American girl, born in Los Angeles in 1905, making her almost the same age as the Hollywood film industry. She appeared in her first movie at 14. At 17 she starred in Hollywood's first technicolour movie, 'The Toll Of The Sea'. She appeared alongside film icons such as Douglas Fairbanks and Marlene Dietrich and, on the stage, a young Laurence Olivier. But she was more than just a film star.

Anna May was photographed, painted and sculpted by the *crème de la crème* of the cultural glitterati. She inspired the composer Constant Lambert to write his 'Eight Poems of Li Po', although he mean-spiritedly altered the order of his verses to give

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it a downbeat ending when she spurned him. The German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin had a crush on her. Eric Maschwitz wrote a song lyric about her called 'These Foolish Things'.

However, this was the Age of the Yellow Peril. Anti-miscegenation laws existed in some parts of the US until the 1960s. She found herself not just part of a race war, but the actual battleground. All around her the literature, the press, the music-hall songs... they were all defining her. The opium, the criminal genius, the sexual threat. She was never to play sunny heroines doing marvellous things: instead she was turned into the misted-up twisted mirror of American society's own malevolence.

Anna May was cast in a slew of demeaning roles that reflected the popular view of China: the Dragon Lady and the Lotus Blossom. She was both the yellow peril threat, embodying all the colonialist fears about China — sly, cunning, powerful — as well as the passive, feminised, primitive child China who Westerners want to penetrate, occupy, save and discard.

At last, fed up with her treatment she joined the exodus of performers of colour such as Josephine Baker, Paul Robeson and Leslie Hutchence in Europe where they were met with respect. She'd been denied the opportunity to kiss her leading man due to some vicious anti-miscegenation laws that ruled that if the leading man was white — even if he was playing a Chinese in yellow face — she wasn't allowed a screen kiss. She was desirable but her characters had to pay the price for the feelings she aroused and she had to die in nearly all her movies. Worse, the *coup de grace* was usually either delivered by her own hand or a fellow Asian.

When asked to make 'Piccadilly' directed by E. A. Dupont in the UK, she was thrilled that at long last she'd be treated as an equal.

She got to kiss her leading man, Jameson Thomas, marred by the presence of a bluebottle subconsciously linking her sexuality with filth in her great vamping scene. Had this happened to any other actress, I believe they would have reshot, but Dupont kept it in. The sad result was that the Lord Chamberlain banned the kiss and it was cut from the film. It wouldn't be until 'Java Head' — made in the UK in 1934 — that she'd finally get to kiss her leading man, and you know what? Without wishing to give spoilers, she dies.

Enjoy 'Piccadilly'. And watch out for an early appearance of Charles Laughton as a restaurant diner.

By Anna Chen, a performer, writer and blogger who writes and presents programmes for BBC Radio 4. Her blog, Madam Miaow Says, was shortlisted in the 2010 Orwell Prize for blogs