

THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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Wednesday 13th March – Sunday 17th March 2013

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The Hippodrome, 10 Hope Street, Bo'ness EH51 0AA

Saturday 16 March 2013 | 17:00

THE OYSTER PRINCESS



Dir. Ernst Lubitsch | Germany | 1919 | b&w | 1h
Accompanied live by Günter A. Buchwald
Screening in partnership with the Goethe-Institut Glasgow

“His life was an uninterrupted ribbon of film.” -- unnamed friend of Ernst Lubitsch.

Ernst Lubitsch is best remembered for the sophisticated comedies of his Hollywood career, such as *Ninotchka* (“Garbo laughs!”) and *To Be Or Not To Be*: as Hitchcock was known for thrills and DeMille for epics, we was associated with “the Lubitsch touch,” an indefinable continental wit and daring that was exotic yet accessible, risqué yet tasteful.

But he first made his mark in his native Germany, as a low comedian, often playing a naughty (and rather superannuated) schoolboy, but as his career progressed his act grew slicker. By 1919 he had almost abandoned performing, but had preserved his fame while moving behind the camera. Having mastered knockabout farce and broad innuendo, he swiftly began to explore the possibilities of storytelling by suggestion, and the use of design, framing and editing to create films which were beautiful objects as well as machines for producing belly laughs.

In the first ten years of his career, he made a fantastic range of dramas and comedies: he could alternate between vast historical tragedies and bawdy comic romps, but somehow established an accepted public image that encompassed all those things. In his period films, the focus was often on observing behaviour, thus humanizing history; whereas his contemporary comedies came complete with exaggerated sets and expressive décor, making them as sumptuous as the courtly antics of *Ann Boleyn* or *Madame DuBarry*.

With *The Oyster Princess*, he was out to make something giddily strange, broadly caricatured, and very silly. He succeeded!



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“EIN GROTESKES LUSTSPIEL” -- it’s easy to see what the subtitle of this 1919 farce is driving at. Lust and grotesquery figure prominently from the off, even in the way Victor Jansen, his pouchy face like a conglomeration of morning rolls, puffs on a cigar as fat and smouldering as the Hindenberg.

Jansen is going at that cigar, which is clasped by a liveried footman, while dictating to a roomful of stenographers, establishing him as a big-shot American businessman, as such a figure might be viewed in a newspaper cartoon. His face is scarily enormous, but his body has been padded out so that his head sits atop it like an insignificant cherry on a cake. The “groteskes lustspiel” has begun.

Lubitsch was always amused by the pretensions of the powerful, hence all the Ruritanian kings in his later Hollywood movies (e.g. *The Merry Window*), and Jansen is ancestor to all those big but oddly helpless men. To aid in the send-up, the film is staged in palatial yet surreally impractical sets, making every frame an elegant, eye-popping oddity. Lubitsch is out to prove that the grotesque can be beautiful.

The title immediately makes us realize that this “oyster king” must have a daughter, and so it proves: toothsome Ossi Oswald, who sets about her role with a twinkling savagery that’s hilariously Teutonic. A room-wrecking temper tantrum is immediately followed by an outburst of joy that’s just as elementally destructive. From her spontaneous desire to keep up with her fellow heiresses by marrying a European aristocrat, the story expands to include a matchmaker, and then a penniless prince and his manservant, and so on, until a universe of bizarre types is parading before us.

The plot, which is relatively simple by farce standards, hinges on arranged marriage, mistaken identity and personal eccentricity, but works mainly as a pretext for fabulously extended comedy moments, most notably the celebrated foxtrot epidemic, in which a dance spreads through the film like an airborne virus, infecting everyone with its insistent rhythm. In Hollywood, Lubitsch would stage similarly ebullient Charleston and waltz numbers, but never with the crazy invention he shows here. It’s probably the highlight of this whole, manically experimental phase of Lubitsch’s long and distinguished career, and it seems a metaphor for the way his comedy starts small and focused on specific details, then expands to envelop the whole of life. Ignatiy Vishnevetsky wrote, “A Lubitsch comedy isn’t just a meal -- it’s the table, the cooks, the menu, the friends invited for dinner, the waiters, and even the competing restaurant across the street.”

As Lubitsch himself later told David Niven, “Nobody can play comedy who does not have a circus going on in his head.”

David Cairns is a writer and filmmaker based in Edinburgh. He runs a film blog, [Shadowplay \(dcairns.wordpress.com\)](http://dcairns.wordpress.com) and has just co-directed a documentary, *Natan*, dealing with French cinema of the twenties and thirties.