


HIPPODROME
silent film festival
celebrating film with live music
WEDNESDAY 16 - SUNDAY 20 MARCH 2022
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The Unknown © 1927 WB/EI

City Girl (1930)

Saturday 19 March 2022

Performing Live: The Dodge Brothers and Neil Brand

FW Murnau established himself as a great director by making such chilling films as the vampire classic *Nosferatu* (1922), the existential drama *The Last Laugh* (1924) and the Goethe adaptation *Faust* (1926) in his native Germany before answering the call of Hollywood and the generous resources of the Fox studio. *City Girl*, from 1930, is the third of his American films. It comes after the masterpiece romance *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) which follows the misadventures of a young couple from the country as they encounter the big city, and the dangers of big city people, and circus drama *4 Devils* (1928), which is sadly lost.

City Girl (working title: *Our Daily Bread*) also hinges on the rural-urban divide, as heartthrob Charles Farrell, the star of *Sunrise* alongside Janet Gaynor, plays Lem, a Minnesota farm boy who falls for a Chicago diner waitress. He was a big star, having played opposite Gaynor in 12 films in three years. After *City Girl*, he married Virginia Valli, star of Hitchcock's *The Pleasure Garden*, and continued to have a long career in film, TV and also politics. Mary Duncan, who plays Kate the waitress, had appeared in *4 Devils* and her career is a little less well known than Farrell's. She started out as a child actress on Broadway but was in films from 1927 to 1933. Reportedly, her film career dwindled pretty fast after *City Girl*, with one journalist writing in 1931: "Mary Duncan was in Hollywood nearly all of last year looking for work with little or no luck. She even altered her appearance by having things done to her nose, but still the producers wouldn't give her a tumble." Duncan spent the rest of her life as a glamorous socialite in Florida (she lived until the age of 98), and speculation persists that she owned the one remaining copy of *4 Devils* – perhaps someone in her family has it still.

Kate falls for Lem too, and alienated by her harried urban existence, dreams of a new life in the peace of the countryside. However, when the newlyweds arrive at Lem's family farm, they are greeted by hostility, distrust and soon out-and-out peril. *City Girl* is a film of vibrant energy and dynamic opposites. The film's transition from exuberant romance, as the lovers cavort in the sun-dappled wheatfields, to the dangerously darkened skies of a harvest thunderstorm, is as invigorating as it is disturbing. Murnau's aptitude in what we'd now call horror cinema bursts to the fore of what we've been duped into thinking is a far lighter kind of film.

Information about the making of *City Girl* is not too easy to come by, but we do know that Murnau's vision was assisted by the deep pockets of his new Hollywood boss William Fox. It's said that an entire farm was built for



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the film's production in Pendleton, Oregon, and while the cast and crew were on location there, Duncan was crowned Round-Up Queen of the local rodeo.

Accomplished Fox cinematographer Ernest Palmer, who photographed Frank Borzage's heartstoppers *7th Heaven* (1927) and *Street Angel* (1928) came too, and brought his mastery of light and shade to the film's contrasting scenes and pointed shadows. His work on *4 Devils* had already brought him his first Oscar nomination – a prize he would eventually win for 1941's *Blood and Sand*. Murnau also had an art director (uncredited) who would later be renowned for making a little look like a lot more: Edgar G. Ulmer, who made his name as the director of B-Movies that punched far above their weight, such as the gritty film noir *Detour* (1945) and the horror film *The Black Cat* (1934). Ulmer was another graduate of the Berlin scene. He had worked for Max Reinhardt's theatre, with Murnau (whom he considered a mentor) and others at Ufa, as well as co-directing the urban ensemble piece *People on Sunday* (1930, with Robert Siodmak, from a story by Billy Wilder). Ulmer has offered a great insight into Murnau's practice, praising his perfectionism by calling him a "great purist" who would never let second-best stand, and his innate understanding of cinematography. Ulmer joked that the director had a "camera instead of a head". "He was always trying to do something new," Ulmer said, "he knew all the secrets of optics."

The result is that *City Girl*, although often a little overshadowed by the acclaim heaped on *Sunrise*, is as fine an example of the inventiveness and lyricism of late silent cinema as you can find. The scale of the film's settings are monumental, even if Murnau is truly interested in the lives of a few small people at the mercy of forces, and elements, far beyond their control. It bears comparisons with such ambitious contemporary works as Victor Sjöström's *The Wind* (1928) and has long been cited as an influence on the unsettling pastoral visions of Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978).

Even the brightest sunshine can be chased by a storm. If *City Girl* represents part of the peak of Hollywood's silent accomplishment, that is partly because a change of weather was already visible on the horizon. In order to keep up with the industry's transition to sound, and to please a change of management, the studio insisted that *City Girl*, which had been shot as a silent film, needed to include new talking sequences. Murnau refused to have any part of this, and when the film was released as a part-talkie, it was a box-office flop. However, archivist Eileen Bowser located the silent print in a vault at the Fox Studio in 1970 and it was screened as it was always intended to be seen, at New York's Museum of Modern Art, four decades after it had been completed. As for Murnau, he made one more film, *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas*, in collaboration with the documentarist Robert Flaherty, before his early death in a car accident aged 42. He may never have lived to embrace sound cinema, but his body of silent work, including the tempestuous *City Girl*, is testament to his artistry and remarkable sensitivity.

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By **Pamela Hutchinson**, a freelance writer and film critic. She edits the website SilentLondon.co.uk and her books include *Pandora's Box* and *30-Second Cinema*.

Director. F.W.Murnau | Adapted for Screen and Written by. Berthold Viertel and Marion Orth | Cinematography. Ernest Palmer | Editor. H. H. Caldwell and Katherine Hiliker | US | 1930 | N/CPG | 1h 28m

With: Charles Farrell, Mary Duncan, David Torrence, Edith Yorke, Guinn Williams, and Ann Shirely.

Screening material courtesy of **Eureka**

To learn more, post-festival you will be able to view our online talk: *Mark Kermode in Conversation with Neil Brand and Mike Hammond*. This talk can be viewed on the [HippFest Facebook page](#), the [FCT YouTube channel](#) or you can visit the [Q&As and Playlists](#) page on [our website](#)."

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