


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

The Mark of Zorro (1920)

Friday Night Gala: Friday 18 March 2022

Performing Live: Neil Brand and Frank Bockius

Plus shorts accompanied by **Forrester Pyke**: Flipbook: *Le Duel* (c. 1896-1900) (San Francisco Silent Film Festival) and extract from *Sword Points* (1928) (Photoplay Productions and Patrick J. Stanbury)

Douglas Fairbanks made some kind of occult bargain with gravity: he would leave it alone if it left him alone. Watching his muscular hi-jinks on the screen, no other explanation seems possible for the way he vaults furniture and co-stars, ascends walls, seems to pause in mid-air to wink at us. In fact, of course, it's a Hollywood illusion of sorts, but not a special effect. One of his directors, the long-lived Allan Dwan, revealed that sets and props were all specially constructed for Doug, measured precisely to be a size the actor could leap without showing any sign of strain. So Doug not only does the apparently impossible, by being very strong, fit and nimble, he does it with godlike ease.

And he does it in all kinds of films. He first became a star in a series of contemporary comedies, where his boyish zeal and energy was both the butt of a great joke and the true value the films celebrated. But then he made the (graceful) leap to period movies: a few of his comedies, like *A Modern Musketeer* (1917), had hinted that the Fairbanks persona had a lineage dating back to historical pageants of the far past, and so it made sense for him to pick up a sword and trade his smart suits for period dress. *The Mark of Zorro* was his first costume picture, and its huge success led to both a sequel, *Don Q, Son of Zorro*, and to follow-ups like *The Three Musketeers*, *The Iron Mask*, *The Thief of Bagdad*, *The Black Pirate* and *Robin Hood*.

Zorro is, arguably, the first costumed crimefighter, the 'Batman of Old California'. Johnstone McCulley, creator of the character, arguably just ripped off *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and transposed him to America, in the process converting him from the saviour of endangered aristos to a protector of the weak. But he added the mask and cape, and sowed the seeds for the Marvel and DC Comic Universes, something acknowledged by the appearance in the recent film *Joker* of a marquee advertising 80s spoof/reboot Zorro, *The Gay Blade*.

The story makes an ideal vehicle for Fairbanks' celebrated grin: no Dark Knight, this hero rights wrongs because it's a good thing to do and anyway he enjoys it, even if he also carves up his opponents faces in a manner reminiscent of Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*. We're not encouraged to worry about that sadistic



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edge. And, because Zorro also has a foppish alter-ego, Don Diego Vega (come to think of it, Vega is a favourite Tarantino name, appearing in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*), he's able to display his world-beating light comedy chops in a different register. He'd played his fair share of comic milquetoasts before, though he always rallied by the last reel.

Though not the most handsome leading man ever to vault atop a charger - atop Fairbanks' athletic physique rests a chunky, turnip-like head - the star has charisma galore and radiates the super-positive attitude that seemed to animate his every moment of living, as well as a lively sense of humour about his screen persona, so that *The Mark of Zorro* is both totally sincere as idealistic adventure, and a touch campy and self-aware.

Fairbanks is ably supported by his regular leading lady, the glamorous Marguerite de la Motte, and by the somewhat grotesque character stars Noah Beery and Snitz Edwards (who worked several times with Buster Keaton). Next to that pair, he looks like a veritable Apollo.

The movie is slickly directed by Fred Niblo, a suave but tough professional also known for the original *Ben-Hur* (1925). Like his star, he worked almost entirely in silent pictures, his success so associated with the era that he immediately came to seem old-fashioned when talkies came in.

Today, of course, an adventure story like this appeals precisely because it *is* old-fashioned, the kind of picture they don't make anymore, though they regularly try and sometimes get close enough to make a lot of money. The stunning, often moody photography, tinted and toned in shades of orange and teal, combines with stylish sets (measure to match the hero's stride) to create a kind of historical fairy tale, an escapist fable in which a costumed crimefighter triumphs over all opposition.

By **David Cairns**. David is a filmmaker, writer, academic and critic who blogs at *Shadowplay* dcairns.wordpress.com

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Director. Fred Niblo | Scenario. Douglas Fairbanks and Eugene Millar | Cinematography. William C. McGann and Harris Thorpe | US | 1920 | N/C U | 1h 25m

With: Douglas Fairbanks, Marguerite De La Motte, Robert McKim, Noah Beery, Claire McDowell, Charles Hill Mailes, and George Periolat

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