

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

The Unknown (1927)

Sunday 20 March 2022

Performing Live: Jonny Best

The things we do for love...

This film was considered lost until the 1970s, when word got out that the Cinémathèque française might hold a print. The trouble was, that archive contained thousands of reels labelled “UNKNOWN” ... But persistence paid off.

The director-actor team of Tod Browning and Lon Chaney concocted a number of perversely disquieting tales of crime and desire, but perhaps none as fervid, peculiar and mind boggling as *The Unknown*, a movie whose barest plot summary – armless knife-thrower lusts after misandrist equestrienne – already provokes unease.

Browning was a former carny and somnambulist (“The Living Hypnotic Corpse!”) whose life story would make *Nightmare Alley* look like a Mary Pickford picture. He would achieve immortality with the 1931 *Dracula*, but it’s his silent work with Chaney (and also 1932’s astonishing shocker *Freaks*) which show his deeply weird sensibility at its most raw.

Chaney was born to be a silent actor, being a Child Of Deaf Adults, and who didn’t speak himself until late childhood, communicating by gesture of necessity. An expert with the make-up kit, he performed bizarre and often painful transformations to play disabled, deformed or monstrous characters. The Man of a Thousand Faces would sometimes play more than one character in a film, just to show off his versatility, and it could be argued he invented the modern horror film almost single-handedly, proving that stories about ugly, villainous and unsympathetic characters could be big box office, simply because of the public’s appetite for the weird and unfamiliar.

In this, Browning made an ideal collaborator. Originally a specialist in comedy, his work changed radically after a serious car accident left him with life-changing injuries (it’s been speculated that he suffered castration, and in the days before safety features this was a not uncommon consequence of auto wrecks). From then on, crime, mutilation, deformity and bizarre tragedies became staples of his work. And there’s always a tension: between Browning the come-on artist, exploiting physical oddity for profit, and Browning the man, with a sympathy for the different, the disabled and the outcast.



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SCAN
ME

The Unknown © 1927 WB

Like *Freaks*, and 1927's John Gilbert vehicle *The Show*, *The Unknown* is one of Browning's circus stories. It's a world he certainly knew well, though whether he loved it is hard to say. In his movies, the circus is typically a place of terror and violence. For Chaney too: his two clown movies, *He Who Gets Slapped* and *Laugh, Clown, Laugh*, are dark and tragic.

It's extraordinary that both Browning and Chaney found a sympathetic home, at least for a while, at Metro/MGM, generally the most respectable and conservative of the major studios. But Chaney was an exception. His audiences knew what they were going to get – sort of. It's a quality summed up in the title of this film, but to which adjective the words weird, unexpected, creepy and bizarre could be added. By the coming of Browning's *Dracula* in '31, this kind of cinema would be formalised as the horror movie, but as yet it was a field consisting basically of a solitary star, Chaney.

Still, even by Browning and Chaney's standards, this is one insane film. At the film's climax, Chaney gets some of the greatest reaction shots of his career, a spectacle of mounting horror and psychopathic fury. In melodrama, the situations may be as unbelievable as you like, in order to give just a little protective distance from the feverish and alarming emotions...

The story of *The Unknown* is one of mad love, and the film has a great leading lady to inspire it. Joan Crawford, aged twenty-one, was a relative newcomer. Soon, MGM would make her a great star with a trio of roles that took her from the silents into the talkies – *Our Dancing Daughters*, *Our Modern Maidens* and *Our Blushing Brides*. In them, Crawford discovered the character she'd play most consistently, the working girl struggling to chart a virtuous path through the temptations and threats of modern life. Here, she's something else again, as Nanon, the ringmaster's frigid daughter. She can't bear to be touched. Chaney, as the armless knife-thrower (he uses his feet, a typical Chaney triumph of physical acting, enhanced by the careful use of a genuine amputee as double) is the only man she can bear. But he has a dark secret...

The movie makes splendid use of Crawford's demented artificiality, a quality she was able to keep in check in her best-known roles but which was apt to erupt in her more camp performances, and in many of her real-life appearances. Everyone here is a grotesque, a caricature, at the service of Browning's ludicrous but oddly compelling narrative.

Though *The Unknown's* morbid anxieties take Crawford far from the terrain she'd soon conquer, they're a dry run of sorts for her career's remarkable third act, when *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* saw her reinvent herself as a kind of movie monster, personifying Hollywood's fear of ageing, of powerful women, and of, yes... the unknown.

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

Director. Tod Browning | Writers. Tod Browning and Waldemar Young | Editor. Harry Reynolds and Errol Taggart | Cinematography. Merritt B. Gerstad | USA | 1927 | N/C recommended 16+ | 1h 3m

With: Lon Chaney, Norman Kerry, and Joan Crawford, Nick De Ruiz, John George, and Frank Lanning.

Screening courtesy of Park Circus / Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

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