

## Mantrap

Dir. Victor Fleming | US | 1926 | N/C PG | 1h 11m + short

Performing live: Neil Brand (piano)

8pm on Friday 22 March 2024

Screening courtesy of Park Circus

Clara Bow didn't invent "it", but no star has ever encapsulated sex appeal in quite the same way as the red-haired vixen who burned up the silver screen (and her fragile psyche) in the Roaring Twenties and early sound era. We should be wary of using the word "unique" about anything film-related since so much is lost, but it's safe to say that Bow's explosive sexual energy has never been matched: "She's positively electric. Never saw so much pep in all my life", exclaimed the *Chicago Daily Tribune's* pseudonymously-named critic Mae Tinée (Frances Peck) – a vibrant writer if ever there was one. Tinée was talking about *Mantrap*, Bow's favourite film and the one that best showcases a bewitching personality barely containable within the projector's glow. It may be the Bow film most often shown, largely because she's become so associated with the term, but *Mantrap* is a significantly better film, for multiple reasons, not least of which is the canny direction of Victor Fleming.

In 1926 no one expected Sinclair Lewis, America's most successful critical novelist, to write anything as deceptively light as *Mantrap*. The author of *Main Street* and *Babbitt* (filmed in 1923 and 1924, respectively) was supposed to tackle serious subjects such as small-town hypocrisy and bourgeois pretensions, not an amusing romance about a city flapper who marries a big lug of a Canadian backwoodsman but can't keep her eyes off any man with two legs. On its appearance in book form, the novel was advertised in *The Saturday Review of Literature* with the catchphrase "For high brows, low brows and bright children." Critics – even now – didn't know quite what to make of their much-lauded auteur's leap into more overtly humorous material, but Paramount saw the potential even before it was first serialized by *Collier's Weekly* and purchased the rights when still in manuscript. They then made two shrewd hires: Victor Fleming as director and Clara Bow as female lead.

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Fleming may now be best known for his sound films, but he began his directorial career with his good friend Douglas Fairbanks in 1919, and throughout the first half of the 1920s was a reliably popular filmmaker as skilled with lively satires as he was with muscular adventures. Though Adelaide Heilbron and Ethel Doherty are credited with the screenplay, Fleming's biographer Michael Sragow credits Broadway playwright Vincent Lawrence with structuring the scenes and turning Lewis' novel into the kind of romantic comedy that would work on screen, further enlivened by George Marion Jr.'s piquant intertitles (I've not seen the production files so can't testify to the accuracy of this assessment). "The picture delights us because it makes no concession to the ten-year-old intelligences which producers insist crowd our very best picture palaces," wrote the *New York Herald Tribune's* perceptive film critic Harriette Underhill, who also pointed out stylistic similarities in the opening scenes with E.A. Dupont's *Variety*, acknowledging however that there was little chance Fleming – or master cinematographer James Wong Howe – could have seen the German film which was only released in the U.S. after *Mantrap* had wrapped filming (though could the editor Adelaide Cannon have seen it before finishing her work?).



Bow was working like a fiend in 1925 but the exposure was proving to be a double-edged sword: some commentators suggested she was more a personality than an actress, and

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while she was already seen as the embodiment of the modern flapper, she still needed a starring vehicle that would positively showcase both her sexual energy and her thespian skills. *Mantrap* became that film. Fleming's direction (assisted by Henry Hathaway) offers a masterclass in visual humour – watch early on how the camera smoothly dollies back when Percy Marmont's woman-hating Ralph Prescott enters the lingerie showroom – and while he has fun with all the characters, he makes Bow's Alverna the most real of them all. The film never demonizes her sex drive and, remarkably, neither does her unlikely screen husband played to perfection by Ernest Torrence. Whether in the city scenes, shot on the Paramount studio lot, or in the backwoods filmed about 85 miles east of Hollywood at Lake Arrowhead, Alverna adapts the environment to her needs rather than the other way around, and as played by Bow she's a deliciously empowering figure. Did it help that the star and the director began an affair on set? It certainly didn't hurt, though their pairing the following year on *Hula* isn't on the same level (by then Bow's revolving door of romantic attachments included Gilbert Roland and Gary Cooper). Fleming "got" Bow, he respected her talents, saw her crushing insecurities and understood how to make her feel valued not just as a sexual fantasy but as an actress. Bow's stardom was secured and *Mantrap* became a box office hit: "Will appeal to those who read Lewis and Voltaire" was the comment from a contented exhibitor in Pocahontas, Iowa (population c. 1,300). One wonders how many people in Pocahontas read Voltaire now. Or Lewis.

### JAY WEISSBERG

*Film historian and critic Jay Weissberg has been the director of the Pordenone Silent Film Festival since 2016. Equally active in the contemporary cinema world, he was attached to Variety for 18 years before joining The Film Verdict in 2021.*

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