

The Constant Nymph

Dir. Adrian Brunel | UK | 1928 | N/C 12A | 1h 50m

Performing live: Mike Nolan (piano)

7:30pm on Saturday 15 March 2025

Screening courtesy of Photoplay and BFI National Archive

Margaret Kennedy is little-known today but she was propelled to celebrity in 1924 on publication of her second novel, *The Constant Nymph*. Its somewhat risqué tale of a teenage girl's devotion to an older man, set in a creative Bohemian milieu, quickly became a best-seller. Kennedy further cashed in on its popularity by entering into a successful collaboration with theatre director Basil Dean to bring it to the stage, and she soon received overtures from film companies to bring it to the screen. Kennedy turned down lucrative offers from Hollywood, refusing to have her story compromised by America's strict censorship rules, and instead sold the rights to Gainsborough Pictures for a more modest price.



Gainsborough was one of the most important British studios at the time, headed by producer Michael Balcon, who went on to produce the Ealing comedies in the late 1940s and 1950s. He was convinced that *The Constant Nymph* would be a money-spinner for the company and it was to be one of his most lavish productions to date.



Kennedy and Dean insisted on writing the initial screenplay themselves, but knowing that they were novices in the film world, Balcon brought in talented screenwriter Alma Reville (aka Mrs Hitchcock) to get it into shape. Reville was the ideal choice for this assignment, with her excellent eye for cinematic composition and sympathy for narratives with strong female characters. Her draft script was then passed to another writer, Angus McPhail, for a final polish.

Kennedy and Dean wanted to inject “a touch of poetry”, writing several fantasy sequences into their script, which employed superimposition and fade-ins to convey the mental state of the characters. Some of these were shot, but Balcon, aware that his distributor would never approve of such affectations, later cut them out. The concept of ‘art’ in film was anathema to the industry at the time and very few directors could get away with inserting visual flourishes.

Dean was keen to get into film-making and insisted on having a hand in direction; Adrian Brunel, one of the studio’s regular directors, was asked to work with him. Although Brunel balked at being credited as “under the supervision of” Dean, he couldn’t turn down the opportunity to work on such a prestigious adaptation, and he set about preparing for the shoot.

The key role of Tessa was given to Mabel Poulton, whose petite stature made her well-suited to playing a teenager. Tessa is a member of the Sanger family: a famous English composer and his daughters who live in a chalet in the Alps. When the father dies, his protégé Lewis Dodds, played by matinee idol Ivor Novello, contacts the girls’ uncle and they move to London, where Tessa is sent to school. Lewis has wed their cousin Florence but the marriage begins to fall apart and Lewis realises too late that it’s Tessa he loves.

The cast and crew were despatched to the Austrian Tyrol to film the exteriors and Brunel was delighted with the dramatic landscapes and quaint villages that it offered. Dean’s arrogance quite quickly made him unpopular with the crew and Brunel had to intervene quite frequently to avoid arguments. The actors generated quite a lot of sparks too, with the women apparently fawning over Novello, despite him being openly gay.

As well as directing, Adrian Brunel was a skilled editor, and was allowed the luxury of three months to assemble the film, with little interference. The smooth narrative development, effective creation of character, and sophistication of *The Constant Nymph* is attributable to his expert work. It also contains his trademark humour, as well as some moving performances from the largely female cast.

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The film was so eagerly anticipated that the Prince of Wales requested a sneak preview of some scenes several months before its completion. It was unveiled to the trade at a lavish event at the Marble Arch Pavilion on 20 February 1928 and press and public alike were clamouring to attend. The musical accompaniment to this event incorporated appropriate melodies by modernist composer Eugene Goossens and a symphony was specially written for Lewis Dodd’s central performance.

The critics were virtually unanimous in their praise for the film, declaring it “one of the most brilliant pictures yet made” and “as an entertainment... second to none”, although they weren’t quite sure which of the two directors should get most credit. British cinema audiences were equally enthused, voting *The Constant Nymph* ‘Best Film of 1928’ in the poll by fan magazine *Film Weekly*.

Despite its popularity, *The Constant Nymph* disappeared from view and was considered a lost film until a 16mm print came into the hands of silent film historian Kevin Brownlow in the 1980s. Its rediscovery has been a valuable contribution to the ongoing reappraisal of British silent cinema.

DR JOSEPHINE BOTTING

Josephine is a Curator at the BFI National Archive and author of Adrian Brunel and British Cinema of the 1920s.

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