

## Forgotten Faces

Dir. Victor Schertzinger | USA | 1928 | N/C PG | b&w | English intertitles | 1h 23m + short

Performing live: Stephen Horne (piano, accordion, flute), Frank Bockius (percussion)

8pm on Sunday 23 March 2025

Restored by the Library of Congress

A strong case can be made that Paramount's roster of silent features tops those of all other US studios, and yes, that includes MGM with its "more stars than there are in heaven". Paramount's releases may have, with a few exceptions, lacked the production budget of its rival, but there's an undeniable charm to the studio's house style of sophisticated worldliness that came to be embodied by Ernst Lubitsch and Josef von Sternberg in the early sound era.



Released in August 1928, *Forgotten Faces* is in keeping with Paramount's style, a winning blend of crime caper and melodrama filled with arresting visuals and vivid characterizations. "Heliotrope" Harry Harlow (Clive Brook) is a gentleman bandit in league with his somewhat less dapper associate Froggy (William Powell). Returning home after a job that almost goes awry, Harry finds his wife (Olga Baclanova) with another man and, realizing that she had tipped off the police, shoots her lover dead, leaves their infant daughter on the doorstep of a wealthy couple, and begins a prison sentence for murder secure in the knowledge that his wife can never lay her scheming hands on his precious child. Or can she?

*Forgotten Faces* was capably directed by Victor Schertzinger, a fascinating person whose online biographical sketches inevitably focus more on his youth as a violin prodigy



and career as a conductor and composer than the 89 films he directed in a relatively brief span that ended with his untimely death at age 53 in 1941. He was a talented craftsman who flourished in the studio system, directing pictures as disparate as *Redskin* (1929), *One Night of Love* (1934), and two Bob Hope-Bing Crosby “Road” films.

Schertzing and cinematographer J. Roy Hunt are responsible for the film’s visual style, which includes noirish lighting, elegant camera movements, and effective close-ups. The editing is fast-paced—there’s hardly a let-up in the story—and for that we note David O. Selznick’s unusual “Editor-in-Chief” credit. Having recently arrived at Paramount as an assistant to production head B.P. Schulberg, Selznick was clearly positioning himself for a storied career.

*Forgotten Faces* was based on a story by Richard Washburn Child and was the second film adaptation (*Heliotrope*, a lost film, was released in 1920); it would be remade twice more in the sound era. It’s best to not overanalyze the plot, which repeatedly strains credulity, and enjoy the performances. Clive Brook maintains a dignified air despite some very undignified circumstances, William Powell displays the good-natured cheer that would soon become his stock in trade as leading man, and Mary Brian (who plays the grown-up daughter) is quite charming.

But we have to talk about Olga Baclanova or, as she’s credited here, simply “Baclanova” (shades of “Nazimova,” one suspects). Born in Moscow, billed as “The Russian Tigress,” she must have relished playing a character so relentlessly cruel for she chews the scenery with a ferocity that’s both mesmerizing and distracting. Contemporaneous reviews of the film uniformly praise her performance, like this from *Picture-Play Magazine*: “This strangely fascinating Russian, with her catlike eyes, conspire to hold the spectator in a hypnotic spell throughout her iniquitous doings.” You can’t ignore her in this film, that much is for certain. Baclanova was unable to make the transition to sound due to her heavy accent, but you might recall her for playing the equally duplicitous Cleopatra in *Tod Browning’s Freaks* (1932).

*Forgotten Faces* was initially preserved by the Library of Congress from its original camera negative; the restoration showing at HippFest was scanned from safety preservation elements plus a 16mm print borrowed from the Museum of Modern Art. The Library acquired more than one hundred silent features from Paramount between 1969 and 1978, the vast majority of them nitrate prints.

#### MIKE MASHON

*Mike was Head of the Library of Congress Moving Image Section from 2005-2023.*