

VALENTINO & NOVELLO: TWO SILENT COMANCESPIANO ACCOMPANIMENT ARRANGED AND PLAYED BY STUART ODERMAN

THE CONSTANT NYMPH (Michael Balcon-Gainsborough, 1928) Directed by Adrian Brunel; Produced by Basil Dean; Screenplay by Margaret Kennedy, Basil Dean and Alma Reville based on the novel and play by Margaret Kennedy; Camera: James Wilson, D.W. Gobbett, M. Koch and Willy Kiermeyer; Assistant Director, Chandos Balcon; 2 hrs approx. NY premiere, June 29 at the Little Carnegie Theatre. Print courtesy Kevin Brownlow.

With: Ivor Novello (Lewis Dodd); Mabel Poulton (Tessa Sanger); Frances Doble (Florence); Mary Clare (Linda Sanger); George Heinrich (Albert Sanger); Benita Hume (Antonia Sanger); Dorothy Boyd (Pauline Sanger); Robert Garrison (Trigoria); Tony de Lungo (Roberto); Peter Evan Thomas (Ike); J.H. Roberts (Dr. Churchill); Yvonne Thomas (Kate Sanger); Clifford Heatherley (Sir Berkeley); Elsa Lanchester (party guest); Erna Sturm (Susan).

All three versions of "The Constant Nymph" are extremely elusive; Basil Dean's early sound remake with his wife, Victoria Hopper, does exist in at least one 35mm print in this country, and the early 40's version from Warners with Fontaine and Boyer certainly exists, but has been long withheld for legal reasons. This fine original print of the first British version, owned by Kevin Brownlow who kindly loaned it for this screening, is almost certainly the only extant print of the 1928 version. Some of you may have seen it when Kevin presented it at Syracuse last March, but the print was then badly buckled and was unavoidably out of focus much of the time. It has been worked on steadily in the intervening three months and should look fine on the big screen tonight in its farewell appearance before going back to England.

It's an extremely handsome production, benefitting certainly from prolonged location shooting in the Tyrol. (British producers in the late 20's loved to get out of England and shoot films abroad on the slightest pretext, and here for once the pretext was quite genuine). It is perhaps a shade too long for its own good, and the middle sections of the film - post-Tyrol, but before the film starts building to its emotional finale - are a bit protracted and would benefit from trimming. But far be it from us to complain when a film as rare as this emerges in a fully complete, uncut state. Some scenes towards the end - particularly those involving the embarkation - seem a little ragged and/or abrupt, but the film's footage does correspond to the original 10½ reel running time, so at most a brief scene or two might be missing here. It's more likely that, realising that the film was headed for an above-average length, it was decided to finish it off in a hurry -- either by eliminating a few scenes, or just not shooting them.

No version of the novel/play can rightly be called a classic. It's unwieldy material, with too many characters, and two themes - the abstract one of artistic revolt and the more specific one of unrequited love - that don't really mesh. Two disadvantages of this version are (a) the fact that it can't take advantage of the rich prose and dialogue of the original novel, which do give it considerable emotional impact, and (b) Ivor Novello, who was a striking personality but hardly a sensitive actor, and thus commands little sympathy or real interest. Mabel Poulton deservedly won all the acclaim for her fine performance as Tessa, though even a lesser performance might have achieved the same critical response given the lack of real male competition. (Poulton's career was essentially in silents, and her opportunities dwindled with sound, though she did have a good role in Michael Powell's "Crown Versus Stevens".) The rest of the cast includes some very familiar (if then much younger) faces including Elsa Lanchester in a flamboyant bit, and Robert Garrison, best remembered from Pabst's "The Joyless Street". It's an interesting coincidence that Daphne du Maurier screen-tested for the role of Tessa; Joan Fontaine, who later became the definitive du Maurier heroine, of course played the role in the 40's version.

When the film opened here in June of 1929 The NY Times was quite astute in some of its criticisms, although also a trifle unfair in calling it old-fashioned (because it was a silent) and in criticising those elements of film-making that had changed with the coming of sound. Oddly enough, all of the NY publicity refers to Basil Dean as the director, with no mention of Adrian Brunel. This may be because Dean had worked over here, and was being pushed as a British director with Hollywood "expertise", overcoming exhibitor antagonism to British films at a time when there were more than enough American talkies to go around. This was obviously very unfair to Adrian Brunel, an interestingly off-beat director whose films (particularly "The Man Without Desire") were usually a little more experimental than this one. However, it's pointless to take a sure-fire property like "The Constant Nymph" to task for not being a little more daring; it's literally like contrasting Robert Wise's "The Sound of Music" with his earlier "The Curse of The Cat People". Anyway, it's good to have the original "The Constant Nymph" back for this one showing, probably the last in New York until Kevin's daughter loans it to my grand-daughter for a Summer repeat in Film Series #168.

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

CAMILLE (Metro, 1921) A Nazimova Production, directed by Ray C. Smallwood; scenario by June Mathis from the novel and play by Alexandre Dumas jr. Camera: Rudolph Bergquist; Art Direction, Natacha Rambova; 60 mins. Last New School showing: February 1975
With Nazimova (Camille, Marguerite Gautier); Rudolph Valentino (Armand Duval); Arthur Hoyt (Count de Varville); Patsy Ruth Miller (Nichette); Zeffie Tilbury (Prudence); Rex Cherryman (Gaston); Edward Connelly (Duke); Consuela Flowerton (Olimpe); Mars Oliver (Manine); William Orlamond (Monsieur Duval)

Perhaps the two biggest surprises of this curious if static version of "Camille" are that the major contribution is made by the often maligned Natacha Rambova, whose bizarre sets are both eye-popping and dramatic, and that Metro would allow Valentino to be used in such a

subsidiary manner after his fantastic success in "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse". Nominally, he does have the male lead - but Mme. Nazimova contrives to keep him off the screen a great deal, and in their big scenes together it is mainly a matter of many (much filtered and gauzed) closeups of her, and a stress on two and three-shots for Valentino, with a paucity of closeups. No wonder that he was so dissatisfied at Metro that he quickly transported himself to Paramount, to appear in poorer pictures but better vehicles. Although a "modern" adaptation of Dumas, it is set in such a wild, jazz-age Never Never Land that it now seems an authentic if rather strange period piece. (The movie is now 71 years old; when it was made, the novel was 73 years old, so today it serves as a mid-way link). This Armand and Camille are a strangely cold and passionless pair of lovers, who seem to come to life only when they transport themselves into a strange vision of the parallel "Manon Lescaut" story. There is no real acting to speak of - certainly nothing to match Henry Daniell's magnificently malevolent de Varville in the Garbo version - it is all a matter of stolid tableaux posing against those incredible sets. But visually the film more than holds attention with its interesting echoes of German expressionism (clearly Rambova and Nazimova had seen "Caligari") and prophetic foreshadowings of the art-deco form that would be launched officially in 1925. The florid subtitles are a delight, and the camerawork interestingly inconsistent as it supplies Nazimova with endless filters and then yanks them away ruthlessly when anyone else comes into camera range. Nazimova and Rambova may have been self-indulgent in their desire to put art on the screen, but they were also conscious of economy. Unlike Fairbanks, who, with a more assured audience, could confidently let his films run to 14 reels, theirs were more realistically limited to six or seven reels. (These notes abbreviated from longer ones initially issued on Feb.14 1975, and partially updated).

----- William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.55. No discussion session tonight; next week's shorter program will allow for one then.

For your reference -- a listing of the remaining programs in this series. Fuller descriptive comment can be found in the New School Summer bulletin available in the lobby.

Program 3: June 19 Two early 30's melodramas: 13 WOMEN (1932) with Irene Dunne, Ricardo Cortez, Myrna Loy; A VILLAGE TALE (1935) with Randolph Scott, Kay Johnson.

Program 4: June 26 Two comedies, raucous and sophisticated. GOING TO TOWN (1935) with Mae West, Paul Cavanagh, Fred Kohler NO TIME FOR LOVE (1943) with Claudette Colbert, Fred MacMurray

Program 5: July 3 Two powerful early 30's pre-Code thrillers NIGHT WORLD (1932): Lew Ayres, Mae Clarke, Boris Karloff, George Raft OK AMERICA (1932) Lew Ayres, Maureen O'Sullivan, Edward Arnold

Program #6: July 10 3 lively crime "B" movies, offering differing studio styles LEGION OF TERROR (1936) with Bruce Cabot, Ward Bond, Marguerite Churchill BULLETS FOR O'HARA (1941) with Roger Pryor, Joan Perry, Anthony Quinn ILLEGAL TRAFFIC (1938) with Robert Preston, Mary Carlisle, J. Carrol Naish

Program #7 July 17 Two British films: ACTION FOR SLANDER (1937) with Clive Brook, Margaretta Scott NO PLACE FOR JENNIFER (1949) with Janette Scott, Rosamund John, Leo Genn

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