

PARIS PITT presents

TUESDAY NIGHTS AT THE TRANS-LUX

"SALOME" (Allied Producers, 1922) Directed by Charles Bryant.
Scenario by Peter M. Winters from the play by Oscar Wilde.
With Alla Nazimova, Nigel de Brulier, Mitchell Lewis.

How does one approach this (in contemporary parlance "way-out") SALOME today? If one admits that it is no masterpiece, one also has to insist that it was a milestone. Does one applaud it for its integrity and daring--or recoil against its sheer pretentiousness? Recall first that in 1922, the American moviegoer had just discovered that the cinema was also "ART," and that he was beginning to take his Saturday matinee fare seriously. Notwithstanding the fact that D.W. Griffith had already produced four of the cinema's enduring masterworks, it took the post-war European invasion, and specifically the expressionism of the German "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari," to bring about the concept of the motion picture as an "art form." SALOME was very much influenced by "Caligari," was hardly a boxoffice giant in its day, but it was taken seriously. And indeed, in its fantastic costuming, sets and decor, it was and is an exciting essay in visual fireworks. Much of the film's design is the work of Natacha Rambova, the fiery, temperamental and to put it tactfully, "unique" wife of Rudolph Valentino. (Her handling of his career resulted in a sudden plummeting of his popularity, until she was literally barred from interfering any further.)

Basically SALOME is not a movie, but a combination of ballet-pantomime. The version we are seeing tonight has been carefully condensed from the original and is not radically changed by the editing; more than half of the film is still there, all the story line--and perhaps less of the exasperating slowness and archness of Miss Nazimova herself--a fascinating personality who moves and utilizes her body beautifully, but who in her closeups hardly suggests the extreme youth of the real Salome. (However, neither did Theda Bara or Rita Hayworth!)

Nazimova's position in the star-firmament of the silent screen was even loftier than Garbo's. She never had the same huge mass appeal that Garbo enjoyed, and never sought it. Consciously or otherwise, there was a Goddess-like quality to Nazimova; she was respected from afar, held in awe, but never really loved by her subjects. Once she was rich and powerful enough to do so, she began to put her own very specialized ideas about the art of the cinema into practice. As a producer, audiences were bowled over by her sumptuous sets and costumes, ~~her~~ her own bizarre and stylized acting, and to the surrealist flavor she brought to films like SALOME and, perhaps even odder, a weird version of "Camille." They were bowled over--but they weren't terribly entertained. The fiery and human Nazimova of old--standing against the Hun in melodramas like "War Brides"--they had liked. This new "image" was a little too much for them. Respect for her grew--and boxoffice receipts from her movies dwindled. Like Garbo, she became a legend; unlike Garbo, she was not a living legend. Audiences found her as remote and cold as the ancient Greeks--and as unentertaining.

In 1925, she realized her folly and made an attempt to court the public approval again with a return to more down-to-earth film fare. But it was too late. One year later, Garbo's arrival from Sweden erased Nazimova's last chances of regaining her former throne. In the 40's, Nazimova made a return to the screen with a good character performance in the film "Escape," but this, too, was a mistake...a mistake that Garbo has thus far been wise enough to avoid. The legend that had been Nazimova was no more. Still, she left quite an impression on Hollywood,

this fascinating, idealistic woman who made movies that were both beautiful and grotesque and who, in her own way, loved the art of film, saw its potentialities, and tried hard to raise its standards. Whether SALOME was her greatest glory or her supreme folly is for you to judge; all we can promise is that, one way or another, it will knock you for a loop.

DANCING MOTHERS (Paramount, 1926) Directed by Herbert Brenon. Scenario by Forrest Halsey from the original stage play by Edmund Goulding and Edgar Selwyn; camera: Roy Hunt.

The Cast: Kittens Westcourt (Clara Bow); Ethel Westcourt (Alice Joyce); Jerry Naughton (Conway Tearle); Kenneth Cobb (Donald Keith); Mars Masurene (Dorothy Cumming); Irma (Elsie Lawson); Hugh Westcourt (Norman Trevor); Butter and Egg Man (Spencer Charters); and Matt McHugh as an extra.

Paramount was a busy studio in 1926. Harold Lloyd, Pola Negri and Gloria Swanson were among their biggest stars, and D.W. Griffith, Victor Fleming, Raoul Walsh, Lewis Milestone and Herbert Brenon headed up an impressive directorial roster. Brenon, an early pioneer director famous for his staging of the giant Annette Kellerman spectacles back in 1914-1915 (for one of which he had literally changed the geographical face of Bermuda!) was now at his very peak. Considered a top woman's director, he obtained from Clara Bow - one of Paramount's newer stars - one of her best performances in this film. Perhaps because of the film's vague parallel with the kind of sophisticated sex farces that Ernst Lubitsch was making so successfully at Warner's, the film was sold primarily as a comedy that poked fun at the times. One of the typical catchlines from the original posters reads: "Hey, Hey, Charleston Babies! Parked Perambulators! Dancing Mothers! Jazz! Jazz! Jazz!"

Superficially a disappointment perhaps, in that the title combined with Clara Bow suggests a wild flapper yarn in the "Our Dancing Daughters" tradition, DANCING MOTHERS is actually a generally quiet and rather thoughtful little film that holds up extremely well, and certainly reflects the uncertain moralities of the times more accurately than most of the flaming youth epics. As a play (which opened in August of 1924) it had been considered hackneyed and already rather old-fashioned, but was saved for most of the critics by the decidedly off-beat ending. As a film, it stands the test of time rather better, for in faithfully retaining the plot and much of the dialogue of the play, it achieves a kind of honesty that was usually sidestepped in movies of this type in the 20's. The tug-of-war between pre-War Victorian standards and post-War demands for sophistication and "freedom" were usually wrapped up in neat little packages about the girl who pretends to be a wanton, but, unbesmirched, finally settles for the old values after all. DANCING MOTHERS, while admittedly never too profound, does suggest that the old values at least need a little overhauling, while the new ones warrant cautious consideration. It also suggests that maybe the Sanctity of the Home is not the be-all and end-all of existence, and that European liberalism was a kind of Utopia to which the fortunate could escape. As a kind of unwitting sociological document, carrying on in a straight line from "A Fool There Was," "True Heart Susie," "The Sheik" and "Foolish Wives," DANCING MOTHERS is a valuable record of changing morals and mores.

As a film, though seemingly of less importance than such immediately prior Herbert Brenon films as "Peter Pan," "A Kiss for Cinderella" and "Beau Geste," it is still unobtrusively stylish. The sets are handsome, though apart from a bizarre Greenwich Village night club in pirate decor,

there are no real stunners. The camerawork is expert, but unshowy. Yet despite a preponderance of long dialogue exchanges, notice how Brenon keeps it from coming too much like a photographed play. There are a lot of intricate exits and entrances, with characters missing one another, hiding, confronting, and so on - and yet it all seems effortless and natural, without the stage-managed chalk-line quality one might expect. Too, some of the big emotional and dramatic scenes are resolved or climaxed by long-held and well-underplayed closeups, specifically of Alice Joyce and Clara Bow.

Clara Bow is quite fine as Kittens, although perhaps her pep and vitality - especially in the scene where she invades Conway Tearle's apartment - make the character a shade too likeable. No villainess certainly (Helen Hayes played the role on the stage), Kittens is nevertheless shallow and selfish; yet for the most part one's sympathies seem to be with her, and it is only the reactions of others that make one realize she is really somewhat of a brat! Alice Joyce gives a dignified and restrained performance, and indeed none of the acting dates at all. Every performance is quite valid today, which is perhaps another reason why it isn't quite the "fun" picture that the title and genre might lead one to expect. However, this comment is by way of amplification and not apology, for DANCING MOTHERS is one of those good "little" films that seems to grow in stature every time one sees it, and in time it may well prove to be one of the most durable of all the "jazz age" sagas.

William K. Everson