

Document Citation

Title	Films from the archive: The struggle
Author(s)	Eileen Bowser
Source	<i>Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.)</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Griffith, D. W. (1875-1948), LaGrange, Kentucky, United States
Film Subjects	The struggle, Griffith, D. W., 1931

The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

11 West 53 Street, New York, N. Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

Films from the Archive

Tuesday, September 19 (2:00)

Wednesday, September 20 (5:30)

THE STRUGGLE. 1931. Produced by D. W. Griffith, Inc. Distributed by United Artists. Directed by D. W. Griffith. Screenplay by Anita Loos and John Emerson. Photographed by Joseph Ruttenberg. Edited by Barney Rogan. Music arranged by Philip Scheib and D. W. Griffith. 76 minutes.

Cast: Hal Skelly (Jimmie Wilson), Zita Johann (Florrie), Charlotte Wynters (Nina), Jackson Halliday (Johnnie Marshall), Evelyn Baldwin (Nan Wilson), Edna Hagan (Mary), Claude Cooper (Sam), Arthur Lipson (Cohen), Charles Richman (Mr. Craig), Helen Mack (A Catty Girl), Scott Moore (A Gigolo), Dave Manley (A Mill Worker).

"Some quirk of vanity caused Griffith to deduct five years from his age throughout his professional life. At 56, however, he was plainly tired, and he rested for the year following ABRAHAM LINCOLN. He was convinced that his years of failure were the result of working for others with insufficient control of the film-making process, and he was sure that he could achieve success again if he could manage to produce a film on his own in the East. In 1929 the D. W. Griffith Company had been awarded a sizable tax refund (due to a 1920 overpayment), and the company treasurer had invested the money in stocks without telling Griffith. Despite the state of the stock market these investments had proved to be good. By 1931 the company was able to get a small bank loan that was sufficient to activate Griffith's plans, and THE STRUGGLE was made cheaply and hastily in a rented Bronx studio.

It is not easy to understand why THE STRUGGLE was received with such universal disapproval. Audiences laughed at it, and one of the trade papers declined to review it out of respect for Griffith's former greatness. Griffith hid in the seclusion of his hotel room and refused to see anyone. United Artists, which had advanced some of the production costs in exchange for distribution rights, withdrew the film and cut it hastily to attempt wide distribution before word of its failure spread. It never went beyond a few showings in Philadelphia. Some years later it was revived briefly as a 'laugh' movie under the title TEN NIGHTS IN A BARROOM.

Although it may have looked more old-fashioned in 1931 than it does at this remove, THE STRUGGLE is certainly not the least of Griffith's films. The addition of dialogue to his typically melodramatic scenes must have shocked audiences as much as the first florid love phrases that John Gilbert spoke aloud. In BROKEN BLOSSOMS the image of Donald Crisp drunkenly abusing a cowering Lillian Gish had been effective; in THE STRUGGLE, the same situation abetted by sound effects and dialogue proved to be ludicrous. Nevertheless, THE STRUGGLE scene is well staged. Hal Skelly gives a convincing performance, and the close-ups of his shattered face are remarkable.

THE STRUGGLE avoids the theatrical dialogue that was common to the early talkies. Griffith tried to capture everyday speech, and his characters are more apt to toss out a casual 'Yeah?' than to engage in clever repartee. Unfortunately, his attempted

realism fails because the actors were simply not up to his demands. Zita Johann, acquired from the Broadway stage for her first film role, is particularly inadequate.

Why THE STRUGGLE did not have a better script, given old hands like John Emerson and Anita Loos to write, is a puzzle. The sound film demanded more complex motivation, subtlety and depth than could pass on the silent screen, but to all appearances Hal Skelly's motivation for return to drink is that his wife wants him to wear a flowered lavender tie. The message of THE STRUGGLE is muddled, too. Griffith intended to underscore the evils of Prohibition, in particular poisonous bootleg liquor; what came out, however, was a morality play on the evils of drink with a plot that is not much more sophisticated than his 1909 Biograph one-reeler, A DRUNKARD'S REFORMATION.

The film does contain many sharply etched realistic touches - the Bronx street scenes, the splendid factory sequences (made at the Stamford Rolling Mills in Springdale, Connecticut), and the shots of Hal Skelly in the horrors of delirium tremens are all well done. The nostalgic opening sequence in a pre-Prohibition beer garden and its contrasting scene of a twenties jazz café are also effective."

-- Eileen Bowser, D. W. Griffith, (Museum of Modern Art, 1965)