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Garbo



Ninotchka

(1939, 110 min.) Directed by Ernst Lubitsch. Produced by Ernst Lubitsch for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Screenplay by Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder and Walter Reisch. Adapted from the story by Melchior Lengyel. Photographed by William Daniels. Edited by Gene Ruggiero. Score composed by Werner R. Heymann. Set decorations by Edwin B. Willis. Production designed by Cedric Gibbons and Randall Duell. Gowns by Adrian. Make-up created by Jack Dawn. Sound recording by Douglas Shearer.

Ninotchka	Greta Garbo
Count Leon d'Algout	Melvyn Douglas
Grand Duchess Swana	Ina Claire
Commissar Razinin	Bela Lugosi
Iranoff	Sig Rumann
Buljanoff	Felix Bressart
Kopalski	Alexander Granach
Count Rakonin	Gregory Gaye
Hotel Manager	Rolfe Sedan
Mercier	Edwin Maxwell
Gaston	Richard Carle

"... [S]omething wonderful happened. She was cast (I have never found out why) to play what would be her first all-out comedy role. It was the story of a Soviet special envoy in a satire prepared by Walter Reisch, Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, entitled *Ninotchka*; it would be directed by Ernst Lubitsch....

"Lubitsch was rightly regarded as one of the most sophisticated directors in the world, obviously suitable for Garbo. Thus it was a kindly fate that brought the two together for *Ninotchka*; and it was a consummate irony that this was to be their only film together and the last great one of each.

"The present disposition is to think of *Ninotchka* primarily as the film in which Garbo first appeared in a comedy role. But the real distinction of the picture is its velvet quality as a social-political satire that develops infectious comedy out of a topical situation that is sheer and quite apparent make-believe. Garbo's precise attunement to it is just one of its fine felicities." —Bosley Crowther, *The Great Films*

"'Garbo laughs,' said the original ads in 1939, but there is by now a widespread story that although Garbo could pantomime laughter superbly, no sounds emerged, and these were provided by an anonymous creature in the sound lab. The rest of her performance is her own—and she brings distinction as well as her incredible throaty, sensual abandon to the role of a glum, scientifically-trained Bolshevik envoy who succumbs to Paris freedom i.e., champagne. The film includes an historic encounter when the great instinctive artist of the screen meets the great stylist and technician of the stage, Ina Claire: the fur flies exquisitely. Directed by Ernst Lubitsch, this light, satirical comedy has the nonchalance and sophistication which were his trademark—but it also reveals that this time the trade marked him too high." —Pauline Kael, *Kiss Bang Bang*

"I believe that Garbo is probably the most inhibited person I have ever worked with. . . . This kind of actor must be coaxed into playing a situation. But when the scene is finished it is distinctive, not routine. You feel it is being born for the first time—it has a freshness. And I think this is one reason for Garbo's unique appeal.

"She is a very unusual girl. She gets quite worried about scenes. She had to play a drunk, for instance, in *Ninotchka* and do the scene in a public restaurant. But I realized soon that she was full of inhibitions and disliked playing the scene in front of all the extras. So she came to me and said, 'I don't think I can play it.' That was my signal for action. 'Look here,' I said, 'I'll do anything you want; I'll change the script, the dialogue, but this can't be changed. Too much depends on it. You must make up your mind that you'll have to play it.' After that, of course, she had to continue. So I waited two weeks before starting that particular scene. When we did get to it, she was very—afraid is too strong a word—timid. But finally I got her to relax completely by talking to her and being patient....

"I think Garbo has no routine whatsoever. She doesn't rely on technique. She might at first be inhibited, but when finally you break through this and she really feels a scene, she's wonderful. But if you don't succeed in making her feel it, she can't do it cold-bloodedly on technique." —Ernst Lubitsch (1939)