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# Document Citation

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| Title | **Street angel** |
| Author(s) | Tom Milne |
| Source | *Monthly Film Bulletin* |
| Date | 1980 Jul |
| Type | review |
| Language | English |
| Pagination | |
| No. of Pages | 2 |
| Subjects | |
| Film Subjects | Street angel, Borzage, Frank, 1927 |

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# Street Angel

**U.S.A., 1928** **Director: Frank Borzage**

*Cert*—A. *dist*—BFI. *p.c*—Fox Film Corp. *asst. d*—Lew Borzage, Ralph Kaufman. *sc*—Marion Orth. Based on the play *Lady Cristilinda* by Monckton Hoffe. *adapt*—Philip Klein, Henry Roberts Symonds. *titles*—Katherine Hilliker, H. H. Caldwell. *ph*—Ernest Palmer, Paul Ivano. *ed*—Barney Wolf. *a.d*—Harry Oliver. *m*—(added score; originally released both silent and with dialogue sequences). *cost*—Kathleen Kay. *l.p*—Janet Gaynor (*Angela*), Charles Farrell (*Gino*), Guido Trento (*Police Sergeant*), Henry Armetta (*Masetto*), Natalie Kingston (*Lisette*), Alberto Rabagliati (*Policeman*), Louis Liggett (*Beppo*), Milton Dickinson (*Bimbo*), Helena Herman (*Andrea*), David Kashner (*Strong Man*), Jennie Bruno (*Landlady*), Gino Conti (*Policeman*). 3,636 ft. (at 24 f.p.s.) 101 mins. (16 mm.).

Naples. Unable to afford the medicine needed by her sick mother, Angela hits on the desperate resort of prostitution. Tempted to try to steal when her gauche solicitations are ignored, she is arrested. Managing to escape, only to find her mother dead, she is rescued by Masetto, owner of a small travelling circus whose star attraction she becomes as a dancer. Struck by her beauty, Gino, a vagabond artist, tags along with the troupe; and Angela, at first cynical but melted by the ethereal vision he expresses in a portrait of her, soon returns his love. But alarmed to see two policemen loitering while she does a stilt act, she falls and breaks her ankle; and despite her misgivings, Gino insists on taking her to Naples for treatment. Brighter prospects, including marriage, seem imminent when Gino is commissioned to paint a mural at the Teatro San Carlo. But Angela is recognised and arrested again; begging for a last hour with Gino, she leaves him in happy ignorance, unable to confess the truth since he had expressed contempt for fallen women. Serving her term in jail, Angela consoles herself with the thought that Gino will by now be a famous artist. In fact, his inspiration gone, he has lost the commission and is drowning his disillusionment in bars. Told by Lisette, a vindictive tart whose advances he rejected, that Angela has just been released after a sentence for theft while soliciting, Gino angrily attacks Angela in a chance encounter. She takes refuge in a church where they realise that the altarpiece is Gino's portrait of her, bought by an unscrupulous dealer and turned into an 'Old Master' of the Madonna. Moved by Angela's plea that she is still the pure soul he painted then, Gino begs her forgiveness.

*Street Angel* is something of a triumph of form over content. It is all very well to talk of "transcendent levels" when all one means is that through their love, like all Borzage's romantic couples, Gino and Angela transcend their sordid material surroundings. But when the meaning of the word creeps towards transcendentalism, as it

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does in John Belton's monograph on Borzage, where the conventionally soppy, pre-Raphaelitish portrait Gino paints of Angela becomes endowed with "metaphysical significance", it is time to call a halt. Even granting the contrivance with which the portrait is set up as a *deus ex machina*—then just happens to be hung in the church to which the couple happen to repair—it would take more than the two high-angle shots of Gino and Angela seen from the point of view of the Madonna in the painting (stressed by Belton as suggesting that it "actually interacts with the characters . . . becoming the agent of their reunion") to make Borzage's "mystical design" here anything more than a queasily embarrassing quasi-religiosity. Visually, however, the film is stunning, right from the fluid second sequence in which the camera roves dreamily over what appears to be the whole of Naples crammed in microcosm into one brilliant stage set, complete with gossiping wives, hanging washing, market stalls, goats, beggars, glaziers, moored boats and ubiquitous flights of stone steps, at the top of one of which, in a shabby room under a vaulted recess echoing the dêcor of Nosferatu's castle, it finally discovers Angela and her dying mother. Borzage's very evident model here is the German *kammerspiel* film, with direct Expressionist borrowings promptly surfacing in the scene of Angela's trial. In the foreground, the judge sits back to camera; dwarfed in the background, facing camera, is Angela; and as she hesitantly approaches the bench that lowers forbiddingly over her, only her frightened eyes remain visible over its edge. Dovetailing well with the more 'American' style of Angela's escape and headlong flight (though even here the dark, menacingly empty streets and huddled rooftops bear their irresistible reminiscence of *Caligari*), these Expressionist elements form a perfect bridge to the pastoral escape of the circus and the tender, Griffithian idyll as the lovers begin to create a world within a world. Their reappearance toward the end, however, is a mixed blessing: superlative in sequences like Gino's long, ghostly flight along the fogbound riverfront in frenzied search of the "girl with the face of an angel and a soul black as hell" whose portrait will express his new intimations of despair, with the wraithlike Angela moving ineluctably to the encounter from the opposite direction; but a good deal less satisfactory in Gino's earlier expression of those intimations. Shoulders drooping with the woes of Sisyphus, arms hanging inertly at his sides, Charles Farrell has unmistakably been instructed to act, like Emil Jannings, with his back; and he is, unfortunately, no Jannings. Farrell and Gaynor are lightweight, charming, touching. They might even have carried the film off (in the manner of the marvellous *Moonrise*) had their predicament not been so absurdly contrived. Since the film goes to inordinate lengths to establish Angela's purity (her 'solicitations' deceive nobody; she hesitates on the brink of theft; she and Gino punctiliously repair to separate rooms each night), the whole thing tends to smack rather more of a storm in a teacup than of transcendental experience.

TOM MILNE

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