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A Fine Romance

The Shop Around the Corner
Directed by Ernst Lubitsch
1940; 97 minutes
A Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Production

Cast

Margaret Sullavan
James Stewart
Frank Morgan
Joseph Schildkraut
Felix Bressart
William Tracy
Sara Haden
Inez Courtney

Credits

Director	Ernst Lubitsch
Producer	Ernst Lubitsch
Screenplay	Samuel Raphaelson
Based on a play by	Niklaus Laszlo
Photography	William Daniels
Art Directors	Cedric Gibbons, Wade B. Rubottom, and Edwin B. Willis
Music	Werner Heymann

Notes

In discussing the world of Ernst Lubitsch, the most common and distinctive memory is of a world of kings and princesses, baronesses, heiresses, and remarkably elegant jewel thieves. It is a universe of shimmering elegance and luxury - as smooth and steady as the graceful camera which brought us into this world and as delicate and precarious as the human emotions which fill and create it. The director's most memorable characters - the trios in Trouble in Paradise and Design For Living, Jack Benny and Carole Lombard in To Be or Not To Be Greta Garbo in Ninotchka - all possess an elegance of style and humanity (if not station) that makes them both enviable and romantically identifiable. In many ways Lubitsch's 1940 masterpiece The Shop Around the Corner seems quite a typical of the director's stylistic and thematic concerns. However, upon closer examination, the film and its characters reveal themselves to be a distinctive and necessary extension of a quality inherent in the director's entire oeuvre.

The Shop Around the Corner deals with two sales clerks who hate each other in person, but are secretly carrying on an anonymous love correspondance. The story is neither new nor particularly original. Yet, as always with Lubitsch, it is the dissection of manners and emotions with which is primarily concerned. There is a sadness and nostalgic wistfulness to the film which can be found in the majority of the director's works, but which here is brought to the front. The characters of Klara Novak and Alfred Kralik (beautifully played by Margaret Sullavan and James Stewart) are brought together by a common sadness and spiritual unity, the depth of which they never fully understand. (The film seems to have been greatly influenced, both structurally and visually by Frank Borzage, the director with whom Lubitsch worked on the 1936 Desire.) Beyond this, in the character of Hugo Matuschek, we are again able to find the story of the stern and genial man within whom lies the tragedy of the individual. It is as if Lubitsch, the director and the man, were examining and revealing what lay beneath the beauty and elegance which make up his and our own worlds.

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The American Cinema: A Survey 1896-1976

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