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BROKEN BLOSSOMS

1919 *Produced, written, and directed by* D. W. Griffith
Based on "The Chink and the Child," *in* Limehouse Nights *by* Thomas Burke *Photographed by* G. W. Bitzer
Special effects by Hendrick Sartov 95 minutes
Cast: *Lucy, the Girl* Lillian Gish
The Yellow Man Richard Barthelmess
Battling Burrows Donald Crisp *His Manager* Arthur Howard
Evil Eye Edward Peil *The Spying One* George Beranger
A Prize Fighter Norman Selby ("Kid McCoy")

Griffith started production on *Broken Blossoms* in November, 1918, as one of his series of program pictures for Paramount-Artcraft, but as its importance grew in his mind he withdrew it from this series and reserved it to open the D. W. Griffith Repertory Season that occupied the George M. Cohan Theatre in New York during the spring and summer of 1919. Later he bought out the interest in the film held by Adolph Zukor of Paramount, in order to make it his first contribution to the United Artists program, the company which he had formed together with Charles Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford, in the hope of becoming truly independent.

Like most of Griffith's films and many others of the period, *Broken Blossoms* made use of tinted stock in a variety of colors that are missing from the duplicate prints now available for circulation. In the case of this film it is a special loss, because here Griffith reached his highest achievement in the use of color for mood and atmosphere, using a variety of hues in an unrealistic way that heightened the emotional values of his story.

Griffith's last "big" picture had been the war-propaganda film, *Hearts of the World* (1918). This was to be very different. From the large canvas he turned to an intimate photoplay based on one of the stories in Thomas Burke's *Limehouse Nights*. Like most of Griffith's films and all of his best ones it carried a message: the earlier picture had roused America's fighting spirit, but this fairy tale of nonresistance spoke of international tolerance. The part of the London waif might have been made to measure for Lillian Gish, and the choice of Richard Barthelmess as the Chinese boy was fortunate. Work went unusually smoothly, and after the customary period of rehearsal, the film was completed in eighteen days at the extremely modest cost of $88,000.

When *Broken Blossoms* appeared, everyone was overwhelmed, and not only by the discretion and force with which a difficult subject had been handled. Reviewers found it "surprising in its simplicity," hastening to explain that the photography was misty on purpose, not by accident. The acting seemed a nine-day wonder—no one talked of anything but Lillian's smile, Lillian turning like a tortured animal in a trap, Barthelmess' convincing restraint. Few pictures have enjoyed greater or more lasting *succès d'estime*. (It also made a substantial profit.)

By 1919 the motion picture was learning fast how to deal as freely with ideas and feelings as with deeds, and here *Broken Blossoms*, despite its rather theatrical form, played an important part by scaling down dramatic action and intensifying intimate emotion. Definitely a studio picture, it emphasized a new style of lighting and photography, which, though it has been abused, was valuable. In its contrasting periods of calm and violence it borrowed something from *Intolerance*, just as the grim finale recalls the death of Mae Marsh in *The Birth of a Nation;* but there is a sureness and perhaps a sophistication here which had not formerly been evident. Out of *Broken Blossoms* much was to come—it cannot have been without its influence in Germany; we know that it profoundly influenced Louis Delluc and his disciples in France; and, but for it, we might never have had Charles Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris*.

E.B., I.B.

Lillian Gish in "Broken Blossoms"