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Dartmouth Film Society

NINOTCHKA (1939)

Ninotchka	Greta Garbo	Buljanoff	Felix Bresart
Count d'Algot	Melvyn Douglas	Kopalski	Alexander Granach
Duchess Swana	Ina Claire	Commissar Razinin	Bela Lugosi
Ivanoff	Sig Rumann	Count Rakinin	Gregory Gaye

Scenario by Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder and Walter Reisch, from a story by Melchior Lengyel. Photographed by William Daniels. Edited by Gene Ruggiero. Music by Werner R. Haymann. Released by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, October 10, 1939.

Produced and directed by ERNST LUBITSCH

The legacy of Greta Garbo is but twenty-eight films, stretching from some advertising commercials made in Sweden in 1921 to TWO-FACED WOMAN in 1941. It is in many ways a strange group of films, but it is possible today for a researcher with the time, patience and money to see them all with the exception of THE DIVINE WOMAN (1928) which seems, incredibly, to be lost.

Garbo was born in Sweden in 1905, her real name being Greta Loyisa Gustafsson. Her first feature film was a bit part in something called PETER THE TRAMP (1922), the only comedy in which she was to appear until NINOTCHKA. The great director Mauritz Stiller "discovered" the young actress and cast her in the important Swedish film THE STORY OF GOSTA BERLING (1924); the movie was seen by L. B. Mayer and is said to have been directly responsible for her importation to America, although Mayer was after the director, not his leading star in this case. After appearing as the second female lead in G. W. Pabst's THE JOYLESS STREET (1925) in Germany, Garbo and Stiller departed Europe for America.

Once in America, MGM was uncertain what to do with either Garbo or Stiller. The director, who was somewhat temperamental, was put on a Pola Negri vehicle, HOTEL IMPERIAL, and Garbo made her debut as a vamp in THE TORRENT (1926). The film's direction is credited to Monta Bell, a very minor personality who had once served as Chaplin's editor on A WOMAN OF PARIS, but it was said that Stiller carefully coached the actress through all her rehearsals. The film was a great success and MGM decided next to put Stiller and Garbo into a film based on a novel by the popular Spanish novelist Blasco-Ibanez entitled THE TEMPTRESS (1926). But after a short time, Stiller so annoyed the studio bosses that he was replaced by the extremely successful hack Fred Niblo, who had earlier endeared himself to the studio by saving BEN HUR when the film was faced with almost certain ruin. Despite the indifferent direction, Garbo was almost immediately recognized by the critics as a great actress. Stiller, furious at the studio, shortly returned to Sweden, where he died in 1928.

But his protégée stayed on, making eight more silent films on the assembly-line system so dear to the big studios. Most of these films had wretched scripts and average to poor direction, but Garbo proved she could illuminate even the most dismal materials. FLESH AND THE DEVIL (1927) was her first film opposite John Gilbert, and one of her great successes, although a revival of this film by the Dartmouth Film Society in 1961 showed it to be somewhat on the silly side by modern standards. A WOMAN OF AFFAIRS (1929), although not as well known, is possibly her best film of the period, reasonably well directed by Clarence Brown, with a good supporting cast, an exciting story and some superb camerawork by William Daniels, who photographed all of her American movies. THE KISS (1929) was her last silent film, indeed the last silent film made at MGM. The great question was whether the actress could make the switch to sound.

These doubts were spectacularly dispelled with ANNA CHRISTIE (1930) one of her best remembered roles, directed in a English version by Clarence Brown and a German-language edition by Jacques Feyder; Garbo appeared as the lead in both films, but with different supporting casts. According to those who have seen the German film, it is far better than Brown's effort.

There were fourteen Garbo sound films, varying from the excellent (NINOTCHKA, QUEEN CHRISTINA), to the interesting (AS YOU DESIRE ME, CAMILLE) to the ludicrous (MATA HARI). In addition to Clarence Brown, her directors included Robert Z. Leonard, George Fitzmaurice, Edmund Goulding, Rouben Mamoulian, Richard Boleslawski, George Cukor, and Ernst Lubitsch, a mixed bag at best. On the whole, the sound films were expensively mounted, generally well cast, and badly written. But in each one Garbo gave a performance which elevated the commonplace material to the status of art, or at least left us with that feeling during the projection.

If one was faced with the horrible question of having to save but one Garbo film for posterity, the choice might well be NINOTCHKA. For a change, MGM found a good script for the actress, penned by the team of Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett, with an assist from the Austrian emigré writer-director Walter Reisch. (It must have been one of Wilder's favorite creations, for some of the characters appear later in his ONE, TWO, THREE). The direction was entrusted to Ernst Lubitsch, the master of sophisticated comedy, and the production values were, again, first rate. Having weathered a campaign boasting "Garbo talks!" in the case of ANNA CHRISTIE, the actress now found her film advertised with the slogan "Garbo laughs!" Actually, she did quite a lot of laughing in some of her other films, especially A WOMAN OF APPAIRS, but the slogan was soon absorbed into American folklore.

NINOTCHKA received rapturous reviews, and seeing it 27 years later, it still seems fresh and funny, which is a lot more than can be said for most of her other films, although some of them are indeed funny in a way the producers never imagined. Garbo was nominated for an Academy Award (her fourth nomination) but it went instead to Ginger Rogers, a comment of some sort on the Hollywood system.

After one more film, TWO-FACED WOMAN, Garbo retired from the screen for reasons best known to herself. A projected comeback in 1949 failed because of lack of money needed for an elaborate production. Earlier this year, there was an announcement that she might appear as a nun in a forthcoming film, but one has learned to take these stories with a large grain of salt. A comeback is not worth the possibility of destroying the greatest cinematic legend of our time.

David Stewart Hull

Our last program of the season is devoted to a film by another living legend, Marlene Dietrich, playing Catherine the Great in Josef von Sternberg's masterpiece, THE SCARLET EMPRESS (1934). It is presented Tuesday, May 31st, at 4 and 8:30 pm