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Haevnens nat (Night of revenge), Christensen, Benjamin, 1916

The Museum of Modern Art

Benjamin Christensen: An International Dane

September 9–26, 1999

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2

Note: All programs are subject to change without notice. The public may call 212/708-9480 to confirm schedule.

Thursday, September 9, 6:00; Saturday, September 18, 2:30.

Haevnen's Nat (Blind Justice/The Night of Revenge). 1915. Denmark. Written and directed by Benjamin Christensen. With Christensen, Karen Sandberg, and Peter Fjelstrup. Christensen gives a great performance in the lead role as Strong John, a man falsely accused of murder, on the run with his small son. Recaptured and imprisoned for many years, he plots a complex revenge. A social melodrama of guilt and redemption with masterfully constructed scenes of sophisticated suspense and artful cinematography, the film had an unprecedented eight-month production period and was the most expensive Danish film of its time. The story, inspired by *Les Misérables* and written by the director, attempted to reveal the ineffective aspects of European prison methods and advocated reforms. At the American premiere Christensen was invited by the warden of Sing Sing prison to screen his film for the inmates. Silent film with piano accompaniment by Stuart Oderman on September 9. With English intertitles. Courtesy the Danish Film Institute/Film Archive. 106 min.

Friday, September 10, 3:00; Sunday, September 19, 5:00.

Seine Frau, die Unbekannte (His Wife, the Unknown). 1923. Germany. Directed by Benjamin Christensen. With Willy Fritsch and Lil Dagover. A young artist (played by Fritsch, introducing the soon-to-be-popular comic actor) loses his eyesight in the war but does not give up hope of finding the woman to whom he gave shelter years ago and who made an everlasting impression on him. An intricate tale of mistaken identities, role-playing (by Dagover, already a major star who reaped much praise for her skill as a comedienne), and ideas of romantic love, the film veers between melodrama and farce but nevertheless displays some of the director's trademark interplay of light and shadow in exquisite frame compositions. Cinematographer Frederik Fuglsang, a fellow Dane, created a stylish look for the film by using key lights to bring out faces and details. Silent film with piano accompaniment by Stuart Oderman on September 19. With German intertitles and English voice-over. Courtesy the Danish Film Institute/Film Archive. 77 min.

Friday, September 10, 6:00; Sunday, September 19, 2:30.

Det Hemmelighedsfulde X (Sealed Orders/The Mysterious X). 1913. Denmark. Written and directed by Benjamin Christensen. With Christensen, Karen Sandberg, and Otto Reinwald. One of the most astonishing debuts in cinema, Christensen's spy-melodrama concerns a lieutenant

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accused of treason who is saved at the very last moment. Conventional as the story is, it is transformed by the visual power of the images and a narrative style and sophistication that announce a uniquely gifted film artist. The first-time director/writer finds physical expression for psychological traits and manners with seeming ease, and creates (with cinematographer Emil Dinesen) starkly contrasting images as well as scenes of shadow-light interplay of unusual authority and eloquence. The dramatic editing gives the film an amazing energy, and a unique attention to detail makes the situations palpably real. Three months of production time (when one or two weeks was the norm) paid off with glowing international reviews and successful runs at home and abroad. Silent film with piano accompaniment by Stuart Oderman on September 10. With Danish intertitles and English voice-over. Courtesy the Danish Film Institute/Film Archive. 85 min.

Friday, September 10, 8:00; Saturday, September 25, 5:00.

Seven Footprints to Satan. 1929. USA. Directed by Benjamin Christensen. With Thelma Todd, Creighton Hale, and Sheldon Lewis. An entertaining and well-made horror-comedy, Christensen's last film made in the United States pokes fun at superstition. The irony in his description of the banality and naïveté of common dreams and fantasies about horror, the erotic, and the occult finds a fitting setting in a vintage mystery house inhabited by monsters, dwarves, witches, and assorted characters of the fantastic, as well as the guests at a masked ball—including Satan himself! Brilliant camerawork (by Sol Polito) based on the contrast between light, dark, and shadows creates a perfectly spooky atmosphere, and Christensen's ingenious use of camera tricks and artifice keeps the deranged goings-on moving at a brisk pace. The film was made in two versions—one with sound effects and limited dialogue (now lost), the other silent. Silent film with piano accompaniment by Stuart Oderman on September 10. With Danish intertitles and English voice-over. Courtesy Fondazione Cineteca Italiana, Milan. 60 min.

Saturday, September 11, 2:30; Friday, September 24, 5:00.

The Devil's Circus. 1926. USA. Written and directed by Benjamin Christensen. With Norma Shearer, Charles Emmett Mack, and Karl Dane. *The Devil's Circus* is an unalloyed melodrama of conflicts and jealousies in a circus milieu. The story spans several decades and concerns a pure, young artist (Shearer) who is alternately pursued and abandoned. Her only true friend, the White Clown, is played by Dane, a countryman of the director who had enjoyed some success as a comic actor in Hollywood since 1917. Christensen's keen eye for realistic detail is visible throughout and gives life to the film, as does his expert dramatic buildup and timing. He beautifully captures the excitement and implicit danger of the circus environment, while also devoting attention to small human touches. Silent film with piano accompaniment by Stuart Oderman on September 11. With English intertitles. Courtesy Warner Bros. 74 min.

Saturday, September 11, 5:00; Sunday, September 26, 2:30.

Mockery. 1927. USA. Written and directed by Benjamin Christensen. With Lon Chaney, Ricardo Cortez, and Barbara Bedford. An anticommunist melodrama set during the Russian Revolution, Christensen's second production for MGM was a showcase for Chaney, one of the

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most popular character actors of his time. Chaney plays a simpleminded peasant lured to the Bolshevik cause. He saves a countess and is tempted to force his affections on her when the specter of class comes between them, but is instead redeemed by his devotion. Christensen's exquisite play with the contrasts of light and shadow is employed to great effect, enhancing the sinister mood in several dramatic scenes set in lavishly staged Russian country inns and aristocratic homes. Silent film with piano accompaniment by Stuart Oderman on September 11. With English intertitles. Courtesy Warner Bros. 66 min.

Sunday, September 12, 2:30; Monday, September 20, 6:00.

Skilsmissen's Børn (Children of Divorce). 1939. Denmark. Directed by Benjamin Christensen. Screenplay by Christensen, based on Alba Schwartz's novel. With Johannes Meyer, Grethe Holmer, and Ellen Malberg. Ten years after *Seven Footprints to Satan* and his return to Denmark, Christensen finally made his first full sound film. A passionate contribution to the contemporary debate on rebellious youth, carefree sexual mores, and parental responsibility, the film made a much-needed serious artistic addition to the Danish filmmaking scene of the time. An extremely well-made social drama, the film especially impresses with its direction of actors to present the full range of human emotions. In Danish with English subtitles. Courtesy the Danish Film Institute/Film Archive. 94 min.

Sunday, September 12, 5:00; Thursday, September 23, 6:00.

Barnet (The Child). 1940. Denmark. Directed by Benjamin Christensen. Screenplay by Christensen, Leck Fischer, and Fleming Lyng, based on Fischer's play. With Lis Smed, Mogens Wieth, and Agis Winding. Like *Children of Divorce*, this film is a problem-drama, this time concerning itself with the (still) controversial subject of abortion. The film's investigation of this volatile matter is integrated into a warm and believable portrayal of milieu and characters—the two young people in particular are characterized with exceptional sensitivity and are well played by Smed and Wieth. The film is distinguished by its ambitious moral scope and its mature handling of a sensitive problem not often treated in movies of the time. In Danish with English subtitles. Courtesy the Danish Film Institute/Film Archive. 85 min.

Monday, September 13, 6:00; Saturday, September 25, 2:30.

Häxan (Witch). 1922. Sweden. Written and directed by Benjamin Christensen. With Christensen, Elisabeth Christensen, and Astrid Holm. The most famous film in Christensen's oeuvre is also his most ambitious and controversial. Announcing its particularity from the outset in a prologue describing the film as a "Cultural-Historical Lecture in Moving Pictures," the director aims to present a well documented, critical overview of superstition and fanaticism through the ages. A (somewhat uneasy) marriage of documentary and fantasy, the fantastic elements are marvelously inspired and extremely inventive in their visual execution. A spectacular and unique work in which the director's unbridled imagination is matched by his cinematic vision, the film was far ahead of its time—and the most expensive Scandinavian production of the era. The film is shown in two different versions: a beautifully tinted silent copy restored and lent by the Swedish Film Archive, and the American rerelease version from 1967 with voice-over narration read by William Burroughs. Silent film with piano

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accompaniment by Stuart Oderman on September 25. With English intertitles. Courtesy the Swedish Film Archive. 108 min.

Tuesday, September 14, 6:00; Sunday, September 26, 5:00.

Gaa med mig Hjem (Come Home with Me). 1941. Denmark. Directed by Benjamin Christensen. Screenplay by Leck Fischer. With Bodil Ipsen, Johannes Meyer, Grethe Holmer, and Mogens Wiedt. The last in Christensen's trilogy on contemporary social ills—and his next to last film—*Come Home with Me* takes as its protagonist a woman lawyer so involved in helping other people solve their problems that she neglects her own family. With his artistic approach to realism and humanistic distillation of the social mores of everyday life, Christensen's Danish sound films still impress with their integrity and resourceful artistic visualization of contemporary society and people. In Danish with English subtitles. Courtesy the Danish Film Institute/Film Archive. 93 min.

Friday, September 17, 3:00; Tuesday, September 21, 6:00.

Häxan (Witchcraft Through the Ages). 1922. Sweden. Directed by Benjamin Christensen. American re-release version 1967, with voice-over by William Burroughs. With Christensen, Elisabeth Christensen, and Astrid Holm. 80 min.

Saturday, September 18, 5:00; Friday, September 24, 2:30.

Mikaël (Chained/Heart's Desire/The Invert). 1924. Germany. Directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer. Screenplay by Dreyer and Thea von Harbou, based on the novel by Herman Bang. With Benjamin Christensen, Walter Slezak, and Nora Gregor. While Christensen was working in Germany, the other "Great Dane," Dreyer, was preparing to shoot *Mikaël* for the noted German producer Erich Pommer. Dreyer asked Christensen, who had always appeared in his own films and had started out as an actor in the theater, to play the role of the painter Zoret, "the Master"—the pivotal character whose relationship to Mikaël and to art is the main axis of the film's dramatic construction. The collaboration between the two esteemed directors—if not without friction—resulted in a uniquely beautiful and personal film from Dreyer, not the least owing to a moving and authoritative performance by Christensen—his best ever. Silent film with piano accompaniment by Stuart Oderman on September 18. German intertitles with English voice-over. Courtesy Anthology Film Archive. 93 min.

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For further information or photographs, please contact Harris Dew, Senior Publicist for Film and Video, at 212/708-9847 or harris_dew@moma.org.