

Document Citation

Title	Anna Christie
Author(s)	James Card
Source	<i>Museum of Fine Arts, Boston</i>
Date	1973 Nov 16
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Anna Christie, Feyder, Jacques, 1930 Anna Christie, Brown, Clarence, 1930

FILM TREASURES FROM EASTMAN HOUSE

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston - Lecture Hall

Friday, November 16, 1973 6:30 p.m.

ANNA CHRISTIE

USA, 1930. German version. Photographed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Directed by Jacques Feyder. Photographed by William Daniels. Screenplay adapted by Frances Marion and Walter Hasenclever, from the play, Anna Christie, by Eugene O'Neill. With Greta Garbo (Anna Christie), Hans Junkermann (Matt), Salka Viertel (Marthy). 100 minutes. Sound. No English subtitles.

It would be quite impossible to overstate the degree of adulation accorded to Greta Garbo all over the world by the end of the silent era. In the United States her star status had far eclipsed anything experienced by any film performer before her. Neither Pickford nor Chaplin nor Fairbanks, Clara Bow, Swanson, Talmadge, or Pola Negri could even approach the hysterical popularity of Miss Garbo. And whenever in the world American films were projected: in Japan or India, South America or Rumania, she inspired the kind of irrational devotion usually accorded to saints or goddesses. In retrospect, comparing her films with those of her contemporaries, there is simply no contest. Usually seen in films of inferior caliber, the Garbo performances invariably transcend the vehicle to such a degree that the action in her films becomes almost unobservable: the drama resides in the incomparable arena of her own wondrously enigmatic personality.

As dialogue films began replacing the silent photoplays that Garbo had graced so exquisitely, the film world and her producers anxiously awaited an answer to the awful question: would the Garbo voice enhance or dispel the magic no one could begin to analyze? Would an English-speaking Garbo with a heavy Swedish accent still be surrounded by a mystery that had enchanted film watchers for seven years?

To her waiting world, Garbo provided two answers in the year 1930. For English-speaking admirers, the role of Swedish-born Anna Christie provided an ideal introduction to the Garbo voice: rich, deep, and melodious as a viola. That she played a tired and ailing prostitute, dressed in one of the most unlikely waterfront ensembles ever seen in a Hollywood offering, was largely overlooked by her fans in the frantic excitement of hearing her speak.

Unnoticed too in 1930 was the obvious strain Garbo was under in attempting to articulate still unfamiliar English for the ruthless microphones of early talkies. Watching Anna Christie forty-three years after the novelty of "Garbo Talks", one can only writhe under the heavy hamminess of the American version with Marie Dressler shamelessly mugging beyond all bounds of theatrical permissibility: George Marion re-creating a stage role in a style so reeking of maudlin self-indulgence that not even a not-too-critical Hollywood point of view would have found acceptable but for Marion's stage reputation in the same play.

All these liabilities magically disappear in the German version, filmed on the same sets, in the same studios as the Clarence Brown version. But with what a colossal difference! The director of the German version is no longer that total, complete American, Clarence Brown, but the ideally international artist of the world, Jacques Feyder. Feyder, a Belgian, who had already created film masterpieces in Germany (Therese Raquin) and in France (Crainquebille, Visages des Enfants), had already directed Garbo in her last silent film, The Kiss.

In the German Anna Christie Garbo is no longer struggling with the vicious vowels of English: she speaks a fluent German; her second language for many years. No longer is she confronted by the facial contortions of a female Wallace Beery in the person of Marie Dressler, for the role is played by Salka Viertel - one of Garbo's closest and few intimate friends in Hollywood. In this version, dressed in a totally different wardrobe (such as a streetwalker might really be expected to wear) she is able to concentrate on the nuances of a performance that rings so true to O'Neill, that provides so vivid a glimpse of the Garbo-to-come in Queen Christina and in Camille that one could only wish Anna Christie existed only in this superb German-language version.

There are no English subtitles on this rare print from Eastman House, but a knowledge of the Eugene O'Neill play or the following synopsis should suffice to make the film comprehensible to those not fluent in German:

Anna Christie (Greta Garbo) has been left by her sailor father, Chris, on a farm owned by relatives. She fled from the cruel family and went on her own, eventually becoming a prostitute. Disgusted with her life and broke, she comes to her father and goes to live on his fishing barge. She meets Marthy (Salka Viertel), an old waterfront woman, who was her father's mistress. One day, during a storm, they save a seaman named Matt (Hans Junkermann) from drowning. Anna and Matt fall in love. However, Anna's anger at her father for neglecting her for so many years causes her to blurt out her past to her father and Matt. Matt, in disgust, walks out. Unable to stop loving Anna and knowing that he had made mistakes, Matt returns. He asks Anna to marry him and she accepts.

James Card, Director
International Film Department
Eastman House
Rochester, New York