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The Super Stars

Grand Hotel

Directed by Edmund Goulding
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
1932; 113 minutes

Cast

Grusinskaya, the Dancer	Greta Garbo
The Baron	John Barrymore
Flaemmchen, the Stenographer	Joan Crawford
Preysing	Wallace Beary
Otto Kringelein	Lionel Barrymore
Senf	Jean Hersholt
Meicrheim	Robert McWade
Zinnowitz	Purnell B. Pratt
Pimenov	Ferdinand Gottschalk
Suzette	Rafaela Ottiano
Chauffeur	Morgan Wallace
Gerstenkorn	Tully Marshall
Rohna	Frank Conroy
Schweimann	Murray Kinnell
Dr. Waltz	Edwin Maxwell

Credits

Director	Edmund Goulding
Adapted by	William A. Drake
From the play by	Vicki Baum
Photography	William Daniels
Editor	Blanche Sewell

Notes

The years of the early 1930's were critical ones for the motion picture industry. The recent transition to sound found many studios experimenting with new talent and trying to salvage old careers. For many (like John Gilbert, for whom the role of the Baron was originally intended), the switch to sound resulted in their rapid (and frequently tragic) descent from the Hollywood galaxy. For others, like Garbo, the Barrymores, and Joan Crawford, sound pictures offered new and challenging opportunities, and vehicles were sought to showcase their "talking" talents.

Grand Hotel, the 1932 Oscar-winner for Best Picture, was to the new world of sound what pictures like Singin' in the Rain would become to the musical genre...a "coming together" of all of the important elements that make a great film. Adapted from a play by German author Vicki Baum, Grand Hotel created an illusion of absolute reality. The personalities of the performers themselves enhanced the illusion created, seeming to underscore the theme of destruction and corruption that pervades the film. Garbo's luminous Grusinskaya possesses that unique sense of fatalism that has been a strong part of her personality. John Barrymore is both handsome and fiery as the Baron. As the shabby, abject Kringelein, Lionel Barrymore's performance runs the gamut from comedy to profound pathos. And Crawford's ambitious stenographer-on-the-make who reforms marks the end of her "dancing daughter" days and the beginning of a new "Crawford formula". Grand Hotel is memorable as the vehicle that gave Crawford new eminence as a dramatic actress (after all, she held her own with two Barrymores). It was also with this film that Garbo became publicized and known by only her last name.

As a showcase for the studio's talents, this cosmopolitan, multicharacter production did wonders for the studio and for its stars. Its importance as a political commentary cannot be overlooked, too. The Grand Hotel appears as a microcosm of Europe's last grand days. It's almost prison-like atmosphere conveys the claustrophobia of Europe as it progresses inevitably towards Fascism. Money is a character in the film, an antagonistic force that represents the destruction of aristocracy (the Baron) and of industrial power (Preysing). At the same time, however, money is a redemptive force for Flaemmchen and Kringelein. Critic Benjamin de Caseres wrote: "The solidity of Grand Hotel not only lies in its vivid character creations and dramatic web that is so cleverly woven around these persons unknown to each other in the Grand Hotel and who are destined to affect one another's lives, but there is an allegorical background to the whole story. Grand Hotel is the world we live in. These people are you and I."

Grand Hotel weaves a complicated magic illusion of reality - both threatening to destroy that world, and promising to redeem it.

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