

# HIPPODROME silent film festival

Our 10th festival celebrating silent film with music

ONLINE FROM 17-21 MARCH | HIPPFEST.CO.UK



## The Woman Men Yearn For (1929)

*Die Frau, nach der man sich sehnt*

Saturday 20 March 2021

Music By: Frame Ensemble

Although Marlene Dietrich's big breakthrough came with *The Blue Angel* (1930), the film which launched her extraordinary collaboration with Josef von Sternberg and set her on the path to international stardom, it's far from true that – as she later liked to claim – she was at that point a virtual unknown, more or less fresh out of drama school. Dietrich was notoriously dismissive of her career in silent cinema, but film scholar Siegbert Praver aptly dubbed her 'the clearest illustration of the old showbusiness adage that it takes ten years to make an overnight success'. Prior to *The Blue Angel*, she not only worked in theatre, cabaret and revues, but also appeared in more than a dozen films, not always in minor or supporting roles. *I Kiss Your Hand, Madame* (1929), was a silent film with a brief sound insert, in which Dietrich starred as a glamorous divorcee who falls in love with a waiter (German matinée idol Harry Liedtke) who is really a Russian count. Critics were captivated by her charm, beauty and ability to show off Parisian couture to best advantage: 'After this film, she should be greatly in demand for roles which require good looks and an elegant demeanour without asking too much in terms of acting,' was one double-edged verdict.

But Dietrich's next film, *The Woman Men Yearn For*, did ask more of her. This was the 27-year-old's first opportunity to star in the kind of *femme fatale* role which would make her a cinematic legend. It's a darkly romantic thriller in which the mysterious Stascha (Dietrich) is bound to her lover, the sinister Dr Karoff, by a terrible secret. But one night, on a crowded train, she catches the eye of a young man, newly married, who abandons everything, including his new bride, to come to her aid.

*The Woman Men Yearn For* is based on a novel by Max Brod, today best known as the friend and literary executor of Franz Kafka (it is Brod we have to thank for disregarding Kafka's request that all his manuscripts be burned unread). Without seeing the film for himself, Brod wrote to the press complaining that its director, Kurt Bernhardt, had not been faithful to his novel, to which Bernhardt quite properly responded that film is a different medium with its own laws which have to be respected.

And indeed, the film's storytelling is far more cinematic than literary: while the German film industry was busy debating the merits of sound, *The Woman Men Yearn For* fully exploits the expressive potential of late silent cinema. Its New Year's Eve ball scene, in particular, is a *tour de force*, its increasingly delirious atmosphere heightened through rapid editing and a virtuosic, restless camera, while – in an eloquent burst of visual excess – confetti and streamers rain down on the characters, entangling and imprisoning them in their desperate relationships. With intertitles kept to a minimum, this is a film in which the absence of dialogue doesn't feel artificial but is integral to a story which has at its centre an enigmatic beauty whose silence, resulting from fear, makes her all the more intriguing and alluring.

This was the last silent feature of 29-year-old director Kurt Bernhardt, who spotted Dietrich in a Berlin stage production of Bernard Shaw's 'Misalliance' and was instantly struck by her extraordinary erotic charisma. Like so many other filmmakers of Jewish background, Bernhardt would soon have to flee Nazi

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Germany (at one point he was arrested for insulting the memory of Nazi martyr Horst Wessel and was lucky to escape with his life). From 1933 he worked in France and England, but eventually established himself in Hollywood where he changed his name from Kurt to Curtis and rebuilt his career as a renowned director of 'women's pictures', drawing powerful performances from stars such as Joan Crawford, Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck.

Curt Courant, the film's cinematographer, was also not quite 30 but had a marked flair for technical innovation and a wealth of experience in a variety of genres (including Fritz Lang's science fiction adventure *Woman in the Moon*, 1929). Forced out of Germany, like Bernhardt, on account of his Jewish background, he would go on to collaborate with Hitchcock (*The Man Who Knew Too Much*, 1934), Renoir (*La Bête humaine*, 1938) and Carné (*Le Jour se lève*, 1939).

While Bernhardt's film had mixed reviews (including one which appeared under the headline 'Films One Doesn't Yearn For'), Fritz Kortner was widely praised for his finely nuanced portrayal of Dr Karoff – suave yet menacing, simmering with passion and repressed anxiety. One of the greatest stars of the Weimar stage and screen, the Austrian-Jewish Kortner is probably best remembered for the not dissimilar role he played just prior to this film – that of Dr Schön in *Pandora's Box* (1929).

As for Dietrich, critics frequently compared her, not always disparagingly, to Greta Garbo. According to Frank Maraun in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, Dietrich, whose 'indolent, playful lassitude seems to combine innocence and vice', steers clear of imitation but appears to share 'a primal affinity' with the Swedish star. Maraun begins his review with a description of the mixed crowd clustered around Dietrich's publicity portrait in a Berlin cinema foyer, both sexes equally appreciative. Which brings us to the title of Bernhardt's film (and Brod's novel) which – in the original German - makes no mention of 'men', but translates literally and less reductively as 'The Woman One Yearns For'. With Dietrich in mind, this certainly seems more apt. Her first encounter with Sternberg is still a few months off, but her seductive power is already all-embracing.

By Margaret Deriaz.

**Margaret Deriaz** is a freelance film programmer. Between 2015 and 2019 she programmed the Cambridge Film Festival's silent film strand. In 2019 she curated a two-month season of Weimar cinema (BEYOND YOUR WILDEST DREAMS: WEIMAR CINEMA 1919-1933) for BFI Southbank.

Presented in collaboration with the Yorkshire Silent Film Festival

Dir. Kurt Bernhardt | Germany | 1929 | N/C PG | German intertitles with English surtitles | 1h 18m  
Screenplay: Ladislaus Vajda (based on Max Brod's novel of 1927)  
Cinematography: Curt Courant, Hans Scheib  
Production design: Robert Neppach

**With:** Marlene Dietrich (Stascha), Fritz Kortner (Dr Karoff), Uno Henning (Henri Leblanc), Oskar Sima (Charles Leblanc, Henri's brother), Frida Richard (Madame Leblanc, mother of Henri and Charles), Edith Edwards (Angèle Poitrier), Karl Etlinger (Monsieur Poitrier, Angèle's father), Bruno Ziener (Phillipp, the Leblancs' manservant)



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**Frame Ensemble** is a quartet of musicians based in the north of England specialising in improvised silent film accompaniments. Frame's debut was at Sheffield's Abbeydale Picture House in 2018 accompanying *Metropolis*, followed by *Nosferatu* at York's National Centre for Early Music, and a three-city tour of the Antarctic documentary *The Great White Silence*. Frame Ensemble's members are Irine Røsnes (violin); Liz Hanks (cello); Trevor Bartlett (percussion) and Jonny Best (piano).

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