

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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WEDNESDAY 21 MARCH - SUNDAY 25 MARCH 2018

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The Student Prince in Old Heidelberg (1927)

Performing live: Neil Brand

Friday Night Gala: 23 March 2018

In 1899 Wilhelm Meyer-Forster published his novel *Karl Heinrich* about the impossible love between a crown prince and an innkeeper's daughter. He made it into a play *Alt-Heidelberg* in 1901. Two years later the play opened in New York in a translation by Rudolf Bleichmann, *Old Heidelberg*. A film adaptation directed by John Emerson and starring Wallace Reid and Dorothy Gish came out in 1915. A German film version was made in 1923 by Hans Behrendt, with Paul Hartmann and Eva May. An operetta version by Dorothy Donnelly and Sigmund Romberg, *The Student Prince*, opened in New York in 1924, breaking all box-office records. Noting its success, in 1926 MGM decided to make a film of it directed by Ernst Lubitsch.

MGM secured Hans Kraly, Lubitsch's regular scenarist, to make the screen adaptation and chose two of their biggest stars for the principal roles. The romantic Ramon Novarro, who had just played the lead in *Ben-Hur*, was ideally cast as the Crown Prince. But the casting of Norma Shearer, wife of MGM's 'boy wonder' Irving Thalberg, proved troublesome. The usually genial Lubitsch protested saying she was too grandly mannered for the part. An extract from Sam Marx's book *Mayer and Thalberg* describes what happened when Thalberg and Shearer returned from honeymoon and Shearer began work on the set: "Mein Gott," Lubitsch shouted. "I can get a waitress from the commissary who will do better than you!" The tearful star asked that Thalberg be called to the set. Lubitsch sat down calmly in his camp chair, pulling on his unlit cigar, while everyone within earshot waited to see what would happen when the new husband arrived on the scene. What happened is he listened to his distraught bride, then kissed her lightly and said "Darling, I'm sure we can all learn a lot from Mr. Lubitsch."

"The vast lands of Culver City resemble a corner of romantic Germany", wrote a German journalist visiting Lubitsch on the set of *Old Heidelberg*. To achieve this authenticity 32 trunks full of uniforms and accessories - including four hundred beer tankards - had been brought from Germany by Lubitsch's long-time costumiere, Ali Hubert. Andrew Marton, the film editor, explains how the sets were made: "We used the biggest MGM stage and Heidelberg Castle was put at the end of the stage in a perspective set. The castle and the trees were all models - and then came the studio floor, which you couldn't see because of the storm parapet that let us into the beer garden." The archway to the beer garden and a cemetery were constructed at Laurel Canyon as the native oak trees growing there were reminiscent of Heidelberg. Lubitsch was not convinced by the atmosphere they had created. So in March 1927, after completing the first cut, he travelled to Heidelberg to film exteriors, mainly of the castle, none of which was used in the final cut.



Back in Hollywood, Lubitsch finished editing his film. To avoid a court case with Meyer-Foster, the author of the play *Old Heidelberg*, MGM changed the title to *The Student Prince in Old Heidelberg*. Its lavish sets and large crowd scenes made the film one of the most expensive of the day – it cost \$1.2 million. The premiere of the film took place on September 21, 1927 at the Capitol Theatre in New York. A trade paper of the time said the film “will become one of America's greatest peacetime diplomats, soothing the cruel hurts inflicted by the World War”.

The lavish reconstructions and expansive crowd scenes, though expensive, are merely a backdrop for an intimate human story. The Prince and Kathi's courtship is pure and joyous, Lubitsch conjuring delightful scenes of their strategems to be together. Karl's other important friend in his isolated life is Dr. Juttner, played by Jean Hersholt. A great character actor, Hersholt, is wise and affectionate, the dependable father figure Karl lacked.

Old Heidelberg is a glorious example of what became widely known as ‘the Lubitsch touch.’ With perfect comic timing and virtuoso visual wit, Lubitsch transformed the original romantic operetta, into a universal story of love, duty and the irrevocable loss of times past.

Credits

Director/Producer: Ernst Lubitsch
Executive Producer: Irving Thalberg
Scenario: Hans Kraly
Camera: John Mescal
Asst. Director: George Hippard
Designer: Cedric Gibbons, Richard Day
Costumes: Ali Hubert, Eric Locke
Editor: Andrew Marton

Cast

Ramon Novarro (Prince Karl Heinrich), Norma Shearer (Kathi), Jean Hersholt (Dr Juttner), Gustav von Seyffertitz (King Karl VII), Philippe de Lacy (the young Karl)

Running time: 1h 45m

Adapted from programme notes supplied by Photoplay Productions

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