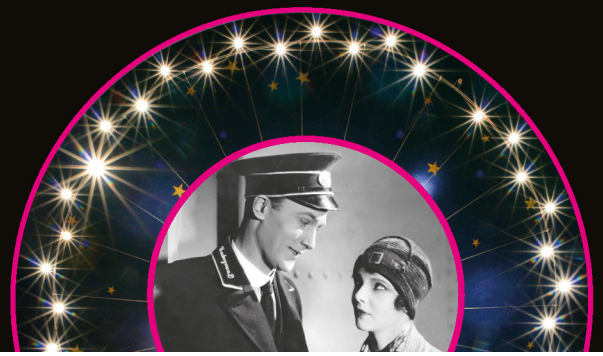


HIPPODROME silent film festival

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Seven Footprints to Satan

Saturday 24 March 2018

Performing live: Jane Gardner and Roddy Long

This is a real rarity: the middle of three spooky house films made by Danish director Benjamin Christensen, who's best known for the satanic documentary *Haxan*, AKA *Witchcraft Through the Ages*. The other films are lost, though the music and sound effects discs that once accompanied *The Haunted House* can be heard on YouTube: lots of whistling wind and hooting owls. You might want to imagine those sounds as you experience *Seven Footprints*, whose original score and FX are lost: but we'll endeavour to make up for that with our own live accompaniment.

Christensen came over at the same time as Garbo, and for a while looked to be making a go of it in Hollywood, directing successful films at MGM and Warner Bros. His very weird sensibility seems surreal now, but apparently fitted into the commercial cinema of the day. *Seven Footprints* is based on a perfectly serious mystery novel, but the director rewrote it from scratch and turned it into a bizarre and hilarious parody, a parade of sensational events with scarcely any narrative connection. We're just trapped in a spooky house with a nice couple being terrorized by a criminal cult, led by... Satan himself!

The relentless succession of thugs, dwarfs, fiendish orientals, sinister cripples, phony gorillas, ludicrous grotesques and exotic women, all entering and exiting through secret panels, usually carrying pistols (except the gorilla) and uttering baffling warnings, plays like a Fu Manchu movie viewed through an opium haze. Though the film is cheerfully ridiculous, Christensen apparently strove to get his stars in the mood by providing his own enervating soundtrack, consisting, as a fan magazine put it, of "shrieks, groans, moans and howls; the screeching of metal on metal; chattering as of teeth; sirens screaming; bells of all sorts ringing; pistols fired off stage." Christensen was described as going home with his voice all but gone after a night's vocalisations.

The cast is amazing, not that any of them are wildly famous today: star Creighton Hale, who had already done 1927's *The Cat and the Canary*, the prototype for this kind of monkeying around, is perhaps best-known for an utterly false rumour that he once had sex with a goat in a stag film, or was it a stag in a goat film? Anyway, he didn't do it, your Honour.

The beautiful Thelma Todd would go on to play furious wives in a whole series of Laurel & Hardy talkies, partner with Cary Grant in his first film, and romance the Marx Brothers twice, but she died tragically young, gassed in her garage in an incident that has never been resolved as accident, suicide, or murder.

Supporting these luminaries are an array of startling physiognomies: Japanese actor Sojin was a specialist in yellow peril roles (you may be starting to suspect that this amiable spookshow



is not exactly PC); tiny, bow-legged Angelo Rossitto would lead the cast of *Freaks* and continue working right up to *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*, all the while running a newsstand on the side. "I was only ever a ham-and-eggs actor," he would say, but he's still fondly remembered by the small person acting community today; in the ape suit is Charles Gemora, who came to the US illegally from the Philippines and worked tirelessly in movies as artist, designer, special make-up effects guru, and gorilla, terrorizing everyone from Laurel & Hardy to Abbott & Costello and doubling for Marlene Dietrich (!) when she briefly dresses as a gorilla in *Blonde Venus*. He invented techniques which revolutionized Hollywood make-up but couldn't copyright them because he didn't acquire citizenship until he'd been in the movies for decades.

Gemora is likely responsible for the array of weird faces rounding out the rogue's gallery of kinky satanists alarming our heroes: where nature failed to supply a sufficiently peculiar countenance, he would be on hand to extend eyebrows down to the cheekbones, add sprouting warts, or sideburns that seem to be consuming the entire face like a fungus. Christensen had already featured magnificent full-body make-ups in *Haxan*, donning one of them himself to play the role of Satan: the man had form. Hang onto your seats; watch out behind you; and for heaven's sake, BEWARE THE SPIDER!

By David Cairns. David is a filmmaker, writer, academic and critic who blogs at Shadowplaydcairns.wordpress.com

Credits

Director: Benjamin Christensen

Producer: Wid Gunning

Scenario: Benjamin Christensen (as Richard Bee)

Photography: Sol Polito

Titles: Cornell Woolrich (as William Irish)

Editing: Frank Ware

Cast

Thelma Todd (Eve Martin), Creighton Hale (James Kirkham), Sheldon Lewis (The Spider), William V. Mong (The Professor), DeWitt Jennings (Uncle Joe)

Running time: 1h 10m

Screening material courtesy of Cineteca Italiana