

# THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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WEDNESDAY 16 MARCH – SUNDAY 20 MARCH 2016

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Saturday 19 March | 13:30

## Variety

Dir. Ewald André Dupont | Germany | 1925 | 1h 35m

With: Emil Jannings, Lya de Putti, Warwick Ward

Accompanied live by Stephen Horne (piano, flute, accordion) and  
Frank Bockius (percussion)

Supported by the Goethe-Institut Glasgow

Screening material courtesy of the Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Foundation

E.A. Dupont had perhaps the most precipitous career trajectory of any German filmmaker of the silent years, plunging from the pinnacle of his native industry to the stinky depths of *The Neanderthal Man* (1953) in Hollywood. Supposedly the secret of his lack of success was an incident in 1939 when he was fired for slapping a bit player on the set of a *Dead End Kids* picture, and he spent a decade working as a talent agent (helped no doubt by his obvious sympathy for performers, ahem). It might be observed that if you're directing a *Dead End Kids* picture your career has already descended a few notches since your heyday.

*Variety* (1925) was Dupont's breakthrough film, and today it's remembered more in film histories than it is actually seen. The movie led directly to Dupont's British hit *Piccadilly* (screened previously at HippFest in 2015) a bloodstained melodrama with a showbiz background. This is the prototype.

Emil Jannings, Germany's greatest star at the time, plays Convict 28, summoned to the governor's office to learn of his wife's plea for clemency after ten years in the slammer. He's never before spoken of his crime, but moved by her fidelity, he begins to tell his sorry tale: Now we're in a Hamburg carnival, where we meet a younger Jannings, a former circus acrobat (which stretches credulity like pretzel dough) who takes in a nameless "foreign girl," Lya de Putti. Jannings' domestic arrangements are rather unsatisfactory and soon he's plotting to ditch his wife and baby in favour of this new arrival. Lya overlooks his bulbous physique, simian features and glowering, violent personality, and she's soon de Putti in his hands as they alight for Berlin.

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Meanwhile, trapeze artist Artinelli (lanky Brit Warwick Ward) is in search of a new act, having dropped his brother (from the act, and from earthly existence) at the London Palladium, and he selects Jannings and de Putti as likely co-stars, leading to an inevitable triangle that's not so much romantic as pungently sexual.

Believing the portly Jannings is one-third of an aerialist act may be hard work, especially since the body double seen in long shots is, for obvious practical reasons, considerably more lithe than the lumpen star. Adding to this discomfort is the rather unsympathetic treatment given to all the principle players. But once you learn to overlook this, you can be truly dazzled by the filmmaking.

This was the age of the "unchained camera," and while Dupont doesn't scale the heights of Murnau's *The Last Laugh*, he seems determined to try, with cameraman Karl Freund devising ingenious rigs which allow us to swing on the trapeze alongside the actors, swooping over the heads of the crowd. And what a crowd! Added to the kinetic thrust and flash are leering close-ups of audience members, grotesques out of Grosz. From start to finish, the film is more concerned with capturing grime, lust, physical peculiarity and violence than it is with story or character.

Which is fine, once you accept that that's what it's all about.

It's ironic that Dupont's silent work should be not only so vigorous but so fast. In 1929 he made his first talkie, *Atlantic*, about the Titanic sinking, in which, despite the impressive spectacle of the ship-sinking sequences, he became rather infamous for his ponderous treatment of the dialogue. But there's no hanging about with *Variety*, except that which is done from sturdy cables before a paying audience, and it's fantastic to see the film screening again so we can appreciate the chiaroscuro lighting, chunky architectural compositions, and propulsive camera movements as they were meant to be seen. Prepare for a triple mid-air somersault into moral squalor!

By David Cairns

David is a filmmaker, writer, academic and critic who blogs at [Shadowplaydcairns.wordpress.com](http://Shadowplaydcairns.wordpress.com)

