

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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WEDNESDAY 22 MARCH - SUNDAY 26 MARCH 2017

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Saturday 25 March | 13:30 The Hands of Orac (Orlacs Hände)

Dir. Robert Wiene | Germany | 1924 | 1h 32m

With: Conrad Veidt, Alexandra Sorina, Fritz Strassny

Performing live: Günter Buchwald (piano & violin) & Frank Bockius (percussion)

Screening material courtesy of Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung
Supported by the Goethe-Institut Glasgow

These notes contain 'spoilers'.

The film *The Hands of Orlac* by Robert Weine was highly acclaimed by contemporary critics and was almost unanimously treated as one of the most important German films of the year 1924. The film was praised for its synthesis of phantasm and realism, the plausible description of the psychological motif of the characters and for the outstanding achievement in acting. These statements – at this time - show that the film was appreciated for what it was: an effective, modern thriller that gave special attention to the psychological development of its characters.

That was different in 1945 when the film was barely mentioned. If there had been given any attention to the film at all, it was seen as a failed Expressionistic successor to *Dr. Caligari*. This was due to an over-emphasis on the few scenes that were reminiscent of Expressionistic elements such as crooked facades and dark narrow streets as well as exaggerated facial expressions and gestures. However, the excessively long scene of the railway accident has largely gone unnoticed despite its naturalistic and documentary character that creates an immersive effect for the audience. Equally unnoticed was the fact that the decorative elements in the film take a back seat for the benefit of a larger emphasis on the psychological development of the characters.

After 1945, the film was absolutely misjudged due to the incomplete archiving of the film. After the censor notes had been found, a comparison with the existing material in other European archives (most 16mm copies were in bad condition) showed that some parts were missing or had been wrongly assembled. In 1995 the 'Deutsches Institut für Filmkunde' (DIF) found a 35mm copy with original German sub-titles at the film archive in Belgrade, which seemed to come closest to the original. In cooperation with the rights-holder 'Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung' (the Murnau Foundation) the DIF decided to re-construct this important German silent film.

Further film fragments from the federal archives in Berlin and Koblenz, from the 'Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung' and the 'Deutsches Institut für Filmkunde' were used for the creation



of a consistent version of the film that now gives justice to the psychological development of the characters. This version shows the conflict between Orlac and the criminal Nera from the beginning, thus depicting it as much more plausible than in previous versions of the film. During Orlac's hospitalization, he experiences a traumatic encounter with Nera, which has a great impact on the following plot. In addition, the new version makes the complicity between Nera and Orlac's housekeeper much more explicit. This detail is the necessary key that enables the police to solve the crime – a plot point that had seemed slightly contrived and not satisfyingly convincing in the previous versions.

Although the Ministry of the Interior for the Federal State of Saxony criticised – at that time – that the film was giving an example for by-passing police measures (showing the almost frightening realism of the film acknowledged by the censors), the film has remained largely unaffected by censorship cuts. This and the fact that the censor notes including all sub-titles still existed, significantly facilitated the reconstruction.

Despite making use of manifold materials and the screening of several other versions, there are still eight minutes missing from the current coherent version. However, it can be argued that this version can withstand the earlier criticism of the film's alleged imitative late expressionism and instead let the audience appreciate it for what it is: an astonishingly modern thriller.

The modern quality of the topic is proven by the fact that several films were made in the following decades that dealt with the same subject. Some examples are: *Mad Love* (UK 1935), directed by Karl Freund and Peter Lorre in the title role and *The Hands of Orlac* (UK 1960), directed by Edmond T. Greville, with Mel Ferrer.

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