

Sunday 16 March | 20:00

VISAGES D'ENFANTS
(FACES OF CHILDREN)

Dir. Jacques Feyder | France/Switzerland | 1925 | 1h 57m
Accompanied live by Stephen Horne
Screening supported by the Alliance Française de Glasgow

One pleasure of silent cinema can be submersing oneself in an antique world of strange mannerisms, alien artifice and antique craft. That's not to be underrated. But to discover an apparently ancient film that speaks clearly across the decades, in completely modern tones, is another, more startling pleasure.

Having learned his craft in the teens on scores of smaller pictures, Jacques Feyder graduated to epics, sophisticated dramas, swooning romances, and helped train the next generation of directors, several of whom worked as his assistants. During short spells in Hollywood he directed Garbo twice, making her first talkie, *Anna Christie*, and worked with Marlene Dietrich on the British production *Knight Without Armour*. A versatile chap, he was equally at home with exotic romances and gritty, down-to-earth dramas. What unites his work is the sheer photographic beauty he imparts to it, regardless of subject.

In the twenties, Feyder was at the pinnacle of the French industry. In 1923 he directed *Crainquebille*, a slice of working-class realism, and discovered a child actor of amazing intensity and maturity, Jean Forest. Realizing he had caught lightning in a bottle, Feyder immediately cast young Forest in another picture, *Faces of Children*, which he co-wrote with his wife, the great actress Françoise Rosay.

In a tiny, elevated Alpine town, a boy has lost his mother. Feyder films the funeral procession as a series of electrified details, onlookers and the slow advance of the coffin and the boy's shell-shocked expression. At the cemetery, under a jutting, almost expressionist crucifix, the lad collapses in a paroxysm of angst. Feyder,

editing his own film as was the custom, frenziedly cross-cuts a burst of subliminal images to suggest Jean's overloaded emotions.

Throughout this extraordinary film, Feyder alternates sweeping vistas of Swiss scenery, in which figures can loom over valleys like gods, or vanish into landscapes where the skyline towers to the very top of the frame; and in a single breath he can take us into the mind of a character through a captured expression, a tightly focussed viewpoint, or a striking subjective effect. He had absorbed the innovations of the impressionist filmmakers who aspired to capture internal states using the cinema. This was the time when theorist-filmmakers like Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac and Jean and Marie Epstein were pioneering techniques which evoked the sensations of delirium, giddiness, inebriation and dream. Feyder, meanwhile, had his other eye on the spectacle afforded by the natural world and by the possibilities of his troupe of actors.

Jean Forest, with his watchful expression and dramatic, strikingly adult postures, is a true prodigy, a child of twelve with both a flair for the dramatic—he can fling himself into attitudes of angst with the bravura of Lon Chaney—but also with an inherent truthfulness and a believable solemnity. He's joined by two equally impressive youngsters; little Pierette Houyez plays his sister, too young to register their mother's death, and Arlette Peyran is the new step-sister, upon whom all of Jean's anxieties and resentment fall. Of the three, you may find Houyez the most appealing of all, since she never seems to be acting at all, just behaving. She's certainly not acting when her stepmother aggressively scrubs her dirty face. Feyder could be a little ruthless with his stars, I fear.

What's most impressive about this scenario is that it produces intense drama without a villain: Jean's new stepmother is a well-meaning woman, his father is aware of his son's sensitivity (spoken of as a condition it is hoped he'll grow out of) and tries his best to allow for it, and Arlette is just a kid, no more selfish or wilful than Jean. The trauma of bereavement throws life off kilter and the result could end in tragedy. It's both grippingly tense and all too credible. Exhilarating experimentation, quietly powerful performances, a touching story, and a setting that takes the breath away.

David Cairns is a writer and filmmaker based in Edinburgh. He runs a film blog, [Shadowplay \(dcairns.wordpress.com\)](http://dcairns.wordpress.com) and recently co-directed a documentary, *Natan*, dealing with French cinema of the twenties and thirties.



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