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FRI 24 MARCH | 14:00

MASTER OF THE HOUSE

Dir. Carl Th. Dreyer| Denmark | 1925 | N/C PG | 1h 47m

With: Johannes Meyer, Mathilde Nielsen, Astrid Holm, Clara Schønfeld, Karin Nellemose

Screening material courtesy of the Danish Film Institute

Performing Live: John Sweeney (Piano)

Those in the audience expecting a difficult film by a gloomy Scandinavian director are bound to be disappointed by Carl Th. Dreyer's *Master of the House*. This deft tale of domestic tyranny and subsequent insurgency is characterized by wry humour and bell-like clarity. From its exquisite attention to detail to its neatly symmetrical structure, *Master of the House* (*Du skal ære din Hustru*) unfurls with a thoroughly enjoyable precision. Tom Milne expressed it neatly in 1965 in *Sight and Sound*: "Its golden simplicity almost defies description." As with so many of Dreyer's films, the topic is the subjugation of women, but the weapon of resistance is irony and a series of comic reversals that begins with the sardonic intertitle: "The heroine of this story is called Ida. The 'hero' is called Victor."

Our heroine and not-quite-hero are Ida (Astrid Holm) and Victor (Johannes Meyer), a married couple who live in a small apartment with their three children. Dreyer gave their living arrangements a stiflingly realistic atmosphere by building a replica of a typical inner-city apartment, instead of an open-faced set. Not only were the dimensions exact, but it was supplied with gas and running water and the kitchen drawers stocked. In such a tightly marked space, with characters and other rooms often glimpsed through half-open doors and with the wall clocks frequently in shot, it is always obvious to us where everyone is in the home, and what work needs to be done to keep the household moving.

An early sequence shows Ida and her daughter Karen (Karin Nellemose) busily working their way through the long list of morning chores, from feeding the caged birds to lighting the stove and preparing a breakfast tray, all the while being careful not to wake the still-sleeping Victor and rouse his anger. He goes out to work but recently had to sell his own business, so money is tight and, when he's indoors, he refuses to lift a finger to help with the housework. Having lost his status in the world of work, he clumsily attempts to reclaim it in the home. It's an unsupportable situation, with Victor playing the domestic despot, and an idle one at that, with no claim to call himself "master of the house," while his wife and children suffer for his comfort.

Enter Mads (Mathilde Nielsen), his former nanny, who is just enough of an outsider to see the injustice for what it is, familiar enough to know when Victor needs to be taught a lesson, and kind enough to recognize that he isn't a brute—it's just that he has some more growing up to do. Which is why she recruits his mother-in-law to assist with the lesson. Like a spoiled boy, Victor is ignorant as well as petulant, so he has plenty to learn from these two mother figures. Ida has not done her part on this score. She has been hiding both her labour and her economizing from him: when he complains that his breakfast is meagre, she scrapes butter from her bread onto his, which only convinces Victor that there was enough to go around in the first place. This is where the comic structure kicks in. George Schnéevoigt's deceptively unobtrusive camerawork has calmly tracked the labours and sacrifices of wife and daughter around the house, making us privy to a mass of information that Victor doesn't know. He is about to fall prey to a giant practical joke, and we know what's waiting for him.

The play that *Master of the House* is based on was called *The Tyrant's Fall*. First performed in 1919 in Copenhagen, it was written by playwright Svend Rindom, who had actually spent a few years working in the cinema, mostly as an actor, and had a future as a prolific screenwriter ahead of him. However, Dreyer, consciously avoiding the trap of "filmed theatre," cut the text of the play back with a sharp blade. As he explained to *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1965: "In the theatre, you have time to write, time to linger on words and feelings, and the spectator has time to perceive these things. In the cinema it is different. This is why I have always concentrated on the purification of the text, which I compress to the minimum. I did this as early as Master of the House … we compressed it, cleaned it, purified it and the story became very clear, very clean."

Dreyer was working as a journalist before he entered the film business, and his first jobs at the booming Nordisk studio involved editing and writing screenplays, as well as the elliptical art of intertitle construction. For him concision was always key; he famously whittled away at the dialogue in his first talkie, *Vampyr* (1932), until it was almost a silent. Although his five sound films are perhaps better known, Dreyer directed nine superb silent films, from 1919's *The President* to his widely acclaimed masterpiece from 1929, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. At one point considered an outlier in Dreyer's career, as a comedy with no emphasis on faith, *Master of the House* is now rightly acclaimed as one of the strongest of his nine silent films, and it was made right in the middle of his most productive decade.

The cleanliness and purity of *Master of the House*'s narrative and visuals have contributed to the rise in its critical fortune. The style of the film has a crisp modernity, to match its timeless subject. Film historian Casper Tybjerg has counted more than eleven hundred edits in this film, far more than in any contemporary Danish film. *Master of the House* also belongs to a German/Scandinavian style called the *Kammerspielfilm*: intimate psychological dramas composed of interior scenes, in which the audience is privileged to enter the private world of an ordinary family. As in Dreyer's previous film, the lavish romantic drama *Michael* (1924), the drama in *Master of the House* arises from the choreography of gazes around a confined space—and the note-perfect performances of the three leads who steadfastly resist the traps of exaggeration or caricature. Delicate-featured, ballet-trained Holm, best known before this role as a Salvation Army martyr in Victor Sjöström's *The Phantom Carriage* (1921), is allowed the film's only touches of pathos, in her daily sacrifices and her eventual nervous collapse. Meyer, a huge star in Denmark, who had already appeared in two Dreyer silents, *Leaves from Satan's Book* (1920) and *Love One Another* (1922), is beautifully brittle as the tyrant about to topple. Early in the film his sneers are enough to turn the audience against him, but it's clearly just a mask for his real discomfort and his remorse, when it hits, feels authentic. Nellemose made her film debut with *Master of the House*, giving a memorable performance as the daughter caught between parents. It's little surprise given the sensitivity of her portrayal here, but she went on to work on Danish film and television until the early 1980s.

The real star of this film, however is sixty-six-year-old Nielsen, beloved matriarch of the Danish screen, as saviour of the household Mads who promises to be hard, but not cruel, while she dishes

out some delicious justice on behalf of overworked and underappreciated women everywhere. She may be mischievous but she is also fantastically imperious, directing her final dressing-down of Victor to the men in the audience, too. In the end, all her machinations and lectures are for a good cause: the restoration of domestic harmony, which is the perfect closure to an immaculately designed comedy, summarized neatly by Dreyer's playful final image. In the end it's love, not labour, that makes a happy home.

(These programme notes were originally written for the San Francisco Silent Film Festival)

PAMELA HUTCHINSON

Pamela Hutchinson is a freelance critic, curator and film historian. Her publications include BFI Film Classics on The Red Shoes and Pandora's Box, and her website SilentLondon.co.uk is dedicated to silent cinema.