



Just Around the Corner

Dir. Frances Marion | US | 1921 | N/C PG | 1h 20m

Performing live: Maud Nelissen

3pm on Friday 22 March 2024

Screening material courtesy of Library of Congress / Eye Filmmuseum

Life wasn't easy for working class women at the beginning of the twentieth century. They faced long working hours in often dire circumstances and lacked the means to protect themselves from exploitation or the unwanted (sexual) attentions from their (usually male) overseers. To them, a good marriage was often the only way out of personal and economic precariousness. However, finding a good husband in New York City, notoriously filled with 'cads', wasn't easy either... so Essie Birdsong, the heroine of *Just Around the Corner*, finds herself in rather a tough spot. After getting fired from her low-wage job (which she desperately needs in order to support her widowed mother and younger brother) she is forced to take on a night job which worries her already overbearing mother. On top of that, Essie's (worthless) boyfriend, Joe, isn't likely to propose and refuses to pay her ailing mother even a short courtesy visit. With her mother's health rapidly declining, Essie must figure out a way to reassure her mother of her future well-being so she can pass away in peace.

For her second feature as a director, scenario writer Frances Marion decided to play it safe. She picked another story by popular author Fannie Hurst, whose *Humoresque* she had already successfully adapted in 1920 for Frank Borzage and which had become one of that year's biggest hits. *Just around the Corner* was advertised as more of the same: a crowd pleasing yarn about mother love and sacrifice ('Another Humoresque,' the ads unambiguously promised.) Fannie Hurst was famous and well-loved for writing accessible, somewhat sentimental but also topical and socially conscious stories often focussing on female protagonists. The adapted story, originally called 'Superman', had appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* and had been part of a 1914 short story collection called *Just around the Corner*. Several of Hurst's novels and stories would be turned into films well into the sound

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era. *Imitation of Life* was even adapted twice, in 1934 by John Stahl and in 1959 by Douglas Sirk.

Despite this being a Hurst adaptation Frances Marion made sure to make her mark. In the original story, Essie's basement factory job is only mentioned in passing, but Marion turned it into the setting for an important dramatic scene. In the gloomy place where flower ornaments for fashionable ladies' hats are made, she pauses to focus on the women's labour. In doing so, not only does she bring the traditionally invisible labour of the garment industry to the fore (her camera focuses on the women's fingers and hands), she also highlighted the need for female solidarity under difficult circumstances (for example when they are bullied on the job). While a scene like this clearly functions as social commentary, the film remained a melodrama at heart. Most of the action is concerned with romantic conventions and a severed mother-daughter connection. There is even a race against time to make things right.



In addition to the film's core female creative team (direction, scenario, source novel), the film's dual focus on two female protagonists, Essie and Ma Birdsong, the story foregrounds two, sometimes incongruous, female points of view (there is a tension between

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young and old, modern and conservative, the home and the world) and the narrative switches back and forth between them.

While the film features some very vivid location shots of New York's East Side covered in snow and some *couleur locale* of an ethnically diverse street market, most of the action takes place indoors in a cramped tenement apartment or inside sparsely lit public spaces (dance halls, tenement sweatshops, pool saloons). Here, the photography, by Henry Cronjager who had also photographed Marion's feature debut, is overall low-key, nocturnal and designed to highlight dramatic detail such as faces, gestures or small objects. The indoor settings were created by none other than Joseph Urban, a scenic designer for the Ziegfeld Follies who had been hired by media tycoon William Randolph Hearst to work on the occasional film for his Cosmopolitan Productions.

After the rather ambitious and perhaps overloaded *The Love Light* (1921, starring Mary Pickford), Marion opted for a non-Hollywood approach. Unknown Swedish actress Sigrid Holmqvist (who was called "the Mary Pickford of Sweden") was cast in the leading role and Marion went out of her way to have the role of the Jewish mother played by Margaret Seddon, at that time mostly known for her work on the stage. The 'good man' (or 'superman') in the story was played by none other than the director's own husband, Fred Thomson. The couple had met during the First World War, but had only married afterwards as Marion's and Thomson's commitments - she was a war correspondent and he was an army chaplain - kept the couple apart. His athletic looks had already earned him a part opposite Pickford in *The Love Light*, but during the twenties he would become a star in his own right in a series of 'clean and wholesome' westerns (often penned by his wife, under a pseudonym.)

Just around the Corner does not deny that life can be hard, unfair and troublesome but it ultimately chooses optimism and hope. One of the final lines (spoken in one of the inter-titles) is the immensely comforting: 'It's alright, ma'. And that it is.

ANKE BROUWERS

Anke Brouwers is a film history lecturer and author based in Antwerp, Belgium. She hosts a film podcast, Meet the Masters, for Filmfestival Oostende and has guest-curated film programs for the Nederlands Silent Film Festival (Eindhoven) and The House of European History (Brussels).

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