



RE-RELEASES

The Shop around the Corner

Ernst Lubitsch grew up in Berlin as the son of the Russian Jewish émigré owner of a dressmaking company. He knew the world of shops and they feature often in his films. Perhaps witnessing the patter of his father's employees – the centrality of role play to the life of a salesman – encouraged the young Lubitsch to play roles, and drew him towards acting as a profession. Before he became a director, he was a successful self-mocking character actor, first on the German stage for Max Reinhardt and later in films. That he should end up in Hollywood seems a natural progression for a Jewish sophisticate trying to escape his trade roots.

Jewish traders of European extraction, such as Adolph Zukor (furs), Carl Laemmle (retail clothing) and Louis B. Mayer (scrap metal), founded the Hollywood studio business. There was always an affinity between 'putting on a show' to sell shop items and 'putting on a show' in movies. In his seminal 1988 book *An Empire of Their Own*, Neal Gabler says that the Jewish traders made 'a sustained attempt to live a fiction and to cast its spell over the minds of others'. Lubitsch moved to Hollywood at the invitation of Mary Pickford after the international success of his historical dramas *Madame DuBarry* (1919) and *Anna Boleyn* (1920). She hired him to direct her in *Rosita* (1923), and though they didn't get on that well, Lubitsch remained in Hollywood and flourished as one of its most accomplished artists.

In the context of *The Shop around the Corner*, it is easy to imagine the young Lubitsch as Pepi, the teenage errand boy of Matuschek and Co. played so brilliantly by William Tracy as the sharpest Budapest street kid turned legit. Pepi constantly complains that the pampered wife of proprietor Mr Matuschek runs his legs off after hours, so his favourite occupation is to imitate her in a high voice: 'Pepi, go to the dressmaker. Oh Pepi, will you please pick up a package at the drugstore?'

Of course, Lubitsch's father did not work in a leather-goods store, and in any case the film was based not on any Lubitsch autobiographical matter but on Nikolaus Laszlo's 1936 play *Parfumerie*, but we know that one essential ingredient of what came to be known as 'the Lubitsch touch' is that the director would act out every role for every actor he was directing. This is what accounts for the extraordinary consistency of tone in his films, including those that he produced but were directed by the likes of Frank Borzage and Otto Preminger. A talent for mimicry, pretence and persuasion was the foundation of his approach.

The Shop around the Corner almost entirely concerns the eight people who work at Matuschek and Co., although one superlative aspect of the film is how much of what happens off screen is a pertinent part of the narrative – not least Mrs Matuschek, whom we never see nor hear. Mr Matuschek (Frank Morgan) is an ageing proprietor whose lifelong business instincts are no longer a match for those of his chief salesman Alfred Kralik (James Stewart), whom Matuschek is grooming to take over as manager. The film begins the morning after Kralik has been a guest at the Matuschek home and both are feeling bilious from 'too much goose liver'. They have a disagreement about some cigarette boxes Matuschek wants to buy that play the repetitive Russian folk melody 'Ochi Tchornya' when you open them. Kralik, rightly, thinks they won't sell; Matuschek is annoyed with him.

The rest of the shop's staff includes: Pirovitch (Felix Bressart), an unassuming family man, and the film's moral centre in whom everyone confides; in contrast is Vadas (Joseph Schildkraut), a dandy of a certain age feared by everyone as 'a rat and stool pigeon'; there are two ladies, the demure Flora (Sara Haden) and the shopaholic Ilona (Inez Courtney), who stay mostly in the background; and the newest member, Klara Novak (Margaret Sullavan), who comes in from the street to be met by Kralik as a customer when she's really a shopgirl after a job.

The Kralik-Novak relationship goes further down the wrong track when, to get the job, Klara sides with Mr Matuschek on the issue of the cigarette boxes and manages to sell one as a 'candy conscious' box, whose tune will remind you every time you succumb to a piece of candy that maybe you should cut down on your consumption.

What neither Novak nor Kralik knows as they bicker and demean each other all day is that each is the other's romantic pen-pal. This is the kind of spectacular social irony that 'the Lubitsch touch' feeds on, but it is absolutely bound in to the social position in which its protagonists find themselves. The story originates in the Great Depression, about people for whom the magic words are 'paycheque', 'bonus' and 'raise'. Though Mr Matuschek will turn out to be a benevolent figure (indeed, his staff count keeps on increasing while the shop remains mostly empty – at least until the Christmas climax) his whims are potentially lethal, as Kralik discovers when he is summarily 'let go' after a disagreement, albeit with a shining reference.

Though Lubitsch's films are always graceful and light and designed for maximum easy viewing pleasure, there's a solid underpinning of real circumstance to *The Shop around the Corner*. One of the most fascinating aspects of Hollywood film in its heyday is the economical use of space. There are only three scenes in the film that occur away from the shop: the café where the pen-pals are supposed to meet – although Klara doesn't find out for some time that the Kralik she meets and thoroughly patronises was her blind date; Klara's bedroom, where she takes sick after her beau doesn't seem to show; and the hospital room where Matuschek ends up for reasons you'll have to watch the film to discover.

Everything else happens either just outside the shop or in the shop's four spaces: the main hall, Mr Matuschek's office, the staff room and the stockroom, to which Pirovitch disappears whenever he hears Matuschek announce, 'All I want is your honest opinion.' All this would reinforce the idea that the shop is the world and a sort of prison – you have to make it there or fail – if it were not for the evocatively deft way that the world outside is conjured from within.

This is a yet more sophisticated version of Lubitsch's famous propensity for making the audience imagine what's going on behind a closed door. From just a few grace notes we can picture Pirovitch's modest home life, what it must be like to have dinner at Mr Matuschek's house with his flirtatious wife (too much goose liver and all), and where, after all, the vile Vadas's tokens of 'good luck' come from. More refined still is the moment when, towards the end, Klara describes her early feelings about Kralik to him – we become aware that Lubitsch and Sullavan have given us not the slightest indication of these feelings, so we're even invited to reimagine what we've already seen. Perhaps the simplest example of making the invisible imaginable, though, is when Pepi says to Mr Matuschek near the end: 'You see that girl over there on the corner? Well, I'm her Santa Claus.' Lubitsch knows he doesn't need to show us the girl.

Nick James, *Sight & Sound*, January 2011

THE SHOP AROUND THE CORNER

Directed by: Ernst Lubitsch
Production Companies: Loew's Incorporated, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Produced by: Ernst Lubitsch
Unit Manager: Arthur Rose *
Assistant Director: Horace Hough *
Screen Play by: Samson Raphaelson
Based on a play by: Nikolaus Laszlo
Director of Photography: William Daniels
Editor: Gene Ruggiero
Art Director: Cedric Gibbons
Associate: Wade B. Rubottom
Set Decorations: Edwin B. Willis
Hair Styles for Miss Sullavan: Sydney Guilaroff
Musical Score: Werner R. Heymann
Recording Director: Douglas Shearer

Cast

Margaret Sullavan (*Klara Novak*)
James Stewart (*Alfred Kralik*)
Frank Morgan (*Hugo Matuschek*)
Joseph Schildkraut (*Ferencz Vadas*)
Sara Haden (*Flora Kaczek*)
Felix Bressart (*Pirovitch*)
William Tracy (*Pepi Katona*)
Inez Courtney (*Ilona Novotni*)
Sarah Edwards (*woman customer buying a belt*)
Edwin Maxwell (*doctor*)
Charles Halton (*detective*)
Charles Smith (*Rudy, new errand boy*)
Grace Hayle (*plump cigar box customer*) *
Charles Arnt (*policeman*) *
Renie Riano (*customer for bags with zippers*) *
William Edmunds (*waiter*) *
Mary Carr (*grandmother*) *
Mabel Colcord (*Aunt Anna*) *
Claire DuBrey, Ruth Warren, Joan Blair,
Mira McKinney, Gertrude Simpson (*customers*) *

NEW & RE-RELEASES

Petite Maman

Continues from Fri 26 Nov

Rebel Dykes

Continues from Fri 26 Nov

The Shop around the Corner

From 3 December

Swan Song

From Fri 17 Dec

USA 1940©

99 mins

* Uncredited

A BFI release

The screening on Fri 3 Dec 18:10 will feature a pre-recorded introduction by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Apartment

Wed 1 Dec 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by critic and improviser Tara Judah); Mon 13 Dec 14:30; Wed 22 Dec 20:40; Tue 28 Dec 18:10; Thu 30 Dec 20:30

Remember the Night

Thu 2 Dec 14:30; Mon 27 Dec 13:00; Thu 30 Dec 18:00

Meet Me in St Louis

Fri 3 Dec 20:45; Sun 19 Dec 12:20; Wed 22 Dec 18:00; Tue 28 Dec 12:20

Miracle on 34th Street

Sat 4 Dec 15:50; Sat 11 Dec 18:00; Fri 17 Dec 14:30

A Christmas Tale (Un conte de Noël)

Sun 5 Dec 17:50; Tue 28 Dec 15:15

Scrooge (aka A Christmas Carol)

Mon 6 Dec 18:30; Thu 16 Dec 21:00; Fri 17 Dec 18:20; Sat 18 Dec 18:10; Sun 19 Dec 15:40; Mon 20 Dec 18:10; Tue 21 Dec 14:30

Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas

Tue 7 Dec 18:30; Sat 11 Dec 16:00; Tue 21 Dec 21:00; Thu 23 Dec 20:45

Gremlins

Wed 8 Dec 17:50 (+ intro by Justin Johnson, Lead Programmer); Sat 18 Dec 20:45; Wed 22 Dec 20:45; Wed 29 Dec 20:50

Bad Santa

Fri 10 Dec 20:45; Mon 13 Dec 20:50; Fri 17 Dec 21:00

It's a Wonderful Life

From Sun 12 Dec – Thu 23 Dec

Tokyo Godfathers (Tokyo goddofazazu)

Tue 14 Dec 20:45; Mon 20 Dec 20:45

Carol

Wed 15 Dec 17:50; Mon 27 Dec 18:00; Thu 30 Dec 14:20

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