



IN THE EYES OF A SILENT STAR: THE FILMS OF ASTA NIELSEN

The Abyss + The ABC of Love

+ intro by season curator Pamela Hutchinson (Thursday 3 February only)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

'She tore a piece of quivering human flesh out and held it toward the light for all to see. Her amazing face had toward the end a tragic power without equal.' (Thomas Krag)

'She is all. She is the drunkard's vision and the hermit's dream.'
(Guillaume Apollinaire)

It was Asta Nielsen's first film performance in the 1910 Danish film *The Abyss* (*Afgrunden*) which inspired these panegyrics. These two poets were the first of many to laud the talents of the great Danish actress during her 22-year career. Her 76 films reveal a consistently high level of performance and a vast range of characters which made her one of the first, if not the first, and one of the greatest, if not the greatest, international screen stars of the 1910s and 1920s.

Siegfried Kracauer called her 'the most fascinating personality of the primitive era'. Lotte Eisner in *The Haunted Screen* refers to her as 'an intellectual of great refinement... the quintessence, the epitome of her era'. Béla Balázs wrote, 'Dip the flags before her, dip the flags before her, for she is unique.'

To all but a few film historians and scholars, however, Asta Nielsen's death in 1972 was noted, if at all, as merely the passing of a vaguely familiar figure from the cinema's dim beginnings. 63 years before then, in Apollinaire's words, 'a new light seemed to shine from the screen'.

Asta Nielsen had been working in the Danish theatre for nearly a decade before she made *The Abyss*. Since reading Ibsen's *Brand* at the age of eight, she had dreamed of being a great tragedienne. But the Copenhagen theatre directors would only cast her in character roles. She would not, they felt, be accepted as a leading lady. Her mouth was too thin, her nose was crooked, she had no figure, her voice was not a female alto but a male tenor.

So in 1910, after years of playing an 80-year-old farmer's wife one night and a French coquette the next, she had little to lose by accepting an offer from Urban Gad, a theatre art director, to act in a film he had written for her. Gad had secured 8,000 kronor backing from a theatre-owner friend – exactly enough for eight days shooting. *The Abyss* was made during the summer of 1910 in a deserted jail yard, on the streets of Copenhagen, and in the Frederiksberg Gardens. Only the cameraman, Alfred Lind (who also thought Nielsen should not have been given a leading role), had ever made a film, and he and Gad frequently quarrelled during the shooting.

Gad and Nielsen made no secret of the fact that they were making the film to attract the notice of the Copenhagen theatre establishment. But the theatre directors boycotted the premiere, held at the Kosmorama cinema on 12 September, 1910. Director and star hardly had time to commiserate with each other. As Asta Nielsen recalls in her autobiography: 'Soon the film was

being shown all over the world, and everywhere everyone agreed that... a turning point had been reached in the history of the cinema. The papers which had never reviewed films before now praised this first proof of film's claim to being an art form. In spite of the film being distributed without our names being mentioned on it, my name everywhere rose like a phoenix out of the ashes. Letters from all corners of the world began to pour in to me, the adventure of the film had become my reality.'

In *The Abyss*, Nielsen plays Magda, a young music teacher who becomes engaged to Knud, an engineer. On a trip to the country to meet his parents, her eye is caught by an advertisement for a travelling circus featuring the dashing, chap-clad cowboy, Mr Rudolf. She persuades Knud to take her to the circus, and Mr Rudolf is struck by his attractive admirer. That night, while rhapsodising over the debonair entertainer, Magda is startled to see him climbing through her bedroom window. With a profession of everlasting love and a fiery kiss, Mr Rudolf carries her away to join his nomadic life. Hero soon turns to villain, however, as we learn that Mr Rudolf showers his affections on any female within striking distance. All attempts to contain her roving lover having failed, Magda seizes his lasso and coils it round him. Then, in what for 1910 must have been a scandalously erotic dance, she declares both her passion and her desperation, grinding her body against his, her expression an ecstatic trance. Apart from temporary immobility, however, Magda's dance has little effect on Mr Rudolf. Because of his extra-curricular activities he is soon fired from the circus, and Magda finds herself supporting an unemployed cowboy by playing the piano in the park. One day her former fiancé happens along and arranges to meet her. Mr Rudolf bursts in and begins striking Magda, and in a fit of rage she stabs him to death. The final shot shows Magda being led down the stairs to a waiting police wagon.

The plot of *The Abyss* is memorable for two reasons. First, it contains the standard elements of successful films from 1910 to now: sex and violence. Secondly, its theme of the bored, middle-class fun-seeker lured to ruin by the glittering world of cabaret and circus is the prototype for a number of later films, particularly German films of the 20s: *The Street*, *Joyless Street*, *The Blue Angel*, etc.

But even in 1910 *The Abyss* would hardly have stirred a ripple of interest had it not been for the acting of Asta Nielsen. Her style was in direct opposition to the reigning technique of exaggerated gesticulation. After killing Mr Rudolf, for example, instead of indulging in wild breast-beating she walks towards the camera in the last scene in an almost somnambulistic trance, her expression hardly changing throughout the sustained shot; yet – as Thomas Krag said – her face has 'a tragic power without equal'. Hers was a restrained, naturalistic style, her frugal use of external gesture riveting attention on her expressive face. To quote Apollinaire again: 'She laughs like a girl completely happy, and her eyes know of things so tender and shy that one dare not speak of them.'

Even in her first film she demonstrated knowledge of her characters down to, as she called it, 'the last externals'. This knowledge, coupled with her great improvisational talents, manifests itself in the illuminating though unobtrusive touch which pushes the character into three dimensions. The rope-dance in *The Abyss*, for instance, was largely improvisational, and the combination of ecstatic mask and frenzied dance perfectly sums up the character of Magda at that point in the action. [...]

In 1916 in Germany she made a series of films for Neutral Films, of which the best were **The ABC of Love** (*Das Liebes ABC*) and *The Eskimo Baby* (*Das Eskimobaby*), both comedies. She found comedy difficult; she remembered being ‘completely devoid of any trace of humour at all’ during her stage training in Copenhagen. It was more likely that her sense of the comic was buried, requiring the ego-boost of *The Abyss* and the self-confidence of continued success to bring it to the surface. What we see on the screen is far from forced, and her acting is so self-assured that one might think she had come into film after years in the music-hall. The character which emerges from her comedies is the unstoppable extrovert, constantly plotting and endowed with more energy and determination than all the other characters put together.

Robert C. Allen, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1973

Pamela Hutchinson is a freelance writer, critic, film historian and curator based on the south coast of England. She writes for *Sight and Sound*, *Criterion*, *Indicator*, the *Guardian* and *Empire* and regularly appears on BBC radio. Her publications include the BFI Film Classic on *Pandora’s Box* and *30-Second Cinema*, as well as essays in several edited collections. She indulges her passion for silent cinema at SilentLondon.co.uk

THE ABC OF LOVE (DAS LIEBES ABC)

Director: Magnus Stifter
Production Company: Berlin Neutral-Film GmbH
Assistant Director: Ernst Köner
Screenplay: Louis Levy, Martin Jörgensen
Cinematography: Carl Ferdinand Fischer
Art Director: Fritz Seyffert

Cast

Asta Nielsen (*Lis*)
Ludwig Trautmann (*Philip von Dobbern*)
Magnus Stifter (*Graf von Kiesel*)

Germany 1916
42 mins

Restoration of reconstructed version from 2011
by Danske Filminstitut

**With live piano accompaniment by
Stephen Horne**

THE ABYSS (AFGRUNDEN)

Director: Urban Gad
Made in Co-operation with: Hjalmar Davidsen
Production Company: Kosmorama K/S Production
Screenplay by: Urban Gad
Photography: Alfred Lind

Cast

Asta Nielsen (*Magda Vang*)
Poul Reumert (*Rudolf Stern, circus performer*)
Robert Dinesen (*Knud Svane, Magda’s fiancé*)
Emilie Sannom (*Lilly d’Estrelle, singer*)
Oscar Stribolt (*waiter*)
Arne Weel (*garden guest*)
Hans Neergaard (*Peder Svane, vicar*)
Hulda Didrichsen (*vicar’s wife*)

Denmark 1910
37 mins

Digitally restored in 2004 by Danske Filminstitut

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The Abyss (Afgrunden) + The ABC of Love (Das Liebes ABC)

Thu 3 Feb 20:30 (+ intro by season curator Pamela Hutchinson); Fri 11 Feb 18:20

Zapata’s Gang (Zapatás Bande) + The Eskimo Baby (Das Eskimobaby)

Fri 4 Feb 18:00; Sat 12 Feb 18:00

The Black Dream (Den sorte Drøm)

Fri 4 Feb 20:40; Sat 12 Feb 15:40

Dora Brandes

Sat 5 Feb 15:20; Thu 17 Feb 18:00 (+ intro)

The Queen of the Stock Exchange (Die Börsenkönigin) + The Guinea Pig (Das Versuchskaninchen)

Sat 5 Feb 18:00; Thu 17 Feb 20:40

Towards the Light (Mod Lyset) + Asta Nielsen

Wed 23 Feb 18:10; Sun 27 Feb 15:50

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