



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

Zapata's Gang + Eskimo Baby

Asta Nielsen was perhaps surprisingly adept at broad comedy, though there's always a transgressive twist. In **Zapata's Gang**, she plays an actor, as she often would, in self-reflexive reference to her own celebrity. On location to shoot a film about bandits, Nielsen and her crew run into a real band of robbers who steal their clothes, forcing them to change into their outlaw costumes. While cross-dressed as a brigand, Nielsen gets involved with admirers of both sexes.

The Eskimo Baby features one of Nielsen's most full-throttle comic performances in the fish-out-of-water mode. In this romp that bears no relation to geographical authenticity, Nielsen plays a young Inuit woman brought to Berlin by an Arctic explorer, marvelling at the madness of big-city life.

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Asta Nielsen 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 (*Jugend und Tollheit*, *Zapatas Bande*, *Vortreppe-Hintertreppe*, *Das Liebes ABC* and *Eskimobaby* among others) is the unstoppable extrovert, constantly plotting and endowed with more energy and determination than all the other characters put together.

In most of the comedies, the humour springs from an incongruity between the character Nielsen plays and the situation. In *Eskimobaby* she plays an Eskimo brought back by a young Arctic explorer to his upper-class home. In *The ABC of Love* she is a young woman who teaches her Caspar Milquetoast boyfriend the ways of the world by going out on the town disguised as his brother. In *Engelein* she is an 18-year-old girl who has to masquerade as a 14-year-old when her uncle comes to visit. Whether as a man, a child, an Eskimo or a highway robber (*Zapatas Bande*), she usually invades a stuffy, middle-class environment and turns it on its ear – not through burlesque or slapstick but by behaving more or less normally for the character she is playing. Had she decided to concentrate on comedy rather than tragedy and melodrama, she might well have developed into one of the finest comediennes of her age.

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

ZAPATA'S GANG (ZAPATAS BANDE)

Director: Urban Gad

Production Company: Projektions A-G Union

Screenplay: Urban Gad

Directors of Photography: Axel Graatkjær, Karl Freund

Production Designer: Fritz Seyffert

Cast

Asta Nielsen

Fred Immler

Senta Eichstaedt

Adele Reuter-Eichberg

Germany 1913/14

42 mins

Restored in 2006 by the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung,
digitised in 2014

Live piano accompaniment

by Cyrus Gabrysch on Fri 4 Feb

Costas Fotopoulos on Sat 12 Feb

THE ESKIMO BABY (DAS ESKIMOBABY)

Director: Walter Schmidhässler

Production Company: Neutral-Film GmbH

Screenplay: Louis Levy, Martin Jørgensen

Director of Photography: Carl Ferdinand Fischer

Cast

Asta Nielsen (*Eskimo*)

Freddy Wingardh (*Knud Prætorius*)

Germany 1916/18

66 mins

Restored in 2000 by Danske Filminstitut and Deutsche Kinemathek

IN THE EYES OF A SILENT STAR: THE FILMS OF ASTA NIELSEN**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 (Zapatas 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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