



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

Towards the Light + Asta Nielsen

Towards the Light

The last film that Nielsen ever made in Denmark is this captivating religious melodrama in which she plays a wealthy countess who strings along a series of suitors even though she's fallen in love with a baron. When her thoughtless flirtations turn out to have dreadful consequences and she learns her lover's terrible secret, can the countess redeem her wasteful life by turning to God?

Asta Nielsen

The only film Nielsen ever directed is this documentary self-portrait from 1968 in which the actress reflects on her life and magnificent career in conversation with the Danish actor Axel Strøbye. Watch as the celebrated tragedian poignantly sheds her final tear for the camera.

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Meeting Asta Nielsen in 1950

At a time when sex appeal was all that was wanted in the flickers, Asta Nielsen showed a bony figure and a long and unpretty face, but she broke all the rules of her day and also of her future when she became the world's greatest star – by the sheer fascination of her art of acting: she introduced stylized acting into a hodgepodge of low naturalism and plain amateurishness. Purpose and form of her acting showed off the accidental nature of the crowd photographed as her partners. She was as masterful in tragedy as she was in comedy, and never was she conventional. Unfortunately she has not appeared in a picture that was great in itself, but all of them were carried by her unique personality and the unforgettable beauty of her gesturing.

Most of her pictures were made in Germany (notably a silent version of *Hamlet* and Pabst's *Joyless Street*), but she refused to work under Nazi rule and returned in 1937 to her Danish fatherland, leaving behind her house and two-thirds of her money according to the Nazi rules of that time. She has not done a thing since her return to Copenhagen. Her funds running low, she asked the government for a licence to run a cinema. It has been refused to her several times. The reason: she is considered a 'German actress' because she became famous in pictures made in Germany.

This does not sound like a convincing or just reason, and Asta Nielsen's bitterness is understandable. I saw her in her Copenhagen flat, a couple of blocks away from Carl Dreyer's. It is full of large and beautiful antiques, but somehow cold and empty. And there is Asta herself: she still wears her world-renowned bangs, but her hair is not jet black any more. It is reddish by a hair-dyer's favour. Face and figure have rounded themselves a bit, but there are still the large burning black eyes of hers, the expressive hands and their strange and beautiful gesturing, and the young, stormy temperament of the great artist. I admire the delicately shaped nose of hers, the pointed chin with the slight and joking pouch underneath. Asta Nielsen is older now, but she is

quite unchanged in temper and in the way of her own and very personal beauty. She has only to begin to speak, and there is all of her and no day has passed.

But Asta Nielsen, who scarcely had an equal on the screen, is forgotten. For sixteen years, exactly as long as the day of Hitler's seizure of power, she has not made a picture. The Danes have arbitrarily declared her a German and the Germans have kicked her out because she did not conform with Nazidom. A few years ago she wrote her memoirs – an important part of motion picture history. The book was published in Denmark and became a great success, because even the younger generation that had never seen her, had heard her fabulous name. No doubt, Asta Nielsen is able to-day to show new generations of audiences and players how motion picture acting can be as delicate and refined as the description of a sundown by a Chinese painter. She would still be not only the greatest actress, but also the greatest teacher.

John H. Winge, *Sight and Sound*, April 1950

TOWARDS THE LIGHT (MOD LYSET)

Director: Holger-Madsen

Production Company: Nordisk Films Kompagni

Screenplay: Holger-Madsen

Director of Photography: Sophus Wangøe

Cast

Asta Nielsen

Augusta Blad

Alf Blütecher

Frederik Jacobsen

Denmark 1919

62 mins

With thanks to: Karola Gramann - Kinothek Asta Nielsen

Live piano accompaniment by Neil Brand on Wed 23 Feb and
Cyrus Gabrysch on Sun 27 Feb

ASTA NIELSEN

Director: Asta Nielsen

Production Company: Laterna Film

Screenplay: Asta Nielsen

Director of Photography: Peter Roos

Editor: Merete Neergaard

Composer: Morten Slæbo

Sound: Knud Kristensen

With

Asta Nielsen

Poul Reumert

Axel Strøbye

Denmark 1968

28 mins

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

Towards the Light (Mod Lyset) + Asta Nielsen Wed 23 Feb 18:10;
Sun 27 Feb 15:50

In the Eyes of the Law (Nach dem Gesetz) Tue 1 Mar 20:50;
Mon 7 Mar 18:15

Hamlet Wed 2 Mar 18:15; Sat 5 Mar 17:00 (+ Intro by
Prof Judith Buchanan)

Earth Spirit (Erdgeist) Sat 5 Mar 12:10 (+ intro by Season Curator
Pamela Hutchinson); Wed 9 Mar 20:50

The Decline (AKA Downfall) (Der Absturz) Sat 5 Mar 14:30 (+ intro by
season curator Pamela Hutchinson); Tue 15 Mar 18:20

The Joyless Street (Die freudlose Gasse) Sun 6 Mar 17:40 (+ intro by
BFI Inclusion Team Coordinator, Miranda Gower-Qian); Wed 16 Mar
18:00

Impossible Love (Unmögliche Liebe)
Wed 9 Mar 18:20; Tue 15 Mar 20:45

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