



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

# Hamlet

'I am telling all my friends to see this truly great picture and I could never tire of seeing it. It is thrillingly intellectual and passionately human, and she is great, GREAT, GREAT.'

(The actress Julia Arthur, New York 1921)

Asta Nielsen was born in 1881 in Copenhagen, the daughter of a washerwoman and a blacksmith. When she was 14 her father died and she became the family's breadwinner. After working as an extra in opera houses, she studied drama and became a character actress with minor theatre companies. Then in 1909 a would-be film director, Urban Gad, asked her to appear in *Afgrunden* (*The Abyss*) in which Nielsen played a schoolteacher pushed into erotic obsession and violence; it was an unexpected sensation because of her extraordinary blend of psychological intensity and expressive movement. In 1911 she and Gad were invited to work in Germany. She was paid more than any other silent screen performer, and soon Asta Nielsen was the most popular film star in the world.

Her independence and her androgynous style made her a role model for young women, especially in Weimar Germany (Dietrich and Garbo were both inspired by her). She introduced such iconoclastic characters as Ibsen's Hedda and Nora, Strindberg's Miss Julie and Wedekind's Lulu to the new mass cinema audience, and onscreen she deliberately explored the roles open to contemporary women – from artists to shopgirls to militant suffragettes. She frequently cross-dressed, mocking modern male behaviour, and she systematically developed what she called a 'silent language' of gesture that would 'make the spirit visible'. Her phenomenally detailed acting embraced realism and expressionism, tragedy and farce. It seemed inevitable that she should one day turn to Shakespeare (indeed she planned a feminist *Taming of the Shrew*), and when she came across a half-forgotten book called *The Mystery of Hamlet* (1880) by Edward P. Vining (a railroad engineer stepping outside his field), Asta Nielsen's next step was inevitable.

Since the late 18th century many great actresses had chosen to risk their careers by playing Hamlet, including Sarah Siddons, Charlotte Cushman and Sarah Bernhardt. Edward Vining argued that Hamlet actually is a woman, reared from birth in male disguise to maintain the royal family's hold on the Danish crown. This, he claimed, explained everything – the reluctance to use violence, the hysteria, the strangely close relationship with Horatio... In 1920 Nielsen founded her own production company, Art Film, and she decided to make *Hamlet* her signature project, with a script by Erwin Gelpi developing themes from Saxo-Grammaticus (Shakespeare's source) and with fellow Dane Sven Gade as director. Together they created a unique tragi-comic fantasia on Shakespeare and gender identity in the aftermath of World War I.

In her autobiography, Nielsen noted with satisfaction that though it provoked a scandal (she put *Berliner Tageblatt's* review on the posters: 'Oh, horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible...') her *Hamlet* was Germany's biggest box-office success of 1921. In America, it was praised to the skies: 'Asta Nielsen seems to us the greatest artist on the screen. There is a delicacy, a power, an artistry

in her work which makes it a revelation of what acting for the films can be.' One critic judged it 'the most fascinating picture I have ever seen'. Unfortunately the New York screening coincided with a xenophobic Hollywood trade-war campaign against German films, including *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*; *Hamlet* was kept out of major cinemas.

When sound came, Asta Nielsen retired from films; when Hitler came to power, she left Germany. Soon her astonishing *Hamlet* was forgotten. In the 1990s film historians and Shakespearean scholars such as Ann Thompson and Lawrence Danson rediscovered Nielsen's *Hamlet*, and in 2005 the Deutsches Filminstitut purchased a vintage print of the film. Amazingly, it was in colour...

Gade shot *Hamlet* in black and white (using two cameras simultaneously to create 'German' and 'American' release versions), but some tinted prints were made using a stencil process. It was assumed that no coloured copies had survived, but the 2005 discovery made an ambitious digital restoration possible. Although the Filminstitut print was incomplete, a French archive copy was used to replace missing and damaged sequences. Lost intertitles were recreated using the censors' records. The colour tinting adds another dimension. Scenes which looked underpopulated or awkward in black and white take on new beauty or new harshness. The mud-coloured battle scenes that open the film evoke the war that had ended only months earlier. Impassioned reds, pastoral greens and above all the glacial blue tints that isolate Hamlet in grief and desolation expand the characters' emotions.

This version is slightly longer than the archive prints screened earlier, yet it plays faster because restored caption-cards impose a strong dynamic Act-structure. One major difference is already controversial. There are more scenes for Ophelia, and they suggest that Hamlet has real romantic feelings for her. Evidently Art Film decided to trim these in other prints to focus on the central relationship between Hamlet and Horatio. As a result Ophelia became virtually a comic character, deluded and derided by Nielsen's satirical portrait of raffish masculinity. Restoring the longer Hamlet-Ophelia relationship prompts fascinating questions. Did Art Film originally assume there must be a sentimental bond between 'hero' and heroine, which they then realised was illogical and redundant? Or did Asta Nielsen look too closely for comfort into the complexities of same-sex desire?

**Tony Howard, 2011**

**Professor Howard (University of Warwick) is the author of *Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in Theatre, Film and Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 2007)**

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## HAMLET

*Directors:* Sven Gade, Heinz Schall

*Production Company:* Art Film

*Producer:* Asta Nielsen

*Scenario:* Erwin Gepard

*Based on the play by:* William Shakespeare

*Photography:* Curt Courant, Axel Graatkjær

*Art Directors:* Sven Gade, Siegfried Wroblewsky

*Costume Designers:* Hugo Baruch, Leopold Verch

*Music:* Joachim Bärenz

Digitisation of the print restored in 2006 by the  
DFF – Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum

Piano accompaniment will be by Cyrus Gabrysch on Wed 2 Mar  
and Meg Morley on Sat 5 Mar

The screening on Sat 5 Mar will be introduced by Prof Judith Buchanan

## Cast

Asta Nielsen (*Hamlet*)

Paul Conradi (*King Hamlet*)

Mathilde Brandt (*Queen Gertrude*)

Eduard von Winterstein (*Claudius*)

Heinz Stieda (*Horatio*)

Hans Junkermann (*Polonius*)

Anton de Verdier (*Laertes*)

Lilly Jacobsson (*Ophelia*)

Fritz Achterberg (*Fortinbras*)

Germany 1921

110 mins

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

### 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

## SEEN & HEARD: DARING FEMALE COMING-OF-AGE FILMS

### Skate Kitchen

Tue 1 Mar 20:40; Sun 13 Mar 20:45

### Divines

Wed 2 Mar 20:50; Tue 15 Mar 20:50

### Jinn

Sat 5 Mar 17:45; Tue 8 Mar 21:00

### 37 Seconds (37 sekanzu)

Sat 5 Mar 20:30; Sat 12 Mar 20:45

### Water Lilies (Naissance des pieuvres)

Sun 6 Mar 18:45; Mon 14 Mar 20:50

### Marie Antoinette

Tue 8 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by Hannah Strong, Little White Lies Digital  
Editor and author of *Sofia Coppola: Forever Young*); Sun 13 Mar 18:00

### Somersault

Fri 11 Mar 20:50; Mon 14 Mar 18:10

## THE CAMERA IS OURS:

### BRITAIN'S WOMEN DOCUMENTARY MAKERS

#### From Beside the Seaside to the English Inn: Restoration Programme 1 + intro by BFI curator Ros Cranston

Thu 3 Mar 18:15

#### For Sama + intro by director Waad Al-Kateab + Children of the Ruins

Thu 3 Mar 20:30

#### The Camera Is Ours: Study Day + Independent Miss Craigie + Q&A with director Lizzie Thynne and producer Hollie Price

Sat 5 Mar 12:00-17:00

#### From the Sea to the Land Beyond

Sat 5 Mar 18:15

#### Seniors Free Archive Matinee: White Riot + discussion

Mon 7 Mar 14:00

#### Cow

Tue 8 Mar 20:40

#### The Hermit of Treig + Q&A with director Lizzie MacKenzie

Fri 11 Mar 18:10

#### From Birth-Day to Something Nice to Eat: Restoration Programme 2 + intro by BFI curator Ros Cranston

Mon 14 Mar 18:15

#### Hostile + director Sonita Gale in conversation with journalist Jon Snow

Tue 15 Mar 18:00

## NEW RELEASES

### La Mif (The Fam)

Continues from Fri 25 Feb

### Rebel Dread

From Fri 4 Mar

### Ali & Ava

From Fri 11 Mar; Tue 15 March 14:00 Seniors' matinee + discussion

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