



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

The Joyless Street

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

By the mid-1920s, films of the calibre of *Vanina* and *Erdgeist* were becoming scarce. Many studios had fallen into the hands of greedy distributors, and American interests had invaded the German industry, reducing some domestic producers to grinding out 'quota films' necessary for American imports. As Asta Nielsen described the situation:

'The films I was forced to act in for a while were not only pure film-hawking, but were ground out in the studios at breakneck speed for reasons of economy. Often the photographer was not allowed to adjust his lighting and long shots and close-ups whirled among each other in the same constant light. The same decoration served widely different interiors, only from another angle of view. The result ... was technically at the 1908 level.'

It was fortunate, therefore, that G. W. Pabst, wanting to add some 'names' to his production of *The Joyless Street* (1925) after deciding on an unknown (Garbo) for one of the leads, turned to Asta Nielsen and Werner Krauss.

Nielsen's role is a development of her Magda in *The Abyss*. She plays Maria Lechner, a girl caught up in the poverty of postwar Vienna who sells herself to a rich speculator so that her boyfriend can make a profit on the stock exchange. She discovers him being unfaithful, however, strangles her rival, and resigns herself to being the speculator's kept woman, letting the police think her boyfriend committed the murder. But a spark of conscience returns and she confesses the crime. Running parallel with the Maria plot is that of Greta Rumfort (Garbo), who flirts with the twilight world of Mrs Greifer's nightclub but never succumbs, thanks to the somewhat *deus ex machina* appearance of an American Red Cross lieutenant.

The real poignancy of the film comes from Maria, who although she does sell out to the parasites of society, shows herself to be the only really moral character by choosing to accept the consequences of her actions. Whereas the moral nadir of *The Abyss* occurred with the rope-dance, in *The Joyless Street* it comes in a brilliant scene in which the speculator enters a shady hotel room accompanied by a frizzy-haired woman in a see-through, sequined dress. The woman turns towards the camera and is seen to be Maria, a vacant, lifeless expression on her gaudily painted face.

Because of its mutilation by censors in various countries, *The Joyless Street* did little to enhance Nielsen's career. Her role was apparently completely excised in the American version, and the programme notes of the London Film Society (its only British screening until 1935) bear witness to its butchering: 'The action is so complex and tangled that there is little opportunity for detailed characterisation.' After an almost two-year absence from the screen, during which she toured in a play, she returned to do the last of the 'street' films, *Dirnentragodie* (*Tragedy of the Street*, 1927), for Bruno Rahn.

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

THE JOYLESS STREET (DIE FREUDLOSE GASSE)

Director: G.W. Pabst

Production Company:

Sofar Filmproduktion

Assistant Director: Mark Sorkin

Assistant Director: Anatole Litvak *

Screenplay: Willy Haas

Based on the novel by: Hugo Bettauer

Photography: Guido Seeber, Curt Oertel, Walter Robert Lach

Editors: Mark Sorkin, G.W. Pabst *

Art Director: Hans Sohnle, Otto Erdmann

Medical Consultant: Nicolaus Kaufmann

Germany 1925

151 mins

* Uncredited

A reconstruction by Filmmuseum München

With live piano accompaniment by

John Sweeney (Sun 6 Mar)

Costas Fotopoulos (Wed 16 Mar)

The screening on Sun 6 Mar will be introduced by

BFI Inclusion Team Coordinator, Miranda Gower-Qian

Cast

Jaro Fürth (*Councillor Josef Rumfort*)

Greta Garbo (*Grete Rumfort*)

Loni Nest (*Mariandl Rumfort*)

Asta Nielsen (*Maria Lechner*)

Max Kohlhase (*Mr Lechner*)

Sylvia Torf (*Mrs Lechner*)

Karl Ettlinger (*Director General Rosenow*)

Ilka Grüning (*Mrs Rosenow*)

Countess Agnes Esterhazy (*Regina Rosenow*)

Alexander Mursky (*Dr Leid, the lawyer*)

Tamara (*Lia Leid*)

Henry Stuart (*Egon Stirner*)

Robert Garrison (*Don Alfonso Ganez*)

Einar Hanson (*Lieutenant Davy, USA*)

Mario Cusmich (*Colonel Irving, USA*)

Valeska Gert (*Frau Greifer*)

Countess Tolstoi (*Miss Henriette*)

Frau Markstein (*Mrs Merkl*)

Werner Krauß (*Josef Gieringer, the butcher*)

Hertha von Walther (*Else*)

Otto Reinwald (*Else's husband*)

Gregory Chmara (*waiter at Hotel Merkl*)

Raskatoff (*Trebitsch*)

Krafft-Raschig (*American soldier*)

Marlene Dietrich (*extra in butcher's queue*)

Maria Forescu, Eugen Burg

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

Cultural partner



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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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