



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Day of Wrath (Vredens dag)

Though set in 17th-century Denmark, Dreyer's masterpiece feels strangely modern in its interest in the plight of women in patriarchal society. Cursed by a woman he sent to the stake for witchcraft, an elderly parson suspects his young wife has become estranged from him after his son returns home... Pleasingly ambivalent regarding the women's actions and capabilities, the film achieves great emotional intensity.

Day of Wrath is generally regarded to be one of Dreyer's greatest works. Its mood is sombre and intense; the narrative pace is steady and deliberate, presenting horrific events with chilling restraint; and it deals with all his prime concerns: religious faith, the supernatural, social intolerance, innocence and guilt, and the clash between society and the individual, especially the individual woman.

This is a dark and powerful tale of love and betrayal, and of a community gripped by an obsessive fear of witchcraft. It is adapted from a 1909 stage play, *Anne Pedersdotter*, by Norwegian writer Hans Wiers-Jenssen. Dreyer said that he saw in it 'possibilities for great monumental visual effects four or five figures as sharply defined as medieval wood sculptures'. He used light and darkness to express moral and emotional concerns, with severe, black-garbed figures set against stark white walls, and opposing lines of force creating tensions within the frame.

In early 17th-century rural Denmark an old woman is hunted down and burned as a witch, despite the efforts of the parson's young wife, Anne, to save her. Anne (whose own mother had been suspected of being a witch), is possessed by a secret passion for her stepson, a young man of her own age, and when her elderly husband dies she finds herself accused of using witchcraft to cause his death.

Seen by some as an allegory of the Nazi occupation of Denmark and by others as an indictment of male domination and suppression of strong women, *Day of Wrath* has an extraordinary emotional intensity achieved by superb performances, and is a stunning example of the humanity, artistic power and technical mastery of Dreyer's art.

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Contemporary reviews

Day of Wrath, Carl Dreyer's great film, the result of a patient calculation and consummate artistry which never intrude upon but always emphasise the inner emotions of the small group of his characters, is the most distinguished piece of cinema to appear on our screen since the War.

Carl Dreyer's two masterpieces *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *Day of Wrath* are separated in production by 15 years, yet they are linked in theme and style. *The Passion of Joan of Arc* was one of the rarer films of the late silent period, anticipating in its camera-technique and characterisation the period of sound which was just being born. *Day of Wrath* dispenses with all adventitious aids, such as background music. In an interview with the writer, Dreyer said he was looking ahead in this film to the day when the technique of the sound film would be so assured that complete simplicity of treatment would be sufficient to enable the director to achieve the revelation of character, the emotions being so strong that they do not require the support of background music to give them stamina.

Day of Wrath uses little elaboration of set design, yet all is perfect and in keeping, the old woman's hut, the Rembrandt-like backgrounds in the Pastor's house, the vaults of the Church. The costumes, tailored in black and set off by stiff white ruffs, are as severe as the religious principles of the period. The actors and actresses were chosen with the greatest care, for the face in the cinema, Dreyer maintains, is the window to the soul. No artist uses make-up: the structure of his face and the nature of his temperament are prime reasons for Dreyer's choice of an actor to portray a character. No one can forget Mlle Falconetti's face in which lay the heart of Dreyer's earlier film. In *Day of Wrath* the spiritual wrestling of conscience lies in the ascetic features of Pastor Absolon; amorous pride in those of his wife in love with her step-son.

Dreyer's camera moves relentlessly over the scene, his microphone recording the rich though sparse and essential dialogue, rich because it enables the actors to weigh it with significance and meaning, to merge it with the emotions expressed by their faces. Though this film deals with a grim theme of the fear of witchcraft in 17th century Denmark and no detail of the torture of the old witch seems to be omitted, there is no scene, no shot in which an act of torture is photographed: all is done by sounds and cries, and the final act of burning is achieved by one terrible shot in which the old woman falls forward from a height bound on a stretcher, and this alone, by skilful cutting, contains all the terror of actual burning.

Day of Wrath is another milestone in the cinema's slow passage to maturity of artistic expression: where most are still apprentices, Dreyer is a master of the art of the film.

Roger Manvell, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1946-7

This dark and sombre story is told with all the humanity and technical power of Carl Dreyer's art, which was first generally acclaimed in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) and which has been widely seen since. The two films are closely related in spirit and technique. Camera and lighting peer into the recesses of suffering revealed in faces deeply troubled. The camera turns slowly round the simple settings to discover people dressed and grouped like a picture by Rembrandt or one of the Flemish masters. Every scene proceeds with a majestic slowness of pace, each point is calculated (like the faintly ticking clock behind the scene when Absalon in his distress is consoled by his mother), and yet the precision of technique never leaves the scene cold.

Dreyer is the artist of character in suffering. Each person in the drama is strong in personality: the old witch with her half-naked body shaken before her torturers, her wits half crazed with fear of death; the Pastor's mother, her mouth pursed and twisted with hatred of her daughter, a Rembrandt-like portrait in her bonnet of black and white; the Pastor himself, lean in his black gown, the lines of his face deep with spiritual self-torture offset by the harsh pattern of his stiff white ruff; the girl Anne, restrained and modest until her love brings defiance to her manner and witchcraft to her thoughts; the Pastor's son, his face masked with the lines and hollows of a man assailed with doubts beyond his years. In the portrayal of these people lies the root of Dreyer's artistic power, using every aid of lighting and close-up to stress their emotions. Each scene proceeds at a speed natural to its searching self-revelation, unhurried and strong.

No short analysis can do justice to the continuous technical mastery of this film. *Day of Wrath* should be remembered permanently in the history of the cinema.

Monthly Film Bulletin, November 1946

DAY OF WRATH (VREDENS DAG)

Director: Carl Th. Dreyer
Production Company: Palladium (Copenhagen)
Producer: Tage Nielsen
Screenplay: Mogens Skot-Hansen, Poul Knudsen, Carl Th. Dreyer
From the novel and play by: Wiers Jønsen
Photography: Karl Andersson
Editor: Edith Schlüssel
Art Director: Erik Aaes
Designs for Sets and Costumes by: Lis Friberg
Costumes: N. Sandt Jensen, Olga Thomsen
Music: Poul Schierbeck
Psalm Texts: Paul La Cour
Violin Solo: Erling Bloch
Cello Solo: Hans Kassow
Sound: Erik Rasmussen
Mixer: Johan Ankerstjerne
Historical Adviser: Kaj Uldall

Cast

Thorkild Roose (*Absalon Pederssøn*)
Lisbeth Movin (*Anne Pederssøn*)
Sigrid Neiiendam (*Merete Pederssøn*)
Preben Lerdorff Rye (*Martin Pederssøn*)
Albert Høeberg (*bishop*)
Olaf Ussing (*Laurentius*)
Anne Svierkier (*Marthe Herlof*)
Dagmar Wildenbrück
Emilie Nielsen
Kirsten Andreasen
Sophie Knudsen
Harald Holst
Preben Neergaard
Emanuel Jørgensen
H. Chr. Sørensen

Denmark 1943
97 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

All the President's Men

Fri 1 Jul 20:25; Tue 5 Jul 18:00; Sat 9 Jul 17:45

Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)

Sat 2 Jul 11:50 (with live piano accompaniment); Fri 22 Jul 18:30 and
Mon 25 Jul 20:50 (with Edmund Meisel score)

Pandora's Box (Die Büchse der Pandora)

Sat 2 Jul 15:10 and Sat 16 Jul 12:20 (with Peer Raben score); Sun 31 Jul
15:20 (with live piano accompaniment)

Theorem (Teorema)

Sat 2 Jul 20:50; Mon 4 Jul 20:50; Tue 26 Jul 18:00

Rome Open City (Roma città aperta)

Sun 3 Jul 13:10; Mon 18 Jul 18:20; Wed 27 Jul 20:40

To Sleep with Anger

Wed 6 Jul 18:15 (+ intro); Fri 8 Jul 18:10

Day of Wrath (Vredens Dag)

Thu 7 Jul 18:15; Mon 11 Jul 20:30

Blue Velvet

Thu 7 Jul 20:40; Sun 17 Jul 18:30; Fri 29 Jul 20:40

Matewan

Fri 8 Jul 20:25; Tue 19 Jul 18:00

Manhunter

Fri 8 Jul 20:40; Thu 21 Jul 18:20; Sat 23 Jul 20:40

His Girl Friday

Sun 10 Jul 16:50; Wed 20 Jul 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew,
Programmer-at-Large); Thu 28 Jul 20:45

The Scarlet Empress

Wed 13 Jul 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sun
24 Jul 13:20

The Piano

Thu 14 Jul 14:20; Sat 23 Jul 17:50; Sat 30 Jul 11:45

Mandabi (The Money Order)

Fri 15 Jul 20:40; Wed 27 Jul 18:10

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goes down.

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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