



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Letter from an Unknown Woman

Introduced by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large (Wednesday 21 September only)

Producer John Houseman on 'Letter from an Unknown Woman'

Letter from an Unknown Woman is bittersweet Viennese. It is the confession of a woman who has been in love for most of her life with a man to whom she had meant so little that – though they have been intimate, in different ways, at three different times of their lives – he does not even remember her. The first two-thirds of our story were altogether romantic. They were a joy to work on. Joan Fontaine had proved in *Rebecca*, *Suspicion* and *Jane Eyre* that she was an expert at portraying the emotions of an adolescent girl in thrall to an older man. She had no difficulty at all in playing the teenage Lisa, crouched in the dark stairwell, listening to her idol playing Chopin upstairs in his room. And she was charming and moving as the passionate young Viennese girl giving herself without regret in a romantic ecstasy to the man she has worshipped for most of her life.

The third and last episode presented more serious hazards of writing and acting. The frame of Zweig's novella is a letter written by Lisa as she is dying; it is not a reproach but a profession of gratitude to the man who, without being aware of it, has given her all the love she has ever known. It is a literary device that was valid in print but seemed less convincing when it was transferred to the more specific realism of film. And Joan, with her poignant immaturity, ran into problems of credibility when she was called upon to play a European *femme du monde* in her thirties.

Koch was a sincere writer with a good sense of structure. Vienna was not his territory, but he had Max by his side to guide him and to devise some of the script's most imaginative moments. This was an atmosphere that Ophuls knew intimately and dearly loved: he used it in *Liebelei* and would use it again, years later, in *La Ronde*. All through production he was tireless and insatiable, to the point of exasperation, in his insistence upon authentic atmospheric detail. Above all I remember that touching, entirely original scene of Lisa's seduction in the mock-up compartment of a European railroad carriage with the painted Alpine scenery moving by outside on a slowly rolling canvas cyclorama propelled by a little man furiously pedalling a stationary bicycle.

Yet, as the film moved into its final stages, I detected a disturbing tone of discouragement and diminishing energy. Some of this had to do with Joan's performance; some was inherent in the form of Zweig's novella, to which Koch had scrupulously – perhaps too scrupulously – adhered. Some of it stemmed from Ophuls' mercurial temperament.

One night, during the last week of shooting, I got a call from him long after midnight. He begged me to drive out and meet him as soon as possible at an all-night joint in the Valley next to the studio. When I got there I found him plunged in raging gloom. We sat for two hours over drinks and coffee, then

walked around the back lot, where the dawn was coming up over our Viennese amusement park. Max informed me that he had spent the previous evening running the rough cut of our film and it was his sombre conclusion that our ending was downbeat, maudlin and wholly lacking in dramatic conviction. He blamed Zweig, Koch, Miss Fontaine and, most particularly, himself for our failure. Once in a while he wept, blew his nose and went on talking. There was truth in what he said, all the more since the censors in the Breen Office had taken much of the emotional shock out of Lisa's last moments with her lover. But at five in the morning, I found his attitude defeatist, self-indulgent and dangerous. I pointed out that it was too late in the day for him to be making these discoveries; that it was impossible, at this stage of the film, to reshape the ending without losing the essential quality of Zweig's story. I assured him that the film was beautiful; I did all I could to send him back on to the set in a less calamitous frame of mind. Three hours later I watched him riding a boom with his usual enthusiasm and that night he called to tell me that our rushes were wonderful.

In the fall of 1947 my future in the film business looked bright. I seemed to have not one winner, but two. While we were preparing and shooting *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, I had continued to work with Nick [Nicholas Ray] on the final editing and scoring of *Thieves Like Us*. In September we had two good previews, then cut the negative and began showing it to critics of the trades and magazines under its new title of *Your Red Wagon* (the title of a blues number in the film). Our first reviews were wonderful; Iris Barry gave us a special running at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and word began to get around that we had one of the sleepers of the year.

Then, overnight, disaster struck. Our film was scheduled to be released during the winter of 1947-48. But, before that, the trades carried the dark news one morning that RKO had been acquired by Howard Hughes. His first act was to get rid of Dore Schary and to reverse all arrangements made by the previous management. These included the release of our film, which mouldered in a studio vault for two years before it was released under the title *They Live by Night*. The magazines would not review it a second time or reprint their earlier notices. The daily press treated it as what it had become – a B-picture on the second half of a double bill.

This sabotage of my favourite picture left me with *Letter from an Unknown Woman* as my last hope of establishing my reputation as a serious filmmaker. The Doziers seemed happy; our San Francisco preview had gone well and I was beginning to get congratulatory letters from people whose opinions I valued – such as Preston Sturges and Joseph Losey.

My euphoria was short-lived. In the latter part of April, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* was given a hurried national release. It was the year of the Korean War and the national mood was violently anti-romantic. With few exceptions, our reviews were terrible. It took several years of European success to restore *Letter* to its honoured place in the canon of Max Ophuls' film work. In its day, it was an unmitigated disaster – critically and commercially – and a devastating defeat for us all.

Extracted from *Unfinished Business* by John Houseman, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1986

LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN

Director: Max Opuls [Ophuls]
Production Company: Rampart Productions
Presented by: William Dozier
Producer: John Houseman
Co-ordinator of Production: John Hambleton
Assistant Director: John F. Sherwood
Screenplay: Howard Koch
Based on the novel by: Stefan Zweig
Director of Photography: Frank Planer
Editor: Ted J. Kent
Art Director: Alexander Golitzen
Set Decorators: Russell A. Gausman, Ruby R. Levitt
Gowns: Travis Banton
Make-up: Bud Westmore
Hairstylist: Carmen Dirigo
Musical Score: Daniele Amfitheatrof
Orchestrations: David Tamkin
Technical Adviser: Paul Elbogen

uncredited

Production Manager: Edward K. Dodds
2nd Assistant Director: Les Warner
3rd Assistant Director: Mickey Bennett
Script Supervisor: Adele Cannon
Casting: Mildred Gusse
Special Photography: David S. Horsley
Matte Camera: Glenn Adams
Matte Camera Assistant: Robert Pierce
Camera Operators: Dave Ragin, Lloyd Ward
Camera Assistant: Walter Blummel
Dolly Grips: Lester Kahn, Arvid Woodin
Grips: Roland Smith, Ben Hawkins
Gaffer: Tom Oulette
Electrician: Tex Bellan
Stills: Bert Anderson, William Wallace
Supervising Art Director: Bernard Herzbrun
Set Decorator: Charlie Baker
Props: Wally Kirkpatrick, Earl Neal
Wardrobe: Virginia Tutwieler, Gene Coffin
Make-up: Louis La Cava, John Holden
Hairdresser: Helene Parrish
Piano Double for Louis Jourdan: Jakob Gimpel
Choreography: Bert Prival
Sound: Leslie I. Carey, Glenn F. Anderson
Sound Technician: Martin Brown
Boom Operator: Frank Gorbach
Horses/Carriages: Jim Phillips

Cast

Joan Fontaine (*Lisa Berndle*)
Louis Jourdan (*Stefan Brand*)
Mady Christians (*Frau Berndle*)
Marcel Journet (*Johann Stauffer*)
Art Smith (*John, Stefan's valet*)
Carol Yorke (*Marie*)
Howard Freeman (*Herr Kastner*)
John Good (*Lt Leopold von Kaltnegger*)
Leo B. Pessin (*Stefan Jr*)
Erskine Sanford (*porter*)
Otto Waldis (*concierge*)
Sonja Bryden (*Frau Spitzer*)

uncredited

Patricia Alphin (*Pretty*)
William Trenk (*Fritzel*)
Fred Nurney (*officer on street*)
Torben Meyer (*driver*)
Hermine Sterler (*mother superior*)
C.S. Ramsay-Hill (*Colonel Steindorf*)
Will Lee, William Hall, Paul Peter Szemere,
Sven Hugo Borg (*movers*)
Lotte Stein, Lisa Golm, Liesl Valetti, Mary Worth, James Shade,
Tom Costello (*musicians*)
Ilka Grüning (*ticket taker*)
Roland Varno, Norbert Schiller (*seconds*)
Leo Mostovoy, Shimen Ruskin (*older men*)
William Gould (*the burgomaster*)
Roy Gordon (*elderly man in uniform*)
Celia Lovsky, John Elliott (*flower vendors*)
Lester Sharpe, Jack George (*critics*)
Helen Spring, Edith Angold (*middle-aged women*)
Michael Mark (*customer*)
Al Eben, Bill Schroff, Hal Melone (*waiters*)
Lois Austin (*elderly woman*)
Kay Morley (*daughter*)
Mauritz Hugo (*young man*)
Countess Elektra Rozanska (*elegant lady*)
Irene Seidner (*Frau Mombert*)
Max Willenz (*baggage man*)
Edna Holland (*nun*)
Gordon Clark, William Vedder (*street singers*)
Betty Blythe (*Frau Kohner*)
Rex Lease (*station attendant*)
Walter Bonn (*Colonel Kohner*)
Bruce Riley, Robert W. Brown, Jack Worth (*officers*)
Blanche Obronka (*young woman*)
Erich von Schilling (*usher*)
Edmund Cobb (*carriage driver*)
Edwin Fowler (*dancing master*)
Ashley Cowan (*callow youth*)
Gabrielle Windsor (*ballet girl*)
Joe Garcia (*collector*)
John Bambury (*midget*)
Diane Lee Stewart, Doretta Johnson, Vera Stokes, Lorraine Gale
(*girl friends*)
Tay Dunn (*young officer*)
Polly Bailey (*passenger*)
Arthur Lovejoy (*footman*)
Frieda Stoll (*the burgomaster's wife*)
Paul Rochin (*Bavarian man*)
Joseph Kamaryt (*Bavarian mountain climber*)
Pietro Sosso (*coachman*)
Watson Downs (*conductor*)
Howard Mitchell (*man on streetcar*)
Sam Gilmore, Guy L. Shaw (*café patrons*)
June Wood (*cashier*)
Herbert Winters (*student*)
Jean Ransome (*maid*)
Roy Bross (*porter*)
Judith Woodbury (*model*)
Joe Ardao (*small man*)
Donald Chaffin (*pedestrian*)
Helen Dickson (*large woman*)
John McCallum (*store helper*)
Kurt Fuerberg (*butler*)
Manuel Paris (*Baron's second*)

USA 1948©

87 mins

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