



SILENT CINEMA

The Man without Desire

The Man without Desire

Directed by: Adrian Brunel
an Atlas Biocraft production
Producers: Ivor Novello, Miles Mander
Production Manager: Jack Ewen
Scenario: Frank Fowell
Story by: Adrian Brunel
From an idea by: Monckton Hoffe
Photography: Henry Harris
Editor: Adrian Brunel *
Architect [i.e. Set Design]:
Hugo Ballenstedt
Costumes: L.H. Nathan
Cast:
Ivor Novello (*Count Vittorio Dandolo*)
Nina Vanna (*Leonora/Genevra*)
Sergio Mari
(*Count Almoro/Count Gardi-Almoro*)
Christopher Walker
(*Simon Mawdesley/Robert*)
Dorothy Warren (*La Foscolina*)
Adrian Brunel (*the editor*)
Jane Dryden (*Luigia*)
UK 1923
92 mins

* Uncredited

With live piano accompaniment by
Stephen Horne

A BFI National Archive print

Library Talk: Adrian Brunel and British cinema of the 1920s

A journey through the career of the British filmmaker, with Dr Josephine Botting
Monday 17 April 2023 18:30
BFI Reuben Library

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+ intro by Josephine Botting, BFI Curator and author of *Adrian Brunel and British Cinema of the 1920s*, published by *Edinburgh University Press*.

One of the stranger films to emerge from Britain in the 1920s, *The Man without Desire* was the feature film debut of Adrian Brunel, better known today for a series of short burlesques, including *Crossing the Great Sagrada* (1925), and as a founder of the Film Society with Ivor Montagu and others.

Asked to direct a period drama set in Venice, Brunel, conscious that period could be a box-office turn-off, offered a compromise, with the early 18th Century Venetian story framed by events 200 years later. Despite a tight budget of £5,000, there were sufficient funds for location filming in Venice.

Studio and post-production work took place in Germany, and the film shows the influence of the emerging German expressionist films, notably *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (*Der Cabinet des Dr Caligari*, d. Robert Weine, 1919), whose somnambulist emissary, Cesare, is echoed in *The Man without Desire* by the magician-scientist's Indian manservant, and *Nosferatu* (d. F.W. Murnau, 1922). It's worth noting that Brunel's German visit came some two years before the first visit by the young Alfred Hitchcock.

As the title – which surprisingly made it past the censor – suggests, *The Man without Desire* concerns loss of sexual desire and, implicitly, impotence. At its centre is Ivor Novello (on his way up but not yet the stage and screen idol he was to become) as tragic lover Vittorio, who, in despair at the death of his love Leonora, volunteers to be put into suspended animation, awaking after two centuries and immediately finding himself attracted to Leonora's descendant – and virtual double – Genevra. But Vittorio's slumber has robbed him of his passion, and their marriage is unfulfilled.

Novello's other-worldly beauty and sexual ambiguity – a homosexual when such things weren't spoken of – is perfectly suited to Vittorio's aloofness, just as it was to his more celebrated role as Hitchcock's *The Lodger* three years later. *The Man without Desire* was the first of three films with Brunel, including Noël Coward's *The Vortex* (1927).

Mark Duguid, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

Adrian Brunel

In the 1920s Adrian Brunel was one of the liveliest new directing talents working in Britain. Short comedies burlesquing cinema trends tickled insiders and sophisticates; while mainstream Gainsborough features like *Blighty* (1927) and *The Constant Nymph* (1928) achieved considerable box-office success. Like George Pearson, Graham Cutts, and other leading directors – but unlike Alfred Hitchcock – talkies then removed Brunel from the limelight. There were subsequently years of unemployment, and others of furious activity directing quota quickies; he also worked as a film 'doctor' and helped his friend Leslie Howard on *The First of the Few* (1942), but a successful return to the director's chair eluded him.

Born in Brighton in 1892, Brunel grew up with a liberal outlook and multifarious gifts. Educated at Harrow, he soon succumbed to the lure of the stage (his mother, Adey Brunel, was a respected drama teacher). He acted, wrote plays, and trained as an opera singer. Cinema initially was one interest among many, but it began to dominate after local journalism in Brighton and a period in distribution with Moss Empire's Bioscope. In 1916 he formed Mirror Films with the scriptwriter Harry Fowler Mear, directing the company's sole feature, *The Cost of a Kiss* (1917). He gained further experience during the war in the Ministry of Information's Film Department, where he developed the concept of 'Film Tags' – short instructional films, peppered with humour, presented in the weekly newsreels. Returned to civilian life in 1919, he worked as scenario editor for the British Actors' Film Company.

The first signs of Brunel's directorial personality emerged in 1920 in *The Bump* and other short situation comedies, made with Leslie Howard and the writer A. A. Milne

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Seniors: Ragtime + intro

Mon 17 Apr 14:00

African Odysseys: Executive Order + intro and Q&A with director, Lázaro Ramos (work permitting)

Sat 22 Apr 14:00

Relaxed Screening: Deep End + intro and discussion

Mon 24 Apr 18:00

Experimenta Mixtape S02E02

Mon 24 Apr 18:15

Intimate Relations + intro by Vic Pratt, BFI Video Publishing

Tue 25 Apr 18:20

Filmmaking for Artists: Advanced

Filmmaking Workshop

Sun 2 Apr 10:30-16:30

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Alan Bennett in Conversation + Objects of Affection: A Woman of no Importance + Talking Heads 2: Waiting for the Telegram

Mon 17 April 18:10

BFI Flipside UHD/Blu-ray launch: Full Circle: The Haunting of Julia + Q&A with director Richard Loncraine and film historian Simon Fitzjohn

Wed 19 Apr 18:10

Preview: Polite Society

Fri 21 Apr 20:40

The Duellists + Q&A with composer Howard Blake

Mon 24 Apr 18:10

Theorem (Teorema) + intro and talk with Bruce LaBruce, and Doesn't Exist magazine launch

Thu 27 Apr 18:00

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for their company Minerva Films. Brunel then joined other bright sparks, directing *The Man without Desire* (1923) on location in Venice with studio work in Berlin; theatre idol Ivor Novello took the role of a lovelorn eighteenth century nobleman awoken after two centuries' suspended animation. The unusual story and Brunel's atmospheric visuals distinguished the film from most British product of the time.

Brunel's visual inventiveness found a sprightlier outlet in the series of burlesque comedies beginning with *Crossing the Great Sagrada* (1924), a travel film lampoon. Some of Brunel's humour may appear unduly facetious, but the visual japes and games with film form still fascinate and entertain. These burlesques were made independently until Michael Balcon offered to produce them through Gainsborough Pictures. *The Typical Budget*, a newsreel spoof of the *Topical Budget* newsreel, had its first showing at the opening screening of the Film Society in October 1925.

Brunel was one of the Society's champions and served on its Council; many films imported for screenings passed through his hands at his editing office. With Ivor Montagu, the Society's co-founder, who shared similar passions in cinema and politics, he turned the office into a business for hire, training new cinema recruits along the way. Until talkies curtailed business, the Brunel and Montagu company regularly prepared imported films for British distribution.

Balcon liked to attract lively minds to Gainsborough and offered Brunel the chance to direct feature films. But he was asked to withdraw from the Film Society's Council for fear that it branded him a highbrow, and the feature subjects chosen for him stuck close to the popular and fashionable. *Blighty* dealt sentimentally with a family's experiences of the Great War; *The Vortex* (1928), featuring Novello again, made polite but visually lively work of Noël Coward's sensational stage play; *The Constant Nymph* showcased Novello once more in Margaret Kennedy's Alpine story about a schoolgirl's love for a British composer.

With these films, made with the benefit of major players, eye-catching subjects and extensive promotion, Brunel reached the apex of his career. Yet after two further Gainsborough features, *A Light Woman* (1928) and *The Crooked Billet* (1929), Brunel found little else to direct but low-budget productions or fix-up jobs.

The turbulent introduction of sound played some part in his loss of status. There were also personal matters. Following *The Crooked Billet*, Brunel was advised to instigate legal proceedings against his employers for unpaid fees. Settlement was reached, but the affair jarred the industry, and offers of work shrank. For British International Pictures in 1930 Brunel made the revue film *Elstree Calling*, but saw his editing plans ignored and Hitchcock summoned to re-shoot material.

With no directing work of his own, Brunel wrote the book *Filmcraft*, first of three popular instructional guides for aspiring filmmakers. By the time of publication in 1933, Brunel himself was back directing, making quota quickies, comedies and thrillers, mainly for Fox British and the producer George Smith.

Some projects gave him more scope, like *Badger's Green* (1934), based on R. C. Sherriff's popular play, and *Variety* (1935), a music-hall salute. But by the end of the 1930s Brunel was functioning more as a fixer of other people's problems than a director in his own right. In 1939 he was part of a triumvirate directing Korda's rushed production of *The Lion Has Wings* (d. Brunel/Michael Powell/Brian Desmond Hurst); later he served as Leslie Howard's production consultant on *The First of the Few* (1942) and *The Gentle Sex* (d. Howard/ Maurice Elvey, 1943). His own last official directing credits, in 1940, were on two Home Front propaganda shorts.

In 1949 Brunel re-emerged as the author of *Nice Work*, an entertaining account of his film experiences. *Nice work* or not, Brunel's career was clearly not what it might have been, and the apparent absence of surviving copies of many of his talkies makes a thorough re-evaluation of his work difficult. But the burlesque comedies alone give him a distinctive place in British cinema history as a satirical jester, and a key player in the film industry's uneasy war between art and commerce. He died in Gerrard's Cross on February 18, 1958.

Geoff Brown, *Reference Guide to British and Irish Film Directors* (BFI, 2006) quoted on screonline.org.uk