



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Shop around the Corner

The Shop around the Corner

Directed by: Ernst Lubitsch

Production Companies: Loew's Incorporated,
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Produced by: Ernst Lubitsch

Unit Manager: Arthur Rose *

Assistant Director: Horace Hough *

Screen Play by: Samsen Raphaelson

Based on a play by: Nikolaus Laszlo

Director of Photography: William Daniels

Editor: Gene Ruggiero

Art Director: Cedric Gibbons

Associate: Wade B. Rubottom

Set Decorations: Edwin B. Willis

Hair Styles for Miss Sullavan: Sydney Guilaroff

Musical Score: Werner R. Heymann

Recording Director: Douglas Shearer

Cast:

Margaret Sullavan (*Klara Novak*)

James Stewart (*Alfred Kralik*)

Frank Morgan (*Hugo Matuschek*)

Joseph Schildkraut (*Ferencz Vadas*)

Sara Haden (*Flora Kaczek*)

Felix Bressart (*Pirovitch*)

William Tracy (*Pepi Katona*)

Inez Courtney (*Ilona Novotni*)

Sarah Edwards (*woman customer buying a belt*)

Edwin Maxwell (*doctor*)

Charles Halton (*detective*)

Charles Smith (*Rudy, new errand boy*)

Grace Hayle (*plump cigar box customer*) *

Charles Arnt (*policeman*) *

Renie Riano (*customer for bags with zippers*) *

William Edmunds (*waiter*) *

Mary Carr (*grandmother*) *

Mabel Colcord (*Aunt Anna*) *

Claire DuBrey, Ruth Warren, Joan Blair,

Mira McKinney, Gertrude Simpson (*customers*) *

USA 1940©

99 mins

Digital

* Uncredited

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Ernst Lubitsch grew up in Berlin as the son of the Russian Jewish émigré owner of a dressmaking company. He knew the world of shops and they feature often in his films. Perhaps witnessing the patter of his father's employees – the centrality of role play to the life of a salesman – encouraged the young Lubitsch to play roles, and drew him towards acting as a profession. Before he became a director, he was a successful self-mocking character actor, first on the German stage for Max Reinhardt and later in films. That he should end up in Hollywood seems a natural progression for a Jewish sophisticate trying to escape his trade roots.

Jewish traders of European extraction, such as Adolph Zukor (furs), Carl Laemmle (retail clothing) and Louis B. Mayer (scrap metal), founded the Hollywood studio business. There was always an affinity between 'putting on a show' to sell shop items and 'putting on a show' in movies. In his seminal 1988 book *An Empire of Their Own*, Neal Gabler says that the Jewish traders made 'a sustained attempt to live a fiction and to cast its spell over the minds of others'. Lubitsch moved to Hollywood at the invitation of Mary Pickford after the international success of his historical dramas *Madame DuBarry* (1919) and *Anna Boleyn* (1920). She hired him to direct her in *Rosita* (1923), and though they didn't get on that well, Lubitsch remained in Hollywood and flourished as one of its most accomplished artists.

In the context of *The Shop around the Corner*, it is easy to imagine the young Lubitsch as Pepi, the teenage errand boy of Matuschek and Co. played so brilliantly by William Tracy as the sharpest Budapest street kid turned legit. Pepi constantly complains that the pampered wife of proprietor Mr Matuschek runs his legs off after hours, so his favourite occupation is to imitate her in a high voice: 'Pepi, go to the dressmaker. Oh Pepi, will you please pick up a package at the drugstore?'

Of course, Lubitsch's father did not work in a leather-goods store, and in any case the film was based not on any Lubitsch autobiographical matter but on Nikolaus Laszlo's 1936 play *Parfumerie*, but we know that one essential ingredient of what came to be known as 'the Lubitsch touch' is that the director would act out every role for every actor he was directing. This is what accounts for the extraordinary consistency of tone in his films, including those that he produced but were directed by the likes of Frank Borzage and Otto Preminger. A talent for mimicry, pretence and persuasion was the foundation of his approach.

The Shop around the Corner almost entirely concerns the eight people who work at Matuschek and Co., although one superlative aspect of the film is how much of what happens off screen is a pertinent part of the narrative – not least Mrs Matuschek, whom we never see nor hear. Mr Matuschek (Frank Morgan) is an ageing proprietor whose lifelong business instincts are no longer a match for those of his chief salesman Alfred Kralik (James Stewart), whom Matuschek is grooming to take over as manager. The film begins the morning after Kralik has been a guest at the Matuschek home and both are feeling bilious from 'too much goose liver'. They have a disagreement about some cigarette boxes Matuschek wants to buy that play the repetitive Russian folk melody 'Ochi Tchornya' when you open them. Kralik, rightly, thinks they won't sell; Matuschek is annoyed with him.

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The Umbrellas of Cherbourg

(Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)

Fri 1 Dec 14:40; Wed 13 Dec 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);
Sun 17 Dec 18:45; Wed 20 Dec 20:55

The Passenger

Sat 2 Dec 20:20 (+ pre-recorded intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sun 10 Dec 15:45;
Wed 27 Dec 17:50

After Life (Wandafuru Ralfu)

Sun 3 Dec 12:45; Tue 12 Dec 17:15;
Wed 27 Dec 14:40; Sat 30 Dec 20:20

My Night with Maud (Ma Nuit chez Maud)

Mon 4 Dec 18:15; Thu 14 Dec 20:50;
Thu 28 Dec 18:15

Five Easy Pieces

Tue 5 Dec 14:30; Sat 9 Dec 20:55;
Tue 19 Dec 18:15; Fri 29 Dec 18:20

White Material

Wed 6 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by film curator Abiba Coulibaly); Fri 29 Dec 20:45

Boyz n the Hood

Thu 7 Dec 20:35; Sat 16 Dec 18:15;
Sat 23 Dec 20:40

Meet Me in St Louis

Fri 8 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by writer Richard Dyer);
Wed 20 Dec 14:30; Thu 21 Dec 18:10;
Sat 23 Dec 11:50

It's a Wonderful Life

Wed 13 Dec 18:10; Sat 16 Dec 20:25; Mon 18 Dec 20:25;
Wed 20 Dec 18:10; Fri 22 Dec 14:30, 20:25;
Sat 23 Dec 18:10

The Shop around the Corner

Fri 15 Dec 18:20; Mon 18 Dec 14:30;
Thu 21 Dec 20:45; Sat 30 Dec 12:20

Remember the Night

Sun 17 Dec 12:15; Tue 19 Dec 20:40

Fanny and Alexander (Fanny och Alexander)

Sat 23 Dec 14:20; Fri 29 Dec 13:30;
Sat 30 Dec 13:00

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The rest of the shop's staff includes: Pirovitch (Felix Bressart), an unassuming family man, and the film's moral centre in whom everyone confides; in contrast is Vadas (Joseph Schildkraut), a dandy of a certain age feared by everyone as 'a rat and stool pigeon'; there are two ladies, the demure Flora (Sara Haden) and the shopaholic Ilona (Inez Courtney), who stay mostly in the background; and the newest member, Klara Novak (Margaret Sullavan), who comes in from the street to be met by Kralik as a customer when she's really a shopgirl after a job. The Kralik-Novak relationship goes further down the wrong track when, to get the job, Klara sides with Mr Matuschek on the issue of the cigarette boxes and manages to sell one as a 'candy conscious' box, whose tune will remind you every time you succumb to a piece of candy that maybe you should cut down on your consumption.

What neither Novak nor Kralik knows as they bicker and demean each other all day is that each is the other's romantic pen-pal. This is the kind of spectacular social irony that 'the Lubitsch touch' feeds on, but it is absolutely bound in to the social position in which its protagonists find themselves. The story originates in the Great Depression, about people for whom the magic words are 'paycheque', 'bonus' and 'raise'. Though Mr Matuschek will turn out to be a benevolent figure (indeed, his staff count keeps on increasing while the shop remains mostly empty – at least until the Christmas climax) his whims are potentially lethal, as Kralik discovers when he is summarily 'let go' after a disagreement, albeit with a shining reference.

Though Lubitsch's films are always graceful and light and designed for maximum easy viewing pleasure, there's a solid underpinning of real circumstance to *The Shop around the Corner*. One of the most fascinating aspects of Hollywood film in its heyday is the economical use of space. There are only three scenes in the film that occur away from the shop: the café where the pen-pals are supposed to meet – although Klara doesn't find out for some time that the Kralik she meets and thoroughly patronises was her blind date; Klara's bedroom, where she takes sick after her beau doesn't seem to show; and the hospital room where Matuschek ends up for reasons you'll have to watch the film to discover. Everything else happens either just outside the shop or in the shop's four spaces: the main hall, Mr Matuschek's office, the staff room and the stockroom, to which Pirovitch disappears whenever he hears Matuschek announce, 'All I want is your honest opinion.' All this would reinforce the idea that the shop is the world and a sort of prison – you have to make it there or fail – if it were not for the evocatively deft way that the world outside is conjured from within.

This is a yet more sophisticated version of Lubitsch's famous propensity for making the audience imagine what's going on behind a closed door. From just a few grace notes we can picture Pirovitch's modest home life, what it must be like to have dinner at Mr Matuschek's house with his flirtatious wife (too much goose liver and all), and where, after all, the vile Vadas's tokens of 'good luck' come from. More refined still is the moment when, towards the end, Klara describes her early feelings about Kralik to him – we become aware that Lubitsch and Sullavan have given us not the slightest indication of these feelings, so we're even invited to reimagine what we've already seen. Perhaps the simplest example of making the invisible imaginable, though, is when Pepi says to Mr Matuschek near the end: 'You see that girl over there on the corner? Well, I'm her Santa Claus.' Lubitsch knows he doesn't need to show us the girl.

Nick James, *Sight and Sound*, January 2011