

The Wedding March

By Crystal Kui

“The Wedding March” (1928) was Erich von Stroheim’s most personal film. It demonstrated his tremendous capacity for rich characterizations and complex motivations, and for working out every detail of costumes and settings. At the same time, it touched upon the limitations of his realism and pre-figured his diminishing reputation as a director. He dedicated the film to “true lovers of the world.” Of his intentions, von Stroheim said: “They say I give them sewers—and dead cats! This time I am giving them Beauty. Beauty—and apple blossoms! More than they can stand.”

“The Wedding March” was von Stroheim’s first and only release through Paramount. It was made by arrangement with Pat Powers, who signed von Stroheim on contract and financed half of the film, keeping a strict check on every phase of the production. Paramount’s Jesse Lasky recognized von Stroheim’s genius and uncompromising methods, but decided to take the risk.

Having portrayed himself in Hollywood as an aristocrat with military training, von Stroheim played the lead role of Prince Nicki, a cavalry officer of the Imperial Guard who is forced to marry the limping daughter of a wealthy industrialist in order to redeem his family’s depleted fortunes. The marriage between Nicki and Cecelia (Zasu Pitts) is arranged by their fathers at a brothel party, which foregrounds the crumbling world of the aristocracy and the social aspirations of the nouveaux riche.

We witness the fragile romance between Nicki and Mitzi (Fay Wray), an innkeeper’s daughter. Standing in opposition to their “Paradise” (the film’s theme song) is the villain Schani (Matthew Betz), a butcher who threatens to take Nicki’s life and forces Mitzi to marry him. The story concludes with the wedding of Nicki and Cecelia, celebrated with the pageantry of a religious ceremony. The plot bore a strong resemblance to Universal’s “Merry-Go-Round” (1923), which had resulted disastrously in the director’s dismissal by the studio’s head of production and the junking of twenty thousand feet of footage. If von Stroheim had a tendency to repeat his past, “The Wedding March” was no exception.

The script was a collaboration between von Stroheim and his friend Harry Carr, a writer for the “Los Angeles Times.” Authentic uniforms and insignia for von Stroheim’s elite guard were fabricated by the



Original release poster features illustration of Erich Von Stroheim. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Collection.

Western Costume Company, owned by Pat Powers. The art director Richard Day designed three dozen sets and an impressive replica of Vienna’s St. Stephen’s Cathedral. Von Stroheim demanded complete authenticity and scrupulous attention to detail in everything including the acting, camera style, and editing. Before shooting began, Pat Powers complained the script had “400 scenes too many” and the film was “alarmingly behind schedule and over budget.”

To emphasize the high production values, the Corpus Christi procession was filmed in two-color Technicolor. Few productions were shot entirely in Technicolor at this time, but von Stroheim embraced color in several of his films. On “Foolish Wives,” (1922) individual scenes of fire were hand colored; in “Greed” (1924), hundreds of shots of gold objects were enhanced by the Handschiegl process; “The Merry Widow” (1925) featured a coronation ceremony in two-color Technicolor, and a bouquet of roses colored red by Handschiegl. Lasting for only three minutes, the color sequence in “The Wedding March” elevated the religious and military spectacle with its plumes, epaulettes, and mounted soldiers. Technicolor cameraman Ray Rennahan believed that von Stroheim’s use of color helped build the public’s desire for color.

Most of the cast had worked under von Stroheim's direction before and were committed to the project in spite of his exacting demands. Due to her exceptional work in "Greed," the comedienne Zasu Pitts portrayed Cecelia, endowing her role with sensitivity and sympathy. Matthew Betz, a character actor who played villainous roles, took great pains to stress Schani's grotesque behavior. In one scene, the butcher chews off a piece of raw meat. Betz repeated the scene multiple times, to von Stroheim's dissatisfaction, until he finally ran off the set, which was swarming with maggots, and threw up. An eighteen-year-old Fay Wray, who had previously appeared in Hal Roach comedies and Universal pictures, rose to prominence after being discovered by von Stroheim. At their first meeting, the director saw that she embodied Mitzi and did not require a screen test.

Von Stroheim spent money lavishly, being driven only by his passion for artistic perfection. Handmade apple blossoms tied to the trees in the orchard were imported and reportedly cost \$25,000. Gallons of bootleg gin were brought on the set for an orgy scene lasting several days, but only a few brief moments were used in the final film. Von Stroheim's obsession for authenticity was frequently exacerbated by his indecision. Some scenes were shot thirty to forty times without any indication of what the director wanted. When Pat Powers could no longer bear the exorbitant costs, budgeted at \$1,125,000, Paramount stepped in.

In the fall, the company spent a few grueling days of shooting on location at Mount Whitney before moving to the Paramount lot. After eight months of shooting (a typical production might take a month or two), production stopped on January 30, 1927. Von Stroheim's initial cut of the film ran at about nine hours. It was decided to divide the film into two parts: "The Wedding March", which concludes with Nicki and Cecelia's wedding, and "The Honeymoon," which continued the story in the Austrian Tyrol.

After extensive editing, von Stroheim was still unable to cut the film down to feature length. Paramount called on Josef von Sternberg to intervene. But his version was rejected by the studio too and subsequently turned over to the editor Julian Johnson. Pat

Powers brought von Stroheim's two-part version to New York to show to Jesse Lasky, who refused to look at it, while Powers refused to accept Johnson's version. Lasky permitted Powers to make a single twelve-reel picture, however, the Johnson version was shown in a preview at Anaheim.

Louis de Francesco and J. S. Zamecnik composed a synchronized music and effects score, which contained musical motifs for each important character. After two years, the film finally opened at the Rivoli Theatre in New York on October 12, 1928. It attracted curiosity and praise, but was a box office failure. The reaction from small town exhibitors was less than favorable. A truncated version of "The Honeymoon," a third of which contained portions from part one, was released in Europe and South America but never shown in the United States. The only known print of "The Honeymoon" perished in a nitrate fire in 1959.

Although "Greed" is his acknowledged masterpiece, the historian Richard Koszarski maintains that "The Wedding March" captures von Stroheim's "characteristic sense of poetry and epic drama at its best." Unlike the grim naturalism of "Greed," "The Wedding March" was a romantic tragedy expressing the director's memories and nostalgia for the past, at least as he imagined it. In his biography of von Stroheim, Arthur Lennig regards "The Wedding March" as the director's greatest accomplishment because he was able to convey "genuine emotion and empathy," without sentimentality. "The Wedding March" depicts only half of von Stroheim's intended story, but it is nonetheless a complete work. Despite the controversies surrounding its production, the director would never again realize a film as mature in style.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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