

7th Heaven

By Aubrey Solomon

In the years between 1926 and 1928, Hollywood experienced a maturation which blended art and industry to a new level of cinema. Influenced heavily by the experiments of foreign talents, largely German, new concepts of cinematography, lighting, set design, and special effects known as “trick shots,” permeated American film-making methods. The somber and sometimes morbid themes of German cinema also seeped into their films, often to the chagrin of American exhibitors who preferred their own exuberant optimism and happy endings.

“7th Heaven” characterizes a perfect blend of optimistic romantic fantasy and German influenced production design. It also became one of the most popular films of the late silent era. Its opening title card set the tone: “For those who will climb it, there is a ladder leading from the depths to the heights - from the sewer to the stars - the ladder of Courage.”

Based on a hugely successful play by Austin Strong which ran at the Booth Theatre on Broadway from October 30, 1922, to May 21, 1924 for a total of 685 performances, it portrayed the travails of young lovers who meet amidst the sordid gutters of pre-World War I Paris. Happy-go-lucky street cleaner Chico saves waifish, homeless, Diane, a runaway from her abusive sister. Against Chico’s initial resistance, he falls in love with Diane only to end up going to war and being declared dead in battle. In a classically sentimental ending, Diane is shown proof that her beloved is dead and she has lost all hope, but the blinded Chico miraculously returns to restore her faith.

A story bordering so closely on maudlin, even by contemporary standards, could have veered off into hand-wringing melodrama. Fortunately, versatile director Frank Borzage, who had been discovered and directed by Thomas Ince in 1912, was capable of handling the emotional aspects of the story. Borzage had dealt with domestic relationships in some of his three dozen previous features during the previous decade. Film critic Andrew Sarris cogently summed up Borzage’s rare strength as an “uncompromising romanticist” who “plunged into the world of poverty and oppression... to impart an aura to his characters... through a genuine concern with the wondrous inner life of lovers in the midst of adversity.”

What also turned out to be fortuitous for the success of “7th Heaven” was its casting. By June of 1926,



THE MOTION PICTURE—
7th HEAVEN

with
JANET GAYNOR and CHARLES FARRELL

FACTS
about the picture
certain to make
Box Office history!

Two young stars (destined to be the greatest) in a dramatic thunderbolt!

The Director **FRANK BORZAGE**, at his very best!
John Golden's triumph - 4 seasons on Broadway - and a top attraction on the road - everywhere!
Realism! 2 years in the making. Scenes photographed in France and Hollywood. Costumes and taxicabs that were actually used in the World War!
Made to be a great outstanding production!

You can call this a promise or a threat—7th HEAVEN is absolutely the greatest drama of this year or any other year!

FOX
PROFIT
PICTURE

An advertisement from a June 1927 edition of Motion Picture News. [Courtesy Media History Digital Library.](#)

Fox Films vice-president and general manager Winfield Sheehan acknowledged audiences were becoming more discerning and were no longer interested in films with “a mediocre plot, played by mediocre actors.” The screen needed new names “for, as good as they are, a little group of screen idols cannot go on forever.”

Janet Gaynor, born in Philadelphia, graduated from Polytechnic High School of San Francisco. After living in several cities, her family settled in Los Angeles, where she worked as an usherette and bookkeeper but preferred extra work in the movies at the Hal Roach and Universal studios. A chance try-out for short subjects at Fox led to a stand-out supporting role in “The Johnstown Flood” (1926). A five-year Fox contract, which began at \$100 weekly, resulted in four more major supporting parts in 1926. Fox’s most prominent director, F.W. Murnau, then cast Gaynor as the lead in his upcoming major cinematic event, “Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans.”

By the time Fox announced the part of Diane, it was, according to *Photoplay*, “the choicest morsel thirsted

for by every famous dramatic actress on the screen.” *Photoplay* reported that Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks had tried to buy the rights from Fox for a dual appearance. Dorothy Mackaill and Blanche Sweet were also talked about for the role. Since “Sunrise” was still in post-production and would not be released until after “7th Heaven”, Fox was, in effect, casting a virtual unknown in this major role. Gaynor was paid \$300 weekly.

For the part of Chico, Fox also took a chance on Charles Farrell. Originally from Massachusetts where his father owned several movie theaters, Farrell started out with a vaudeville troupe in 1923. When the troupe performed in Los Angeles he stayed behind as a film extra at \$7.50 daily. He was signed by Warner Brothers but was cast in a picture that he claimed “was bad, and I was worse—a lot worse—so they let me go.” When his career didn’t take off, one of the directors he asked for a job was Frank Borzage and was told to turn to something else for a career. “I thought Charles was like a lot of other good-looking young fellows seeking something easy to do,” Borzage was quoted. He would later joke about this encounter. According to *Picture Play Magazine*, Mack Sennett was of the same opinion and said “He’s terrible. He couldn’t find the word ‘acting’ in a dictionary.”

Farrell nevertheless did manage to snare some supporting roles and a lead in “Old Ironsides” (1926). After shooting “7th Heaven”, Farrell returned to Boston to visit his father, who sent a telegram asking how much money he needed for the trip. Farrell was making \$100 weekly at this point.

After spending six weeks in France researching pre-World War I conditions in Paris, with an emphasis on street life, Borzage and cameraman Ernest Palmer returned to Los Angeles to begin production on January 7, 1927 and continued through April 5 at a negative cost of \$692,127. This was one of Fox’s most expensive productions of the year and was riding on the talents of two young actors. After a world premiere on May 6, 1927, the film went into release in major cities on October 30, 1927 with a Movietone musical score including the theme song “Diane” which would become a perennial favorite.

Both Gaynor and Farrell acquitted themselves brilliantly as reflected in contemporary reviews. The diminutive, winsome Gaynor known as “the girl with the pathetic eyes” got the most praise. *The New York Times* remarked that “in (Gaynor’s) acting, there’s

nothing imitative.” *Motion Picture News* quoted Fox General Superintendent Sol M. Wurtzel referring to “7th Heaven” and “Sunrise,” “Miss Gaynor has proved that she is an artist of exceptional ability and her selection for these highly important portrayals is additional proof of our faith in her inherent capabilities.” *Picture-Play Magazine* singled out Charles Farrell as “a naturally fine actor, with the sweeping ignorance of technique that goes only with a high grade of inherent talent.” *Film Daily* summed up the sentiment with “It is one of the luckiest victories in picture history, though merited by the quality of their personalities. These personalities offer something that the screen has been lacking for several years—youth, real youth, and not the sophisticated variety which has been so much in the spotlight.”

Borzage too received rave reviews. *Variety* wrote, “Borzage deserves the blue ribbon for this one... he has brought to the fore a little girl who has been playing in pictures for two years and made a real star out of her over night.”

“7th Heaven” became a very profitable release for Fox Films with global film rentals of \$1,781,415 and a profit of \$478,651. Demonstrating the universal audience approval of the film were the foreign rentals which made up 65 percent of the total, much higher than the average international returns of 40 percent.

Gaynor and Farrell suddenly became Fox’s most popular stars and led the studio into the sound era as a romantic couple in ten more films over the next seven years. By 1928, when Gaynor came of legal age, she refused to sign her new contract at \$1,000. She wanted \$3,000. Within a week, Fox complied and she probably received close to, if not all of, what she had demanded.

“7th Heaven” was nominated for five Oscars in the first-ever presentation and won for Best Actress, Best Dramatic Director and Best Writing Adaptation.

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

Aubrey Solomon has published three books on the Fox Film Corporation and 20th Century Fox. He has also produced documentary specials, written for many episodic television series and several feature films. His most recent story credit is for “Ice Age: Collision Course.”