

***Lonesome* (1928)**

By Raquel Stecher

"In the whirlpool of modern life -- The most difficult thing is to live alone."

For the film industry, 1928 was a turbulent year. A major transition was occurring; one that would forever alter how movies were made. Just one year prior, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), a part-talkie, a silent film with a few talking sequences added in, would make a splash in Hollywood. Audiences flocked to the theatres and the once reluctant studio heads realized that the transition to sound was inevitable. Filmmakers scrambled to learn the new technology and develop movies to go with it. In 1929 all-talking films became the standard and once the industry was well into the 1930s silent filmmaking was officially a thing of the past. The time between 1927 and 1929 was pivotal and it was then that *Lonesome* (1928) was born.

Universal Pictures purchased Mann Page's three-page for outline for a mere \$25. It collected dust until director Paul Fejos decided that *Lonesome* would be his next film. *Lonesome* follows the story of two working singles in New York City. Barbara Kent stars as Mary, a switchboard operator and Glenn Tryon as Jim, a factory worker. They're as different as they are the same. They work monotonous jobs and live their lives by the hustle and bustle of the city. Mary and Jim meet at Coney Island and soon fall in love. A roller coaster accident, an arrest, a torrential rainstorm and unyielding crowd separate them for what seems like forever. They go back to their apartments not realizing that

they're really neighbors. The audience suspends their disbelief for the joyous reunion of the two lovebirds who will never be lonesome again.

If it wasn't for the insistence of Fejos, *Lonesome* might never have been made. Much like the industry itself, Fejos was in a state of transition. Born and raised in Hungary, he studied medicine, became a medical orderly during WWI and then switched careers and worked on films in his native country. He moved to New York City in the 1920s but struggled to make ends meet. He then moved to Hollywood determined to make his first feature film. With some hard work, ingenuity and some help, he produced *The Last Moment* (1927). The film was successful and Universal Pictures came calling. Carl Laemmle Sr. hired Fejos because his teenage son Laemmle Jr. shared Fejos' vision for filmmaking. Laemmle Sr. thought *Lonesome* would turn out to be a sentimental travelogue. Fejos proclaimed "well, travelogue or not, that's what I want to make, and my contract says I select the story."

Drawn to the story because of his time in New York City Fejos said, "I wanted to put in a picture New York with its terrible pulse beat – that everybody rushes... this terrific pressure which is on people; the multitude in which you are always moving but in which you are still alone..." According to an article from the Criterion Collection, Fejos' strongest work had a central theme "that everyone deserves the opportunity to succeed in life and be happy, and that it is an

offense against human dignity to deny or thwart this.” The collaboration between the Laemmles and Fejos would produce a couple more films for Universal: *Broadway* (1929) and *The Last Performance* (1929). *Lonesome* proved to be the most successful. Attempts to continue working with Universal failed and Fejos left Hollywood in 1931. He made films in Europe and documentaries in more exotic locations. Eventually Fejos had a prosperous career in anthropology.

During the late 1920s, silent filmmaking had hit its stride and the art form had reached a level of sophistication in cinematography and storytelling. This peak was cut short with the advent of talking pictures and the industry had to start from the beginning. *Lonesome* benefited from a simple story, complex storytelling, fine cinematography and the skilled work of experienced silent filmmakers.

The film is a great example of the work of art by a great mind who was willing to think outside the box. Fejos believed in freedom of movement when it came to the camera. It weaves through crowds and hops on a rollercoaster and other amusement park rides. These techniques can be seen in other films by Fejos and would influence future filmmaking. *Lonesome* is chock full of experimental techniques. Sound effects and synchronized music elevate it from its original silent film status. Audiences hear bells, whistles, factory machines, park rides and various sounds from the crowds that fill the screen. “Always” by Irving Berlin is the film’s signature theme. An orchestral version unites the couple at the beginning of their romance and a lyrical version, sung by Nick

Lucas, reunites them at the end. *Lonesome* also includes color tinting, done by hand and machine for individual prints, layering for dreamlike effects and on location shooting at Venice Beach and Long Beach, California, to represent Coney Island.

The most unusual aspect of *Lonesome* is the addition of three dialogue scenes. The film was released in June 1928 in a silent version with the synchronized sound. Once the fervor of part-talkies was in full swing, Universal decided to add dialogue scenes to *Lonesome* for a re-release. These talkie parts hurt rather than helped the movie. It breaks up the otherwise frenetic pace of the story and slows down to deliver three awkward moments with less than stellar dialogue. Fejos reflected, “It was sheer horror, but then no picture could go which was entirely silent.” Audiences and critics alike did not care for the new version. Even so the film did well at the box office and was a good return on investment for Universal. “Made for \$156,734.64, it earned a world-wide revenue of \$407,923.23.

With the advent of all-talking pictures and Fejos’ permanent retirement from Hollywood, *Lonesome* was forgotten and eventually thought lost. In the 1950s, Fejos’ three films for Universal were discovered and sent to the George Eastman House for preservation. The English intertitles and original script do not exist. A nitrate print from the Cinematheque Francaise was restored and the original English that had been translated into French was translated back into English.

Today *Lonesome* is fully restored and available for home viewing. The Library

of Congress added the film to the National Film Registry in 2010. It is screened at festivals and repertory theatres often with live musical accompaniment. Contemporary audiences have discovered *Lonesome* as not only a representation of transitional period in film history but also as a sweet story of how disengaged people living in a fast paced world can discover meaningful human connections. It's a timeless movie that will speak to generations to come.

Sources:

Criterion.com

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New York Times review October 1928

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

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