

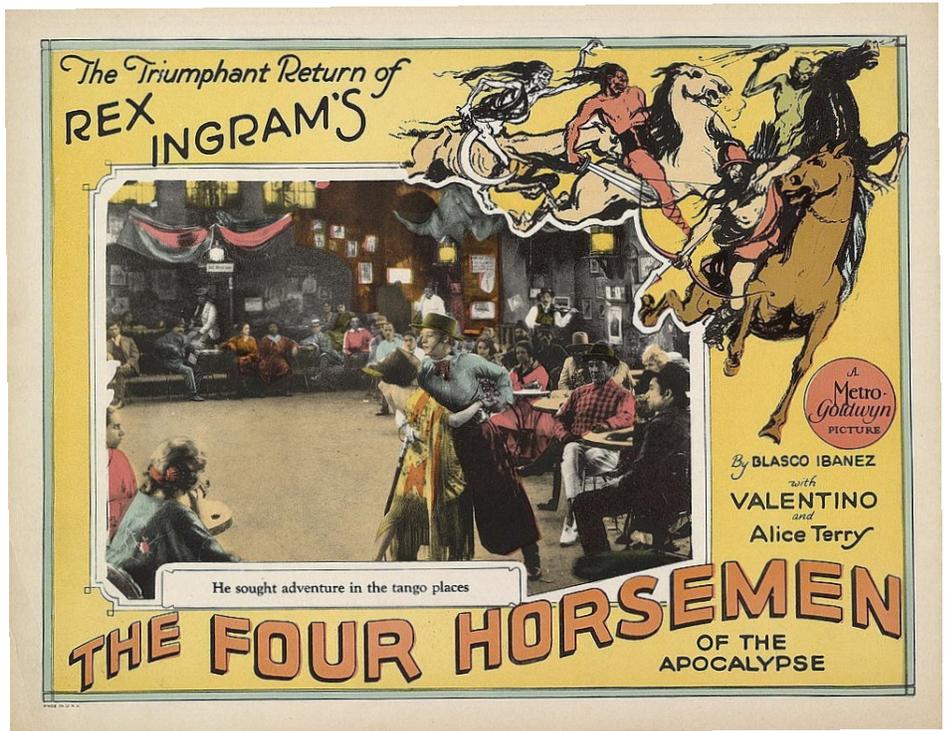
The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

By Randy Haberkamp

After D.W. Griffith's controversial "The Birth of a Nation" (1915) revolutionized the American film industry and altered its audience's expectations, it was arguably "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (1921) that was the next great advancement of American cinematic style and storytelling. Dazzling in its scope, it would set the bar for the Silent Era epics that followed such as "The Ten Commandments" (1923), "The Covered Wagon" (1923), "The Big Parade" (1925), "Ben-Hur" (1926), and "Wings" (1927). It inspired future dynamic filmmakers including David Lean and Michael Powell. It made a star of Rudolph Valentino and reached a new level of art direction and design that is still impressive today, yet its director, Rex Ingram, and the film itself are not as widely remembered nor acclaimed, as they should be.

Though a lover of silent film all my life, it was "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" in a restored version overseen by Kevin Brownlow that illustrated so completely how important film preservation is, and how mind-blowing a successful restoration can be. Though I had seen the film projected in 35mm before, it was from a gray and truncated black-and-white print and had left me rather unimpressed. The restored version with rediscovered scenes from prints culled from archives around the world, a careful reconstruction and delicate timing of the famous tango sequence, a revived black-and-white vibrancy with appropriate color tints, and a dynamic orchestral score by Carl Davis, returned the film to greatness beyond what I thought possible. Equally impressive, the Valentino "mystique", so renowned but not necessarily understandable to modern eyes given some of his later, more kitschy films, was also restored and on display as originally captured in 1921 in his 25-year-old glory. It suddenly wasn't hard to understand what all the fuss was about... way back when. He was there... "alive" on the screen.

Just as importantly, it also exemplified for me how the career of Rex Ingram serves as a prime example of how damaging an effect "lost" films and neglect



This lobby card prominently features Valentino in his star-making tango scene. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection.

can have on our impressions of an artist. Though he began directing features in 1916 after some early work as an actor and writer, few of his films made before "Four Horsemen" survive, and while those that do survive offer some glimpses of his artistic style, they are generally in such poor condition as to make it nearly impossible to evaluate them properly. Ingram's later work consists of several excellent examples of filmmaking, but most of his films have suffered greatly through loss of picture quality or completeness, and several of them are no longer known to exist or our difficult to see because they exist only in various archives.

Released when Ingram was only 29, "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" fully celebrates his training as an artist and sculptor at Yale under Lee Lawrie and his inspiration from New York roommate Thomas Hart Benton. Though other directors like Griffith and DeMille had strong theatrical backgrounds to inform their storytelling style, Ingram's eye for painting with light in partnership with his cinematographer and collaborator John Seitz was a feature that was duly noted and quickly imitated. Ingram's use of detailed composition and the visual creation of depth in a 2-D medium were startling advancements and are still impressive today. His infatuation with the darker and unusual elements of life permeates and individualizes his work as well, paving the way for Tod Browning and James Whale among others.

Equally unknown is Ingram's striking female star, Alice Terry, his collaborator and soon to be wife (they were married later that year during the filming of "The Prisoner of Zenda.") Ingram chose Terry to star after seeing her in some brief minor roles, and she would thereafter appear in nearly all his films, and only five that he did not direct, retiring from films when he did after co-directing one sound film with him in 1930.

This timely convergence of talent did not stop with Valentino, Ingram and Terry however. Metro's story department head, June Mathis, was not only responsible for bringing Valentino and Ingram to the project, but also for crafting the scope of Vicente Blasco Ibáñez's novel into a compelling screenplay, infusing a "war story" with the passion and appeal to make its tragedy and horror all the more heartfelt. Despite the Great War being only a few years old, audiences flocked to the images that box-office wisdom had deemed too fresh and recent. Creating the top box-office success of 1921, the film earned \$9 million in its initial run, and catapulted Valentino, Mathis and Ingram to the forefront artistically and commercially.

All three and Terry would next work together on "The Conquering Power," which registered as a solid, if smaller success. Valentino would then split off to embody a new version of "matinee idol" before dying five years later at the age of 31. Mathis would continue overseeing productions and writing screenplays for Valentino and others. Her decision to offer the direction of "Ben-Hur" to Charles Brabin instead of Ingram, however, would end their professional relationship and she would die in 1927 at the age of 40. Ingram would survive the transformation of his Metro studio into Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer by keeping new studio chiefs Mayer and Thalberg at a distance, eventually moving his productions to France and

Africa where he became the model of independent cinema and auteurism before those concepts were even fully formed, his stamina and luck running out just as sound transformed the movies into a temporarily more static and less visually oriented medium. "Four Horsemen" had transformed the silent cinema for the 1920s and its four major contributors were all finished by 1930, with Ingram and Terry living off the films profits for years afterwards with sculpting and painting as their primary artistic outlets.

Though all four had additional successes, "Four Horsemen" was the pinnacle for them all. Despite being shot entirely in Hollywood and environs, the film has the authenticity and detail one would expect from location work in Argentina and Europe, its pictorial compositions reflecting a new level of artistry for visual cinematic storytelling. (Ruth Barton's book, "Rex Ingram: Visionary Director of the Silent Screen" finally gives Ingram his due and offers more insight into the filming of this classic.)

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

As Managing Director of Preservation and Foundation Programs for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Randy Haberkamp directly oversees its Library, Archive, Nicholl Screenwriting Fellowship, Student Academy Awards, and Visual History Project. He received his Master's in Motion Picture Production from UCLA and worked for the CBS as Director of Specials and Feature Films. He founded The Silent Society that has presented and preserved silent films in Los Angeles for over 25 years.