

The Life and Death of 9413: A Hollywood Extra

By Brian Taves

Robert Florey, who came to the United States in 1921 as a reporter for French film journals, quickly had the idea for a short picture based on the impressions of an "everyman" actor with futile dreams of becoming a star. A few years later, attending a performance of George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," Florey was inspired, as he recalled, to write a "continuity in musical rhythm of the adventures of my extra in Hollywood, the movements and attitudes of which appeared to synchronize themselves with Gershwin's notes." The script was worked out in precise detail, shot by shot, determining the precise footage needed, a necessity because the \$97 budget was coming entirely out of Florey's pocket.

Only three professional performers appeared, with the title role enacted by Jules Raucourt, formerly a leading man who by then was unemployed and nearly forgotten. The vapid star was portrayed by Voya George, and the starlet was played by Adriane Marsh, an authentic extra. In the film, would-be star John Jones presents himself to the studio head, only to have a number inscribed on his forehead, 9413. Other performers audition at the same time, and one of them has a completely bland, expressionless face (George). George dons a series of masks, mimicking other well-known actors in an effort to compensate for his own lack of personality, and a star instead of a number is inscribed on his forehead.

9413 is daily faced with the haunting sign, "no casting today." Yet whether auditioning or unemployed, the actors become automatons under the direction of a large, pointing hand in the foreground of many shots. Finally, 9413 dies of privation, represented by the cutting of a film strip. Despite the mockery of his fellow performers, he ascends to Heaven (depicted as the opposite direction from Hollywood), where the offensive number is erased and he becomes an angel. The denouement is intended as both a fitting cap to the melodramatic story and a satire on Hollywood's traditional happy endings.

"A Hollywood Extra" not only has a surreal story, but is rendered in an expressionist manner. Shapes, angles, and disorientation are its visual hallmarks, with



A frame enlargement from the film depicts an auditioning actor who has donned a sinister mask. Courtesy Library of Congress.

three basic types of compositions: miniatures, close-ups with live actors, and newsreel-type scenes of Hollywood and the studios. The faces of the three performers are often kept partially in shadow, blocking off part of their features and depriving them of wholeness. A casting director is mocked with an extreme close-up revealing only his mouth stuffed with a cigar, one hand holding a phone and the other shaking a pointed finger. The acting is in an overwrought, tormented vein that compliments the expressionistic visuals. Miniature sets were constructed by Slavko Vorkapich out of paper cubes, cigar boxes, tin cans, children's toys, and other odds and ends. They represent buildings and geometrical designs, and are characterized by distortion and superimposition, quivering and reflecting light in a myriad of directions according to the mood.

In contrast to the artificial scenes of the city are newsreel-type shots of the streets and local sights of Hollywood. Filmmaking is symbolized by scenes of previews, spotlights crisscrossing the night sky, and moving cameras, reels, and dangling celluloid strips. While authentic in content, these scenes are often shot from a wildly moving or tilted camera, and edited into rapid juxtapositions.

Most of the camerawork was done by Florey and Vorkapich, with some assistance from 28-year-old Paul Ivano. All the lighting was provided by a single 400-watt bulb, Vorkapich creating some of the spectacular illumination of the miniatures. Gregg Toland,

then age 23 and assistant cameraman, had use of a Mitchell camera, which allowed some shots which would have been impossible with only a DeVry. These scenes included some three hundred feet of close-ups and what Florey called "trick stuff—four or five exposures on one plate." "A Hollywood Extra" was edited to a one-reel length of 1,200 feet, with special attention to tempo and rhythm. Upon the completion of "A Hollywood Extra," Florey showed the film to his friend Charlie Chaplin (in 1946, the two would co-direct "Monsieur Verdoux"). Chaplin was so impressed that he invited the elite of Hollywood to a screening at his home, and to Florey's surprise "the producers and stars present were vitally interested in this new technique and at the unexpected angles of the shots." Eventually "A Hollywood Extra" was released by F.B.O. to over 700 theaters in America alone.

"A Hollywood Extra" was not only welcomed by Hollywood, but later remade as a feature, "Hollywood Boulevard" (Paramount, 1936), co-authored and directed by Florey. The central figure is again an actor, looking for a job amidst the cruel splendors of movieland, dependent on the whims of public fancy and the vagaries of producers. The theme was echoed through the appearance of over two dozen former stars in supporting and cameo roles. Stylistically, "Hollywood Boulevard" opens with an extraordinary 2 ½ minute credit sequence including 30 different shots. It ends on a slanted shot of a boulevard street sign as the traffic signal

clangs to read "GO" as the story commences; the picture concludes with the sign changing to read "STOP." Throughout the first reel, startling angles reflecting the disordered nature of movie life, described in dialogue as "crazy, senseless and exciting." The direction both makes light of, and pays lip service to, the conventional excesses of such cinematic self-portraits.

Florey had an early appreciation of the cinema's heritage and a passion for film lore, becoming known as one of the outstanding chroniclers of Hollywood and movie history, for which he won the Legion of Honor from his native France in 1950. His writing on the history of Hollywood, all of it in French, continued until his death in 1979, with his twelfth and last such book published posthumously in 1986.

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

Brian Taves (Ph.D., University of Southern California) has been a film archivist with the Library of Congress for twenty-five years. In addition he is the author of books on Thomas Ince, Robert Florey, P.G. Wodehouse, Talbot Mundy, and the genre of historical adventure movies. His most recent volume is Hollywood Presents Jules Verne: The Father of Science Fiction on Screen.