

Lady Windermere's Fan

By Scott Simmon

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By the late 1920s, in the final few years before the death of the studio silent film, the form found an unexpected subtlety. In the hands of the a few masters, it proved able to convey complex psychologies and intricate social relations. It is difficult to imagine many greater challenges to silent film than an adaptation of Oscar Wilde's first comic play, "Lady Windermere's Fan," which floats an artificial high-society melodrama on a stream of verbal witticisms. At first glance, it's an impossible project — which may have been one of its appeals for Ernst Lubitsch.

By 1925, Lubitsch had been directing in the United States for just over two years, but already this film was marketed through his reputation: "You will find 'Lady Windermere's Fan' produced and directed the LUBITSCH way; and acted by a cast of stars in the LUBITSCH way." Born a tailor's son in Berlin in 1892 (three weeks, as it happened, before the London stage premiere of "Lady Windermere's Fan"), he rose to leads in Max Reinhardt's theatrical company before shifting in 1913 to acting and directing in the German film industry. When his historical drama "Madame Dubarry" was a surprise hit in its 1920 American release (under the title "Passion"), he was sought by U.S. production companies. After a disastrous costume drama starring and produced by Mary Pickford, "Rosita" (1923), he discovered his distinctive style through a series of sophisticated comedies of manners, beginning with "The Marriage Circle" (1924), and his subtle cinematic flair became widely admired as "the Lubitsch touch."

In adapting "Lady Windermere's Fan," he made a few expected revisions, eliminating minor characters, updating the setting to the 1920s, and opening up the film to scenes only alluded to onstage. Lubitsch's most surprising and radical decision was to omit every word of Wilde's wit from the text intertitles. Judging from a few borrowed staging details, it is evident that he or screenwriter Julien Josephson remembered the ponderous 1916 British adaptation, which the "New York Times" had complained was 'too much given to soliloquies and 'asides' reminiscent of the old dramatic forms, thus making the captions [intertitles] fully two-fifths of the entire picture."



May McAvoy portrays Lady Windermere. Courtesy National Film Preservation Foundation.

Lubitsch felt obliged to justify his decision at the time of his version's release: "Epigrams on the printed page or on the stage are delightful. Playing with words is fascinating to the writer and afterward to the readers, but on the screen it is quite impossible." Wilde's lines were so tempting that Warner Bros. couldn't resist quoting them in advertisements, but alone they come across more like homilies than banter. "Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes" and "I can resist everything except temptation" accompanied caricatures of the actors in magazine ads.

The film was not exactly a star vehicle — Lubitsch was the star — but the leads were well-known. Top-billed Ronald Colman, the only genuine Briton among them, was near the start of his fame in both silent and sound film (a transition he made more smoothly than any other male star). Fresh from the unsympathetic role of Stephen Dallas in "Stella Dallas," released the month before, he plays Lord Darlington as a graceful seducer and seems to have followed Wilde's belief that the character is not a villain but genuinely convinced that Lady Windermere would be better off without her husband. Twenty-four-year-old May McAvoy, then known for her ingénues — she was just four feet eleven — carries that innocence into her portrayal of Lady Windermere. Lubitsch had cast her in his third American film, "Three Women" (1924), as the one who innocently marries her mother's lover.

Central to "Lady Windermere's Fan" is the role of Mrs. Erylne, the notorious woman whose reappearance

ance precipitates the events. Lubitsch often built his slightly risqué comedies around sexually and socially aggressive women — that was part of his “touch” — as played by Pola Negri in “Madame Dubarry” and other of his German films and by Miriam Hopkins in his early sound films “Trouble in Paradise” and “Design for Living” (until such female assertion was tamed by the Production Code). Here the type is played by Irene Rich, who described her usual screen persona acidly as “the doormat in an endless series of domestic films.” Mrs. Eryllynne was “a different sort of role for her,” as “Variety” noticed. Wilde’s original title was “A Good Woman” (until his mother convinced him that such a title would interest nobody), one paradox being that society’s bad woman proves to be the truly good woman. That Mrs. Eryllynne is in fact the mother whom Lady Windermere thinks long dead is a plot secret that Wilde keeps longer than Lubitsch, but in both play and film Lady Windermere never learns the truth. This is a comedy without comedy’s traditional ending in which all is revealed and everyone reconciled.

Indeed, the play and the film both rely on the comedy of partial understandings and false viewpoints. It’s a story about deceptions and misapprehensions among characters who fail to see the whole picture — to which only we are privy. In that sense, the silent film, in Lubitsch’s hands, was ideally suited to the story, which he emphasizes is also about people watching and being watched — through windows, binoculars, lorgnettes, monocles, and keyholes. The obsessive observation is mostly social — involving class jealousies and catty curiosity — but erotic voyeurism is there too. Lubitsch could thus extend point-of-view shots, reactions, and cutting-on-glances to a complexity that no film had previously approached. By all accounts, he planned every camera setup, acted out gestures for his players, and was “personally cutting the film” — unusual enough in the studio system for it to be so reported in “Moving Picture World.” Lubitsch came to the unlikely Warner Bros. studio (known at the time more for such action films as the Rin-Tin-Tin vehicle “Clash of the Wolves”) mainly because his extraordinary contract gave him full authority and final cut, including the right to close the set even to the Warner brothers themselves. His start-to-finish perfectionism would not be rivaled until Hitchcock, who was also drawn to stories about voyeurism and sexual control.

Mary Pickford, who refused to bend to Lubitsch, complained that he was “a director of doors,” and it is true that he understands character through social space — here by way of mansion doors opened or barred, garden hedges obscuring or revealing, grandstand seating packed or empty, love seats filled or vacant. Even doorbells can be pushed in revealing ways. Part of our fun comes from watching the characters misunderstand a series of everyday objects: letters, checks, a cigar, the title fan ...

In Hollywood’s hands works of literature typically result in “classics illustrated”— films that retain the story line but miss the essence. In “Lady Windermere’s Fan” we are treated to a rare example of an enduring literary work and its masterful film adaptation. The plot details are quite different, and yet the play’s essential spirit is intact. What is additionally remarkable is that, shorn of Wilde’s words, the implausible plotline of “Lady Windermere’s Fan” ought to sink in the heaviest of melodramas—with its abandoned child, fallen woman, desperate wife, and secret maternal love—but Lubitsch buoys it up through the wit within gestures, expressions, and spaces.

It’s easy to appreciate the high artistry of the film, and Warner Bros. rented theaters across the country to “road-show” it at two-dollar admission prices. But “Lady Windermere’s Fan” also proved a popular hit, breaking box-office attendance records at the Warners’ theater in Manhattan. This from a movie with the temerity to silence Oscar Wilde.

This film has been preserved by the Museum of Modern Art.

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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