

# *The Shop Around the Corner*

By Kevin Bahr

Simon Lubitsch was nothing but a simple tailor, a Russian émigré to Berlin who owned a small shop that he hoped to give to his sons when they were older. However, his youngest son decided to pursue theater and film, embarking on a legendary career devoted to the fantastical. Whether he was directing comedy, drama, or big-budget spectacles, Ernst Lubitsch was always focused on larger-than-life figures. Kings, princesses, jewel thieves, artists, lieutenants, spies. Lubitsch had an obsession with fantasy, best seen in the opening of 1919's "Die Puppe," where Ernst appears onscreen and pulls various toys out of a box to decorate a diorama until it has formed the opening scene of the film. For Lubitsch, cinema was about opening up a toy box and creating something entirely out of his wild imagination, practically escaping from the dullness of the life of a simple tailor.

His 1940 masterpiece, though, "The Shop Around the Corner" features nothing but low-key, normal characters happy with their low-key, normal lives. They are content to work during the days, relax in the evenings, and, maybe one day, settle down with somebody special. It is a marked contrast from all the other characters that populated Lubitsch's world, but for all of its simple charm, it may be the grandest film he ever made.

You have likely heard the plot before: Alfred Kralik (James Stewart) and Clara Novak (Margaret Sullavan) are two co-workers at a shop in Budapest, where they are constantly at odds with each other, arguing the minute they arrive at work and rarely letting up throughout the day. Unbeknownst to them, though, they are really each other's anonymous pen pal, slowly falling in love in spite of all their fighting.

It's a story that has been told numerous times since then, most notably in Nora Ephron's 1999 film "You've Got Mail," but the one thing that most adaptations fail to realize is that, in Lubitsch's film, the romance is not the true heart of the story. The real soul of the film lies in the titular shop, Matuschek and Co., a small leather goods store staffed by the kind of people you could see at any shop around the corner all over the world. Frank Morgan plays Mr. Hugo Matuschek himself, introduced to us as a comical and flustered boss type, but transforming mid-



*Margaret Sullavan shows Frank Morgan and James Stewart how to make a sale. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

way through the picture into an incredibly sympathetic character who earns some of the film's biggest smiles and tears.

Midway through the film, this character, who has been the joy of much laughter throughout the picture, discovers that his wife has been unfaithful to him and, after a botched suicide attempt, he is forced to stay in the hospital due to a nervous breakdown. During his stay, he receives a card from the employees of Matuschek and Co. wishing that he gets well and is able to come home soon. The real revelation towards the end of the film is not when Klara realizes that Alfred has been her romantic pen pal all along, but rather, when Matuschek realizes that his shop is his home, and his employees really are his family. It's a heartwarming statement reaffirming the value of the simple things in life, like friendship and work, all coming from a man who thought he would never be content with a simple life.

Despite my earlier comments, though, the romance between Stewart and Sullavan is still an essential part of the film, one which Lubitsch treats with a tenderness that he had only exhibited in only a few other films up to that date. Since 1932, all of Lubitsch's pictures had been romantic comedies, with much more emphasis on the comedy than the romance. Thus, the subject of love in his films had been treated very glibly, usually with more focus on sexual innuendoes than anything else. In this film, despite the central conflict that the two characters who hate each other are secretly anonymous pen pals, their love is not played for laughs often. When Klara runs

out of the office to meet her date, we know that Alfred has already decided not to meet her that night, and our heart breaks for her.

Following this moment, we get one of the most memorable scenes in the whole film. Alfred, having just lost his job, goes to the café and discovers that Klara is his pen pal. Instead of confessing to her right away, he goes in and tries to get along with her for the first time since they met. She tries to shoo him away, insisting that her date will be there any second, but Alfred is insistent and tries to make her see how much the two of them really have in common. Despite their love of high literature, barbed insults are traded back and forth and, for all of Stewart and Sullavan's comic timing, we cannot help but feel sorry that these characters cannot see past their differences and realize that they are perfect for each other. There is a sadness underpinning the entire scene, knowing that Alfred won't be able to admit that he is her secret admirer, all while she continues to put him down. It reaches a breaking point when she calls Alfred an "insignificant little clerk," which is finally the line that gets him to leave.

The next morning, Klara goes to her mailbox to check for the letter from her "dear friend," wondering why he stood her up, and Lubitsch, ever the masterful visual storyteller, turns this one-shot scene into one of the most tender and heartbreaking moments from any romance film. The camera is placed in the mail room, and we move past a series of boxes until we end up on box 237. The door opens, a gloved hand reaches inside, feels around for a moment, and then we see Klara bend down and look inside the empty box, tears in her eyes. It is one of those rare moments in cinema where direction, cinematography, and acting all combine perfectly to make a true emotional connection with the viewer.

This is only topped by the scene where Kralik delivers her a visit later on that day, where she lies in her bed, sick from heartbreak. He tries to comfort her, reaching out to her for the first time as a friend, when her landlady comes in with the letter she has been waiting for. Klara, suddenly well again, tells Kralik he can leave now, but he insists on staying. As Klara reads the letter that he wrote for her, Kralik sees her overcome with joy and he smiles, as do audiences worldwide.

People still talk about the "Lubitsch touch" to this day, a marketing term invented during the silent era to advertise Lubitsch's films among all other pictures of the time. Many critics and scholars have tried to figure out just what makes up the Lubitsch touch, but out of all of his fantastical and comedic stories, I think the answer lies here, in one of his simplest and most heartwarming films. Ernst Lubitsch loved people, and he loved the concept of love. It comes through in every film of his, but this may very well be his most personalized expression of it. By returning to a simple European shop around the corner, Lubitsch was finally able to express on film what was most important to him in life: Friendship, work, and love.

*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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