

The Son of the Sheik

By Donna Hill

Not East of Suez -- but South of Algiers.
Opening title card from "The Son of the Sheik"

If Metro's "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" made Valentino a star, it was Paramount's 1921 film "The Sheik" that made Rudolph Valentino the most popular male box office star of his time. It was his final film, "The Son of the Sheik," which truly cemented his place as *the* exotic lover of the silent screen.

Although Valentino enjoyed making the 1921 film and the fame it brought him, he loathed being characterized as a "Sheik" in off-screen life and had trouble understanding why his fans could not separate the man from the image. He once said "Women are not in love with me but with the picture of me on the screen. I am merely the canvas on which women paint their dreams." Valentino was an early chameleon, portraying in various films, a matador, a Rajah, French royalty and an English Lord. This was due in part to his looks, but that he was believable in such a variety of roles lends credibility to his abilities as an actor of note and not merely a handsome face.

Between "The Sheik" and "The Son of the Sheik," Valentino's career had many ups and downs. His appeal and star power suffered from his strike from and litigation with

Paramount in 1923, which kept him off screen for nearly two years; and the release of a series of flops. By the time Valentino had moved on to United Artists in 1925, he desperately needed a hit. "The Eagle," directed by Clarence Brown was a solid start.

It is no surprise that United Artists decided to capitalize on his biggest success by making a sequel to "The Sheik." Valentino might have chafed a bit at reprising the role, but he recognized the necessity of doing it. Sequels were not yet common in 1926, but all signs pointed to the film being a sure fire winner.

Producer John Considine lined up veteran George Fitzmaurice to direct, which pleased Valentino.



Pictorial featured in August 1926 issue of Picture-Play Magazine.
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Fitzmaurice was the director Valentino had hoped to work with in the 1922 film "Blood and Sand." Considine also brought back as his leading lady his "Eagle" co-star, Vilma Banky. Their rapport was undeniable. George Barnes manned the camera, and famed screenwriter Frances Marion took E.M. Hull's sequel and rewrote the scenario in true Hollywood romantic style. Set Design was handled by William Cameron Menzies, now famous for "The Thief of Bagdad," who worked magic within budget confines, making a lush world out of little more than decorative fabrics and fake – albeit artistic – palm trees.

Whatever grumbles he might have had before filming began, Valentino thoroughly enjoyed making "The Son of the Sheik." He relished physicality and

performed all his own stunts. The film was shot mainly in Hollywood. Yuma, Arizona substituted for the Sahara dunes. Conditions there were little better than the actual Sahara: 110° heat during the day, barely cooling at night. The cast and crew camped in tents. The prop master, Irving Sindler, recorded in his diary that unlike co-stars Montagu Love and Vilma Banky, Valentino worked uncomplainingly in the brutal conditions. He actually seemed to be enjoying himself; home movie footage documents a pith-helmeted Valentino racing around the sands on his horse, appearing to have a wonderful time.

While Valentino cared little for the character he was playing, the production itself was of the quality he had long dreamed of. He was not prone to fooling himself; he knew he was not making high art. Yet low art or high, he cared deeply about getting it right. Most of the costumes were designed by Gilbert Adrian. But Valentino also provided authentic costumes, silks, and weapons he'd purchased in France at a cost of over \$15,000 (\$200,000 in 2015 dollars). He went so far as to personally rent Jadaan, the horse he rode in the 1921 film, for the flashback sequence with Agnes Ayres. Further: he was able to lure the now somewhat stout Ayres her out of retirement to reprise her role as Diana.

Valentino plays a dual role, father and son (Ahmed, the elder and younger). The split-screen process shots of the two Valentinos, done long before the advent of green screen, are still impressive -- all special effects were still executed in the camera in the mid-20's. Valentino reportedly enjoyed strolling the backlot in his bearded, elder sheik state, unrecognized.

"The Son of the Sheik" is a pure romp, a twenties orientalist fantasy. Produced at the peak of the silent era, it is a wonderful balance of action, romance, and humor -- with gorgeous cinematography, to boot. It moves quickly and leaves you cheering in the end.

Tragically for Valentino, "The Son of the Sheik" was his last film. He lived only long enough to witness the film's success in Los Angeles and New York. He was promoting it when he fell ill and died at the age of 31, but lived long enough to know it was going to be, in today's parlance, a monster hit.

United Artists took a risk putting the film in general release while the world mourned the loss of its star. At the time, it was thought to be in questionable taste not to pull the film from release. Happily for United Artists, the fans demanded otherwise. It was incredibly successful; lines snaked down busy metropolitan streets attesting to the flappers and sheiks who yearned for a final glimpse of the Latin lover in what is arguably his best remembered film.

"The Son of the Sheik" was a great film to end a career. Valentino did not suffer the transition to sound as did many of his contemporaries. Much like more contemporary stars who died at a too young age, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe, he is the ever the youthful ideal of screen romance of his time. If none of Valentino's other films survived except this one film, we would still have ample evidence of his charisma and star quality which shines in "The Son of the Sheik."

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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