

The Wishing Ring: An Idyll of Old England

By Kyle Westphal

When the film collector and historian Kevin Brownlow first came across a 16mm print of “The Wishing Ring: An Idyll of Old England” (1914) whilst scouring a defunct film library, he assumed it to be “one of those soporific British silents,” not worth the £5 asking price.

As Brownlow later learned, “The Wishing Ring” was neither soporific nor, in fact, British. An exceedingly charming and subtle romantic comedy, “The Wishing Ring,” was actually shot amidst the white cliffs of Fort Lee, New Jersey, and stands as an emblematic product of that short-lived filmmaking community.

Based on Owen Davis’s 1910 play, which a young Cecil B. DeMille had directed on Broadway, the film version of “The Wishing Ring” was produced as part of a deal between the World Film Corporation and the Shubert Theatrical Company. World -- Film, a distribution company formed with the profits from the importation of feature-length spectacles from Italy and France, recognized that American audiences had developed an appetite for quality features after a steady diet of one- and two-reel films. The World-Shubert partnership aimed to translate recent stage successes like “The Wishing Ring” to the screen, at the rate of one feature per week.

World Film Corporation could draw from a surprisingly deep roster of film talent in Fort Lee, not least the refugees of Éclair Company. The storied French production company had set up an American outpost in Fort Lee in 1911, complete with a sun-lit studio and a full laboratory, and proceeded to send some of its best behind-the-camera talent across the Atlantic to work in New Jersey. Éclair director Maurice Tourneur reluctantly agreed to oversee production in America, but by the time he arrived stateside in May 1914, Éclair’s Fort Lee facilities had been destroyed by a fire and its major production operations moved to Tucson, Arizona. Éclair’s loss proved to be World Film’s gain, with Tourneur and several contract players moving over to the new company.

The first two films that Tourneur directed for World Film Corporation, “Mother” (1914) and “The Man of the Hour” (1914), are presumed lost, but the third is so assured as to be quietly astonishing. By the time Tourneur made “The Wishing Ring,” he had already



Advertisement in Moving Picture World, Nov. 14, 1914 promotes the latest Shubert Feature. Courtesy Media History Digital Library.

secured the services of two of his essential collaborators, art director Ben Carré and cameraman John van den Broek. (Tourneur’s editor, assistant director, and all-around disciple Clarence Brown would join the unit a few months later during the production of “The Cub” [1915].)

“The Wishing Ring” stands squarely between stage and cinema. It opens with a proscenium, a curtain, and a silent chorus. Next, we’re introduced to the cast. (“Gyp Williams,” a dog, is billed fourth; the film’s equally expressive cat goes unbilled.) A low-key romance between poor pastor’s daughter Vivian Martin and aristocratic ne’er-do-well Chester Barnett develops over the next hour. They cannot marry unless Martin reconciles Barnett and his father, a gout-infected earl whom she befriends as part of her calculated rom-com conspiracy. It’s an open-air picture, choked with whimsy, but deft and expert enough to remain unpretentious and ingratiating.

But “The Wishing Ring” is not remotely a filmed play. It is a story in depth, a profusion of details in the background actively competing with, commenting upon, and enriching the action of the foreground. In his brilliant analysis of the film, historian Richard Koszarski observes that “The Wishing Ring” breaks with the grammar of the stage whenever the players “move from one world to the other just by walking towards, or away from, the camera—the chief stage direction in ‘The Wishing Ring,’ a film with remarkably few left-right entrances and exits.” It’s a pity that Tourneur never made a stereoscopic film—then

again, with his ostentatious emphasis on discrete planes of action and continuous movement; his films could be mistaken for 3-D anyway. Staging in depth was something of an obsession for Tourneur, as demonstrated by Clarence Brown's account of their working method:

He was a great believer in dark foregrounds. No matter where he set up his camera up, he would always have a foreground. On exteriors, we use to carry branches and twigs around with us. If it was an interior, he always had a piece of the set cutting into the corner of the picture, in halftone, to give him depth. Whenever we saw a painting with an interesting lighting effect, we'd copy it. We had a library of pictures. 'Rembrandt couldn't be wrong,' we'd say, and we'd set the shot up and light it like Rembrandt. At least we stole from the best!

This is the nub of Tourneur's unique filmmaking approach. He was a sophisticated aesthete whose style both avowed and transcended its debt to painting and theater. Tourneur himself was easily the most cultivated of the early directors; before he began making films for Éclair in 1912, he had already accumulated voluminous experience in the arts as an actor, illustrator, interior decorator, textile designer, and assistant to Auguste Rodin, André Antoine, and Puvis de Chavannes. Tourneur's compositional impulses are academic and imitative, his surfaces fastidious and ordered, his story sense fuzzy and recessive. The editing is effective, but never calls attention to itself. Crucially, the cutting strategy in "The Wishing Ring" doesn't heighten our identification with any individual character. We're always distant observers, taking in the entire picture. Tourneur's images often recall the soft glow and precious air of contemporary Pictorialist photography, but they're not remotely still lives—they're delicate and volatile, with human caprice scraping against the edge of the frame.

In 1914, Maurice Tourneur stood as one pole of American feature filmmaking, a potential model for the young medium at a moment when its form and future was deeply contested. D. W. Griffith could be said to represent his opposite. Griffith found meaning by cutting from one shot to another, while Tourneur's art dwelled on the visual density of each individual shot. One aesthetic was precise, purposeful, and clear, while the other was dewy and meandering. Griffith's montage method won out and set the template for American narrative cinema—and marginalized the achievements of his contemporaries. Tourneur's influence is more scattershot and subterranean, his deep-focus compositional style occasionally re-surfacing a generation later in arty efforts like

"The Long Voyage Home" (1940), "Citizen Kane" (1941), and "The Best Years of Our Lives" (1946).

Subsequent scholarship has questioned Griffith's preeminence and sought a less embarrassing standard bearer. Richard Koszarski went so far as to organize a retrospective entitled 'The Rivals of D. W. Griffith: Alternate Auteurs, 1913-1918' at the Walker Art Museum in 1976. In the accompanying catalog, Koszarski and his contributors discussed a number of such challengers—George Loane Tucker's "Traffic in Souls" (1913), Cecil B. DeMille's "The Cheat" (1915), Reginald Barker's "The Italian" (1915)—but reserved pride of place for Tourneur, represented by "The Wishing Ring," as well as "The Poor Little Rich Girl" (1917) and "The Blue Bird" (1918).

By then, Kevin Brownlow had rectified his earlier error and bought that 16mm print of "The Wishing Ring"—which turned out to be the last surviving copy of the film. It was subsequently preserved by the Library of Congress and blown up to 35mm, regaining its place as an unassuming landmark of early cinema.

Further Reading on Maurice Tourneur, "The Wishing Ring," and World Film Corporation

Kevin Brownlow. *The Parade's Gone By*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968.

William K. Everson. *American Silent Film*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

George Geltzer. "Maurice Tourneur." *Films in Review* Vol. XII, No. 4, April 1961, pp. 193 - 213.

Richard Koszarski. "Maurice Tourneur: The First of the Visual Stylists." *Film Comment*: March 1973, pp. 24 - 31.

Richard Koszarski, ed. *The Rivals of D.W. Griffith: Alternate Auteurs, 1913-1918*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1976.

Anthony Slide. *The American Film Industry: A Historical Dictionary*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.

Edward Wagenknecht. *The Movies in the Age of Innocence*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962.

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

Kyle Westphal is a programmer at the Northwest Chicago Film Society, a non-profit organization dedicated to the exhibition, dissemination, and preservation of celluloid history. Westphal began his film career at Doc Films, the University of Chicago's year-round, student-run cinema-theque, serving variously as treasurer, projectionist, historian, and ultimately programming chair. He subsequently served as the Chief Projectionist of the Dryden Theatre at George Eastman House, and also projected at the Little Theatre, the Film Studies Center, and the Wisconsin Film Festival. On behalf of the Northwest Chicago Film Society, he supervised the photochemical preservation of the independent musical feature Corn's-A-Poppin' (1955). He is a 2009 graduate of the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation.