

THE ARTIST is the May, 2013 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania.

THE ARTIST United States 2011 La Petite Reine black-and-white silent feature drama 100 minutes Sony Pictures Home Entertainment dvd \*\*\*1/2 of a possible \*\*\*\*\* points 13 of a possible 20 points

\*= outstanding performance or technical achievement

#### Points

Producers: Thomas Langmann, Emmanuel Montamat

1 Director: Michel Hazanavicius

1 Editors: Ann-Sophie Bion, Michel Hazanavicius

1 Cinematography: Guillaume Schiffman

2 Lighting: James Planette

1 Story / Screenplay: Michel Hazanavicius

2 Music: Ludovic Bource\*

1 Production Designer; Art Director: Laurence Bennett; Gregory Hooper

2 Sound: Nadine Muse, Michael Krikorian, Olivier Roche,

Maela Premel-Cabic, Yannick Boulot, Marc Mnemosyne, Ken Yasumoto

1 Acting

1 Creativity

Principal Cast: Jean Dujardin\* (George Valentin), Berenice Bejo (Peppy Miller), James Cromwell (Clifton, George's chauffeur), Penelope Miller (Doris Valentin, George's wife), Malcolm McDowell\* (Extra), Missi Pyle (Constance, George's customary co-star), Beth Grant (Peppy's maid), Ed Lauter (Peppy's butler), Joel Murray (Policeman making fire rescue), John Goodman\* (Al Zimmer, producer / director)

Intended both as a tribute to silent cinema and as an expedient Hollywood vehicle for two French-speaking co-stars, THE ARTIST is director Michel Hazanavicius's first American film. Before considering the contemporary film itself, it is helpful to know a few fundamental characteristics of authentic silent movies.

Almost no silent films were truly silent. Most had some kind of musical accompaniment. By 1927, a significant number of feature dramas included complete musical scores designed specifically for theatre auditing. Sound effects had already been incorporated into silent film presentations, utilizing

sound technology pioneered by Lee De Forest and others in the early 1920s. Notable examples of prerecorded sound effects integrated into silent films can be found in several pictures from this period, notably Murnau's *SUNRISE* and De Mille's *KING OF KINGS*. Furthermore, audiences had frequently been entertained by verbal plot summaries or even invented dialogues delivered by lecturers, or, in the special case of Japan, professional entertainers who occasionally surpassed on-screen performers in popularity.

Only one element of 1930s cinema technology was absent from motion pictures released in 1926: synchronized spoken dialogue. Movie patrons did not clamor for its addition. As early as 1925 William Fox wired six theaters his company owned for sound. That experiment flopped dismally, and the sound equipment was withdrawn. Top money-earners as late as 1928 were still primarily silents. Sound was foisted upon the public by studios eager to provide screen opportunities for stage performers requiring musical settings or Shakespearean texts to showcase their talents.

Also, contrary to what you see in *THE ARTIST*, stars of Hollywood productions from the twenties were no hammy muggers. The Victorian theatricality of early silent cinema had given way to the nuanced naturalism of Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin, Greta Garbo, Rudolph Valentino, Eleanor Boardman, Jobyna Ralston and Richard Dix.

Another salient point about silent films: half were at least partially released with color tinting. Pure black-and-white movies were by no means predominant.

As James Card, silent film spectator and preserver, has emphatically pointed out, silent films of the latter half of the 1920s were projected at sound speeds of 24 frames per second. So any visible jerkiness of movement was intended by the filmmakers and not a function of primitive camera or projector operation.

Lastly, silent film audiences were noisy ones. They did not sit mute and passive, watching images on pale white screens. Older children read intertitles to younger ones, fans cheered heroes and booed villains with matching fervor. Spectators openly discussed and commented on actions and characterizations depicted, reinforced by poet-critic Vachel Lindsay, who wrote in 1915 "Beginning Monday and henceforth, ours shall be known as the conversational theatre ... At the door let each person be handed the following card. – 'You are encouraged to discuss the picture with the friend who accompanies you to this place.'" (page 133 of *THE ART OF THE MOVING PICTURE*, originally published in

1915 by Macmillan, New York City, reprinted in 1922 and republished in a Modern Library Paperback Edition in 2000). There was no vital necessity for quiet audiences until the coming of sound films.

Now let's examine the contemporary film set in the period when the "flickers" transitioned to "phonoplays." As *THE ARTIST* opens, we see a male star of the era being tortured in a vain attempt to make him speak. Rescued from this crisis by a devoted dog, the protagonist escapes and eventually recovers the girl he adores. Evil is vanquished and all ends happily. A typical 1927 adventure epic.

Or is it? While we correctly see a pit orchestra and tiers of engrossed viewers, the screen itself is vapidly white, lacking surface sheen. Real urban theaters of the time had screens coated with silver crystals, giving films projected onto them a shining reflectivity missing from current ones. Budget restrictions at work?

Equally painful to watch are the grimaces of George Valentin which begin as *THE ARTIST* opens and continue throughout the chief character's silent film performance excerpts. Nothing of the easy grace and breathtaking acrobatic agility of Douglas Fairbanks is evident. Every action is too mechanical, too schematic, too divisible from the preceding one.

Yet George thinks he is remarkable. Fatuous and egocentric, he ignores co-stars, directors, wife --- everyone other than his pet dog and a lionizing young flapper first encountered in an accidental bumping incident as she attempts to retrieve a dropped autograph pad. From this point on, the director sets out to chart a very unlikely romance, paralleling it with the ascendancy of sound melodramas. Never mind that George is already married and considerably older than aspiring actress Peppy Miller. Marriages can be dissolved and age differences mooted by true love. The modish young woman unimaginatively identified as one Peppy Miller is launched upon an acting career by publicity she garners from her initial meeting with George. A series of bit roles lead gradually to larger ones for Peppy, boosted substantially by the patronage of her idol. His own career falters as sound becomes the new fashion in studio production. George doesn't need or want it, a feeling he shares with Chaplin. But executives in Hollywood, fascinated as ever by novelty, decide to convert exclusively to talking pictures.

That's unreasonably good news for Peppy, since she does no audible speaking in *THE ARTIST*. Presumably, she has an attractive voice. On the other

hand, her obdurately anachronistic supporter cuts his ties with producer-director Al Zimmer in pursuit of Stroheimesque independent silent art film. Finally a glimpse of real silent drama emerges at the conclusion of a jungle saga where George's character defies audience expectation and perishes in quicksand, a too facile metaphor for his acting career. Fans who savored earlier exploits find this turn to seriousness puzzling and unacceptable. Then the stock market crashes and Valentin follows suit.

Unsurprisingly, the only solutions to his current dilemma are alcohol and suicide. Like the Lowell Sherman character in George Cukor's 1932 release, the increasingly impecunious has-been seems bent on alienating everyone who could conceivably assist him, discarding colleagues, friends, fans and even the infatuated Peppy. In a state of intoxicated senselessness, George sets his private collection of film reels ablaze, all but one of which he now considers worthless. That special treasure, clutched to his heart as he collapses, contains the record of his first film partnering with Peppy.

Ah, but death by conflagration will elude this protagonist. Faithful Fido brings timely salvation. A subsequent news article informs successful leading lady Miller of her admirer's grievous condition.

This must not be. Only one person has sufficient wealth and concern to lead such a despairing ruin of a man back to stardom: Peppy the martyr. She will sacrifice both career, if necessary, and youthful wooers in unflagging pursuit of a fairly sordid romantic dream. Only by rehabilitating the career of George can she discover lasting satisfaction. Feminists are bound to love this throwback to 1950s social dependency.

Unwilling to accept charity from a woman, the recuperating ex-actor attempts to once again take charge of his own life by escaping it. Will he succeed the second time around? Watch the final third of this feature and find out.

Obviously, the screenplay by Michel Hazanavicius is not likely to become a classic. Filled with tributes to earlier photoplays such as GRAND HOTEL, CITIZEN KANE, VERTIGO, A STAR IS BORN, THE MARK OF ZORRO, sunset blvd., and SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS (Sullivan fails to make a profitable social drama, but settles for slapstick comedy instead), THE ARTIST is too derivative to establish itself as an independent landmark. There is nothing original in either the characters or the situations presented. Only in moments of real silence do the characters come to life.

A further hindrance is the editing of the film. Neither Anne-Sophie Bion nor editing collaborator Hazanivicius knows how to recreate silent film pacing. Chase scenes are too restrained, cross-cutting acceleration is absent and suspense is diluted by leading music cues. Where silent film actors would utilize a slow, minute gesture or a subtle eye movement, these editors insert an emotionally listless profile shot or a cutaway to a motionless object. The wipes, iris ins and outs, and tracking shots which facilitated and expedited silents are completely missing.

Ludovic Bource's music score is a double-edged sword. The music itself is powerful, dynamic and memorable. It unfortunately too frequently sounds like a traveler just happening to pass through alien situations. What is lacking is uniqueness in the sense that tone colors, rhythms and harmonies suggest other places, times and films.

Similarly, the production design and art direction by Laurence Bennett and Gregory Hooper simulate Los Angeles successfully, but sometimes through the prism of earlier settings. Yes, art deco is appropriate to the 1930s, but the concluding scenery coupled with energetic tap dancing not only recalls Fred and Ginger but pales in comparison to *SWING TIME* and *SHALL WE DANCE*.

Kudos to James Planette for extraordinarily focused and transparent lighting.

Sound recording and mixing are exceptionally fine, though this seems a paradoxical achievement for a silent. Nadine Muse was responsible for the sound editing. A formidable array of mixers consisted of Michael Krikorian, Olivier Roche, Maela Premel-Cabic, Yannick Boulot, Marc Mnesomnye and Ken Yasumoto.

Given the limitations of pantomime, Jean Dujardin's subtle performance as the seemingly doomed George Valentin mostly captures the elegance and flexibility of the speechless stars, although sometimes failing to match their precision of timing. His moods are invariably depicted convincingly, allowing the illusion of drama to persist in the face of trite, commonplace predicaments seen too many times before.

Berenice Bejo is bouncy, sympathetic and completely one-dimensional, which is required by the plot. She deserves better material in the future.

Of the supporting cast, Missi Pyle's frustrated Connie and Malcolm McDowell's noble extra are standouts meriting praise and notice.

Of Michel Hazanavicius's directing, it can be summarized as adequate with regard to the cast, exemplary in choosing locations and unconvincing in storytelling accomplishment.

Extra features include an ingratiating question and answer session with the directors and selected cast members, a blooper reel, an enlightening featurette about locations used, a requisite 20-minute featurette about the making of the film, and four featurettes totaling 11 ½ minutes focused on various technicians and their work.

THE ARTIST is suitable for teens and adults, but an obscene gesture and a graphic suicide attempt make it something requiring parental discretion and previewing.

In sum, THE ARTIST is quite entertaining and worth watching to see Jean Dujardin's Oscar-winning performance as George Valentin. But it is by no means the best picture of 2011, Academy voters notwithstanding.