



The *Ninotchka* dvd is an upcoming LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of it.

United States 1939 black-and-white 110 minutes live action feature comedy
Loew's Incorporated (M-G-M) Producers: Sidney Franklin and Ernst Lubitsch

13 of a possible 20 points = ***1/2 above average film

Key: *indicates an outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- 1 Direction: Ernst Lubitsch
2nd Unit Direction: John Waters
- 2 Editing: Gene Ruggiero*
- 2 Cinematography: William Daniels*
Still Photography: Milton Brown
- 1 Lighting: Floyd Porter
- 2 Screenplay: Charles Brackett*, Billy Wilder* and Walter Reisch*, based on
an original story by Melchior Lengyel
- 1 Music: Werner Heymann
Orchestrations: Sidney Cutner, Maurice De Packh and Leonid Raab
Song: "I Found Romance" with lyrics by Earl Brent
- 1 Art Direction: Cedric Gibbons and Randall Duell

Set Decoration: Edwin Willis*

Props: George Elder

Costume Design: Adrian Greenburg*

Makeup: Jack Dawn

1 Sound

Sound Editing Supervision: Wally Heglin

Recording Direction: Douglas Shearer

Sound Engineer: Conrad Kahn

1 Acting

1 Creativity

13 total points

Cast: Greta Garbo (Ninotchka), Melvyn Douglas (Leon), Ina Claire (Swana), Bela Lugosi (Razinin), Sig Ruman (Iranoff), Felix Bressart (Buljanoff), Alexander Granach (Kopalski), Gregory Gaye (Rakonin), Rolfe Sedan (hotel manager), Edwin Maxwell (Mercier), Richard Carle (Gaston), Dorothy Adams (Swana's maid), Monya Andre (gossip), Nino Bellini (Swana's restaurant guest), Wilda Bennett (Swana's restaurant guest), Eumenio Blanco (waiter), Symona Boniface (gossip), Frederika Brown (Swana's restaurant patron), Emilie Cabanne (gossip), Gino Corrado (bar patron), George Davis (porter at railroad station), Harry Evans (club patron), Fred Farrell (attendant), Bess Flowers (gossip), Charles Fogel (club patron), Mary Forbes (Lady Lavenham – indignant woman in doorway), Rudy Frohlich (j) (young boy, Gurganov's son), Jody Gilbert (street conductress – Moscow roommate), George Golden (club patron), Dick Gordon (club patron), Herschel Graham (club patron), Lawrence Grant (General Savitsky – Swana's consort), Jennifer Gray (cigarette girl), Winifred Harris (English lady getting visa), Ray Hendricks (waiter), William Irving (bartender), Hans Joby (man at railroad station), Charles Judels (Pere Mathieu – café owner), Armand Kaliz (Louis – the headwaiter), Max Linder (club patron), Leota Lorraine (club patron), Hans Moebus (club patron), Peggy Moran (first cigarette girl), Sandra Morgan (gossip), Lucille Pinson (German woman at railroad station), Albert Pollet (waiter), Frank Reicher (Soviet lawyer), Constantine Romanoff (man in restaurant), Alexander Schoenberg (bearded man –

Eiffel Tower tourist), Harry Semels (Gurganov – neighbor spy), Tamara Shayne (Anna – Moscow roommate), Florence Shirley (Marianne – Swana’s phone friend), George Sorel (Swana’s restaurant guest), Edwin Stanley (Soviet lawyer), Count Stefenelli (hotel guest), Kay Stewart (cigarette girl), George Tobias (Russian visa official), Jacques Vanaire (hotel desk clerk), Elinor Vanderveer (gossip), Paul Weigel (Vladimir – with letter from Leon), Elizabeth Williams (indignant woman), Marek Windheim (manager), Wolfgang Zilzer (taxi driver), others

Despite its promising first half, where a screwball comedy format seems in place, *Ninotchka* then tails off into standard Hollywood romance. Greta Garbo’s impassive countenance is iconic. Not so her laughter and half-hearted stabs at infatuation. There’s no screen chemistry visible between her and co-lead Melvyn Douglas. Much less to his discredit than hers. While director Ernst Lubitsch handled a comic trio of Russian commercial traders with commendable restraint and intelligence, he couldn’t pry Garbo out of her non-committal mode. That failing reduced his film’s entertainment value significantly.

Ninotchka’s plot centers on a set of jewels formerly belonging to snobbishly amoral fashion plate Grand Duchess Swana. She’s currently living lavishly in Paris, where a coterie of admirers includes one Count Leon d’Algout, presumably a French native. Like the Grand Duchess, Count Leon subsists as a jobless entity, content to flirt with and seduce the opposite sex.

Marriage never crosses the minds of either Swana or Leon. That would require seriousness. Politics, religion, literature – these are topics they avoid whenever possible. Better just to eat, drink and dabble.

Three Russian traders newly elevated to service as commerce ambassadors show up at a Paris hotel, electing its comforts over a working-class hostel. They’ re quickly snared in such capitalist delights as room service, cigarette girls, champagne and high fashion. None of these advance what is supposed to be their aim: selling Swana’s impounded jewelry to raise money for an impoverished homeland.

Thanks to Russian-born hotel waiter Rakonin, who overhears the bumbling troika of visiting bon vivants discussing their true French mission, Swana is informed of her stolen property’s surfacing in Paris. Accommodating Leon proposes to retrieve it for her by posing as arbitrator between jeweler Mercier,

potential buyer of Swana's gems, and the Soviet government. Armed with an injunction suspending immediate sale of disputed property, Count Leon intimidates both French merchant and three befuddled trade delegates. The matter has to be turned over to legal authorities. It will take some time to be definitively settled.

Extension of their generally delightful stay in the City of Light is enormously appealing to Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski. It's a less attractive prospect for Kremlin overseers, who respond to Count Leon's bluntly antagonistic message by sending another representative, Comrade Nina Ivanovna Yakushova, to break the deadlock and clinch favorable sale of disputed merchandise.

Yakushova turns out to be none other than Greta Garbo in winter no-frills duds. She reproves and rebuffs with a stern mien of Siberian iciness.

Seeking to ingratiate themselves, Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski relocate to considerably more modest hotel chambers, turning over their Royal Suite to Yakushova. She, preoccupied with assigned business, doesn't seem the slightest bit impressed. What Paris offers in fashion is another matter entirely. Nina's soon fascinated by upscale couture, just like male counterparts. In Comrade Yakushova's case, it's a display window cloche that snags her interest. Even tempting contents inside the Royal Suite's safe have less effect on their temporary custodian.

Out on the boulevards in search of an accommodation more aligned with Communist principles, Nina encounters Leon. He's quick to engage an alluring female in superficial conversation. She parries his romantic overtures with terse ironies. Leon finds that behavior both surprising and intriguing. He's therefore eager to accompany the Russian materialist to the Eiffel Tower. From that elevation he continues to flatter and coax a still uninviting Nina to add his home to her itinerary.

When she accepts that offer, a romance gradually takes shape. It's hopeless, though, since Nina must soon return to Moscow and leave cloche, Eiffel Tower and Leon behind.

Nina learns her beau is the stumbling block to prompt sale of Swana's jewelry. He in turn becomes aware she's been sent west to overturn legal obstacles and bring back an infusion of cash to revitalize Russia's sagging economy.

More complications develop. Once Swana sets eyes on a younger Russian woman transformed from unsmiling party line technocrat into Cinderella at the ball, jealousy stirs within her. She can't resist insulting and blackmailing a romantic rival.

Ninotchka buries injury and shame in champagne. While she's too intoxicated to properly guard contents of the safe in her room, it's emptied surreptitiously by Rakonin. He delivers glittering baubles back to their original owner.

Swana then pays an unwelcome call to hung-over Ninotchka around noon the next day, informing her she will be permitted to sell the contested ornaments only if she takes money earned that way back to Russia personally, foregoing companionship of Count d'Algout. Will she do so?

You'll have to watch the film to find out.

Aside from the overly cool playing of Greta Garbo, the rest of the cast is as credible as a preposterous script permits. Sig Ruman, Felix Bressart and Alexander Granach are ideal as wayward merchants vastly underqualified for their critical mission. Melvyn Douglas peddles charm winningly. And Bela Lugosi is suitably sneaky as an exile attempting to score a tardy victory for the outdated Russian Empire. Edwin Maxwell's smug Parisian jeweler is also meriting of praise.

Editing is crisp, abetted by camera movements that frequently weave through interiors and follow actors up staircases. Ascent to the observation deck of the Eiffel Tower becomes simply a preliminary ground level shot succeeded by a second showing climbers together at the end of their upward journey. At times, especially in scenes depicting marching celebrants at a patriotic Moscow parade and thronged insides of a Soviet tenement, Lubitsch's movie resembles a documentary about Muscovite life during the Depression. Action then becomes quite sober. Rather too much so for what is intended to be a frothy Continental lark.

Lighting and sound are satisfactory.

Costumes and set decoration aid immensely in creating appropriate context for mostly droll characters onscreen. Hats off to Adrian and Edwin Willis for remarkably skillful craftsmanship.

The screenplay designed by Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder and Walter Reisch is splendidly witty, replete with one-line zingers. Smart commentary on

everything from Nazi salutations to wrangling over billing credits is contained within it.

“I Found Romance” is a pleasant ditty. Otherwise Werner Heymann’s music is passably agreeable, not likely to ever overshadow scores by Max Steiner, Alfred Newman and Erich Korngold dating from the same period.

Exhibiting both a glamorous Art Deco hotel set and what could easily pass for a high school musical’s mockup of the renowned Eiffel Tower, *Ninotchka* presents only intermittently impressive visual art. Possibly its line producer resolved on trimming the budget through savings on scenery.

Lubitsch’s penchant for double entendres is absent here. *Ninotchka* is thus acceptable film fare for teen and adult audiences. It’s only entertainment fluff at heart. However, a snappy satirical screenplay and highly mobile cinematography make this Lubitsch comedy at least worth one screening.

The only bonus feature on the Warner Video dvd release is an original theatrical trailer for *Ninotchka*.