

Photo: Kermesse eroica 1935 rosay + donne Boom.jpg from Wikipedia Commons public domain Look up this photo on the Internet.

La Kermesse Héroïque (Carnival in Flanders) is a 1935 Jacques Feyder dramedy. Below is Kino Ken's review of its Rare Films for You dvd release.

17 of a possible 20 points = ****1/2 = a minor classic

Belgium / France 1935 black-and-white 109 minutes
subtitled live action feature dramedy Film Sonores Tobis
Producer: Pierre Guerlais

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 2 Direction: Jacques Feyder*
- 2 Editing: Jacques Brillouin*
- 2 Cinematography: Harry Stradling, Sr.*
- 1 Lighting
- 1 Screenplay: Jacques Feyder and Robert Stemmle, with dialogue by Bernard Zimmer, based on a short story by Charles Spaak
- 2 Music: Louis Beydts
- 2 Production Design: Lazare Meerson*
Set Decoration: Alexander Trauner* and Georges Wakhévitch*

Costume Design: Georges Benda*

1 Sound: Hermann Storr

2 Acting

2 Creativity

17 total points

Cast: Françoise Rosay* (Cornelia de Witte a.k.a. Madame Burgomaster), André Alerme (Korbus de Witte, Burgomaster), Jean Murat* (Duke of Olivarès), Louis Jouvet* (priest), Lyne Clevers (fishwife), Micheline Cheirel* (Siska), Maryse Wendling (the baker's wife), Ginette Gaubert (the innkeeper's wife), Marguerite Ducouret (the brewer's wife), Bernard Lancret (Julian Brueghel, painter), Alfred Adam (Joseph Van Meulen, butcher), Pierre Labry (innkeeper), Arthur Devère (fishmonger), Marcel Carpentier (baker), Alexander D'Arcy (Captain), Claude Sainval (Lieutenant), Delphin* (dwarf), Francine Bessy (Gudula), Marianne Hardy (Martha), Roger Legris (merchant), Bernard Optal (Ambroise), Maurice Tillet (shaving scene patron), others

Director Jacques Feyder's bittersweet tribute to his native land of Belgium, *La Kermesse heroïque (Carnival in Flanders)* is set in the Flemish town of Boom. The year is 1616, one that will witness the deaths of both Miguel Cervantes Saavedra and William Shakespeare. Boom is part of the Spanish Empire, compelled to pay an annual tax to Philip III's monarchy. Like most towns in Flanders, it could be considered fair game for pillaging by frequently unpaid soldiers of Philip's government.

Recollections of atrocities committed by Spanish troops some thirty years earlier haunted older members of Boom's town council. They had no wish to suffer the fates of Mechelen, Aalst, Brabant, and Antwerp.

To avoid such a catastrophe, the burgomaster of Boom decides to fake his own death. Most townsmen go into hiding. Though a few take up position as mourners in the mayor's bedroom. His council has advised wives and daughters to stay inside unseen by foreign travelers.

The women reject such a proposal. Led by Cornelia, the burgomaster's spouse, they determine to welcome dashing and reckless Spaniards instead,

highlighting their male counterparts' cowardice and flaunting their own independence.

At the community's outskirts a delegation headed by Cornelia present the Duke of Olivarès, commander of approaching Spanish troops, with a golden key. Boom is at their disposal, the cadaver of its political leader ritually shrouded awaiting passage of his soul to purgatory. The bedroom is illuminated by four large candles, leaving most of the chamber in gloom or shadow.

Food and drink, prepared originally for a celebration known as a *kermesse*, is lavished on foreign troops. However, since Boom is officially lamenting its newly deceased headman, festivities are subdued. Spaniards march into town with suitably muffled drumbeats. The Duke insists on paying an official visit to the late burgomaster's bedside. There a prayer for eternal safeguarding of his soul is presented by a Jesuit priest accompanying the titled Spaniard. Lack of female keeners likely seems odd to these foreigners. Yet they appear to accept it as a local quirk.

Soon afterwards, rank-and-file soldiers are dismissed to find whatever lodgings and amusements they can. Boom's women quickly pair with favored companions. Cornelia herself continues escorting the Duke. For she has another subterfuge to execute: seducing him into ordering marriage between impoverished painter Julian Brueghel and her oldest daughter Siska. That prospective wedlock is opposed by Cornelia's husband, who has promised the girl to Boom's feckless butcher.

A night of carousing – rather than burning, torture, looting, and rapine – find most parties satisfied and even surfeited with victuals and amorous engagements. While the still very much alive political leader of Boom can do nothing to curb licentiousness or unfaithfulness of women temporarily liberated from masculine control. Nor is he, being formally dead, in any position to counter or overrule the Duke's sanctioning of Siska's marriage to Julian. Even the possibility of being made a cuckold in his own home cannot be circumvented.

Will that happen? Are Spanish visitors as thoroughly friendly as they seem?

Check out this dvd from the Ligonier Valley Library after it's been processed and made available to find answers to those questions and any others this review has generated.

Justly famed for Lazare Meerson's thoroughly detailed sets recreating a sixteenth-century Flemish town and sumptuous costuming designed by Georges Benda, *La Kermesse heroïque* also features elaborately detailed interiors decorated by Alexander Trauner and Georges Wakhévitch. These won praise in *Variety* magazine when the film reached American theaters.

Equally laudable and lauded was the performance of Feyder's wife Françoise Rosay as complicated Cornelia, a scolding Xanthippe around her husband, dedicated disciplinarian to offspring, nonetheless an unconditional supporter of daughter Siska's rapturous attraction to lowly Julian.

Jean Murat's Duke of Olivarès, an educated, handsome cavalier with plenty of nobility and tact, has held up well over decades.

Micheline Cheirel made an exquisite dreamy, obedient Siska. Who, unlike her domineering mother, accepts subordination to men and social custom, allowing herself to be piloted by others.

Of course, Louis Jouvet's hypocritical and sadistic Jesuit priest still delights, a largely deadpan countenance masking openness to blackmailing, a voracious appetite, and sanctimonious greed.

In comic relief, Delphin's dwarf, a cynical pessimist with a weakness for monkeyshines, leaves an emphatically favorable impression. His presence onscreen remains drolly entertaining.

Harry Stradling, Sr.'s cinematography manages frequently to overcome unconvincing landscape backdrops, moving restlessly through Meerson's period precise sets and expertly alternating close-ups with tracking shots. The result is more realistic than arty.

Despite an impressive array of talent in its screenwriting department, the story presented is quite conventional, never attaining literary distinction.

Sound and lighting fall considerably short of polished perfectionism. They are neither arresting nor admirable overall.

Feyder's directing is altogether a different tale, achieving entertaining and engaging results. Even juvenile bit players provide credible characterizations.

Adroitly weaving together romantic subplot, crowded dance scenes, and slapstick comic intervals, Jacques Brillouin's editing achievement flirts with perfection. It never slackens unduly or leads to confusion about time or place.

Louis Beydts' score fits well with early Baroque traditions, employing strongly accented folk-like melodies and vigorous dance passages.

There are no bonus features on this rarefilmsforyou dvd release.

Containing some nudity, an abundance of raciness, and very suggestively sadistic scenes recapitulating the Spanish Fury, *La Kermesse heroïque* is decidedly unsuited for teen or child viewing. For adults, it delivers several accomplished histrionic achievements, splendid costuming, buoyantly archaic music, and imposing sets. A convincingly winning combination.