

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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Prix de Beauté (1930)

Saturday 20 March 2021

Music By: Stephen Horne

Louise Brooks was born in Kansas, but the films that secured her legacy were made in Europe, her sanctuary at the end of the 1920s, after she escaped from Hollywood. First, there were two German films. She was the unforgettable Lulu in GW Pabst's dark, decadent adaptation of Frank Wedekind's *Pandora's Box*. Then she played a waif who finds refuge in a brothel, in *Diary of a Lost Girl*, also directed by Pabst. Her third and final European film was this French title, shot by an Italian director. It was also Pabst's idea.

After shooting each of her German films, Brooks returned to New York, not Los Angeles. She was through with American movies; only her Berlin director could entice her back on to a film set. "I wouldn't go to Hollywood – I would go to Pabst," she later said. The first time Pabst called her back it was for a film René Clair was shooting in Paris. Clair jumped ship when he saw the financing was unlikely to come through, and the project stalled. So Brooks hung around for a while causing mischief in Paris, before following Pabst to Berlin to shoot *Diary of a Lost Girl*. Eventually, after another sojourn in New York, the money for the French film was arranged, and Brooks was given a star's welcome on her return to Paris. Her new director, Augusto Genina, met her at the station with a cheering crowd, and the city's best salons were advertising copycat Louise Brooks haircuts. She was thrilled.

Genina was known for his cosmopolitan style, which was fortuitous. He had inherited not only an unbiddable, and hard-drinking, Hollywood star, but a film script, *Prix de beauté*, that had been worked and reworked by French Clair and Austrian Pabst already. Not only that, but it was to be a hybrid film, part-silent, part-talkie (the restoration we're watching is silent, made from both an Italian silent copy and a French sound copy). However, Genina had a fresh, naturalistic style, and fondness for tomboy heroines, so he was ready to rise to the challenge.

The story is about a young woman named Lucienne (Brooks), who very much against her fiancé André's (Georges Charlia) wishes, enters a beauty contest. When she is crowned Miss France, Lucienne is soon torn between the prospect of marriage to André and the temptations opened up by her new-found fame, including the rich and charming Prince de Grabovsky (Jean Bradin), and the prospect of a new career as an actress in the talkies...

The melodrama of the plot is nicely balanced by the realism of the street-level comedy scenes, and Brooks is beautifully cast as a dissatisfied young girl who discovers her face may be a fortune. There is a refreshing ease to her performance, and she would later recall making *Prix de Beauté* as one of her most

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enjoyable jobs, one where she could just work and she didn't have to explain herself. "The happiest time I ever had, looking back, is when I was making pictures in Paris and didn't speak French ... I'd get up in the morning and go to the studio, and didn't have to discuss anything with anyone. I didn't have to talk at all."

The final sequence, which is pretty much as Clair scripted it, remains one of the most haunting scenes in silent cinema, and in its talkie version, one of first great uses of sound film technique. It's almost a farewell to the silent era itself, and a fitting finale of sorts for Brooks. With this performance, she had ended her silent career with three of her greatest films.

While *Prix de beauté* is both artistically successful and socially progressive, critics found its awkward synch effects and dubbed dialogue a technological fail, and its run in cinemas did not last long. However, viewed as a pure silent today it looks remarkable: a lyrical film with delicate cinematography by Rudolph Maté, vivid urban scenes that recall the rush and excitement of a *City Symphony* and a transcendent star performance from Brooks.

By **Pamela Hutchinson**

Pamela Hutchinson is a freelance writer, critic and film historian who contributes regularly to *Sight & Sound*, *the Guardian*, *Empire*, *Criterion*, *Indicator* and the BBC, specialising in silent and classic cinema. Her publications include the BFI Film Classic on *Pandora's Box*.

Dir.: Augusto Genina | France | 1930 | N/C PG | 1h 48m | Italian intertitles with English surtitles

With Louise Brooks, Georges Charlia, Jean Bradin, Augusto Bandini

Music accompaniment: score composed and performed by Stephen Horne

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