

Josef von Sternberg



Josef von Sternberg was a Viennese immigrant who moved to the USA when he was a young boy. He began his trade as a film repairer and grew to be a multi-talented and respected director, screenwriter, producer and editor. He mastered the transition from the silent screen to the talkies and brought the iconic **Marlene Dietrich** to fame. This December BFI Southbank presents a complete retrospective of Josef von Sternberg's highly-regarded work.

Sternberg was notorious for being a perfectionist and for being difficult to work with. Deciding it was absurd to create coloured sets and costumes for the black-and-white *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), he ordered them made in monochrome. Actors on *The Scarlet Empress* (1934) were given screenplays without capital letters or punctuation; "I want them to learn the words," he explained. "I will tell them how to say them." He communicated in images, not words, and his medium was light. He moved characters and objects in and out of it, dipping them in silver, dissolving them into a flow of smoke, veils, feathers, fog. He was the only director of his time to earn membership in the American Society of Cinematographers.

Despite his reputation, he clearly had talent. Of the actors he directed, **George Bancroft** and Marlene Dietrich were each nominated for an **Oscar** and **Emil Jennings** won the first **Academy Award** for Best Actor in history for his performance in *The Last Command* (1928). **Ben Hecht** won an Oscar for Best Original Story for *Underworld* (1927) which Sternberg also directed.

Sternberg made seven films with Marlene Dietrich including *Blonde Venus* (1932), *The Blue Angel* (*Der blaue Engel* 1930) and *Dishonored* (1931). She was one of the few people saw beyond his reputation as a tyrant to being the lonely aesthete who made the elegiac *The Docks of New York* (1928) and the operatic *Shanghai Express* (1932), for which he was nominated for an Academy Award. After the first screening of *Morocco* (1930), for which he was also nominated for an Academy Award for directing, she slipped a note into his pocket. 'You – Only you – the Master – the Giver – Reason for my existence – the Teacher – the Love my heart and brain must follow.'

The critics of the time could never seem to understand Sternberg's focus on the visual rather than the plot and together with the failure to finish his film *I, Claudius* he ended up being ostracised from Hollywood. He ended his career in almost metaphoric isolation, directing, writing, photographing and narrating *The Saga of Anatahan* (1953), with Japanese actors who obeyed him without question. He retired quietly in Los Angeles and died from a heart attack in 1969.

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Josef von Sternberg: An Illustrated Introduction with John Baxter

'I've never met a more disagreeable layabout in all my life,' claimed Charlie Chaplin of a man detested by actors, writers, and producers almost as much as he detested them. Yet Marlene Dietrich called him 'the Master – the Giver – Reason for my existence' and few films remain so indelibly in the mind as *The Blue Angel*, *Blonde Venus* and *Shanghai Express*. John Baxter, film historian and author of a new biography, explores von Sternberg's many contradictions in this illustrated season introduction.
Tue 1 Dec 18:10 NFT3 Tickets £5

The Salvation Hunters

Von Sternberg's synopsis of his debut feature was curt. 'Three derelicts live on a mud scow from which circumstances and environment release them after poetically conceived tribulations.' It shows a California remote from tinsel and orange groves, but with a prelapsarian capacity for hope. As a real-estate billboard in the then-empty San Fernando Valley promises, 'Here Your Dreams Come True.'

USA 1925 With Georgia Hale, George K Arthur c79min PA

Wed 2 Dec 18:20 NFT2, Thu 3 Dec 18:30 NFT3

Underworld

Not, as often asserted, 'the first gangster film', *Underworld* ignores Prohibition and Chicago's mobs, preferring a more fantastic vision of crime, culminating in a ball where thugs gather under a flag of truce and compete to have their molls named Queen. Ben Hecht's portentous scenario strives to emulate poet Carl Sandburg. It won the inaugural Academy Award for a screen story, but ignited a feud between director and writer, the first of many.

USA 1927 With George Bancroft, Evelyn Brent, Clive Brook c81min PA

Wed 2 Dec 20:20 NFT2, Fri 4 Dec 18:20 NFT2

Children of Divorce

An accomplished editor and cinematographer, von Sternberg was frequently hired to rescue troubled productions, like this drama of three people struggling with a cynicism about marriage. As sets had been struck and the actors re-assigned, he filmed in a tent, between thunderstorms. Clara Bow and Gary Cooper, lustful lovers off-screen, were bullied into effective performances as miserable marrieds.

Screening with the surviving fragment of von Sternberg's last silent, *The Case of Lena Smith* (1929, c5min).

USA 1927 Dir Frank Lloyd With Esther Ralston, James Hall c70min PA

Thu 3 Dec 18:30 NFT3, Sat 5 Dec 18:20 NFT2

The Last Command

A former Czarist general, reduced to movie extra, is cast in a film of his own career, directed by a former Bolshevik, once his prisoner. A set-piece attack on the general's train, and his rescue by the revolutionary who loves him, is carried off with enormous flair. The parody of Hollywood toadyism and arrogance shows von Sternberg already snapping at the hand that fed him.

USA 1928 With Emil Jannings, Evelyn Brent, William Powell c96min PA

Sat 5 Dec 20:30 NFT2, Tue 15 Dec 18:20 NFT2

The Docks of New York

The masterpiece among von Sternberg's silents, this unexpectedly tender romance between a stoker and a whore takes place almost entirely in a roaring waterfront saloon. Genial giant George Bancroft strides through the mob, clearing the bar with a sweep of his arm and upending an entire keg when he wants a beer. Betty Compson gives a performance of rare sensitivity, abetted by some of the most inventive lighting of the time.

USA 1928 With Olga Baclanova c96min PA

Sun 6 Dec 16:15 NFT2, Sat 12 Dec 18:10 NFT3

Thunderbolt

Crime, comedy and music combine in von Sternberg's first sound film. George Bancroft is the eponymous gangster and Fay Wray his unfaithful girlfriend. He frames her lover for murder, and both men find themselves on a comic-opera death row, complete with piano, and a barber-shop quartet that dwindles as

members go to a different kind of chair. When Bancroft checks in, an inmate enquires hopefully, 'Are you a tenor?'

USA 1929 With Richard Arlen 95min

Sun 6 Dec 18:20 NFT2, Mon 14 Dec 20:40 NFT2

The Blue Angel Der Blaue Engel

Occasionally, a film becomes emblematic of its historical moment. As Wall Street crashed and the Weimar Republic expired, a bewitched von Sternberg turned his camera on Marlene Dietrich's thighs to create Hitler's favourite film. *Der Blaue Engel* conserves an authentic Berlin *stimmung*: we can smell the beer and b.o.

Germany 1930 With Emil Jannings 106min EST PG

Sun 6 Dec 20:45 NFT1, Mon 7 Dec 20:45 NFT1, Thu 10 Dec 18:30 NFT1, Wed 16 Dec 14:30 NFT3

Morocco

A down-and-out singer drifts to North Africa and discovers the love of her life, a priapic Foreign Legionnaire. Dressed in male evening dress and sold as 'The Woman All Women Want To See', Dietrich cut new benchmarks for cinema's depiction of gender. The film's ersatz Mogador is Jo's first great exotic creation, a languid oasis where only sex can relieve the tedium.

USA 1930 With Gary Cooper, Adolphe Menjou 92min U

Fri 4 Dec 20:45 NFT1, Sat 5 Dec 16:15 NFT1, Wed 9 Dec 20:50 NFT1, Sun 13 Dec 16:20 NFT1

An American Tragedy

In between films with Dietrich, von Sternberg took on this version of Theodore Dreiser's novel, planned for Sergei Eisenstein. Discarding the social message implicit in the story of a deprived boy who kills his pregnant girlfriend to marry a rich one, he delivered a courtroom drama that goaded Dreiser to sue and made Eisenstein his life-long enemy.

USA 1931 With Phillips Holmes, Sylvia Sydney 96min

Tue 8 Dec 18:30 NFT2, Sun 13 Dec 20:40 NFT2

Dishonored

Since Garbo was playing Mata Hari, Paramount asked von Sternberg for his take on the seductive spy. Dietrich's Agent X-27 is a whore, not a dancer, and uses intelligence, not sex, to elicit secrets. Love finally does her in, however, but she dies with flair, demanding a grand piano in her cell, strolling out in furs and high heels, and halting the firing squad to adjust a stocking.

USA 1931 With Victor McLaglen 91min PG

Tue 8 Dec 20:45 NFT2, Sun 20 Dec 18:20 NFT2

Blonde Venus

A slice of autobiography lurks under the rich icing of this tale, in which a German-born singer dumps her stodgy husband and permits her lover to create a new career for her. Despite Dietrich's sensational gorilla dance to 'Hot Voodoo', von Sternberg's best work is in her flight through a glamorised rural South. Squalor never looked so inviting.

USA 1932 With Cary Grant 97min PG

Wed 9 Dec 18:30 NFT1, Wed 16 Dec 20:45 NFT1

Shanghai Express

If he'd never made another film, this dreamlike love story, set in what he conceded was 'a papier-mâché China', would entitle von Sternberg to a place in the pantheon. The longitudinal motion of the train, the film's epigrammatic dialogue and its motif of calligraphy foreshadow graphic novels, with Dietrich's Shanghai Lily, 'the notorious white flower of China', the most ravishing of comic-book queens.

USA 1932 With Clive Brook 80min PG

Tue 1 Dec 20:30 NFT3, Sat 12 Dec 20:30 NFT3, Sun 13 Dec 18:30 NFT1

The Scarlet Empress

Von Sternberg didn't exaggerate when he called this 'my relentless excursion into style'. As Russia's sexpot empress, Dietrich wallows in décor and costumes, playing Hide and Seek with her infantile husband while sneaking up secret staircases in the doll's-house-like palace to consort with husky guardsmen. Realising he'd gone over the top, Jo tried to re-shoot, but too late: box-office disaster ensued, from which his career never recovered.

USA 1934 With John Lodge 82min PG

Tue 8 Dec 14:30 NFT2, Thu 10 Dec 20:45 NFT1, Wed 16 Dec 18:30 NFT1

Crime and Punishment

Cut loose by Paramount, von Sternberg drifted to low-budget Columbia, where Peter Lorre recruited him to direct this version of Dostoevsky as his US debut. By ill chance, *Mad Love*, made at the same time, inaugurated an unwanted career for the actor in horror films. His Raskolnikov is our last glimpse, before a swamp of schlock closed over his head, of the performer who inspired Brecht.

USA 1935 With Edward Arnold 88min PG

Tue 15 Dec 20:40 NFT2, Sat 19 Dec 18:20 NFT2

The Devil Is a Woman

Even more lavish than *The Scarlet Empress*, this Spanish fantasy on Woman As Destroyer ended the Dietrich/von Sternberg partnership, at least on screen. To continue together would only drag her down with him, so Jo severed the bond, but left a souvenir by casting Lionel Atwill, his near-double, as her pathetic ex-lover. Screening with *The Fashion Side of Hollywood* (1935, 10min), a glimpse of Paramount couturier-in-residence Travis Banton, incorporating footage of costume tests for *The Devil Is a Woman*.

USA 1935 With Cesar Romero 82min U

Fri 18 Dec 18:30 NFT2, Mon 21 Dec 20:30 NFT1

The King Steps Out

A feud with his star, soprano Grace Moore, drove Jo to repudiate this Viennese operetta, but his signature is everywhere. Its artificial forests glitter with aluminium paint. Sets appear sculpted in sugar, every sign is spattered with shadows like whipped cream, and lavish furniture crams each blindingly white interior. A celluloid strudel, but delicious.

USA 1936 With Franchot Tone 85min U

Fri 18 Dec 20:40 NFT2, Sun 20 Dec 16:20 NFT2

Sergeant Madden

Von Sternberg's tyrannical father is reflected in Wallace Beery's New York cop, who exercises a benign despotism over his children, natural and adopted. When a son turns to crime, Madden leads the hunt that results in his death – a reflection of the German dramas about parental duty that foreshadowed Nazism.

USA 1939 With Alan Curtis 82min PG

Sun 20 Dec 20:15 NFT2, Tue 29 Dec 18:20 NFT2

The Shanghai Gesture

Following *Shanghai Express*, von Sternberg visited China. The experience informs this version of a 1920s melodrama originally set in the brothel of 'Mother Goddam'. Gambling and lechery replace opium and prostitution, but the roulette pit of 'Mother Gin Sling' is something to see. Gene Tierney is indolently beautiful, but Victor Mature out-vamps her with ease.

USA 1941 With Ona Munson, Walter Huston 99min PG

Mon 21 Dec 18:10 NFT1, Sun 27 Dec 15:50 NFT2

Macao

Nobody knows what's left of von Sternberg in this Asian crime drama, partly re-shot by Nicholas Ray and others. A chase by knifemen across netdraped sampams bears his signature, as do some scenes with the voluptuous Jane Russell. Wrapped in clinging silver lamé, she's as tempting as a liqueur chocolate. By the time it was released, the director had abandoned Hollywood. He never returned.

USA 1952 With Robert Mitchum, William Bendix 80min PG

Tue 22 Dec 18:30 NFT2, Wed 30 Dec 20:40 NFT2

Jet Pilot

Von Sternberg needed work, so agreed to direct Howard Hughes' 'Hell's Angels of the jet age', with John Wayne a red-hating USAF colonel and Janet Leigh a Soviet fighter pilot. Re-shoots and second thoughts delayed release for five years. Leigh was seldom lovelier than in this, the director's first and only colour film.

USA 1957 With Paul Fix 112min U

Tue 22 Dec 20:40 NFT3, Wed 23 Dec 18:10 NFT3

The Saga of Anatahan

Von Sternberg sold his art collection and moved his family to Kyoto to film this erotic fable, based on fact, about marooned Japanese seamen who fight to the death over the sole woman on the island. He directed, photographed and designed it, wrote and spoke the commentary. The Japanese cast obeyed

his orders without question, since neither spoke the other's language. Not surprisingly, it was his favourite among his films...

Japan 1953 With Akemi Negishi 94min

Mon 28 Dec 18:20 NFT2, Tue 29 Dec 20:40 NFT2

The Epic That Never Was

In 1936, Marlene Dietrich secretly paid Alexander Korda \$100,000 to let von Sternberg, then sick and broke, direct *I, Claudius* – a project Korda knew could never be completed. This documentary tells part of that story. Dirk Bogarde and Emyln Williams lavish sympathy on Charles Laughton (who was playing the emperor) and sneer at Jo, while Merle Oberon preens, and Korda, as always, slips away unscathed.

Screening with *The Town*, (1943, 12min), a World War II propaganda documentary designed to combat isolationism.

BBC 1965 Prod Bill Duncalf 70min

Wed 23 Dec 20:40 NFT2, Wed 30 Dec 18:20 NFT2

NOTES TO EDITORS:

Booking information

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