



BLOG, FESTIVAL

LE GIORNATE DEL CINEMA MUTO 2022: PORDENONE POST NO 6

OCTOBER 6, 2022 | PH | 2 COMMENTS

This evening belonged to Marie Prevost, much-maligned silent Hollywood comedienne and high empress of flirtatiousness. She appeared twice on the Verdi screen in front of a packed hall in two fashionable comedies, one about hair and another about lingerie: first in a fragment of the multi-authored flapper farce *Bobbed Hair* (Alan Crosland, 1925), and then full-length in the Al Christie comedy *Up in Mabel's Room* (E. Mason Hopper, 1926).

I wrote about both films for the catalogue ([Here have a link](#) . [And another](#)) so no need to rehearse the facts here, but let me tell you Prevost on the big screen is a provocative Pre-code pleasure. Every wink and pout played to perfection, especially in the feature. And the way she closes her hands around Harrison Ford's neck. Wow. If you're feeling hot under the collar, maybe it's time to slip into something more comfortable...

What made this screening so special of course was Günter Buchwald's shoulder-shimmying, toe-tapping score, played with panache by Zerorchestra. This was a score that pounced on the gags, flew with the innuendo and conducted itself with all the Jazz Age pizzazz of Phyllis Haver strutting across a corridor in a maribou negligée. Delicious.

The day, however, belonged to Norma Talmadge, who crossed over nicely with the Ruritania strand, taking a route there via *Graustark* (Dimitri Buchowetzki, 1925). We had a few detours to take on the way though. Courtesy the Hans Berge Collection, we journeyed by

train in a gorgeous 'scenic' *La Guaira to Caracas* (Clyde E. Elliot, 1918), which certainly was travelling in style – such dramatic land and seascapes. Then a collection of (often quite damaged) beguiling Pathé-Baby home movies from artist and filmmaker Guglielmo Baldassini. This was certainly a delightful programme and these stylish films were a cut above the average home movie. The sweeping accompaniment from Gabriel Thibaudeau really helped to emphasise the artistry of these films when the damage threatened to overwhelm the frame. On the other hand, before our trip to Ruritania, an actuality film of the coronation of the King of Romania (1922) was so crisp it could have been shot this year, or maybe next.

Back to Norma, who woke us up this morning with rousing melodrama *The Sign on the Door* (Herbert Brenon, 1921), later remade with sound and a very young Barbara Stanwyck. I regret to say we landed smack bang in the murky sexual politics of 1921, and poor Talmadge, or rather her character Ruth, was damned if she did and damned if she didn't. But she never did, not once. No matter what the men around her suspected/assumed/fantasised.

First, a word or two about Lew Cody: Sleaze Ball.

We shall continue. Cody played Frank, a terrible seducer who tried it on with Ruth when she was unmarried and returns to prey upon her stepdaughter after she marries. While also continuing an affair with Ruth's husband's best friend's wife. Look, when Frank takes a bullet no one is sorry, but there are at least three suspects and Ruth is the one who is locked in the room with the body. More twists here even that Fred Sato, the Infernal Contortionist could contain.

This film was utterly daft, entirely engrossing, glamorously dressed... and contained a twist that NOT ONE PERSON in the Verdi saw coming. Thanks to Maud Nelissen for accompanying this film with enough verve that we could enjoy the twists and not think too much about the grisly implications.

Talmadge was on surer ground in comedy-drama *Graustark*, which is Ruritania as designed by William Cameron Menzies. Talmadge is the princess who falls in love with an American, Eugene O'Brien, and once back home and threatened with a diplomatic marriage to Marc McDermott's Prince, will stop at nothing to save her man, and marry him too. Murder conviction? No problem. Norma plays up to her charm and glamour both and although perhaps this was lacking a little swashbuckling fire, I am very glad that the Library of Congress has been able to save this 48 minutes or so from the original feature.

We had one more fragment, much shorter, of Norma in *Camille* (Fred Niblo, 1927): so beautiful and sadly so brief. The chemistry between Talmadge and Gilbert Roland was simply volatile, and both so handsome. We all swooned. What remains in this footage is an intoxicating air of heady romance, and inevitable tragedy. Trust Philip Carli to give this material the grandeur it deserves and to handle the missing sections and abrupt cuts so lightly.

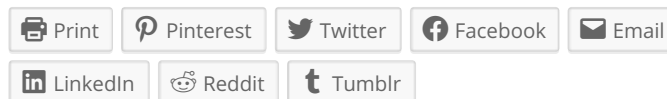
If it wasn't abundantly obvious already, I have been very impressed with Talmadge's wardrobe. So I was delighted to attend Michelle Tolini Finamore's costume lecture, part of a new initiative from the Giornate, hosted by Deborah Nadoolman Landis. The title was Dressing Norma: Fashion in Early Cinema – what could be more enticing? I am already a big fan of Finamore's [Hollywood Before Glamour](#) book, and here she revisited some of that history, but used Talmadge's career for illustrations, which made the subject come alive all over again. I wonder what she made of Prevost's wardrobe later tonight: so flimsy in fact and fascinating in theory.

Intertitle of the Day

“A doo-dad! A feminine doo-dad! An article of intimate apparel!”
Such a tiny thing causes such a big fuss in *Up in Mabel's Room*.

- **Star cameo of the day:** a devastatingly distracting Lucille LeSueur, soon to be Joan Crawford, as one of Norma Talmadge's ladies-in-waiting, in *Graustark*.
- **Website of the day:** Take your time to tour the new online resource for everything Weimar and cinematic – [WeimarCinema.org](#)
- [Read all my Pordenone posts in one place](#) .
- You can read more about the festival, and all of the films, [on the Giornate website](#).
- Silent London will always be free to all readers. If you enjoy checking in with the site, including reports from silent film festivals, features and reviews, please consider shouting me a coffee [on my Ko-Fi page](#).

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