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FILM REVIEW: Shanghai Express (von Sternberg, 1932): USA

Description



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Shanghai Express, a 1932 Pre-Code U.S. production, based on a book by Harry Harvey, written by Jules Furthman, and directed brilliantly by Joseph von Sternberg, is a story of one-time lovers, Shanghai Lily, played by Marlene Dietrich, and Captain â??Docâ?• Harvey played by Clive Brook, who rediscover each other during an exciting, yet dangerous, train ride from Peiping (Peking) to Shanghai. Complete with stabbings, machine gun fire, and plenty of physical altercations the Shanghai Express is a non-stop action/adventure with high production values encapsulated within a melodramatic narrative.

Interestingly enough, most passengers on the train are more concerned that the notorious Shanghai Lily is on board rather than the fact that the country is enmeshed in a bloody civil war. Shanghai Lily is referred to as a â??coaster, a woman who lives by her wits along the China Coast.â?• In essence, it is a nice way of saying she is a woman who indulges in casual affairs as a means to an end â?? a lavish lifestyle of beautiful gowns and stunning jewelry. Yet, when Chinese guerillas stop the train and Captain Harvey is selected to be the hostage, Shanghai Lily foregoes her honor and manages to entice the elusive Mr. Chang, played by Warner Oland, to release the doctor by â??praying all night,â?• and by agreeing to visit Mr. Chang at his castle. By the filmâ??s end, the core group of passengersâ?? real

identities have emerged. None of the characters were who they seemed to be when the train ride began.

Von Sternberg, nominated for an Oscar for Best Director for his work in Shanghai Express, makes exquisite use of the camera and lighting in creating the effect of tight space with mesmerizing shadows and his extensive use of netting in delivering a phenomenal atmospheric of a train ride in the Orient is a visual treat. Dietrichâ??s performance as Shanghai Lily was alluring and she captivates with her emotionally wrought physicalities and exotic costuming. We first get a glimpse of her dressed in black with her face partially covered with a veil. She is often seen puffing on a cigarette as she paces sluggishly back and forth. Her heavy eyelids and sultry good looks, however, offset any semblance of an awkward accent. provided the cinematograpy and received an Oscar for his efforts. Controlling most of this production in China for Paramount Pictures, Sternberg claims to have collaborated extensively with Garmes and felt he was as much deserving of an Oscar as Garmes. In addition, the costuming, handled by Travis Banton (gowns) and Eugen Joseff (jewelry), was right on the mark. The film utilized over 1,ooo extras, primarily in the locales where the train made stops.

The screening was followed by a Q & A with Nicholas von Sternberg, son of Director Joseph von Sternberg, along with author and film historian, Jeremy Arnold. The younger von Sternberg shared an original script book from the 1932 film, *Shanghai Express* as well as how his father discovered Marlene Dietrich on a cabaret scene. The elder von Sternberg saw something in Dietrich he believed would be perfect for his upcoming film, *The Blue Angel*. The two would go on to collaborate on seven films between 1930 and 1935 with most film historians agreeing the 1932 *Shanghai Express* to be the teamâ??s best work.

In my opinion, *Shanghai Express* is a must-see treasure from Hollywoodâ??s Golden Age of Glamour. This digitally restored version of *Shanghai Express* kept the refinement of the original film and provided a seamless viewing. Highly recommended.

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