



Conversations about great films with Diane Ch



**JOSEF VON STERNBERG** (Jonas Sternberg, 29 May 1894, Vienna, Austria-Hungary – 22 December 1969, Hollywood, California, heart attack), according to his IMDb bio by David Smith, "split his childhood between Vienna and New York City. His father, a former soldier in the army of Austria-Hungary, could not support his family in either city; Sternberg remembered him only as 'an enormously strong man who often used his strength on me.' Compelled by poverty to drop out of high school, Sternberg worked for a time in a Manhattan store that sold ribbons and lace to hatmakers. A chance meeting in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, led to a new career in the cleaning and repair of movie prints. This job provided an entree to the film production industry, then flourishing around Fort Lee, New Jersey. As an apprentice filmmaker, from around 1916 to the early 1920s, Sternberg developed a lasting contempt for most of the directors and producers he worked for (an exception was Emile Chautard, who acted in some of Sternberg's films of the 1930s), and was sure that he could improve on their products. Staked to a few thousand dollars – even then an absurdly small budget – Sternberg proved himself right with *The Salvation Hunters* (1925). For the next couple of years, he seasawed between acclaim and oblivion, sometimes on the same project (for instance, he received the rare honor of directing a film for Charles Chaplin, but it was shelved after only one showing and later disappeared forever). His commercial breakthrough was *Underworld* (1927), a prototypical Hollywood gangster film; behind the scenes, Sternberg successfully battled Ben Hecht, the writer, for creative control. With *The Last Command* (1928), starring the equally strong-willed Emil Jannings, Sternberg began a period of almost a decade as one of the most celebrated artists of world cinema. Both his film career and his personal life were transformed in the making of *Der Blaue Engel* (1930). Chosen by Jannings and the producer Erich Pommer to make Germany's first major sound picture, Sternberg gambled by casting Marlene Dietrich, then obscure, as Lola Lola, the nightclub dancer who leads Jannings' character into depravity. The Sternberg-Dietrich story, both on-screen (he directed her in six more movies) and off (he became one of her legions of lovers, more in love with her than most) is a staple of film histories. Sternberg's films of the mid-1930s are among the most visionary ever made in Hollywood, but in spite of their visual sumptuousness contemporary audiences found them dramatically inert. The film's mediocre box office and a falling-out with Ernst Lubitsch, then head of production at Paramount (Sternberg's employer), meant that after *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935) Sternberg would never again have the control he needed to express himself fully. In his sardonic autobiography, he more or less completely disowned all of his subsequent films. In spite (or perhaps because) of his truncated career and bitter personality, Sternberg remained a hero to later critics and filmmakers. His best films exemplify the proposition, as he put it, that in any worthwhile film the 'director is the determining influence, and the only influence, despotically exercised or not, which accounts for the worth of what is seen on the screen.'" Some of his other films are *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941), *I, Claudius* (1937, unfinished), *Crime and Punishment* (1935), *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), *Blonde Venus* (1932), *Shanghai Express* (1932), *An American Tragedy* (1931), *Dishonored* (1931), *Morocco* (1930) and *i*(1928).

**MARLENE DIETRICH** (Maria Magdalena Dietrich, 27 December 1901, Schöneberg, Germany – 6 May 1992, Paris, France) liked to tell interviewers she'd never acted in silent films, but between 1919 and 1929, the year before *The Blue Angel*, she appeared in 17 of them. She had affairs with three of the Kennedys: Joe the father, Joe the son, and Jack the second son. Her IMDb bio by Bruce Cameron: "Born in a small town outside Berlin, her father was a police lieutenant and imbued in her a military attitude to life. Marlene was known in school for 'bedroom eyes' and her first affairs were at this stage in her life – a professor at the school was terminated. She entered the cabaret scene in 1920s Germany, first as a spectator then as a cabaret singer. In 1924 she married, and although she and Rudy lived



**Der Blaue Engel/The Blue Angel**  
(1930, 99 minutes)

Directed by Josef von Sternberg  
Written by Karl Vollmöller, Heinrich Mann, Robert Liebmann and Josef von Sternberg, based on Heinrich Mann's novel, *Professor Unrat*  
Produced by Erich Pommer  
Original music by Frederick Hollander  
Cinematography by Günther Rittau  
Film Editing by Walter Klee (German), Sam Winston (English)

Emil Jannings....Prof. Immanuel Rath  
Marlene Dietrich....Lola Lola  
Kurt Gerron....Kiepert, the Magician  
Rosa Valetti....Guste, his wife  
Hans Albers....Mazeppa, the Strong Man  
Reinhold Bert....The clown  
Eduard von Winterstein....Headmaster  
Hans Roth....The janitor  
Rolf Müller....Pupil Langst  
Roland Varno....Pupil Lohmann  
Carl Balhaus....Pupil Ertzum  
Robert Klein-Lörk....Pupil Goldstaub  
Charles Puffy....Innkeeper  
Wilhelm Diegelmann....Captain  
Gerhard Bienert....Policeman  
Ilse Fürstenberg....Rath's maid

together only 5 years they remained married until his death. She was in over a dozen silent films in increasingly important roles. In 1929 she was seen in a Berlin cabaret by Josef von Sternberg and after a screen test captured the role of the cabaret singer in *Der Blaue Engel* (1930) (and became von Sternberg's lover). With the success of this film, von Sternberg immediately took her to Hollywood, introducing her to the world in *Morocco* (1930), and signing an agreement to produce all her films. A series of successes followed, and Marlene became the highest paid actress of her time, but her later films in the mid part of the decade were critical and popular failures. She returned to Europe at the end of the decade, with a series of affairs with former leading men (she had a reputation of romancing her co-stars), as well as other prominent artistic figures. In 1939 an offer came to star with James Stewart in a western, and after initial hesitation she accepted. The film was *Destry Rides Again* (1939) – the siren of film could also be a comedienne and a remarkable comeback was reality. She toured extensively for the allied effort in WW II (she had become a United States citizen), and after the war limited her cinematic life. But a new career as a singer and performer appeared, with reviews and shows in Las Vegas, touring theatricals, and even Broadway. New success was accompanied by a too close acquaintance with alcohol, until falls in performance eventually resulted in a compound fracture of the leg. Although the last 13 years of her life were spent in seclusion in her apartment in Paris, with the last 12 years in bed, she had withdrawn only from public life and maintained active telephone and correspondence contact with friends and associates." Some of her other films are *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), *Touch of Evil* (1958), *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957), *Rancho Notorious* (1952), *A Foreign Affair* (1948), *The Garden of Allah* (1936), *Desire* (1936), *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), *Blonde Venus* (1932), *Shanghai Express* (1932), and *Dishonored* (1931). She was nearly as famous for her one- and two-liners as for her affairs and her acting, e.g.:

- "On The Blue Angel (1930), I thought everything we were doing was awful. They kept a camera pointed here [groin]. I was so young and dumb."
- "I never enjoyed working in a film."
- "In Europe, it doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman - we make love with anyone we find attractive."
- "A country without bordellos is like a house without bathrooms."
- "To be completely a woman you need a master, and in him a compass for your life. You need a man you can look up to and respect. If you dethrone him it's no wonder that you are discontented, and discontented women are not loved for long."
- "Think twice before burdening a friend with a secret."
- "I am at heart, a gentleman"
- "If there is a supreme being, he's crazy."
- "In America, sex is an obsession, in other parts of the world it's a fact."
- "Once a woman has forgiven a man, she must not rehearse his sins for breakfast."
- "The diaphragm is the greatest invention since Pan-Cake makeup"

**EMIL JANNINGS** (Theodor Friedrich Emil Janenz, 23 July 1884, Rorschach, Switzerland – 3 January 1950, Strobl, Austria, cancer) won the first best actor Oscar for *The Way of All Flesh* 1927 and *The Last Command* 1928. That all ended with the coming of sound: Jannings had a thick German accent, so he moved his acting career to Germany. Unfortunately for his later career, he moved his politics there as well: during WW2 he was a staunch Nazi and

appeared in several pro-Nazi films. According to Leonard Maltin, he was "A bearlike man whose stern features made him most effective as rigid authoritarians (most often unsympathetic), Jannings became a professional actor while still in his teens, making a name for himself as a member of the distinguished Max Reinhardt company in Berlin in the years before World War I. Although he made his film debut in 1914's *Arme Eva* Jannings got mostly unrewarding parts until the end of the decade, when he began playing prominent historical figures in elaborate German and Italian films, including *Madame DuBarry* (1919, as Louis XV), *Anne Boleyn* (1920, as Henry VIII), *Peter the Great* (1921, in the title role), and *Quo Vadis?* (1924, as Nero). During this period Jannings also essayed many great characters from legend and literature, including Dimitri Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1920), *Othello* (1922), and *Faust* (1926, as Mephistopheles). These roles, along with his star turns in two classics-Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924, as the proud doorman at a posh hotel who is suddenly demoted and subsequently humiliated) and Dupont's *Variety* (1925)-eventually brought Jannings to the attention of American filmmakers. He came to Hollywood in 1927, signing a Paramount contract and winning the first Best Actor Oscar ever awarded for his work in *The Way of All Flesh* (1927) and *The Last Command* (1928, as a refugee Russian general working as an extra in Hollywood costume dramas), his first two American films. Jannings made several more silents in Hollywood before the talkie revolution, of which the thickly accented actor was an early casualty. But he scored an amazing triumph back in Germany, playing a pompous college professor enraptured by nightclub singer Marlene Dietrich in Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930, which was produced in both German- and English-language versions). After Hitler's rise to power in 1933, an enthusiastic Jannings eagerly accepted an offer from propaganda minister Goebbels to appear in pro-German, anti-Semitic movies. He appeared in a number of such films throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, and was named "Artist of the State" by Goebbels in 1941. Illness forced Jannings to abandon work on *Where Is Mr. Belling?* (1945), and when Hitler's regime was destroyed shortly thereafter, Jannings found himself persona non grata with the international filmmaking community. He never made another film, and died from cancer five years later.



#### **Philipp Kemp, Sternberg entry in *World Film Directors* v.I. Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1987**

With the exception of Chautard, for whom he retained both professional and personal respect, Sternberg had been distinctly unimpressed by the directors he had worked with (although they were, he commented dryly, "not altogether without value for they showed that no special skill was needed to be a director"). His opinion of the Hollywood output he had seen was scarcely any higher. Most of it he dismissed as worthless, although he appreciated D.W. Griffith's skill with the camera, and commended Chaplin for his "pictorial sobriety" and ability to portray "the most primitive emotions." One of the few directors who earned Sternberg's unqualified approval was Erich von Stroheim, "who invested his films. . . with an intensity that bristled." Sternberg's admiration for Stroheim (also, by coincidence, the product of a poor Jewish Viennese family) was manifested less in his work—though traces of Stroheim's visual influence are evident in Sternberg's early output—

than in the public persona he chose to adopt: arrogant, tyrannical, and intolerant of all who contradicted him, or whose abilities he considered inferior to his own. The last category included virtually everybody—especially actors—with whom Sternberg came in contact.

In Hollywood, he soon found work as assistant director on *By Divine Right* (1923), an independent production directed by Roy William Neill. Thanks to the film's star and coproducer, Elliott Dexter, Sternberg acquired a further



attribute in common with von Stroheim: the aristocratic particle “von,” which Dexter thought would look better on the credits. The addition, according to Sternberg, was made without his knowledge, but he seems to have made no objection, then or later.

*The Salvation Hunters* (1925) was filmed in three-and-a-half weeks and cost \$4,900. The story concerned three young derelicts (expressively designated The Boy, The Girl, and The Child) living on a huge dredge in San Pedro harbor, the vicissitudes they undergo, and their eventual—and somewhat unconvincing—triumph over their muddy circumstances. “There are important fragments of life that have been ignored by the motion picture,” proclaimed Sternberg’s opening title portentously, “because Body is more important than Thought. Our aim has been to photograph a Thought.” This aspiration was scarcely fulfilled by the movie that followed, for all its pictorial originality. Kevin Brownlow found it “pretentious. . . a flat and largely unimaginative exercise in filmcraft,” although he allowed it “a certain austere dignity.”

Already the director’s preoccupation with pictorial composition—especially in the play of light and shadow—and his relative indifference to story line were clearly in evidence. “Instead of the Elinor Glyn plots of the day, I had in mind a visual poem. Instead of flat lighting, shadows. In the place of pasty masks, faces in relief, plastic and deep-eyed. Instead of scenery which meant nothing, an emotionalized background that would transfer itself into my foreground. Instead of saccharine characters, sober figures moving in rhythm. . . . And. . . the hero of the film was to be a dredge.”

The premiere of *The Salvation Hunters* in a small theatre on Sunset Boulevard, was a disaster. “The members of the cast were in the audience which greeted my work with laughter and jeers and finally rioted. Many walked out, and so did I.” However, George K. Arthur had contrived to show the film privately to Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks, both of whom responded with enthusiasm. (Chaplin is said to have claimed, later, that he only praised it by way of a joke.) United Artists bought the picture for release, and Sternberg, now suddenly famous, was invited by Mary Pickford to direct her next film, to a scenario of his own choosing.

[Sternberg came up with a proposed movie to be called *Backwash* and Pickford would play a blind girl in a Pittsburgh slum. Most of the action would take place in her own mind, using subjective camera. Pickford originally commended Sternberg for “freshness and originality” decided such qualities might be taken too far and terminated the contract. Sternberg, now much in demand accepted an 8-picture contract with MGM.]

His first assignment was *The Exquisite Sinner* (1925), a romantic drama set in Brittany.

Both studio and stars were bewildered by Sternberg’s idiosyncratic—and autocratic—working methods. Robert Florey, assistant director on the film, described the final product as being exquisitely photographed, “full of interest, and the direction showed the humor of which Sternberg was master.” The studio, however, found the film incomprehensible and had it completely reshot by Phil Rosen (as *Heaven on Earth*). “The result,” said Sternberg, “was two ineffective films instead of one.” Nonetheless, he let himself be persuaded by Louis B. Mayer to undertake another assignment: *The Masked Bride* with Mae Murray. This was an even greater fiasco. After two weeks of shooting, Sternberg pointed his camera upwards at the studio roof, finding there “more interest than was apparent in the perfect material that clung to the polished floor,” walked off the set, and took his leave of MGM. (The

picture was completed by Christy Cabane, who took directorial credit.) Charlie Chaplin now asked Sternberg to direct a film for him. Entitled *The Sea Gull* (no connection with Chekhov’s play) or alternatively *A Woman of the Sea* (1926), it was intended as a comeback vehicle for Chaplin’s former costar, Edna Purviance. Sternberg’s screenplay, based on an idea by Chaplin, was a love story set in a fishing community on the California coast. When the film was completed, it received one private screening, after which Chaplin withdrew it, allowing no further showings. The only print was eventually burned by the US tax authorities, this being the only condition under which they would allow Chaplin to list the film as a tax loss. John Grierson, one of the few people to see the picture, described it as “a strangely beautiful and empty affair—possibly the most beautiful I have ever seen—of net patterns, sea patterns and hair in the wind.” Sternberg took the episode philosophically: “[Chaplin] charged off its cost against his formidable income tax, and I charged it off to experience.”



*Underworld*, wrote Kevin Brownlow, “was the film that began the gangster cycle, and it remains the masterpiece of the genre, containing all the elements which became clichés in later pictures. Similar assessments of the film have often been made, though not all critics would agree. Andrew Sarris thought it “less of a proto-gangster film than a pre-gangster film,” and John Baxter wrote that its “reputation as ‘the first gangster film’ is unearned. . . . After four decades of gangster films, its histrionic and decorative styles are unconvincing, and the plot fatally episodic.”

[Hecht’s initial reaction was to demand his name be removed from the credits but against all expectations and apparently by word of mouth alone it became a smash hit and Hecht got an Oscar for best original screenplay,

Sternberg got a \$10,000 bonus from Paramount and a request to cut von Stroheim’s *The Wedding March* (1928) to an acceptable length. Sternberg claimed he had von Stroheim’s permission but von Stroheim never spoke to him again.]

In 1927 Paramount had borrowed Emil Jannings, then widely regarded as the world’s greatest actor, from the UFA studios in Berlin and were searching for suitable properties to display their prestigious acquisition. Sternberg provided the story for *Street of Sin* (1928), assigned to Mauritz Stiller, which cast Jannings in the improbable role of a Soho burglar named Basher Bill; and also directed him in a far more suitable vehicle, *The Last Command* (1928). . . . Jannings plays a Hollywood extra, a frail old recluse who is cast as a Russian general in a war picture. A long flashback shows that the old man *is* a Russian general, who once jailed as a revolutionary the man who is now directing the Hollywood movie. In the film’s final sequences the old general imagines he is leading a real charge against the enemy and dies on the set. The story allowed Sternberg to alternate biting satire on the Hollywood studio system, shown as both obsequious and callous, with bravura visual episodes in the revolutionary sequences. His aim, he wrote, “was to extract the essence of the Hollywood film factory and to flash the essentials of a revolution without being realistic with either. I was an unquestioned authority on Hollywood, and that made it difficult to be unrealistic in picturing it. I felt more at home with the Russian Revolution, for there I was free to use my imagination alone.”

By now Sternberg had acquired his permanent reputation as a cinematic tyrant, an arrogant perfectionist demanding total and unquestioning obedience from everybody on the set, actors in particular. “The only way to succeed,” he is supposed to have remarked, “is to make people

hate

you. That way they remember you.”

In his role of tyrannical genius, Sternberg costumed himself appropriately, generally favoring jodhpurs and riding boots. He invariably carried a cane on set, and for *I, Claudius* he added an ornate Javanese turban.

“An actor is turned on and off like a spigot, and like the spigot, is not the source of the liquid that flows through him. . . .How can the sculptor be honest with the piece of clay that considers itself more important than the hands that mold it?”

[Jannings had reciprocated Sternberg’s feeling that he never wanted to work again together but when sound came word came from Germany that Jannings would only accept von Sternberg as director to bring him into sound. It would be a Paramount/UFA production. Sternberg arrived in Berlin in late 1929. He rejected UFA’s first suggestion of a Rasputin film and chose a subject adapted from a novel by Heinrich Mann, *Professor Unrath*.]

Against everyone’s advice, Sternberg chose a little-known revue artiste, Marlene Dietrich, who had given little previous evidence of acting talent. “Her appearance was ideal; what she did with it was something else again. That would be my concern.”

*The Blue Angel* (1930), wrote Andrew Sarris, “is the one Sternberg film the director’s severest detractors will concede is beyond reproach and ridicule.” Much of it, though—especially considered beside his Hollywood films with Dietrich—look crude and clumsy, particularly in the English version. (The film was shot in English and German versions; most critics prefer the latter.) Jannings’ style of acting has not worn well, and many sequences seem static and overarranged.

Response to *The Blue Angel*, in Germany and all over Europe, was immediate and spectacular. Even before the film opened Dietrich had accepted a contract from Paramount (offered on Sternberg’s recommendation), and she sailed for New York on the night of the Berlin premiere. She was greeted on arrival by a lawsuit from Riza Royce von Sternberg, alleging alienation of affection. The Sternberg marriage had never been a great success (the couple had already divorced in 1927. But were subsequently reunited), and it now collapsed in a mess of accusations, legal claims, and emotional scenes. Paramount tried to hush the affair up, to little effect, and Mrs. Von Sternberg was granted a divorce—on grounds of cruelty—in June 1930. Sternberg himself never admitted that his relationship with Dietrich was anything but professional, and claimed that even in that regard he lost interest in her after *Morocco*. Against this stands the evidence of the films, which would appear to trace an even more obsessive fascination, though tempered by ironic self-awareness, as he transformed a “modest little German *Hausfrau*” into “a celluloid monument,” a mythic figure of ambiguous sexuality.

While Dietrich took a prolonged vacation in Germany, Sternberg was asked by Adolph Zukor to direct an adaptation of Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*. This had been assigned to Eisenstein, but Paramount took flight at his proposed treatment, finding it too political. Sternberg, on his own admission, was not interested in the novel’s political dimension: his version of Dreiser’s story of a man impelled to murder by his social ambitions concentrates on the personal angle, emphasizing the self-destructive nature of the hero’s sexual drive. He regarded the assignment, though, as no more than “a little finger exercise,” and his lack of involvement shows in the film, which is flat and cold. Dreiser subsequently sued Paramount for distorting his novel, much to **from Steven Bach, *Marlene Dietrich Life and Legend*. Da Capo Press 1992**

The perpetuation of “Marlene Dietrich”—the legend and artifact—was one of the most disciplined and sustained creative acts of the twentieth century.

[Von Sternberg] did not invent Marlene Dietrich, or even “discover” her: He *revealed* her. He was a great creative force whose genius was largely unacknowledged by his “peers,” often thwarted by his “betters,” finally undone by his private demons.

Sternberg’s amusement.

Sternberg’s concept of film as “a visual poem” reached its apotheosis in *Shanghai Express* (1932), perhaps his finest picture. The plot of the film concerns a train journey from Peking to Shanghai, interrupted by a bandit attack. But the *subject* of the film is Dietrich’s face, on which it plays an endless series of variations: veiled, shadowed, wreathed with smoke, nestling in furs or feathers, framed in patterns of black on white.

“His settings,” David Thomson commented, “are the Shanghai, Morocco, Imperial Russia and Spain only possible on the sounds stages and backlots of California, and the plots are as melodramatically separate from ordinary patterns of life as his images are from a Chinese or Spanish reality.” When, some years later, Sternberg first visited China, he was gratified to find that the reality differed so greatly from his imagined version.

In his last two films with Dietrich, Sternberg claimed to have “completely subjugated my bird of paradise to my peculiar tendency to prove that a film might well be an art medium.” The first of these films, *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), he described as “a relentless excursion into style, which, taken for granted in any work of art, is considered to be unpardonable in this medium.” The film traces the metamorphosis of the innocent young German princess, Sophia Frederica, into the tyrannical and sexually rapacious Russian empress, Catherine the Great.

“In its final, delirious vindication of Dietrich’s open-mouthed depravity,” asserted David Thomson, “it is American cinema’s triumph of *l’amour fou* and a surrealist masterpiece.”

In *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), Sternberg “paid a final tribute to the lady I had seen lean against the wings of a Berlin stage,” and it is hard not to see the film as a valedictory summing-up of his relationship with the star he had created.”

The seven films with Dietrich are generally agreed, by both his admirers and his detractors, to form the central achievement of his oeuvre.

“His world,” according to David Thomson, “is pessimistic because it mocks the idea of meaning. . . . The human willfulness and stupidity that attempt to control it are true gestures of vanity in the face of destiny.” Commenting on the charge of social irrelevance, Andrew Sarris asserted that “paradoxically, Sternberg and Dietrich today look deeper and more dazzling than ever, while most of the cinema of the breadlines looks excessively mannered,” adding that “the subtle humor of the Sternberg *oeuvre* as a whole has been overlooked by critics intent on confusing seriousness with solemnity.”

Sternberg’s films, in John Baxter’s view “have a psychological power that transcends simple plot. Under his scrutiny a reality emerges that is at once obvious and infinitely complex in its implications, the world of human emotion, of love and its dark concomitant, the desire to destroy.”

Sternberg described his last film, made under almost ideal conditions, as “my best film—and my most unsuccessful one” [*The Saga of Anatahan* (1953) made in Japan] The story furnished Sternberg with an almost clinically pure demonstration of his perennial thesis: the destructive power of sexuality and uncontrolled emotion.

From 1959 to 1963 he taught a course on the aesthetics of film at the University of California. In 1965 he published a waspish, rambling and highly idiosyncratic autobiography, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*.

He had already decided to call the film not *Professor Unrat* but *The Blue Angel*. He liked this title for it conveyed a kind of romantic melancholy in English and another mood altogether in German, in which *blue* is slang for *drunk*. A heavenly creature drunk with love, or with self-love, or with love-making, who could act and sing and speak English and captivate the camera and bring Emil Jannings low with a song.

Hugenberg [master of UFA] had misunderstood the whole project. He thought the author of *Professor Unrat* was *Thomas Mann*, who had just won the Nobel Prize for Literature, not his brother *Heinrich*. He was outraged by the story of a symbol of German rectitude sinking to a sordid end. Hugenberg and his cohorts demanded that Pommer “completely rework” the story. The professor represented, if not their class, then their *outlook* and “should be . . . humanly understandable, so that no occasion for [critical] attack might come to pass.

No casting contest like this had been seen since *Lulu* or would be seen again until *Scarlett*. Virtually every German actress remotely suitable was rumored to be in the running or have been offered a contract. Names flew like confetti at a parade, which is what the female flesh trooping in and out of the *Blue Angel* offices resembled, most of them German stars then or later. One candidate who did not claim to have the part was privately convinced that she did: *Leni Riefenstahl*. . . She admired Sternberg and said so.

Riefenstahl did not audition—she dined. And was taken aback to hear Sternberg mention an actress’ name over roast beef at the Hotel Bristol.

Sternberg, Pommer, and the three writers trekked to the Alps [St. Moritz—where Jannings had gone to lose weight] to work with the star on his characterization, which was based on *Heinrich Mann* himself. And Sternberg’s hated Hebrew teacher.

The major alterations from the novel were the addition of the professor’s degradation as a clown and his madness and death at the end instead of imprisonment (for running a gambling house corrupting the bourgeoisie). The tone became romantic pathos instead of Mann’s bitter attack on a hypocritical society which had so alarmed UFA’s Alfred Hugenberg. The script narrowed—or deepened—the end of a tyrant into a story of fatal sexual obsession.

Shooting began at the UFA studios on November 4, 1929. The stock market crash at the end of September exacerbated pressures from Hugenberg & Co., and were not relieved by the poker face of *Buster Keaton* visiting the set the first day of shooting. He didn’t see much. Sternberg shot in sequence and began with models to establish town and milieu. There was no sound to record but foghorns suggesting a melancholy sea.

Sternberg patterned sound as he patterned light and shadow. *The Blue Angel* was perhaps the first sound picture to convey something quite new to filmgoers: the expressive power of silence. Character is revealed through sound in ways impossible without the microphone: the professor’s unanswered whistle to his dead canary; his thunderous nose-blowing in the classroom; the drifting voices of an unseen choir, abruptly silenced by the closing of a window; the German boys hopeless attempts at the English *th*; “the cock-a-doodle-doo” of the clown-professor’s madness; a glockenspiel chiming time and Fate.

Sternberg’s hiatus from Paramount had a time limit: After January 14, 1930, UFA had to make weekly payment penalties to Paramount for his continued presence in Berlin. The budget soared to two million marks, making it the most expensive picture Pommer had ever made and the costliest sound film yet made anywhere.

She left for the boat train and the *Bremen*, the same ship that had carried *Josef von Sternberg* to America two months before. After nearly a decade, after more than forty parts in films and plays, she had become a cliché that, unlike most clichés, almost never happens: an overnight sensation. With less than overnight to savor it.

**ONLY TWO MORE FILMS IN THIS SERIES OF THE MAFAC SUNDAY CLASSICS:** April 7 Luis Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoise*, (1972, and April 14 Jules Dassin's *Rififi* (1954).For more info visit <http://sundayclassics.com>;

**NEXT WEEK, APRIL 9, IN THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS:** *Lindsay Anderson's if...* (1968).*Malcolm McDowell* debuts in this excoriating view of a British upper-class boarding school at its perfect worst. *if...*, made the same year as student and worker riots in Paris, Berlin, Rome and London, is at once realistic and surrealistic, funny and angry. It’s the great school film of the 1960s.The Cannes Film Festival Palm d’Or (gold palm). After that, it's only three more films before you've got to find something else to do on Tuesday nights (until August 27, that is): *Robert Altman's Nashville* on April 16, *Martin Scorsese's Mean Streets* on April 23, and *Billy Wilder's Some Like it Hot* on April 30.

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