Conversations about great films with Diane Christian & Bruce Jackson

**September 17, 2002 (VI:4)**

**QUEEN CHRISTINA** (1933) 97 minutes

Greta Garbo....Christina
John Gilbert....Antonio
Ian Keith....Magnus
Lewis Stone....Oxenstierna
Elizabeth Young....Countess Ebba 'Belle' Sparre
C. Aubrey Smith....Aage
Reginald Owen....Charles
Georges Renavent....Chanut, French Ambassador
David Torrence....Archbishop
Gustav von Seyffertitz....General
Ferdinand Murier....Innkeeper

Directed by Rouben Mamoulian
Writing credits S.N. Behrman (dialogue), H.M. Harwood, Ben Hecht, Margaret P. Levino (story), Salka Viertel (also story)
Produced by Walter Wanger
Original music by Herbert Stothart
Cinematography by William H. Daniels
Film Editing by Blanche Sewell
Art Direction by Alexander Toluboff
Costume Design by Adrian

**ROUBEN MAMOULIAN** (8 October 1897, Tiflis, Georgia, Russian Empire—4 December 1987, Los Angeles) moved to Paris when he was 7, returned to Moscow, graduated in criminal law from Moscow University. Spent evenings at the Moscow Art Theatre, studying acting, writing, and directing under Eugene Vahktangov, a distinguished disciple of Stanislavsky. Mamoulian got no credit for his final piece of filmwork, *Cleopatra* 1963, because he was fired and replaced by Joseph L. Mankiewicz. He didn't receive credit for his previous piece of filmwork either, that time on *Porgy and Bess* 1959, because he was fired, his footage was unused, and he was replaced by Otto Preminger. Some of his other films are *Silk Stockings* 1957, *Golden Boy* 1939, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* 1931, *City Streets* 1931 and *Applause* 1929.

**GRETA GARBO** (Greta Louisa Gustafsson 18 September 1905, Stockholm—15 April 1990, New York, pneumonia) had major roles in 3 European films before coming to America with director Mauritz Stiller (over the objection of Louis B. Mayer who, until he saw the rushes of her first American film, *The Torrent* 1926, thought her uninteresting). While at MGM, she acted in 10 silent and 14 sound films, some of the most famous of which were *Flesh and the Devil* 1926, *Anna Christie* 1930, *Mata Hari* 1931, *Grand Hotel* 1932, *Queen Christina* 1933, *Anna Karenina* 1935, *Camille* 1937, *Ninotchka* 1939 and *Two-Faced Woman* 1941—after which she created and occupied the role of filmdom’s most famous recluse. She was nominated for four best actress Oscars—*Ninotchka*, *Camille*, *Anna Christie*, *Romance*—but was awarded only an Honorary Academy Award in 1955.

**JOHN GILBERT** (John Cecil Pringle, 10 July 1899, Logan, Utah—9 January 1936, Los Angeles, heart failure) was one of the great stars of the silence screen. For years, a story circulated that he just couldn't do sound films, that he was rejected by audiences and his career died. It's not true: there's no problem with his voice in his nine sound films and there's no evidence of critics or audience faulting him for not making the transition to talkies. Far more important was his war with Louis B. Mayer, his alcoholism, and his early death. He had seven uncredited movie roles before his name first appeared on the screen in *The Phantom* 1916. At his peak, he was as popular as Valentino. He starred in four films with Garbo: *Love* 1927 (aka *Anna Karenina*), *Flesh and the Devil* 1927, *A Woman of Affairs* 1928, *Queen Christina* 1933. Gilbert appeared in 9 films in 1922, 8 in 1923, and 10 in 1924—more than 100 films in all. Some of the others were *The Captain Hates the Sea* 1934 (his last), *The Phantom of Paris* 1931, *Redemption* 1930, *Man, Woman and Sin* 1927, *The Big Parade* 1925, *The Merry Widow* 1925, *The Wolf Man* 1924, *While Paris Sleeps* 1923, *Monte Cristo* 1922, *Shame* 1921, and *Hell's Hinges* 1916.
William Daniels (Cleveland 1895—Los Angeles 1970) won an Oscar for his cinematography for The Naked City 1948. He received nominations for Anna Christie 1930, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof 1958, and How the West Was Won 1964. Some of the other 157 films he photographed were Greed 1925, The Kiss 1929, Romance 1930, Anna Christie 1930, Mata Hari 1931, Susan Lenox (Her Fall and Rise) 1931, Grand Hotel 1932, Queen Christina 1933, Anna Karenina 1935, Brute Force 1947, Can Can 1960, and Valley of the Dolls 1967. He also did Bruce's favorite prison film, Brute Force 1947, which we hope to show you in the next Buffalo Film Seminars in fall 2003. He photographed Garbo in all of her American films, save the last.

Robert Sherwood, review in Life of Garbo in The Kiss, 1929:
“If we have, thus far, conveyed that The Kiss is a mediocre picture exceptionally well-directed, that is what we intended. If we have failed to say much about Greta Garbo, that is because we ran out of adjectives two years ago. We have compared her to Duse, Cavallieri, Mrs. Siddons, Helen of Troy and then Venus, and then ground our teeth because we hadn’t made it strong enough. When someone invents a foolproof asbestos pencil, we shall order a gross and write a real piece about Greta Garbo, the best actress in the world. And then, throw it in the stove, as weak, futile and anemic.”

Queen Christina Wasa of Sweden ruled from 1640-1654, then abdicated her throne and converted to Catholicism, which was illegal in Sweden. After abdicating, she lived in Rome, active in promoting religious freedom and the arts. Independent, unconventional, brilliant and unconcerned with appearances, she was a colorful and powerful figure Garbo happily chose to play. Garbo was 28 when she played Christina’s abdication—the precise age of the queen when she removed her own crown. Many see parallels in Garbo’s life. Her willingness to leave Hollywood was what brought Metro to give her complete control over the film, and seven films later she did abdicate the screen where she was queen.

Christina inherited the throne in 1632 at age six upon the death of her warrror-father, King Gustaphus II Adolphus, at the battle of Lützen. At eighteen, she took the formal coronation oath, insisting on the word “king” rather than “queen.” She was a brilliant linguist, thoroughly trained in philosophy, theology, and art, not to mention history and statecraft. Intellectually and physically, she had little in common with the actress of three centuries later, but there were certain striking similarities between the two.

Christina was a solitary, fatherless woman locked in a royal cage from which she was desperate to escape. She had great strength of will and spoke from an early age of “the power I have over myself and my passions.” She was adept at concealing her own feelings while getting others to reveal theirs, even as she was tormented by yearnings that could scarcely be discussed, let alone resolved. In her Apotheums, she wrote that God had given her “a heart that nothing could satisfy.”

Most problematic, for a seventeenth-century monarch, was her sexuality. At birth, she said in her memoirs, “my body was entirely covered with hair, and I had a loud, deep voice. This led the midwives attending me to take me for a boy. [Garbo once made a cryptic, remarkably similar statement to her friend Sam Green: “I looked like a boy when I was born, and I’ll never tell you who told me so.”] The King’s reaction was as graceful as could be expected: “I hope this daughter will be as dear to me as a boy would have been.” As for her mother, “There was delay in informing the queen of my sex until she was able to bear such a disappointment.” Christina herself thanked God for having endowed her with a soul as “masculine as was the remainder of my body.”

Christina felt, in her own words, “an ineradicable prejudice against everything that women like to talk about or do.” Her mannish behavior was known and remarked about throughout northern Europe. She paid no attention to clothes or personal adornment, wore men’s boots, and, when riding, dressed as a cavalier or cavalry officer in order to disguise her sex.

When she reached her majority, the pressure to marry and produce an heir was intense. “I am just as likely to give birth to a Nero as to an Augustus,” she said, but the issue lay deeper, in her aversion to intercourse and childbirth. She would not be “a field for a man to plough,” and her unwavering refusal to marry flew in the face of all prevailing norms. Not unlike Garbo Christina felt powerfully attracted to beautiful women but her attachments were more emotional than physical—an aesthetic more than a sexual kind of love.

From girlhood on, she was deeply interested in the holy virgins, especially Joan of Arc, and by Catholicism’s concept of virginity as a virtue nota defect. Protestant Swedes resented their queen’s celibacy for depriving them of an heir and a secure line of succession. Increasingly Christina saw the conflict between her duty as queen and her private sexuality as irrevocable.

“I am unable to marry,” she declared. “That is how it is. . . .I have earnestly prayed God to let me change my attitude, but I have not been able to do so.” . . .[the quote continues—Paris doesn’t give it: “My temper is a mortal enemy to this horrible yoke (marriage), which I would not accept, even if I thus would become the ruler of the world. Which crime has the female sex committed to be sentenced to the harsh necessity which consists of being locked up all life either as a prisoner or a slave? I call the nuns prisoners and the wives slaves.”]

“Not many have renounced their kingdoms,” she later wrote. “I can only think of Diocletian, Almansoor [the Moor], Charles V [of Spain] and Christina.” In our own century, many kings have lost or given up their thrones but three hundred years ago the resignation of a monarch was a fantastic and baffling event that upset an entire continent. Christina stepped down at twenty-eight, exactly Garbo’s age when she played her. At her abdication, in 1654, she said “I am not keen on applause. I know that the part I have played cannot be governed by ordinary stage rules. . . . Others know nothing of my motives and little or nothing of my character and way of life, for I let no one look inside me. . . . Without being arrogant or vainglorious, I exerted my power, and [now] I lay it down painlessly and with ease.”

A few years later, those exact sentiments could have come from Garbo.

No one, including the great Garbo herself, was excepted from
Mamoulian’s rehearsal policy, as he told Kevin Brownlow:

She said, “Oh, I can’t rehearse.” I said, “What do you mean?” She says, “I never rehearse, I can’t rehearse—if I rehearse I’ll be no good.” I said, “well, how do you do it?” She said, “Well, you tell me what you want me to do…and then we make a take. And usually the first take is my best.” And I said, “Well, look, if this is true and it works that way, it’s marvelous because it saves me an awful lot of time, [but] if it’s not satisfactory you’ll have to do it my way.” And she said, “It will be satisfactory.” So I rehearsed the two actors and I told her what she would be doing and we made a take and I said, ”How do you feel about it?” She said, “Fine.” I didn’t say anything. And she said “Don’t you like it?” I said, “No, I don’t like it.” Her face fell. She said, “Why?” I said, “I can’t begin to tell you, I have to rehearse. There are so many things that are not there.” And she said, “Well, then, we’re lost because if I rehearse, I’ll be worse, I’ll never be better than this.” I said, “I took it your way, now you do it my way.” So we rehearsed for two hours. And she said, “I’m completely gone, this is going to be terrible.” So I made a second take, third take, fourth take—she says it’s getting worse and worse. Eighth take—I said, “That’s it. Take No. 8… I’m going to print Take 1 and then I’m going to print Take 8, and you are going to come to the projection room in the morning at eight o’clock. I won’t even be there. You run the two scenes, then you tell me which you would like to be in the film. And I promise you I’ll take your judgment. She leaned over and whispered, “Please don’t print Take 1.” And that was it.

The best-loved sequence in Queen Christina, apart from its ending, is the “morning after” that night in the inn—perhaps the single most sublime illustration of Garbo’s acting. It is a classic Method exercise in the art of relating emotionally to physical objects: Garbo moves dreamily around the room as the mesmerized Gilbert watches. She strokes the walls, the objects on the mantle, a spinning wheel, the pillow on the bed, and then hugs the bedpost as sensually as if it were her lover. What is she doing, he asks? “I have been memorizing this room,” she replies. “In the future, in my memory, I shall live a great deal in this room.” She plays the scene for joy and sorrow at the same time, longing to preserve rapture but preparing for loss. Mamoulian (1897-1987), a product of Moscow Art Theater, was a modified believer in the Stanislavskian sense-memory system and encouraged Garbo to draw upon things from her own life.

The immortal “touching scene” was performed to the beat of a metronome—a tempo device that Mamoulian had used to good effect in Porgy (on stage) and Love Me Tonight (on film). “Garbo works intuitively,” he said. “She caught on right away. The scene was choreographed. She had to move around the room in what was a kind of sonnet in action. I explained to her: ‘This has to be sheer poetry and feeling. The movement must be like a dance. Treat it the way you would do it to music.’”

Queen Christina is a film worth looking at closely, in that it embodies everything that the Code wanted to destroy. Breen, indeed, tried to destroy it. He launched an all-out campaign to have it cut to pieces only months before he had the power to do so by fiat. Queen Christina ranks as one of cinema’s close calls. It is also the era’s most sophisticated examination of gender and identity, and Garbo’s masterpiece.

Queen Christina was Garbo’s pet project from the beginning. She agreed to a second MGM contract on the condition that the studio let her star as Christina, a bisexual Swedish queen from the seventeenth century.

In Queen Christina, Garbo played a monarch raised from birth as a boy. She hunts; she rides; she wears men’s clothes; and she kisses her lady-in-waiting, Countess Ebba, on the lips. When she finds out that Ebba wants to marry a man, she becomes angry. Meanwhile, her chancellor wants Christina to marry and produce an heir: “You can’t die an old maid.” Christina relishes her ambiguity, “I have no intention to, Chancellor,” she answers. “I shall die a bachelor.”

Queen Christina is unique in that it is a feminist film about a woman who abdicates her power. The film presents Christina’s decision to leave the throne as a victory of the self. Her whole life, we are told, she has lived in the shadow of her father, a warrior king. . .

Queen Christina can be seen as the ultimate expression of the twenties’ and early thirties’ preoccupation with individual concerns over matters affecting society. It was also the film in which Greta Garbo was most free to make her own statement. Made at a time when Garbo had artistic control over her projects, Queen Christina celebrated true love, in all its forms, as something from God. It was as direct a statement as the bisexual Garbo could have made in 1933, and a generous one, meant for all viewers. By showing Christina’s sexuality as earthy to begin with, by placing her in a world of everyday human emotions and passion, Garbo held out the possibility of transcendence to every member of her audience.

Breen went ballistic. He wanted to cut everything from the point where Christina and Antonio are first in the room at the inn—all the way to the scene, three days later, in which Christina memorizes the room. He wanted to chop up that sequence as well. “Miss Garbo should be kept away from the bed entirely,” Breen wrote. “The business of lying across the bed and fondling the pillows is, in my considered judgment, very offensive.” Breen also wanted to cut Christina’s line, “This is what the Lord must have felt. . .”

He didn’t get his way. A review board made up of the various studio heads passed the film over his objections. But he soon won the war. Within months, Breen had the power to impose his pathetically narrow vision of life, art and morals.


Mamoulian has said that his passion for the theatre began

from Complicated Women Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood. Mick La Salle, St Martin’s NY 2000
with Shakespeare, whose plays he saw as a child at Tiflis. Eager to learn Shakespeare’s own language, he went in 1920 to stay with his married sister in London. Mamoulian directed [his first important assignment in London] with a relentless naturalism worthy of Stanislavsky. He later said that this “was the first and last production that I directed in this manner. . . . In my subsequent work, my aim always was rhythm and poetic stylization.” Nevertheless, the production was a success, and brought Mamoulian a long telegram from George Eastman, inviting him to help organize and direct the new American Open Company at Eastman’s equally new theatre in Rochester, New York.

Porgy [staged in 1926 in NY] began with a brilliantly orchestrated “symphony” of street noises, which Mamoulian later reproduced in the movie Love Me Tonight. It is a triumphant early example of what Tom Milne sees as the “real distinguishing mark” of Mamoulian’s films, “their unerring sense of rhythm in exploring the sensuous pleasures of movement.”

Mamoulian wanted his cameras to recover the mobility of silent days—“the movement of the camera along with the delight of movement which constitutes the attraction of the screen.”

Conversations with Greta Garbo. Sven Broman, Viking, NY, 1992
Garbo had taken for granted that the film to some extent at least, follow the historical course of events. . . . But MGM had very different notions of an historical film. A real love story was an absolute requirement. The discussions were heated, but Irving Thalberg, the producer, would not give way on this point.

In January 1934 Garbo wrote:

‘You’ve no idea what it feels like to live in exile and for the sake of ‘Mammon’. I suppose I am a true prostitute. . . .

. . . By the way, Mammon is taking its time. Christina took more than eight months. I am so ashamed of Christina. I often wake up and think with horror about the film coming to Sweden. It’s really bad in every respect, but the worst thing is they’ll think I don’t know any better—just imagine Christina abdicating for the sake of a little Spaniard.

I managed to believe for ages that it would look as though she did it because she was weary of it all and from a boundless desire to be free. But I’m not strong enough to get anything done so I end up being a poor prophet. . . .

. . . You know I hardly ever mention my films but I feel I have to prepare you.

At the same time I would like to ask you to do something I’ve never asked before—would you write to me and tell me what you think when you’ve seen it. . . .

. . . On top of all the other absurdities, they’re marrying me for the 759th time. Can you think of anything lower than the people who are in charge of this ‘art’ I’m part of. . . . They produce the most humiliating articles in all the papers to create publicity for their films. Out of nowhere come long pieces about how I’ve got married, how I’ve disappeared, shot myself, gone to the moon, etc. And I never defend myself. However, I’m still not engaged, still unmarried, houseless, homeless, and love living on pineapples.

. . . It is not hard to understand how Garbo felt. Here she was, all geared up, at last a film she might be able to be proud of. And then, as Garbo saw it, a typical Hollywood hotch potch with no respect for Sweden’s history. What would people think? People around the world, however, knew almost nothing about Queen Christina. The film was a hit just as it was. It became one of Garbo’s greatest films.

She herself would one day hear Winston Churchill telling her how he would relax now and then by watching Queen Christina in his private cinema in his London shelter, while the bombs were falling over London and England.

And when we came to discuss the film with Garbo in Klosters, she was almost proud of her accomplishment.

In Klosters I got the opportunity to ask Garbo about another love scene in the film, the classic one where she is lying on her back and Gilbert dangles a bunch of grapes over her face that she slowly nibbles at.

‘I did learn one thing,’ she said, ‘if you’re going to eat grapes, you shouldn’t be lying on the floor on your back.’

Join us next Tuesday, September 2, for Jean Renoir’s

The Rules of the Game (1939).

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