SEPTEMBER 6, 2000
THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS
CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GREAT FILMS WITH BRUCE JACKSON & DIANE CHRISTIAN
PRESENTED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE MARKET ARCADE FILM AND ARTS CENTER

NINOTCHKA

MGM, 1939, 110 minutes

DIRECTOR Ernst Lubitsch
SCRIPT Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder and Walter Reisch,
from a story by Melchior Lengyel
PRODUCER Ernst Lubitsch
MUSIC Werner R. Heymann
CINEMATOGRAPHER William H. Daniels
EDITOR Gene Ruggiero
ART DIRECTOR Randall Duell
SET DECORATION Edwin B. Willis
COSTUME DESIGN Adrian

ERNST LUBITSCH (28 January 1892, Berlin—30 November 1947, Hollywood) directed 76 films, beginning with Fräulein Seifenschaum (aka Miss Soapsuds, 1914) and ending with That Lady in Ermine 1948. Some of his other films are Heaven Can Wait 1943, To Be or Not to Be 1942, That Uncertain Feeling 1941, The Shop Around the Corner 1940, The Merry Widow 1934, and Trouble in Paradise 1932. His first American film was Rosita 1923, with Mary Pickford. Lubitsch was nominated four times for best picture and best director Oscars: The Patriot 1928, The Love Parade 1929, The Smiling Lieutenant 1931, and Heaven Can Wait. His only award was an honorary one in 1947.

GRETA GARBO (Greta Louisa Gustafsson 18 September 1905, Stockholm—15 April 1990, New York) 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, and Camille 1937. She did only one film after Ninotchka—George Cukor’s Two-Faced Woman 1941—after which she created and occupied the role of filmdom’s most famous recluse.

MELVYN DOUGLAS (Melvyn Edouard Hesselberg, 5 April 1901, Macon, Georgia—4 August 1981, New York) won two best supporting actor Academy Awards (Hud 1963 and Being There 1979). He was one of only three actors to win an Oscar, an Emmy, and a Tony. Some of his other films were Tonight or Never 1931, Captains Courageous 1937, Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House 1948, Billy Budd 1962, I Never Sang for My Father 1970, The Candidate 1972, and Tell Me a Riddle 1980. He was married to Helen Gahagan from 1931 until her death in 1981.

BELA LUGOSI (Béla Ferenc Dezso Blaskó, 20 October 1882, Lugos, Austria-Hungary. [now Lugoj, Romania]—16 August 1956, Los Angeles) appeared in more than 100 films, beginning with A Régiséggyűjtő 1917 and ending with Ed Wood’s perfectly dreadful Plan 9 from Outer Space 1958. He played Count Dracula in the 1927 Broadway version of Bram Stoker’s novel, a role he held for three years. In 1931, he portrayed the Count in Tod Browning’s still-scary Dracula. He is best
known nowadays because of Martin Landau’s Oscar-winning impersonation of him in Tim Burton’s *Ed Wood* 1994, but for years he was filmdom’s premier vampire, probably spending more time in vampire drag than the real Count Dracula. He was buried in his full Dracula costume, cape and all. Vincent Price said that at Lugosi’s funeral, Peter Lorre looked into the casket and “Do you think we should drive a stake through his heart just in case?”

**Billy Wilder**, who once said, “Anyone who doesn’t believe in miracles isn’t a realist,” was nominated for 22 Academy Awards and won 6 of them: best director, picture and screenplay for *The Apartment* 1960; best writing, story and screenplay for *Sunset Boulevard* 1950; best director and screenplay, *The Lost Weekend* 1945. He was the 1988 recipient of the Academy’s Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award. **Charles Brackett** and Wilder worked together on 13 films, including *Double Indemnity*, *The Lost Weekend* and *Some Like It Hot*. At the age of 87, Wilder wanted to direct *Schindler’s List*, which he said would have become his most personal film. When Wilder saw Freud’s therapy couch he said, “It was a very tiny little thing. All his theories were based on the analysis of very short people.” And on the longevity of films: “A bad play folds and is forgotten, but in pictures we don’t bury our dead. When you think it’s out of your system, your daughter sees it on television and says, My father is an idiot.”


“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.” —*Robert Sherwood, review in Life of Garbo in The Kiss*, 1929

“Except for Greta Garbo, no one who had attained really great stardom before the mid-twenties carried over well—or increased his or her status—in the sound era. Many went on making films, among them Clara Bow, Colleen Moore, Marion Davies, Richard Dix, Richard Barthelmess—but their careers soon fizzled out and the decade of the thirties did not belong to them. Garbo, of course, not only endured, but thrived.” —*Jeanine Basinger, Silent Stars. Knopf, 1999*

“...the famous ‘Lubitsch touch’ is misleadingly named, for it is not so much something added to a story as a method of telling a story through ellipsis and emphasis. Omitting the obvious presentation, Lubitsch substitutes allusive detail, and then emphasizes that detail, not simply to be sure that even a hick audience gets the point, but in such a way that the sweet nothing becomes the ornamental equivalent of the dramatic sense. As one of the censors bitterly complained, after the Hays Code had clamped down in 1933, ‘you know what he’s saying but you just can’t prove that he’s saying it!’” —*Raymond Durgnat, The Crazy Mirror Hollywood Comedy and the American Image*, 1969

“Lubitsch’s work, until his last film in 1948, was respected by intellectuals and adored by shop girls.” —*ditto*

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