

**FLESH AND THE DEVIL. Dir. Clarence Brown. USA, MGM, 1926. 113 min.
Black and white, silent. DVD, Turner Classic Movies, 2005**

Several events of 1926 made it a pivotal year in the history of American film:

- Warner Brothers introduced Vitaphone, the first commercially viable sound-on-film technology, when it released the first major “talkie” - an adaptation of Byron’s *Don Juan* which featured racy a lines as well as a kiss a minute.
- Rudolph Valentino (“the great lover”) died shortly after completing *The Son of the Sheik*, a film parodied in *The World’s Greatest Lover* (1977).
- Greta Garbo strode onto the American screen, at the age of twenty-one, as the *femme fatale* in *Flesh and the Devil*, costarring John Gilbert.

The events went together in strange ways. Enflamed by his very real passion for Garbo, Gilbert quickly replaced Valentino as the sexiest man in Hollywood. Meanwhile, the new voice technology took some of the ambiguity out of film. (Was the sheik’s son a rapist? film critics have long asked, and might have decided had there been a soundtrack.)

Under pressure to regulate itself, the Motion Picture Association of America, founded in 1922, began to develop its own production code. The so-called Hays Code (so called because formulated by the Association’s first president, Will Hays, who had previously served as manager of Warren G. Harding presidential campaign) established standards that came into effect in 1930 and officially guided the large studios until the current rating system was introduced in 1967. Section II of the code, “Sex,” began with the statement “The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing.” Film lovers would look back on the 1920s as the “pre-Hays-code” era, the *real* golden age of Hollywood.



Greta Garbo as Felicitas

Garbo arrived in Hollywood in 1925, accompanying her older lover, the Swedish director Mauriz Stiller, who had discovered her a few years earlier. MGM cast her in a short film, *The Torrent*, and then in the feature-length film *The Temptress* (both 1926). The studio soon discovered that Garbo was the hotter property. It fired Stiller ten days into the shooting of *The Temptress*, replacing him with Fred Niblo (dir. *Ben Hur*, 1925), and it matched Garbo with the established director Clarence Brown for her third silent

film, *Flesh and the Devil*. Brown chose studio actor John Gilbert as her co-star, and the two lit up the screen from their first romantic encounters in a steamy train station and a moonlit garden. Garbo's interest in Stiller had cooled, and she found a real love – perhaps her great love – in Gilbert, with whom she made three other films: *Love* (1927), where she played Anna Karenina to his Count Vronsky; *A Woman of Affairs* (1928), where the two are caught up in another love triangle; and *Queen Christina* (1933), a talkie with brilliant dialogue by S.N. Berman, as the famous queen has an affair with a dashing ambassador from Spain.

Flesh and the Devil is based on a sentimental novel by Hermann Sudermann, translated as *The Undying Past* (1906; reprint 1926). The story is basically a love triangle involving two lifelong friends – Leo von Harden and Ulrich von Eltz, played respectively and respectably by Gilbert and Lars Hanson, with whom Garbo had performed in Sweden. The plot doesn't leave room for Garbo's character, Felicitas, to be much more than a vamp. Her job is first to seduce Gilbert, failing to mention that she is already married; then to seduce Hanson, when Gilbert is out of town, and to silence the protests of Hanson's devoted sister, Hertha (played by Barbara Kent); finally to renew the seduction when Gilbert returns. But if seduction is an art – and one could argue that the chief art of cinema is to seduce the viewer – Garbo carries it off as almost no one else has done. Just watch her in the garden outside the house where she lives (Gilbert has just learned) with Count von Rahden, and consider how innovative the lighting and cinematography become at this point.



Garbo and Gilbert meet onscreen

Like most love triangles, *Flesh and the Devil* has a tragic ending. MGM wanted something else, and Brown filmed an alternate, Hollywood ending. The new DVD from Turner Classic Movies (available at Casa Video) includes both endings. (It also includes the other Garbo silents mentioned above.) We'll let you guess which ending you'll see tonight. But we'll note one final irony. Pastor Voss, the stern Lutheran who delivers the film's title line (from the Christian catechism) in the midst of a sermon to Gilbert's character, is played by George Fawcett. Earlier in 1926, Fawcett played the father whose daughter is seduced by Valentino character in *The Son of the Sheik*.

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