

The Museum of Modern Art

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No. 112
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CZECHOSLOVAKIA PRESENTS RARE GIFT OF AMERICANA TO MUSEUM

A rare 43-year-old silent film classic, "Stark Love," has been donated by the Czechoslovak Film Institute to The Museum of Modern Art, it was revealed today by Willard Van Dyke, Director of the Department of Film.

Mr. Van Dyke, just returned from a film survey of Eastern Europe, acknowledged his gratitude for "the magnificent gift," an original tinted print of this forgotten masterpiece, preserved by the Czechoslovakians. Not a single print of "Stark Love" is known to exist in America, according to Van Dyke, who pointed out that the Central European countries, including Russia, put a high value on silent American films, a heritage that we have neglected in our haste to produce more and more films.

"Stark Love" is a naturalistic drama in the tradition of Robert Flaherty's "Nanook of the North" and "Moana." A chance observation of primitive emotion displayed by a pioneer lady of the Utah plains during the making of "The Covered Wagon" led Karl Brown to consider making a film of real people photographed in their natural surroundings. Learning that 5,000 isolated mountaineers who had originally come from England, were left in Kentucky pursuing their own customs he convinced Jesse Lasky to finance the picture. Lasky was also influenced by the prestige that accrued to the producer from Flaherty's "Moana."

Brown wanted to make known the strange ways of the American folk who for 300 years had inhabited the mountains of Kentucky -- indifferent to the outside world, living in crowded, windowless cabins; the women married at fourteen or fifteen, giving birth to an average of a dozen children, killed by overwork and frequent child-bearing; the men, avoiding responsibilities by hunting, loafing or indulging in "moonshine." Only mountaineers appeared in the cast, with the exception of the female lead, Helen Mundy, a high school girl recruited from nearby Knoxville, when no local villager would allow his daughter to participate in the production.

(more)

"Stark Love" opened in New York at the Cameo Theatre February 28, 1927, to unanimous
 rave reviews, but it was not a commercial success, despite its lurid title and advertisements
 that read: "Silken Women of New York, coddled by your furs, your wealth and your men, do you
 know of these other women within 600 miles of New York who grapple life with bare hands and
 lie on their feet."

The picture stands as a priceless record of a primitive way of life which was dying out
 even in the twenties and no longer exists, asserts writer-critic Kevin Brownlow, who recently
 compared its photography to 17th-century Flemish painting.

Against an authentic background, Brown conceived of a dramatic story with father and son
 in conflict over a young girl chosen by the father to care for his family and replace his
 dead wife. The combination of fiction and documentary compares favorably with the film tech-
 niques being used by many young film-makers today, according to the Director of the Museum's
 Department of Film. Van Dyke, a well-known documentary film-maker himself, declared that the
 spontaneity of cinéma vérité has encouraged a dramatic approach and even the filming of
 fantasy in realistic settings.

Brown was 30 years old when he made "Stark Love," his first writing and directorial assign-
 ment. Previously he had served as assistant to Billy Bitzer, cameraman on D.W. Griffith's
 "Intolerance." He joined Bitzer in 1913; two years later he was assigned to experiment in
 D.W. Griffith's laboratory, and according to Brownlow, in the next four years he produced almost
 every photographic effect used in Griffith productions up to 1919.

Following "Stark Love," the career of Karl Brown was singularly uneventful. He directed
 Joseph Schildkraut in 1927 in "His Dog," Aileen Pringle and Ian Keith in "Prince of Diamonds"
 in 1930, Johnny Mack Brown in "Flames" in 1932, and Tala Birell in "The White Legion" in 1936.
 He also wrote "Phantom Killer" in 1942 and "Hitler--Dead or Alive" in 1943, among other films.

The Museum's print of "Stark Love" has Czechoslovakian titles, and a search is being made
 for the original English titles which were written in the Elizabethan dialect that was spoken
 by these Kentucky folk.

 Additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, and Lillian Gerard, Film
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