



7th Heaven

Director: Frank Borzage
Production Company: Fox Film Corporation
Producer: Frank Borzage
Assistant Directors: Lew Borzage, Park Frame
Screenplay: Benjamin F. Glazer
Titles: Katherine Hilliker, H.H. Caldwell
Based on the play by: Austin Strong
Photography: Ernest Palmer, Joseph Valentine
Editor: Barney Wolf
Settings: Harry Oliver
Costume: Kathleen Kay
Restoration: Karl Malkames
Cast:
Janet Gaynor (*Diane*)
Charles Farrell (*Chico Robas*)
Ben Bard (*Colonel Brissac*)
David Butler (*Gobin*)
Albert Gran (*Papa Boul*)
Gladys Brockwell (*Nana*)
Emile Chautard (*Père Chevilion*)
George Stone (*Sewer Rat*)
Jessie Haslett (*Aunt Valentine*)
Lillian West (*Arlette*)
Marie Mosquini (*Madame Gobin*)
Brandon Hurst (*Uncle George*)
USA 1927
117 mins
Digital 4K (restoration)

With live piano accompaniment

Too Much: Melodrama on Film

Brief Encounter

Mon 20 Oct 20:50; Sun 16 Nov 14:45 (+ 80th Anniversary discussion with theatre director Emma Rice, filmmaker Barnaby Thompson and writer Oliver Soden)

Enamorada

Tue 21 Oct 20:45; Sat 1 Nov 12:20

The Cranes Are Flying

Letyat zhuravli

Wed 22 Oct 18:15; Sat 15 Nov 20:45

25 and Under: An Introduction to Melodrama

Wed 22 Oct 19:15 Blue Room

Camila

Wed 22 Oct 20:45 (+ intro by Cinema Mentiré);

Sun 2 Nov 12:15

Leave Her to Heaven

Thu 23 Oct 20:40 (+ intro by Aga Baranowska, BFI Contextual Events Programmer); Sun 30 Nov 15:10

Éi

Fri 24 Oct 20:45; Mon 3 Nov 18:10

Johnny Guitar

Sat 25 Oct 20:45; Sat 8 Nov 14:45

The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant

Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant

Sun 26 Oct 14:50; Wed 5 Nov 20:20

Splendor in the Grass

Sun 26 Oct 18:20; Mon 24 Nov 18:00

Stella Dallas

Mon 27 Oct 20:40; Sat 1 Nov 17:30; Wed 12 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by Lucy Bolton, Queen Mary University of London)

Too Much: Melodrama on Film

7th Heaven

The screening at the [2018] BFI London Film Festival of Frank Borzage's 1927 masterpiece *7th Heaven* in a new restoration was cause for rejoicing. But Borzage, who directed movies from 1913 to the end of the 50s, sometimes seems in danger of shrinking down to just this one title, the way Dziga Vertov is often reduced to *Man with a Movie Camera*. At least this one does exemplify his crazed romantic vision.

Though Borzage made comedies, musicals and war movies, he's known for his sentimental melodramas, which have a remarkable consistency of theme and approach. Like Hitchcock, he continued the approach of his silent movies into the sound era, using his angles and edits to tell stories pictorially and affect the audience emotionally without relying on dialogue. And in *Moonrise* (1948), his last great work, he pulls off a rediscovery of the power of silent expressionism comparable to Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* (1955).

Borzage entered movies as an actor in western shorts in 1912, and attained a modest level of stardom that enabled him to start directing his own vehicles regularly within a couple of years. These early efforts are notable for their smart in-depth staging and their unusual sweetness: the corniness of the old-school western is embraced with innocent pleasure.

Over the next ten years, Borzage moved behind the camera full time and shifted from shorts to features, from westerns to melodramas and romances. There was also a move indoors as Borzage followed the industry's tendency to rely more on studio sets, culminating in his Fox pictures of the later 20s, with their crumbling buildings and misty, crepuscular atmosphere.

Borzage is starry-eyed about romance; he wallows in it. He can easily get 45 minutes out of what happens between boy meets girl and boy loses girl, without the aid of subplots or even scene changes. Lavishing attention on the fine detail of performance, he illuminates attraction, flirtation, growing affection, wariness, confusion. *The River* (1928) stands as the best example of Borzage's approach – partly because so much of it is lost: what remains is an erotic getting-to-know-you sequence played largely in one room. The director builds sexual attraction brilliantly.

A lot of this close study centres on star Charles Farrell, adept at handsome lummox roles: Borzage could use his lack of sophistication in a very sophisticated way. His male heroes are often admirably confident, bursting with can-do spirit which they impart to the heroines, lending them strength. But they're also insensitive to the point of stupidity, and the heroines, often played by Janet Gaynor, have their work cut out raising their partner's awareness. This dynamic is still in play in Borzage's terrific early talkies such as *Man's Castle* (1933) and *Living on Velvet* (1935).

Farrell was cast opposite the doll-like Gaynor so often, by different directors, that fans thought they were married; after the success of *7th Heaven* Borzage paired them in *Street Angel* (1928) and *Lucky Star* (1929). He was a rare heterosexual male exponent of the women's picture, focusing on Gaynor as the audience's surrogate but taking care to showcase the statuesque Farrell as object of feminine desire.

Spring in a Small Town Xiǎochéng zhī chūn

Wed 29 Oct 20:50; Sat 29 Nov 12:40

Volver

Thu 30 Oct 20:40; Sat 29 Nov 18:10

The Nightingale's Prayer Doaa al-Karawan

Fri 31 Oct 18:00 (+ intro by Imane Lamime, curator and founder of Fhamtini Film Festival);

Mon 10 Nov 20:40

Breaking the Waves

Sat 1 Nov 20:00; Sat 8 Nov 11:50

Farewell My Concubine Ba wang bie ji

Sun 2 Nov 14:00 BFI IMAX

Far From Heaven

Sun 2 Nov 18:30; Sat 15 Nov 18:00;

Thu 20 Nov 20:50

Olivia

Tue 4 Nov 18:15; Fri 28 Nov 20:45

Stella

Fri 7 Nov 20:45; Sat 22 Nov 15:00

Mamma Roma

Sat 8 Nov 20:40; Fri 28 Nov 18:15 (+ intro by Giulia Saccogna, BFI Programme & Research Coordinator)

Devdas

Sun 9 Nov 10:45 BFI IMAX

UK Premiere of 4K Restoration: The Arch Dong

fu ren + pre-recorded intro by T'ang Shushuen

Sun 9 Nov 12:20; Fri 14 Nov 20:50

The Eternal Breasts Chibusa yo eien nare

Sun 9 Nov 14:50; Fri 21 Nov 20:45

The Life of Oharu Saikaku ichidai onna

Sun 9 Nov 18:10; Thu 20 Nov 17:50

Now, Voyager

Mon 10 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by film programmer Caroline Cassin, curator and founder of Women & Cocaine); Mon 24 Nov 20:40

7th Heaven

Wed 12 Nov 20:35

A Cottage on Dartmoor

Fri 14 Nov 18:20; Sat 22 Nov 12:30

Melo-dramarama

Sat 15 Nov 11:00-17:00

Written on the Wind

Sun 16 Nov 11:00 BFI IMAX

Madame X

Sun 23 Nov 12:20 (+ intro by season curator Ruby McGuigan); Sat 29 Nov 20:40

The Wicked Lady + panel discussion on

Gainsborough melodramas

Sun 23 Nov 14:50

Madonna of the Seven Moons

Sun 23 Nov 18:20

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SOUND**

These are all underclass romances, the sublime aspects of indomitable love contrasted with sordid settings (lavishly recreated on the Fox sound stages). In *7th Heaven*, Farrell plays a sewer worker, but he proudly declares that he lives among the stars, in the garret the title refers to – reached via a staggering crane-shot that floats up the stairway, giving an X-ray view of the grimy tenement. Borzage, from a working-class background, understood the gap between human aspiration and grim reality.

The three films Borzage made with Farrell and Gaynor all position her in waif roles, even lower down the social scale than Farrell. With the optimism of one of Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches novels, the Farrell character will raise the Gaynor one to his level, but at a certain point she'll find reserves of strength and wisdom that elevate him. This sometimes results in actual on-screen miracles, or implied ones: characters literally resurrected or cured by the power of love. 'I'll never die!' yells Farrell, soundlessly, in *7th Heaven*.

Borzage's romanticism is tied to a nondenominational spirituality. This sounds like it could get syrupy, but it somehow never does. For one thing, Borzage hates prudery and intolerance, so the vision of religion he promotes is idealised, positioned in opposition to any organised zealotry. A certain reticence about strong emotion is evidenced: he often seems to approach melodrama with caution, letting it slowly overwhelm us from a distance. When he does go full cornball, there's a lunatic quality to the scenarios that pitches them beyond any normal sentiment.

I've been searching for weeks to find out who originated the great summary of Borzage's work, 'the triumph of love over plausibility' (according to the internet it may have been me, but I'm certain this is not so). What strikes me as admirable about the line – not a put-down, as I read it – is that it sums up not only the action of a Borzage film but his conscious intent, his whole philosophy. For him, love is stronger than likelihood. The Hollywood dream machine was the perfect medium for his message.

David Cairns, *Sight and Sound*, December 2018