



CINEMA'S FIRST NASTY WOMEN

Various: Denmark/France/Italy/Netherlands/Sweden/UK/US 1898-1926; Kino Classics; region-free Blu-ray; 4 discs; b&w; silent; 875 minutes; 1,321. Extras: *If That Is a Nasty Woman?* video introduction; 11 short documentaries; audio commentaries for selected films; booklet.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL ATKINSON

This ambitious compilation comes routing an explicit agenda: to reacquire film history with the silent era's busy legacy of powerful, disobedient, autonomous women, in films that have been almost entirely neglected up to now. Overseen by feminist academics Laura Horak (from Carleton University in Canada) and Maggie Hennefeld (University of Minnesota), who have both recently written books exploring the terrain, the project's payload is 99 films (shorts plus two features) from 13 different archives and made in seven countries, filling out over 14 hours. The result is an abundance of low-down female slapstick anarchy, in which standard silent-comedy set-ups are relentlessly disrupted by women characters busting out of their assigned gender roles.

'Nasty' is a rather creaky, Pythonesque way to characterise the vibe, given the veneer of scholarly rectitude involved – and there's a lot of editorialising about the films' frequent "racist imagery" and stereotypes – but the hitherto catacombed films can be eye-opening and exhilarating. Some of the filmmakers are women, but the focus falls on the actresses, from the nameless French tornado playing the titular vandalising teen in the globally popular Léontine films (1910-11), to Gene Gauntier as a Civil War 'Girl Spy' in films she scripted (1909-10) and gender-fluid pioneers like Biograph star Edna 'Billy' Foster (who mostly played boys), and Ora Carew, who in one Keystone comedy plays her own twin brother, who then masquerades as his sister. We get women routinely passing for men, doing their own risky stunts, playing 'manly' women entirely uninterested in hetero romance, staging working women's strikes, drinking hard and protesting for women's rights. Native American stars such as Minnie Devereaux (in a 1914 Fatty Arbuckle short) and Lillian St Cyr are rescued from obscurity, rebellious wives are sometimes played by actors in drag, and even a hefty sampling of D.W. Griffith films are offered, in which the usually virginal-recessive heroines are instead "tyrannising the hearthstone", as Hennefeld puts it. It's old-school film history turned inside out.

DISC: Heroic efforts at restoration across the board, and as indicated, the wealth of exegesis on hand is both thoroughly researched and rather ebullient.



THE DRAUGHTSMAN'S CONTRACT

Peter Greenaway: UK 1982; BFI; Region B Blu-ray; English SDH; Certificate 15; 108 minutes; 1,661. Extras: 2003 audio commentary and introduction by Greenaway; contemporary television review by Angela Carter; audio interview with composer Michael Nyman (2002); Saskia Boddeke's film portrait of her husband, *The Greenaway Alphabet* (2017); three short films by Greenaway – *H Is for House* (1976), *A Walk Through H* (1978), *Insight: Zandra Rhoads* (1980); 1981 interviews with Janet Suzman, Greenaway and Anthony Higgins; behind-the-scenes footage; deleted scenes; image gallery; original and restoration trailers.

REVIEWED BY BEN NICHOLSON

An arrogant draughtsman of lower social station, Mr Neville (Anthony Higgins), agrees to draw 12 aspects of a stately home on the condition that, beyond financial remuneration, he is permitted to take his daily pleasure with the lady of the house, Mrs Herbert (Janet Suzman) while her husband is away. This is the ostensible premise of Peter Greenaway's gloriously arch feature debut *The Draughtsman's Contract*, a film of exquisite composition which gradually reveals itself as a cryptic whodunnit dressed in the finery of a late 17th-century romp.

As with most of its characters – save, perhaps the draughtsman himself – there is a lot more going on in the film than might initially meet the eye: a particular irony given that Neville's vocation demands that he depict only what he sees, not what he otherwise knows. Taking his hosts and their friends at face value, Neville becomes embroiled in a potential murder plot in which clues are sprinkled enigmatically around the pristine grounds, power dynamics shift like the elusive sunlight, and the garden's statues seem to come inexplicably to life.

Set in 1694, to coincide with the founding of the Bank of England and reforms around women and property inheritance, this is a film packed with political and social detail but not weighed down by it. Many describe the narrative as baffling, but it remains eminently watchable. It's a cliché to suggest every frame could be a painting, but here the sumptuous cinematography – filled with symmetrical, baroque arrangements – is designed to evoke such lofty comparisons.

DISC: This is, suitably, a handsomely mounted release from the BFI, featuring an array of additional material: from Greenaway's own 2003 audio commentary to Angela Carter's contemporary television review of the film, as well as various interviews and behind-the-scenes clips. As is often the case with BFI Blu-rays, some of the other films slipped in with the release are genuine highlights. These discs feature *The Greenaway Alphabet* – a 2017 film portrait of the director by his wife Saskia Boddeke – and two excellent early Greenaway shorts, *H Is for House* (1976) and *A Walk Through H* (1978).



DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN

Susan Seidelman: US 1985; Final Cut Entertainment; Region B Blu-ray; Certificate 15; 144 minutes; 1,841. Extras: New interviews with director Susan Seidelman and producer Sarah Pillsbury; interview with music writer Lucy O'Brien about Madonna; alternative ending; photo gallery; trailer; poster; postcards; booklet.

REVIEWED BY HANNAH MCGILL

Leora Barish's female-fronted screwball script *Desperately Seeking Susan* passed through numerous directorial hands before it reached Susan Seidelman. In the interviews included with this Blu-ray release, Seidelman mentions that the project had been with John Sayles before it came to her, while producer Sarah Pillsbury recalls taking it to Hal Ashby, George Roy Hill, Claude Lelouche and Jonathan Demme. What the project gained by settling with Seidelman – who, since her admired 1982 debut *Smitherens*, had been wading through dispiriting scripts for sorority sex comedies – was not only an all-female top team, but the punk credibility that adds such background richness to its dreamy comic capers. In peopling her fairytale of New York with real figures from the city's counterculture, Seidelman created a record of a scene she knew and loved, as well as a fizzy romcom that continues to charm. In collaboration with her director of photography Edward Lachman and production and costume designer Santo Loquasto, Seidelman made downtown NYC at once rough and alluring – just as it appears to the film's protagonist, bored New Jersey housewife Roberta (Rosanna Arquette).

Desperately Seeking Susan of course gains much of its enduring fame from the exposure it offered to a burgeoning pop star named Madonna. Chosen over a raft of far better-known names to play the sexy drifter who tempts Roberta down her rabbit hole, Madonna made the film exactly as her star ascended: Seidelman in her interviews recalls the startling difference in "the atmosphere around her" over the course of shooting. Acting chops have never been part of Madonna's redoubtable arsenal, but her physical charisma and developing personal style (which the film adopted as Susan's) more than compensate for her flat delivery. Arguably, her awkward acting even contributes to the thrill of her presence: she already carries a sense of specialness and separation, her constant knowing smile indicating both joy in the role and no intention whatsoever of disappearing into it. Pillsbury, in the extras, nails the effect by calling Madonna "a downtown Mac West": just like West, Madonna provides the soul and spirit of the film, and glides through it seeming rather unaffected by its fictional ups and downs. This self-possession balances Arquette's nervy neediness as Roberta, while Aidan Quinn anchors them by playing nice-guy love interest Dez completely straight.

It's not incidental, of course, that Dez is a movie projectionist. The film is, says Pillsbury, "a metaphor for the movie experience". Clear narrative resonances exist with Jacques Rivette's *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (1974), for those desperately seeking them – but for most viewers, the chief interest here is less the plot than the time-capsule preservation of a fashion and pop culture moment.

DISC: Completists will already have been able to source the Blu-ray transfer, but this 'deluxe limited edition' package looks and sounds good. Director and producer interviews are excellent, and an alternative ending reveals the additional convolutions the film almost embraced – but without a new restoration, actor contributions or commentaries, the package may strike some as a touch less than 'deluxe'.