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BOOKS & ARTSFILM REVIEW

‘Cinema’s First Nasty Women’ Review: The Defiant Dames of Silent Film

The women featured in this four-disc set from Kino Lorber, which gathers nearly a hundred movies made from 1898 to 1926, are anything but damsels in distress.



Mabel Taliaferro in ‘The Snowbird’ (1916)

PHOTO: COURTESY OF KINO LORBER

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‘Cinema’s First Nasty Women,’ a new collection of silent movies available on both DVD and Blu-ray from Kino Lorber, earns points for its catchy, if perhaps sometimes misleading, title. But it deserves even more credit for its contents—a crop of 99 films (some 14 hours’ worth), made from 1898 to 1926. Most come from France and the U.S., but a handful are from Italy, and a smattering hail from Denmark, Sweden or Britain. In all, 13 international archives and libraries contributed material.

Both the Blu-ray and DVD sets consist of four discs, but only the Blu-ray version is complemented by a perfect-bound, 112-page book of scholarly essays, interviews, archival photos and, most important of all, useful notes on the films themselves. Beyond that, audio commentaries in English accompany 19 of the films, with a further 15 in Spanish. (The set is region-free and being marketed worldwide.) English intertitles are present in all movies that originally contained them, and all foreign-language intertitles have been subtitled in English. Newly recorded music, mostly by female composers, accompanies each picture. Many of the scores are cleverly in sync with the era; others, jarringly not.

As the set's moniker makes clear, the emphasis is on women, but not the demure type often associated with early cinema. Instead, this box revels in disruption, rebellion and, more than occasionally, outright mayhem. Yet a stubborn irony lies at its heart: Most of these films were directed, written and produced by men—in marked contrast to Kino Lorber's "Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers," a set from 2018, and its periodic supplements, among them two volumes released in 2020 devoted to the now-celebrated Alice Guy Blaché.

The earliest films here are extremely short (from one or two minutes to about 12). And even the bulk of those shot later seldom exceed a quarter hour. A notable exception is "The Snowbird" (U.S., 1916), at 82 minutes. Its plot, credited to Mary Ryder and June Mathis, concerns a tough society girl's trip to rural Quebec, where she tangles with the ornery cuss defrauding her father. A handful of other films clock in at around 25 minutes, so a long attention span is seldom essential.



Bertha Regustus in 'Laughing Gas' (1907)

PHOTO: COURTESY OF KINO LORBER

Each disc carries a loose general categorization ("Disastrous Domestics & Anarchic Tomboys," "Queens of Destruction," "Gender Rebels" and "Female Tricksters") and then groups films under more specific headers to further divide. The oldest pictures may require unusual patience and concentration, for much had to be implied when watching a film took about as much time as frying an egg.

But as with many things, immersion can engender appreciation. So it is with the 12 (of 24) films in the so-called Léontine series presented here, all made in France between 1910 and 1912. They feature an incorrigible brat (played by a fully grown woman, who, despite fame in her day, now remains nameless) raining all manner of havoc on nearly everyone she meets, though notably none on animals. Her competition comes from two other Gallic rabble-rousers: the unruly Rosalie (Sarah Duhamel) and the

ill-tempered Cunégonde (Little Chrysia), both making life difficult for those around them in their own series.

Two American pictures deserve special mention: “Laughing Gas” (1907), directed by the cinema pioneer Edwin S. Porter and running just seven minutes, features the exuberant Bertha Regustus, a black woman of irresistible charm, under the influence of a dentist’s laughing gas. As she travels home, everyone she encounters, including passengers on a tightly packed streetcar, becomes touched by her uncontrollable mirth. That all are white may be the biggest surprise of all. “Fatty and Minnie-He-Haw” (1914), directed by the infamous comedian Fatty Arbuckle and running 21 minutes, stars Arbuckle and Minnie Devereaux, of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, in a farce that pits her, the earthy daughter of an Indian chief, against his feckless coward, with the pair clumsily attempting physical affection even as he pines for a different bride.

If anything mars this valuable set, it’s the imposition of trendy academese on its contents. The curators—two film scholars, Maggie Hennefeld and Laura Horak, and an archivist, Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi—have framed the project as a barbed counterpoint to anti-feminist rhetoric, and many of the supplements invoke the wearisome jargon of race- and gender-studies, frequently obscuring the useful insights that may also be present. Another annoyance are the condescending title cards addressing racial stereotypes, which in several cases seem random.

Yet those interested in cinema’s infancy and early stages, when technology was slowly but surely metamorphosing into art, will find hours of scintillating footage seen to extraordinary advantage, thanks to recent advances in cinema restoration. This set’s cant can be ignored. The films themselves, like so many of their central characters, are irrepressible.

—*Mr. Mermelstein writes on film and classical music for the Journal.*



Fatty Arbuckle and Minnie Devereaux in ‘Fatty and Minnie-He-Haw’ (1914)

PHOTO: COURTESY OF KINO LORBER