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CINEMA



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DOCUMENTARIES,
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Maggie Hennefeld and Laura Horak, two of the editors of the 2019 collection *Unwatchable* (a book that allowed me to air more of my gripes against von Trier), have joined forces with Elif Rongen-Kaynak to produce a four-disc Blu-ray/DVD set called *Cinema's First Nasty Women*, focusing on the period of a little over a century ago when women seem to have had the most sizable input on film culture. Kino Lorber couldn't send me this physical set in time for my deadline, but links to the films and the 112-page booklet give me plenty of wild stuff to chew on, including the following summary from the latter:

"Discs 1 and 2 center on early slapstick comedies from 1898 from across Europe, the US, and the UK. In Disc 1, 'Disastrous Domestic & Anarchic Tomboys,' vengeful kitchen maids and rambunctious teenagers conspire to leave the domestic sphere in total shambles. This disc spotlights the forgotten films of France's Léontine, Italy's Lea, and catastrophes both in and out of the kitchen. Disc 2, 'Queens of Destruction,' features three popular French comedienne characters, Cunégonde (Little Chrysis), Rosalie and Pétronille (both played by Sarah Duhamel), as well as a curated section on "Tyranny at Home." Discs 3 and 4 pivot from burlesque slapstick to cross-dressing and queer erotics. Disc 3, 'Gender Rebels' explores the porousness of gender from cross-dressing girl spies to the gender hijinks of the Wild West. This disc includes three surviving films from writer/director/actor Gene Gauntier's girl spy series and the best of Edna 'Billy' Foster's work at Biograph. In Disc 4, 'Female Tricksters,' cross-dressing provides myriad opportunities for accidental same-sex attraction, and women don male attire to brave the mean streets of the early 20th-century metropolis. In the set's only two feature films, Evelyn Greeley moonlights as both Sapphic dancer and male Latin professor in *Phil for Short* (1919), while theater star Mabel Taliaferro plays a headstrong society girl who disguises herself as a boy to trick a 'woman-hating' French trapper in the frontier BDSM fantasy, *The Snowbird* (1916)." The emphasis here, contra von Trier and the Movie Brats, is on stuff that hasn't already been digitally available.

Finally, on another upbeat note, Second Run Features in the UK has released on Blu-ray a restoration of one of the most exuberant movies of the Czech New Wave, Vojtěch Jasný's *The Cassandra Cat* (1963). I hope I can be forgiven for revising and excerpting my 1991 capsule review of this nugget:

"Long banned because of its satirical and antiauthoritarian tendencies, this fantasy in 'Scope and colour...describes what happens when a magic show featuring a cat with a pair of eyeglasses turns up in a fairy-tale town. When the eyeglasses are removed, people are obliged to show their 'true colors'—folks in love turn red, liars purple, thieves gray, betrayers yellow, and the local kids see through the duplicity of the adults for the first time. To complicate matters, the magic show and cat are described in advance by a salty local layabout (Jan Werich) who serves as a sort of narrative equivalent to the stage manager in *Our Town* and who entertains the schoolchildren with his tales while serving as their art-class model; when the magic show and cat arrive in the town, the magician is played by the same actor. Whimsical, likable, and inventive, if never wholly successful, this colorful cross between "The Pied Piper" and a radicalized *Bye Bye Birdie* (coincidentally released the same year) qualifies as one of the best early examples of the Czech New Wave; significantly, Ivan Passer worked on it as a second unit director. Also known as *That Cat...* and *One Day a Cat.*"