



RAPSODIA SATANICA

MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY
MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA

DIRECTED BY NINO OXILIA, ITALY, 1917

CAST Lyda Borelli, Andrea Habay, Ugo Bazzini, Giovanni Cini, and Alberto Nepoti PRODUCTION Cines

PRINT SOURCE Cineteca di Bologna

In his witty introduction to film historian Angela Dalle Vacche's seminal 2008 study *Diva: Defiance and Passion in Early Italian Cinema*, Canadian filmmaker Guy Maddin writes, "When on a shopping spree for anguish, rapture, martyrdom, comas, counts, rapes, bastards, orphans, dogaressas, philtres, sirens, suicides, mistaken identities, flower festivals, and sudden fatal loves—even a tattooed baby—one need look no further than the Italian Diva Film, a vast clearinghouse of art nouveau decors and nineteenth-century melodramatic devices still in wondrous working order." As Maddin's description makes clear, unlike today's contemporary meaning of "diva" as a glamorous but headstrong, sometimes difficult woman, the diva of Italian silent cinema was multifaceted and could even be heroic. Along with the melodrama, romance, and tragedy that characterized the plots, the films often tackled contemporary issues facing the increasingly independent women of the era.

The genre flourished in the 1910s. There are no tattooed babies in *Rapsodia Satanica*, a female version of the Faust legend, but there are flowers lavishly strewn, anguish and rapture, and of course, there is Mephisto, popping up bizarrely from a drawing-room table or lounging casually in the branches of a tree, offering to help an elderly crone regain youth and beauty in exchange for her soul.

The film features the leading Italian diva of the time, Lyda Borelli, a stage and screen star so famous and beloved that her name spawned new words in her native language, such as "borellismo" and "borellissimo," describing her acting style and her appeal,

and "borelleggiare," a verb meaning to imitate Borelli. In the 1917 edition of his *Dizionario Moderno*, film critic Antonio Panzini explains borellismo as "young women fussing and moping around, in the manner of the beautiful Lyda Borelli's aestheticizing poses." As the "Silents Please" website notes approvingly of Borelli's emoting, "characterized by poses and dancelike movements based on painterly figures, it is an acting style that is out of fashion now, but breathtaking, and much appreciated in her time." In spite of what comes across today as exaggerated gestures and facial expressions, Borelli's presence in *Rapsodia Satanica*, with her sharp, pointed features and elegant movements, is compelling and at times mesmerizing.

Lyda Borelli is descended from several generations of a theatrical family and made her stage debut at the age of fifteen. By 1905, she was already a successful stage actress, appearing in the works of distinguished writers such as Gabriele D'Annunzio and Victorien Sardou. After Eleonora Duse's retirement she became Italy's leading theatrical star as well as toured in Spain and South America. Borelli made her first film in 1913, *Ma l'Amore Mio Non Muore!* (*Love Everlasting*), which was directed by Mario Caserini and is considered to be the first diva film. Her final screen appearance was in 1918, after more than a dozen films, several of them based on her stage successes. Borelli retired from acting after her marriage to a wealthy nobleman, Count Vittorio Cini. Her husband reportedly bought all the copies of her films and destroyed them. Luckily, some escaped that fate, with about two-thirds of her films since found and restored, including her debut film.

EVERY BIT THE DIVA...

Befitting a star of Borelli's lofty status, the production values of her films were first-rate. According to Dalle Vacche, *Rapsodia Satanica* was shot and finished in 1914, but was not released until 1917. There were delays, likely because composer Pietro Mascagni (best known today for his 1890 opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*) "felt strongly that the music should rule over the image" and asked that changes be made to the film to accommodate his musical score. The film's original Italian-language intertitles, mysterious and occasionally lyrical, were created by poet Fausto Maria Martini. Also striking is the film's added color, both tinted and toned, as well as subtly and painstakingly stenciled throughout.

Every bit the diva in *Rapsodia Satanica*, Borelli acts with sweeping gestures, moving restlessly, constantly, and gracefully. Her performance was probably not meant to be realistic, but grand—always drawing the focus of attention to herself, even in moments of stillness. Much of Borelli's movement in *Rapsodia Satanica*, particularly her intensely theatrical full-body manipulation of a gauzy shawl, shows the influence of American dancer Loie Fuller who report-

edly choreographed the movement in the film. And it is not only Borelli's physicality that reflects Fuller's influence. Mephisto's menacing presence, with his billowing robes and dramatic arm movements, also recall Fuller's famous "serpentine dance" featuring swirling, twirling garments. Born in a Chicago suburb, Fuller began as a child actress and worked in vaudeville and burlesque, eventually choreographing and performing her own highly original dances. Tired of her work being considered a novelty, she moved to Europe in 1892, settling in Paris and hobnobbing with intellectuals, artists, and celebrities such as painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, scientist Marie Curie, and Queen Marie of Romania. Fellow American dancer Isadora Duncan considered Fuller an influence on her own work.

Rapsodia Satanica director Nino Oxilia was not only a filmmaker, but also a poet and songwriter. Born in Turin in 1889, Oxilia as a young man became involved in the anti-bourgeois "Scapigliatura" movement, the Italian equivalent of the French bohemians. He began his career as a journalist, wrote for the theater, and directed Italian diva Francesca Bertini in *Sangue Bleu* (1914). The following year, Oxilia wrote the scenario for *Il Fior di Male*, which starred Borelli. Oxilia was killed in 1917 at age twenty-eight while serving in World War I. Years after his death, Oxilia earned posthumous notoriety of a sort when one of his songs, "Giovinezza," with new lyrics, became the anthem for Benito Mussolini's Fascists.

The costumes and décor in *Rapsodia Satanica* are very much in the fashion of the era, but also over-the-top and attention-grabbing in true diva style, with nods to Orientalism. Even when Borelli is sitting quietly playing the piano or walking

in the orchard, she is always dressed sumptuously, swathed in yards of taffeta. When the plot calls for fancy dress, her costume is dripping with pearls and features elaborate headgear. Dalle Vacche describes one of Borelli's extravagant gowns as based on the couture creations of French designer Paul Poiret, and by the "lampshade look" created by Leon Bakst for the Russian ballet dancer Nijinsky. Her final diaphanous shroud is a beautiful rendering of Fortuny's pleated Delphos. The author adds that the film's plot "seems driven by the dresses used and the objects shown rather than by any significant action." While *Rapsodia Satanica*'s rife quotations from the artistic movements important in Italian and European culture at the time might not be readily understood by audiences today, the film's overall hugeness, from its melodramatic plot to the extravagant color palette, provides its own kind of enjoyment.

The era of the Italian diva film was relatively brief, from 1913 through the end of World War I, with a few additional films until about 1920. Perhaps the worldwide impact of the war, followed by cultural upheavals of the Roaring Twenties, rendered the passions, foibles, and obsessions of the diva era obsolete and even quaint. But the diva herself never really went away. And looking at a film like *Rapsodia Satanica* a century after its premiere, it's clear that, when it comes to love and sex, "the fundamental things apply," as the song goes. Passion and mortality, good and evil, all swirling around a willful, complicated woman never fails to fascinate.

— *Margarita Landazuri*



SHOW-STARTING COLOR

The black-and-white worlds of "old movies" are as familiar to us as the blue sky above, but since the very beginning movies have been shown in color. *Rapsodia Satanica* is a stunning example of "added color," with its tinting and toning as well as select stencil-applied accents. Early filmmakers also tinkered with "natural photography," reproducing the world as seen by the human eye. The first successful natural color system, Kinemacolor, used red and green filters in both photographing and projecting to produce as full a spectrum as was possible at the time. British producer Charles Urban backed the development of the process and, between 1908 and 1914, shot travelogues in color, most famously the two-hour *With Our King and Queen Through India* depicting the 1912 Delhi Durbar. When Urban films shot around the world first played in New York in 1909, *Moving Picture World* called them "of the greatest possible importance in connection with moving picture progress." In 1914, however, a lawsuit invalidated Urban's Kinemacolor patent and the process faded from the movies. Before the screening of *Rapsodia Satanica*, Cineteca di Bologna's Gian Luca Farinelli demonstrates recently restored Kinemacolor films and how color changes everything.

