



The Marriage Circle

By Scott Eyman

Author of *Ernst Lubitsch: Laughter in Paradise* (Johns Hopkins Press) and *Print the Legend: The Life and Times of John Ford* (Simon and Schuster)

The tone is set from the opening scene as Lubitsch effortlessly sets up the duality of one perfectly happy marriage contrasted with another couple in a perpetual state of grimly endured misalliance.

"The day starts late but gloriously in the home of Professor Josef Stock," announces a title. A desultory Adolphe Menjou gets dressed, only to discover that there are holes in his socks. Menjou reacts with what even then was his trademarked frozen *sang-froid*, a dead non-expression but without his customary lightness in the eyes and around the mouth.

Stock's wife, Mizzi, among other failings, is a slovenly housekeeper. Mizzi convinces herself that she's in love with Dr. Braun, the husband of an old friend. Braun loves his wife, but can't very well resist when a beautiful bit of baggage like Mizzi drops into his lap. Stock, nobody's fool, hires a detective to follow his wife and gather the incriminating evidence so he can get the divorce he prays for.

All the complications are rigorously worked out in the script by Paul Bern (and an uncredited Hans Kraly). A garden party sequence, when Mizzi lures Dr. Braun into a meeting, then tosses away her scarf in a burst of willfulness, carries the perceptible thrill of a forbidden affair. Lubitsch knew that in an atmosphere of hushed whispers and discretion, a kiss can carry nearly as much of an erotic charge as consummation.

Ernst Lubitsch's first American picture had been an unhappy experience. Throughout the shooting of *Rosita*, there were struggles with Mary Pickford, the film's producer and star, who had brought Lubitsch to America after his extremely successful career in Germany. The critics liked *Rosita*, and it even made money, but the production was deeply unpleasant for a director used to being in control.

Lubitsch was actively considering going back to Germany when he was approached by Harry Warner to come to work at the Warner Bros. studio on Sunset Boulevard. Warners offered Lubitsch \$60,000 per film, one third of the profits, plus final cut once story and budget were agreed to. Lubitsch offered Warners some desperately needed class for a studio heretofore subsisting on Rin-Tin-Tin.

Their first collaboration was *THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE*, a paradisiacal experience compared to *Rosita*, and something of a masterpiece.

The casting of Adolphe Menjou is an obvious nod to *A Woman of Paris*, which Lubitsch's friend Charlie Chaplin was completing as Lubitsch began shooting in September of 1923. Also deriving from the Chaplin picture is the reflexively continental setting, in this case, Vienna, although there is no particular attempt to convincingly replicate a European milieu. Indeed, Lubitsch derives much of the comic tension in the film from the contrast between Menjou's innate elegance and the comparative coarseness of Monte Blue and Marie Prevost.

The subject matter of *THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE* is only a slight extension of the marital comedies Lubitsch has been making in Germany years before. What is different is the pace.



Before, he had charged up his actors to maintain the energy level of farce. Here, he takes his time, holding reaction shots for several beats. The editing takes its cue from Menjou's cold stares.

THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE is full of scenes with a sense of unspoken formality, of a mutually antagonistic marital standoff that has been going on for years. The move/countermove rhythm slightly anticipates the slow, tit-for-tat rhythms of Laurel and Hardy, but instead of escalating toward physical destruction, Lubitsch freezes the emotional temperature at a quiet, unindicative irony. Unlike real people, these characters never lose their control, which is the essence of their absurdity, the soul of their wit.

The director knew how fine THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE was; he called it "my picture of no regrets...there is not a single change I would make if I had to do it again." The picture was both a critical and commercial success, grossing \$427,000 worldwide on costs of \$212,000. Before this film, the audience could only see Lubitsch characters move; with THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE, we begin to see them think. Before, there were large sets and hundreds of extras. Now, Lubitsch strips everything down to the essentials: a few actors, a car, a garden, a dining room, a staircase. Lubitsch's German films, even the fine ones, tend to be brass bands – compelling, funny, but unavoidably loud. With THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE, Lubitsch became the composer of the cinema's finest, most elegant chamber music.

Once, an aspiring filmmaker asked Ernst Lubitsch why he was personally directing a shot of a still under a theater marquee, the sort of shot that is invariably farmed out to assistant directors.

"Young man, let me explain something to you," said Lubitsch. "Every shot in a picture is the most important shot in a picture."

Even more than his wit, it is the special combination of Lubitsch's lovely, humane sensibility and unostentatious filmmaking precision that continues to thrill – deep charm leavening the power of the perfect placement of a camera, the perfect expression of an actor's face, the perfect inflection in the voice.

In an age where slob comedy has replaced gentle irony and machine-gun editing has replaced the cinematic equivalent of perfect pitch, Lubitsch might seem stodgy, but if people lack the vocabulary to appreciate the beauty of this particular rarified language, it's their loss. They'll never know the exhilaration of an impeccable artist.

Above all, other filmmakers know how hard it is to do what Lubitsch did. "I can't think of another director who was as good with actors," Roddy McDowell said. "In everything else she did, Miriam Hopkins makes you want to kill her, but in *Trouble in Paradise*, she's perfect. And *The Merry Widow* – Jeannette MacDonald – could be heavy-handed, but for Lubitsch she becomes the ravishing expression of operetta. The humor! The style!"

Likewise, Peter Bogdanovich, who notes that "Lubitsch...is the one director whom nearly every other director I ever interviewed mentioned with respect and awe as among the very best."

Lubitsch went on to create more masterpieces – *The Student Prince*, *Trouble in Paradise*, *The Merry Widow*, *The Shop Around the Corner*, *To Be Or Not To Be*, *Heaven Can Wait* – but THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE is his first fully successful film. To see it in this glistening



print from the original negative, with an privately lilting score by the Mont Alto Orchestra, is to fall in love with the cinema – and Ernst Lubitsch – all over again.

[Buy THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE on Manufactured-On-Demand \(MOD\) DVD.](#)

**From the Blackhawk Films® Collection
Presented by Flicker Alley**