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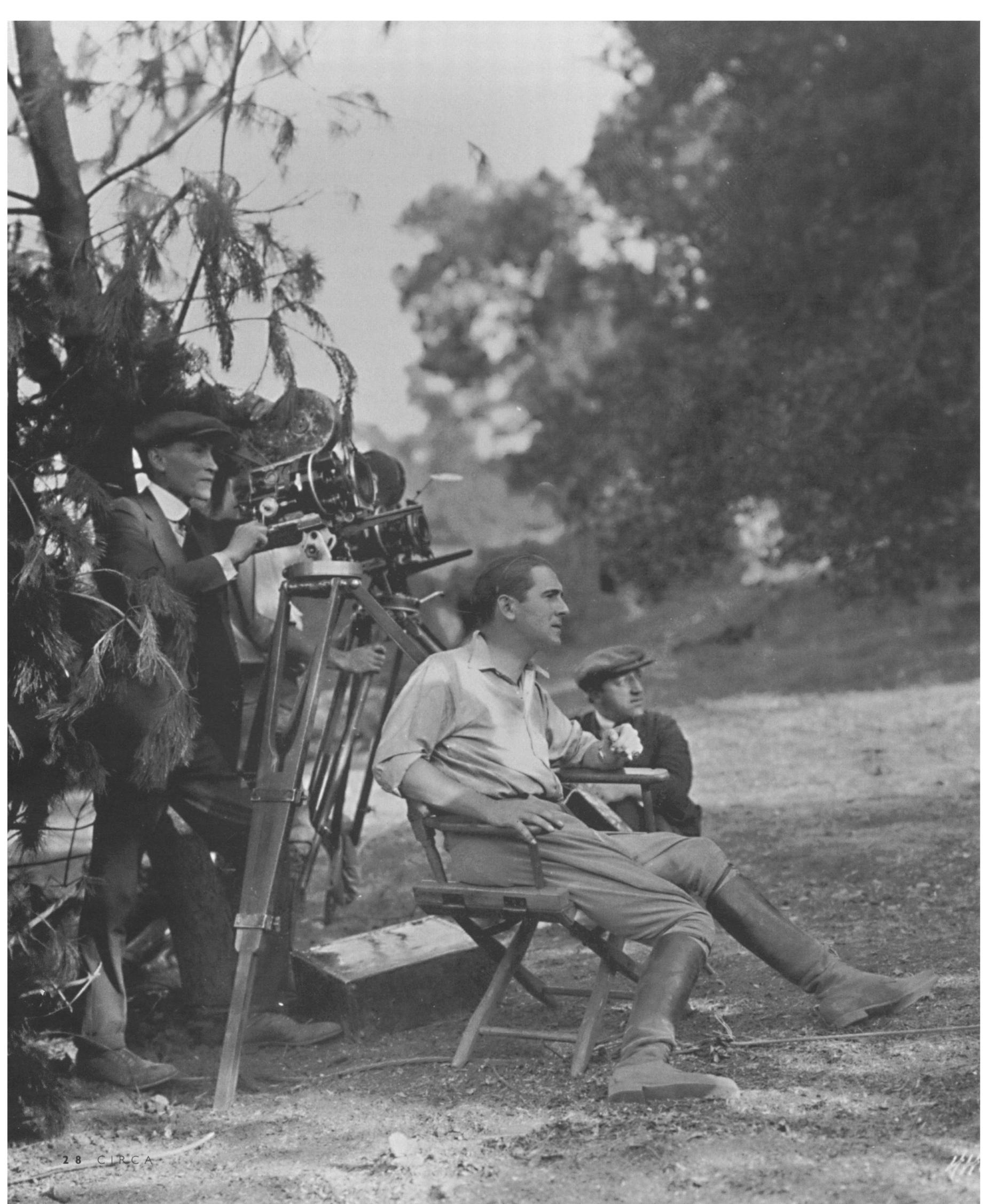
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## FILM



# Silent No More

**Rex Ingram was a major force in American cinema of the 1920s. Kevin Rockett re-assesses his importance for Irish film studies.**

To mark the centenary of the birth of Rex Ingram, the Irish-born filmmaker who was at one time Hollywood's highest paid director, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921) was screened at the National Concert Hall last September. Four more of Ingram's silent features were shown at the Irish Film Centre and the Pordenone Film Festival in Italy, the only film festival devoted exclusively to silent cinema, organised a retrospective of Ingram's work. These events allow us not only to explore some of Ingram's cinematic concerns, but to draw attention to an area of cinema history which has been little appreciated in Ireland until recently.

During the last twenty years in particular, a wide range of sophisticated film research and academic scholarship has focussed on the silent period. This work has, to a degree, united film archivists, 'traditional' film historians and theorists. The reason for this convergence and upsurge of interest are many and diverse, but one of the happy results has been a concerted move to establish silent cinema as a valid area of study as well as a desire to celebrate the silent cinema 'experience' as a major aesthetic event in its own right, thanks to newly struck copies of the films and specially commissioned orchestral accompaniment.

Film historian Kevin Brownlow and composer Carl Davis have been at the forefront of this development through their restoration work in the Thames Television's Silent Classics, and through television documentary series devoted to silent cinema. In Ire-

land, silent films including *Battleship Potemkin* (1926) and *New Babylon* (1929), have been presented with live orchestral accompaniment at the National Concert Hall during the past few years by the Irish Film Institute. The screening of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, organised by the Film Institute, was the first occasion on which the Brownlow/Davis team presented their work in Ireland. The rapturous reception accorded the event testifies to the popularity of the experience.

Popular interest in the silent cinema can be most clearly traced to Brownlow and David Gill's *Hollywood* television series first transmitted in 1980, with music by Carl Davis. The series showed clips together with directors, cameramen and actors recalling the early years of American cinema. The programmes can be readily criticised for anecdotal and ahistorical impressionism, and its concentration on great *auteurs* such as D.W. Griffith, who was the subject of a separate three-part series by the same team transmitted in 1993.

However, despite these qualifications, Brownlow and Gill's series have served as useful statements of the cultural and historical value of this neglected area of cinema. The simple technical feat of projecting silent cinema at the correct speed, rather than with the jerkiness we associate with, for example, the Charlie Chaplin films projected at 24-frames per second rather than the required speed (which approximates 18-frames per second), immediately establishes a sense of visual continuity with sound cinema. Those

who viewed Ingram's films in Dublin experienced as smooth a technical exercise as any in their local cinema.

Brownlow's work on the silent cinema was already well established by the time the *Hollywood* series was transmitted, especially due to his mammoth book of interviews with American silent cinema workers, *The Parade's Gone By...*, first published in 1968. But it was in fact the Irish film historian Liam O'Leary's *Silent Cinema*, published three years earlier, which was the first 'modern' book to celebrate the rich diversity of the silent cinema in English. And, it was O'Leary's biography of Rex Ingram, first published in 1980 [1], which drew attention to Ingram as a major force in the American cinema of the 1920s, a fact confirmed since then in Michael Powell's autobiography: Powell learned his trade under Ingram's supervision in France.

What O'Leary and Brownlow have in common is a historiography which is largely confined to a celebratory appreciation of cinema while often reducing the cinema and its history to the anecdotal, biographical and impressionistic recall by its practitioners. What they lack is a critical methodology. This missing dimension received its first major public expression at the International Federation of Film Archives' Conference at Brighton in 1978. There, and in its subsequent publication, *Cinema 1900-1906: an analytical study* (1982), and in many other fora and publications, silent cinema, especially the Early Cinema (the period before the establishment of Classical Narrative Cin-

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Top: a drawing by Rex Ingram for *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*

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Opposite: Rex Ingram and cameraman John Seitz

ema by about 1917), became of major interest to film scholars.

When we talk about the silent cinema, we are, therefore, exploring two quite different but complementary projects: Early Cinema, and also the establishment of Classical Narrative Cinema, the form of Hollywood cinema which had its apotheosis during the period from the 1930s to the 1950s. One of the main areas which has proved to be productive in the study of Early Cinema has been the close examination of the development of film form and narrative. One well known example, *La Sortie des usines Lumière* (1895) (Workers Leaving a Factory), made by the factory's owners, helps to illustrate the methodological break in approach to Early Cinema. Traditionally, film studies might have confined this single-shot film to a simple 'plotless' or 'documentary' record of workers leaving a factory after a day's work. But, Marshall Deutelbaum [2], for example, draws attention to its careful structure which begins with the gates of the factory closed, then opened as the workers leave and walk past the camera, and the gates then closing again, an action which also closes the film and the narrative. Traditionally, such a film has been described, deploying a simplistic opposition, as being at the origins of so-called documentary cinema, while Georges Méliès is cited as the origin of fiction or fantasy cinema. Now, both kinds of film are seen as parts of a more complex process: the elaboration of cinematic narrative.

Within a short time, these one-shot films were superseded by multi-shot films, with the consequent development of editing and the evolution of key genres, especially topicals or actualities, but also the chase film and the western. By the end of the first decade of 'cinema', its commercial institutional patterns were also becoming more clearly identifiable.

It has been one of the strengths of the scholarship of Early Cinema that it has not confined itself to the development of film form or to close textual readings of films. Instead, it has looked at the whole range of discourses which surround and help define the cinema as an aesthetic-industrial institution. This scholarship has paid particular attention, of course, to the industrial and eco-



nomie discourses informing 'production', but has also been concerned with the discourses of 'consumption', that is to say, what the audience was making of all this. The inter-relationships between the development of film form, technology, industry and audiences have become key elements in the study of cinema. Indeed, with only about 20 per cent of the films of the silent period surviving, it is a pragmatic as well as a necessary amendment to those versions of film history which confine themselves to chronicles of matters industrial or to textual analysis of a small group of 'key' or 'classic' films. As Douglas Gomery and Robert C. Allen declared [3] in a famous phrase, "for certain investigations, film viewing is really an inappropriate research method".

This statement helpfully draws attention away from the often over-determined film textual readings to the exclusion of the broader contexts of industrial production, distribution and exhibition practices. Examination of cinema in Ireland before 1914 illustrates the usefulness of this approach.

Unlike the metropolitan centres of film production in Europe and the USA, Ireland had no indigenous fiction film production during the first two decades of cinema. In Ireland, the consequence for film studies of the late development of indigenous fiction film production allows for a broader approach to questions of film narrative and a more direct focus on exhibition and distribution practices. Here we can trace often important differences from the institutional patterns which predominated in the metropolitan centres. For example, and to simplify a complex set of industrial, demographic and social class data, cinema exhibition in Britain and in the USA started out as being of primary interest to the working class, and to immigrants in the case of the USA. Soon, however, the need for large-scale capital investment in production necessitated the mobilisation of a middle class audience and the consequent re-organisation of exhibition via Picture Palaces to attract people who could

pay higher ticket prices. As a consequence, new production and exhibition patterns evolved both along social class lines and in the content of films themselves.

In Ireland, however, the pattern was different. With the exception of occasional local interest actuality items, and, from 1910 onwards, some fiction films by foreigners, all films shown were imported. With a severely depressed local economy in Dublin during the early 1900s, it was primarily the middle class which could afford to attend the cinema. As a result, news, travel and some comedy items were shown in programmes which were accompanied by operatic and other high art musical interludes. That the advertisements for such programmes at the Rotunda, the main Dublin 'cinema' venue during this decade, announced the availability of carriages to take the patrons home after the show, confirms that during the 1900s, film viewing in Dublin was both socially and ideologically geared to the middle class.

This pattern was broken by James Joyce when he opened the Volta Cinema in December 1909. Choosing to screen an Italian film telling a story of patricide, *The Tragic Story of Beatrice Cenci* (1909), he was rebuked by the *Freeman's Journal* for showing such a film only five days before Christmas. While Joyce did not remain long as manager of the Volta, it is the first known public qualification of a film being shown in Dublin. Within a year, others, including the Archbishop of Dublin, were calling for restrictions on the films being shown, while the whole spectrum of Catholic and nationalist political, cultural and sporting groups could find themselves in comfortable alliance by 1913 calling for film censors to be established by Dublin Corporation.

What had changed, of course, during the four years before World War One, was that there had been a huge expansion in cinemas in Dublin. In 1914 Dublin Corporation issued 25 cinema licenses. This transformation in commercial entertainment brought cheaper-priced local cinemas to working class areas, while the content of American and European films were increasingly at variance with the conservative Christian morality which remained prevalent in a predominantly rural Ireland. Indeed, the American film, *Neptune's Daughter* (1914), direct-



**Ingram retained all the attributes of the professional Irishman abroad - including celebrating St. Patrick's Day and playing Irish tunes on this film sets**

a cloaked and hooded skeleton symbolising death offers a revolver to a man ploughing a field. While the evidence suggests that Ingram had a relatively happy childhood in Ireland, he was obviously not enamoured of the country's politics, a view shared by his father, who, like many other Protestants, left Ireland for Britain, in his case in 1924. The drawing constitutes one of Ingram's few comments on Ireland, a country he left in 1911, at the age of 18.

Liam O'Leary prefaced his biography of Ingram with a series of quotations, one of which cites James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, describing Ingram simply as 'pageant master'. Another quotation is from Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, beginning: "I am too proud to be a parasite". Ironically, as someone who

left Ireland never to return, it could be said that Ingram, while not directly drawing on Ireland for his films, did parasitically draw on many other cultures for his films. He was, of course, not unique in doing so. But, while retaining all the attributes of the professional Irishman abroad, including celebrating St. Patrick's Day and playing Irish tunes on his film sets, Ingram's ignoring of Ireland as subject matter for his films while exploring the exoticism and mystique of non-western cultures, may not seem so surprising when you consider the effect of the traumatic events of both World War One and of the Irish War of Independence on someone of his generation and background.

By the time *Four Horsemen* was released, Ingram was already an established film director, though this epic was to make him an internationally famous director. In the tradition of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Four Horsemen* employed 12,000 people, including 14 cameramen, while five million feet of film were shot for the one million dollar production. *Four Horsemen* traces the fortunes of two branches of a family who, following the death of the grandfather/patriarch, return to Europe from Ar-

One of the elaborate sets built for *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*

ed by Irish-born Herbert Brenon, was probably the first film disrupted by a group of religious zealots as part of their campaign against the cinema. A scantily-clad and occasionally nude Annette Kellerman plays the title role in the film whose notoriety preceded it to Ireland. It wasn't long before the censorship campaigners achieved their goal of having film censors appointed by Dublin Corporation. Appropriately, perhaps, this occurred within six months of the 1916 Rising and serves as a useful reminder that the decade preceding independence laid the groundwork for the cultural protectionism that was such a significant feature of the policies of the Irish state from 1922 until the mid-1960s.

Like his fellow countryman Herbert Brenon in the 1910s, Rex Ingram was also to face the wrath of the changing and increasingly insular social and cultural climate of the 1920s. In January 1923, when *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* was released in Dublin, "a savage attack by a narrow-minded sectarian press did not lessen its popularity" [4]. In his own way, Ingram returned the compliment with a drawing of his vision of the then raging Irish Civil War. In the drawing,



Left: Ingram in *The Spirit and the Clay Vitagraph* 1914.

Right: Ingram at work on a sculpture, in Hollywood, 1940s



gentina, one going to Germany, the other to France, just before World War One. The patriarch's son is represented as a libertine, a trait passed on to his son, Julio (Rudolph Valentino). Working as an artist in France, Julio draws the married Marguerite (Alice Terry) into an affair, which leads to her abandoning her husband. It is only when her guilt-ridden conscience is stirred by her husband who returns blind from the battlefield that she is torn between love and duty. However, her love for Julio draws her back to him again, but in the tradition of many Ingram films, the young lovers do not live happily ever after. Julio dies on the battlefield and Marguerite commits herself to her husband's welfare. Before his death, Julio, while fighting for France, encounters his German cousin on the battlefield, an anti-war theme which the film endorses.

The theme of war or national duty interfering with family or romance recurs in Ingram's films. In *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1920), for example, Rassendyll, who impersonates the imprisoned king, falls in love with Princess Flavia, but they sacrifice their love as her national duty is to marry the real king, even though she does not love him. In *Mare Nostrum* (1926), a World War One story, the married ship-owner Ulysses Ferragut falls in love with a German spy, Freya, the consequences of which are that Ulysses' son is killed, his marriage is ended, Freya is executed, and Ulysses himself dies at sea. The intervention of war is once again seen as responsible for the destruction of the family, as Ulysses' greed leads him away from home and into a fatal attraction. Bizarrely, *The Magician* (1926), where a demonic Alastair Crowley-type character who has used his mystical powers to enthrall a young woman, is one of the few Ingram films where the real lovers are successfully reunited.

Ingram's interest in the exotic and in mysticism recurs in his films. *The Magician*

### Ingram was rash enough to state that European production would account for half world output within a few years

and *Four Horsemen* as well as in many earlier films which are now lost, contain many such elements. In *Four Horsemen*, the riders of the title represent Conquest, War, Famine and Death, but it is the Mystic who signals their presence. Ingram's displacement of the horrors of war onto a mystical plane, is also evident in *Mare Nostrum*, where the young lovers are reunited in death beneath the sea. Another aspect of Ingram's career was his interest in North Africa, where he made three films, including his only sound feature, *Baroud* (1932). Indeed, some evidence suggests that having abandoned his Protestant upbringing he converted to Islam while in Morocco. In *The Garden of Allah* (1927), Christian self-sacrifice is displaced to North Africa. A Trappist monk who leaves his monastery meets a young woman, Dominie, and marries her, without revealing his past. Overcome by guilt, and pledging to return to the monastery if they are rescued from a storm, Dominie is consoled by her new-found faith and the child she is bearing, as the monk returns to his celibate existence. While the young lovers in *Baroud* overcome sectarianism and war in a Moroccan setting, they, too, are separated in the end.

Ingram was apparently less concerned with the material conditions of war and power, rather than more abstract notions of duty and sacrifice, and one film which is set at a time of revolutionary change, *Scaramouche* (1923), betrays Ingram's limited ideological and historical sense. Set in the period of the French Revolution, the film's apparent sympathy with the revolutionary

masses is quickly dissolved. Leadership roles are first of all taken by a young cleric, hardly an institution leading revolutionary change at this time, while the cleric's friend, André, who takes up the cause, and is elected a member of the National Assembly by the democratic masses, turns out to be the illegitimate son of a degenerate and blood-thirsty aristocrat. This relationship of father and son could readily benefit from an oedipal reading, not least through an examination of their regular swordplay. André leaves Paris with his aristocratic mother and girlfriend with the blessing of the revolutionary mob whom he calms. As at the beginning of the film, set as it is in a pastoral village, so, too at the end, as the trio leave the new 'Terror' behind to return to pastoral bliss. Though the film ends with a sympathetic representation of the revolutionary masses, by then their mob-like behaviour has clearly signalled their unsuitability for power. Lying in the wings, observing the revolutionary mob, is Napoleon Bonaparte, the man who would not only reverse many of the gains of the Revolution, but would embark on a destructive imperialist conquest of much of Europe and beyond. For Ingram it is the retreat to the pastoral idyll, abandoning the city, which becomes his ideal.

By the time *Scaramouche* was being made, Ingram himself was planning his own form of retreat from the ironically titled City of Angels. Despite the commercial success of his films, and his apparent integration within the Hollywood studio system, he was far from happy with its work environment. Even at the level of his films' narrative closures, and interestingly he has this in common with Herbert Brenon, his films did not, in general, provide the narrative resolutions perhaps being demanded by the studios. However, after the critical and commercial success of *Scaramouche*, which does have a conventional ending, Ingram was given grudging permission by Metro to make *The*



Ingram instructs Rudolph Valentino for his role as an artist in *Four Horsemen*

*Arab* in Tunisia, with interiors filmed in Paris. While he was away in Europe, Metro became Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, a development which was designed to propel Ingram further away from Hollywood. Because he so loathed the autocratic Louis B. Mayer, Ingram had written into his contract that his films would be known only as Metro-Goldwyn productions.

While in France, Ingram examined the possibility of working at the Victorine Film Studios at Nice. On his return to the country the following year he used the Victorine, on which MGM had by then taken an option to buy, as his base for *Mare Nostrum*. When MGM decided it did not want to purchase the studios, the option passed to Ingram, who paid \$5 millions for them and rented them back to MGM for *The Magician* which was also made there. Ingram's next film, *The Garden of Allah*, was his last production for MGM, which did not renew his contract when he refused to return to Hollywood. In reply to criticism of his decision to remain in Europe, Ingram argued that film production costs were lower in Europe than in Hollywood. He was also rash enough to state that European production would account for half world output within a few years, a view which was both unrealistic and which did not endear him to Hollywood. Despite the continuing use of the Victorine studios, they were not a financial success, and Ingram lost control of them by 1930. By then, his long time collaborators, such as cameraman John Seitz, had drifted back to Hollywood. At the same time, In-

gram's wife, Alice Terry, who played the lead in his greatest triumphs, decided to retire from screen acting. Another factor in Ingram's retreat from the cinema was the imminent arrival of synchronous sound films. Unlike Herbert Brenon, who tried to work with the new technology despite his antipathy to it, Ingram, as already noted, made only one sound film, *Baroud*.

Ingram's search for cinematic independence in the 1920s was no less quixotic than that of the policy makers in his native country three decades later, who also tried to challenge American cinema with their own version of Cervantes' lance, Ardmore Studios. By the 1920s, the American cinema was already so dominant that it has largely remained unchallenged since then. Ironically, it was European film workers, in particular those from Germany, who profoundly influenced American cinema during the following decades and who helped refine and revitalise its classical style. Ingram continued to hope that he could be part of that process, but his attempts to realise film projects during the 1930s and 1940s all proved unsuccessful. Until his death in 1950 his artistic life was confined to the visual arts and to writing.

Ingram's interest in European-based productions was not just a quirky search for independence, but was probably a reflection of the different set of artistic resonances he favoured. One of Ingram's first acts on his arrival in the USA was to enroll at Yale to study sculpture. He was an accomplished, if immature artist before leaving Ireland, and

his interest in the visual arts was to continue throughout his life. Indeed, he even played the role of an artist in his early career as a film actor, such as in *The Spirit and the Clay* (1914), and a number of characters in his films, including Julio in *Four Horsemen* are artists. One of the surviving photographs of Ingram shows him making a bust of one of his ancestors, while the sketches for his films are of interest in themselves because of the high standard of his drawing. It is, perhaps, not surprising therefore, that Ingram would wish to resonate to a European rather than American artistic sensibility, while also trying to blend it with the century's most innovative popular culture, the cinema.

[1] Liam O'Leary, *Rex Ingram: master of the silent cinema*, Dublin: The Academy Press, 1980, p.82. Re-issued (1993) by the Portenone Film Festival in conjunction with the British Film Institute.

[2] Marshall Deutelbaum, "Structural Patterning in Lumière Films", *Wide Angle* Vol. 3, No. 1, 1979. Reprinted in John L. Fell (ed.) *Film Before Griffith* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

[3] Quoted in the excellent collection by Thomas Elsaesser, (ed.) *Early Cinema: space, frame, narrative*, London: British Film Institute, 1990, p.3.

[4] O'Leary, *Rex Ingram: master of the silent cinema*, 1980, p.82.

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