

ENDINGS...

THE CROWD



For the finale, King Vidor sent in the clowns to complete his protagonist's humiliation, and to dissolve it in laughter

By Pamela Hutchinson

The Crowd (1928) may have been King Vidor's most personal film. As late as 1980, he told an interviewer that this relatively early work, a project he returned to with proposed remakes and updates, was "very definitely of myself". Yet the direction of *The Crowd*, which evolved from Vidor's own short story, was not always assured. Vidor was still amending and improvising while on location, which led to MGM production head Irving Thalberg receiving fretful telegrams: "VIDOR UNCERTAIN WHAT TO SHOOT STOP CANNOT GET DEFINITE DECISION FROM HIM..."

As to the ending, there were several. Vidor and MGM havered over seven drafted conclusions, shot at least three and in the event offered a choice of two – one happy, one unhappy – to exhibitors. There was only one request for the former, in which the downtrodden hero has become rich, and celebrates Christmas with his once hostile, now proud in-laws. The unhappy ending proved more popular, but rather than merely downbeat, it is almost obscenely disconcerting: folding tears of grief and estrangement into silent laughter, as the troubles of the Sims family are not swept away but only drowned out by the noise of the crowd.

John Sims, a young American dreamer, was born on the fourth of July to a quaintly optimistic father: "There's a little man the world is going

to hear from." Any American-born child can grow up to be president, after all. John (played by former extra James Murray) grows up, and doesn't become president. He moves to New York and gets a boring job, a miserable wife (Eleanor Boardman, wife of Vidor) and vicious in-laws. The couple have two children, but when the younger dies in a terrible accident, John soon loses his job and his marriage collapses. He's alone, and reduced to a humiliating job as a juggling street clown, carrying a sandwich board on the Manhattan streets.

But John still has one card in his hand – tickets to a vaudeville show, and even though she's about to walk out the door, his wife can see it would be a shame to waste them. So the film ends with John, his wife, their son and his best friend guffawing at clowns taking a kicking, as the camera travels past them to show that they're surrounded by fools just like them, yucking it up over other people's suffering. Surrounded by reminders of his own mortification, John continues to chortle. The clowns on stage reflect his demeaning job, one he once ridiculed: "The poor sap! And I bet his father thought he would be president!" In the programme, there's his terrible advertising slogan – his pathetic attempt to strike it rich, which was followed swiftly by the death of his daughter in the city's relentless traffic. And next to the slogan, a pitiable sap of a juggling clown.

MGM offered a choice of endings – one happy, one unhappy – to exhibitors. There was only one request for the former

The camera movement recalls another swoop in the film, designed to make people smaller and the city bigger – the slow track up a seemingly summitless skyscraper, and then through a window to fly over a grid of identical desks, manned by identical clerks, one of them John. Billy Wilder famously appropriated the second half of this shot for *The Apartment* (1960). In *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), another film inspired by *The Crowd*, Vittorio De Sica achieves a similar feeling of vertigo tracking up a pawnbroker's shelves of linen.

In the final scene, though, the camera pulls back and down, an unsettling movement. John no longer reaches upward either. He is 'one of the mob' (the film's working title) that surrounds him, and the mob that faces him, our mob, in the cinema. Once, John wanted to beat the crowd, and now he joins them. An earlier intertitle has cautioned (although Vidor disowned authorship of the line), "The crowd laughs with you always... but it will cry with you only for a day": humour will bring you more friends than sorrow. In between giggles, even his wife seems to forgive him. John unconsciously accepts that his struggle is over, and now his dreams are humbler, but easier to win – he just wants to be like everybody else.

We've spent an hour or so absorbing John's personal drama only to forget him – after all, everyone in the audience has their own worries. Even if we don't feel bad about dismissing John's sad history from our mind, this cruel ending recalls our callousness, back at the beginning of the picture. We laughed when his father said he would be president, but look who's laughing now. ☹