



A mocking
femme fatale:
Dietrich in
Blonde Venus

Josef von Sternberg
Through October 8
Museum of the Moving Image

Photofest/Museum of the Moving Image

The Great Escapes

Erotic obsession and cold, cruel truths about unrequited love

BY GRAHAM FULLER

Like its summer season of Frank Borzage films, the Moving Image's current retrospective celebrates the work of an auteur who responded to the social upheavals of the 1930s with spectacles of

escapist delirium. But whereas Borzage contended that all we need is love, Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969) scorned such bromides. Cinema's Great Artificer built a world in seven Marlene Dietrich movies that reflected the bitter knowledge that love pined for is more exquisite than love requited—and that the torch of eroticism always outlasts the cigarette glow of romance.

He literalized this metaphor during the fantastical, wordless wedding sequence in *The Scarlet Empress* (showing September 30 and October 1). As the young Princess Sophia (Dietrich)—the future Catherine the Great—waits to be married to the Harpo Marx-ish Grand Duke Peter (Sam Jaffe), Sternberg presents a screen-filling close-up of her face behind her wedding veil. As her eyes fill with tears of desire for the

saturnine Count Alexei (John Lodge), who is seldom filmed without a phallic prop, a candle flame flickers in front of her face, refusing to go out. As if to emphasize the point, Sternberg moves in closer. A political animal, she takes his comrades to bed, never him—that Lodge is the studliest of the admirers in thrall to the Dietrich image makes him, ironically, an even more potent masochist than the Sternberg manqués in *Morocco* (September 23 and 24) and *The Devil Is a Woman* (October 6 and 8).

Sternberg was a vital force before the epochal casting of Dietrich in *The Blue Angel*. Among his silents, *The Salvation Hunters* (September 16), *The Docks of New York* (September 17), and *Thunderbolt* were formative social-realist works; *Underworld* (September 16) helped instigate

the gangster genre; and *The Last Command* (September 17) was the first baleful satire of Hollywood. The Berlin-filmed *Blue Angel* may or may not have been intended as an attack on German bourgeois values, but it afforded the first incarnation of Dietrich as a mocking femme fatale—a Félicien Rops masturbation fantasy come to life—whose antisocial resonance would be perpetuated through 1940s noir.

The six quasi-surrealistic studies in exotica Sternberg then made on Paramount stages neglected narrative in favor of the light and shadow he cast on Dietrich's frequently veiled or masked face and her fetishistically costumed body. His teeming, hyper-stylized re-creations of North Africa, Vienna (*Dishonored*, September 23), Shanghai, Russia, and Spain provided a backdrop for his rueful meditation on Dietrich's unobtainability—presumably the dominant theme of his own life at the

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time. In parceling out concupiscence, Sternberg was nothing if not democratic—the love objects in *Morocco* and *Macao* (October 8) are, respectively, Gary Cooper and Robert Mitchum.

Sternberg was eventually fired from Paramount after an eight-year tenure, apparently too proud to admit that the crowd scenes in *Scarlet Empress* came from a silent picture by his boss, Ernst Lubitsch. His British *I, Claudius* was notoriously abandoned in mid-production and the last decades of Sternberg's career were as unfulfilling as those of Orson Welles and Michael Powell. Though unredeemed by the stoic nobility of the protagonists in the Dietrich films, the ultra-decadent *Shanghai Gesture* (October 7) is worth the wallow, while Sternberg's self-narrated, rarely shown swan song, *The Saga of Anatahan* (September 22 through 24), is remarkable in its plasticity.

Why see these antiques? Partly because it's delicious to drink in their pageantry and feel Sternberg's cold, cruel truths about love emerge from the abstraction. Partly because it's impossible now to imagine such an arrogant, disdainful aesthete posing an alternative to modern Hollywood cinema (though Wong Kar-wai is one of his grandchildren). As Dietrich allegedly said after the partnership ended, "Where are you, Jo?"

Confetti
Directed by Debbie Isitt
Fox Searchlight, opens September 15

Madly Ever After

Three weddings and a reality TV show

BY ELLA TAYLOR

Despite its title, *Confetti*, a chaotic mockumentary in the finest tradition of English vulgarity, has nothing whatever to say about marriage. It's a loud belch in the face of a billion-dollar wedding industry that has sprung up to service the longings of the post-feminist young for ceremonial opulence. Broad as a beam and blithely treading on every politically correct toe in sight, *Confetti* is too tied to situation comedy to function as satire. Which works to its advantage,

for the movie manages to slag off beautifully on the honchos of reality television without patronizing either the form or the fame-and-fortune-hungry multitudes who queue up for their 15 minutes.

The movie's fertile subject is themed marriage ceremonies, and the conceit is a contest, carelessly hatched over a liquid lunch by the publishers of a glossy wedding magazine, between three engaged couples to come up with the best gimmick for their nuptial hours, with the winner scoring a million-dollar mansion in which to embark on their connubial bliss. A couple of giddy wedding planners (played in a key of buoyant pufferism by Vincent Franklin and Jason Watkins) will help them realize their dreams of getting spliced, respectively, while playing tennis, while stark naked, and while dancing a Busby Berkeley spectacular. That all three couples are utterly useless in their chosen fields of performance goes without saying. But as preparations for the compe-

tition videos get under way, the couples' lack of talent or finesse pales before the aggravations of meddlesome friends and family, prominent among them a terrific Alison Steadman, former wife and collaborator of Mike Leigh, as an interfering mum with a basilisk stare guaranteed to freeze the balls off the hapless planners.

Indeed, *Confetti*, cobbled together by a pack of ad-libbing British comedians, plays like an anarchic parody of Mike Leigh's increasingly ossified and earnest method of workshoping and improvisation. In lesser hands, this could rapidly decline into summer-camp burlesque—as it's sort of meant to—but director Debbie Isitt, whose outlook on life will be immediately apparent from the name of her company, Wasted Talent Productions, handily exploits the radical promise of live reality programming to subvert the aims of its managers by running exuberantly out of control. The rollicking and ineffably sweet final wed-

ding sequences offer a rambunctious poke in the eye of television's mania for tight control, its congenital antipathy to dead space or spontaneity. Isitt herself seems to have almost limitless tolerance for the unscripted—her large professional ensemble is sprinkled with real-life figures, including a Spanish tennis coach named "Hey-Soos," who was brought in to coach the actors and stayed to mediate their characters' endless bickering.

As always the ever-so-humble come out tops, yet *Confetti* comes not to emulate, but to rescue us from the seemingly endless stream of cookie-cutter British comedies—the lazy-minded spawn of *The Full Monty*—about workers moving on up through soccer, song and dance, or flashing their tits for a good cause. And if nothing else, this affectionately off-the-wall confection offers exuberant confirmation of every suspicion you might ever have had that the English are charmingly eccentric. They're barking mad.