

Trouble in Paradise

The legendary Ernst Lubitsch created, as did few other Hollywood directors, his own category, “The Lubitsch Touch.” Most commentators felt this “touch” meant essentially camouflaging lively sexual and erotic content with sophisticated and suggestive actions and lines. One critic had a more detailed take: The touch was a “...swift innuendo or rapier-like comment accomplished pictorially by a brief camera shot or telling action, to convey an idea or suggestion in a manner impossible in words.” Another writer said Lubitsch “transformed melodramatic and sentimental tripe into credible human stuff.” He was said to have “invented the modern Hollywood.”

Ernst Lubitsch was born in 1892 in Berlin, son of a Jewish tailor and clothier. He didn't thrive as an accountant in the father's business and was drawn to the theater. Though small, clumsy, and homely, he was able to make it as a comic actor. He eventually worked his way into films, directing his first movie at 22.

He had numerous successes, particularly romantic historical epics. These soon captured the attention of Hollywood, and he moved there to make his first film *Rosita* (1923) as a vehicle for Mary Pickford. It was soon after that that the director moved from romantic subjects to his signature ironic style, to satire and mockery, especially of people in love. He thrived in the Twenties, was a director admired as second only to D.W. Griffith, and, although he had some qualms about moving to talkies, he took to them readily. With sound, he could match his fluid camera and smart cutting to the brilliant dialogue of his writers, Samson Raphaelson in this picture. He probably achieved his apogee with *Trouble in Paradise* in 1932, a masterpiece of comic cinema.

Lubitsch went on to make other great features—*Desire*, *Ninotchka*, *The Shop Around the Corner*, *To Be Or Not To Be*—but *Trouble* was probably the high point of his career and was his personal favorite among his films.

In *Trouble*, smooth European jewel thief Gaston meets his soul mate Lily, a pickpocket pretending to be a countess. The two join forces and trick their way into the employ of Mme. Colet, the rich owner of a perfume company and their potential mark. Gaston, as a Monsieur La Valle, becomes Mme. Colet's personal secretary. Rumors fly as 'M. La Valle' steals Mme. Colet away from her other suitors, while Lily harbors jealous thoughts. Then Gaston's ruse is threatened, and he remains caught between the two beauties.

The stars of the film were bright lights of the early sound era but have been somewhat forgotten in the decades since. Herbert Marshall (Gaston) was a Londoner, popular as a theater actor on both sides of the Atlantic for a decade before settling down in Hollywood in 1932, the year of this film. He moved from suave leading man to character parts over his career, which lasted until he died at 76 in 1966. That career included other memorable roles, like those opposite Bette Davis in *The Letter* and *The Little Foxes* in the early Forties.

Miriam Hopkins, the seductive blonde Lily of the picture, moved from the Broadway stage to Paramount in 1930 and was an immediate success. She made other films with Lubitsch and had her most noteworthy appearance in the title role of *Becky Sharp* (based on the Vanity Fair novel) in 1935. Her star wage had faded by the early Forties, though her career continued in character roles in films and on television dramas until her death at 70.



Kay Francis who plays Mme. Coletthe, the smooth brunette of the piece, had a career that paralleled Hopkins. Hitting Hollywood from Broadway in 1929, she too quickly became a stylish star with Paramount in both romantic and dramatic roles. She later moved to Warner Brothers, as did Hopkins, but by the later 1930's she lost ground to the studio's rising star Bette Davis. Like Miriam Hopkins, her film career ended in the early 1940's, and like Hopkins, she was married four times. She retired from acting in 1952.

They may not be well-remembered names now, but thank heavens we have the medium of film and video to reappraise these three very cool customers (shown in photo above, Francis, Hopkins, and Marshall) at their peak in *Trouble in Paradise*.

(This film is not rated, but it contains adult dialogue. It runs 83 minutes.)