

RECOVERED TREASURES: GREAT FILMS FROM WORLD ARCHIVES

January 15–February 20, 2011

THE SALVATION HUNTERS

Saturday, January 29, 7:15.m.

1925, 65 mins. Released by United Artists.

Live music by Donald Sosin

Restored 35mm print from UCLA Film and Television Archive

Written, directed, produced, and edited by Josef von Sternberg. Photographed by Edward Gheiler. Principal cast: George K. Arthur (as The Boy), Georgia Hale (The Girl), Bruce Guerin (The Child), Otto Matieson (The Man), Nellie Bly Baker (The Woman), Olaf Hytten (The Brute), Stuart Holmes (The Gentleman).

By Jan-Christopher Horak, UCLA Film and Television Archive:

Sternberg's first film, shot for less than \$4,800 on location in San Pedro, L.A.'s Chinatown, and the San Fernando Valley, was possibly Hollywood's first 'independent' feature. The gritty realism of its locations, the utter lack of artifice in its story, and the lower depths embodied by its three principal characters shocked audiences and the Hollywood film community alike. Seen today, the film remains thoroughly modern, not because of its realism, but because Sternberg's characters hide so much of themselves as they create an ad hoc family more out of circumstance than choice. *The Salvation Hunters* made a star not only of its director, but also of Georgia Hale, who would play opposite Chaplin in *The Gold Rush*, and

George K. Arthur, who teamed up with Karl Dane at MGM in a successful series of comedies.

From *The Films of Josef von Sternberg* by Andrew Sarris (Museum of Modern Art, 1966):

The Salvation Hunters is not only the first film to bear Josef von Sternberg's name as a director, it is also his most explicitly personal work until the emotional recapitulation of *Anatahan* closed his career nearly thirty years later...Most film historians, particularly those in the English-speaking world, have discussed *The Salvation Hunters* as a depressing descent to the lower depths in the manner of Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*. The fact that Sternberg's film ran for less than a week in New York and did unspectacular business elsewhere in the country only enhanced its reputation for

revealing the director's initial impulse toward unglamorous realism. Assuming Sternberg's later career had not been noteworthy, *The Salvation Hunters* would probably be remembered...as an isolated island of integrity in a sea of Hollywood compromise.

What has always seemed oblique and obscure in Sternberg's art as compared with that of his contemporaries is the director's reluctance to reveal everything about his characters. On the purely visual level, this reluctance is expressed through veils and filters. On the dramatic plane, Sternberg has generally avoided the kind of direct confrontations in which characters spell out all their motivations. Consequently, there is usually more to Sternberg's characters than meets the eye...the characters in *The Salvation Hunters* now seem far less socially abysmal than asocially absurd in the parlance of Beckett's Theater of the Absurd. And why? Simply because Sternberg has always been interested less in men and their societies than in men and women, or more precisely, in man's confrontation of the myths of womanhood.

From *World Film Directors*, Vol. 1, edited by John Wakeman (H.W. Wilson, 1987):

Sternberg, for his part, was attracted by the idea of directing a film without interference and with no restrictions apart from those imposed by the miniscule budget. *The*

Salvation Hunters was filmed in three-and-a-half weeks and cost \$4,900. The story concerned three young derelicts (expressionistically designated *The Boy*, *The Girl*, and *The Child*) living on a huge dredge in San Pedro harbor, the vicissitudes they undergo, and their eventual—and somewhat unconvincing—triumph over their muddy circumstances.

...Certainly the acting in *The Salvation Hunters* was, by the standards of the day, unusually restrained—Sternberg's legendary control over his actors seems to have been exercised from the very start—and the squalid locations were effectively exploited. Already the director's preoccupation with pictorial composition—especially the play of light and shadow—and his relative indifference to story line were clearly in evidence.

...The premiere of *The Salvation Hunters*, in a small theatre on Sunset Boulevard, was a disaster. "The members of the cast were in the audience, which greeted my work with laughter and jeers and finally rioted. Many walked out, and so did I." However, [actor] George K. Arthur had contrived to show the film privately to Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks, both of whom responded with enthusiasm... United Artists bought the picture for release, and Sternberg, now suddenly famous, was invited by Mary Pickford to direct her next film, to a scenario of his own choosing.

Museum of the Moving Image is grateful for the generous support of numerous corporations, foundations, and individuals. The Museum is housed in a building owned by the City of New York and received significant support from the following public agencies: the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs; New York City Economic Development Corporation; New York State Council on the Arts; Institute of Museum and Library Services; National Endowment for the Humanities; National Endowment for the Arts; Natural Heritage Trust (administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation).

Copyright © 2011, Museum of the Moving Image