KINONIK

QUEEN KELLY (1929)

Directed by Erich von Stroheim

SATURDAY MATINEE February 21st 2PM

SATURDAY February 21st 7PM



A 4K restoration presented (sadly) as a digital projection - the only way we can possibly screen this amazing film. In the long history of Hollywood excess, there is no tale as torrid as that of Queen Kelly. This lavish silent melodrama starring Gloria Swanson and directed by Erich von Stroheim will screen as the pre-opening event at this year's Venice film festival, with a new score by composer Eli Denson. The film is an outlandish saga of illicit love in sordid surroundings – and so is the story of its production.

Queen Kelly is set in Europe before the first world war and tells the story of Patricia Kelly (Swanson), a convent girl who falls in love with a prince (British actor Walter Byron) who is engaged to a deranged queen. Patricia is sent away to Tanzania, where she is forced into marriage with a vile character called Jan, later earning the nickname Queen Kelly. It's a far-fetched tale, which sets a curious tone from the beginning with its infamous meet-cute, in which Patricia is so overawed by meeting the prince that her knickers fall to the ground.

On the first day of shooting in 1928, Swanson had a premonition that the film would never be finished, and events proved her correct. The screening at Venice consists of a new restoration by Dennis Doros that incorporates previously unseen material, and some inventive methods of recreating the film's grand finale. He describes this version as a "reimagining". Viewers of the film have always had to fill in the gaps, as did those who wanted to learn what happened behind the scenes.

The story of the film begins with a love affair. In 1927 Swanson was one of the biggest stars in Hollywood, married to French war hero Marquis Henry de la Falaise, when she met the married Boston businessman Joseph P Kennedy, father of the Kennedy clan. The following year Swanson and Kennedy became lovers, and their relationship was soon an open secret in Hollywood. Swanson, who was living beyond her generous means, put her financial affairs in his hands.

Kennedy had been in the movie business for some years, and together they planned a lucrative showcase for Swanson's talent. Making an expensive silent film when the talkie revolution was already in motion was one questionable decision. The next was hiring Von Stroheim to write and direct it. He was anything but a safe bet, known for his censor-baiting storylines, immense profligacy (insisting the extras in 1922's Foolish Wives be supplied with silk underwear) and epic running times (his original cut of 1924's Greed was said to be nine hours long).

Von Stroheim proved as immoderate as ever. In the third month of filming, with costs soaring, Swanson and Kennedy called the whole thing off. Her objection was that Von Stroheim had taken the narrative in a direction that would never pass the censors. The scenes they were working on in Africa were clearly set in a brothel. She was exhausted by his reshoots and horrified by having to do a scene in which Jan (Tully Marshall) dribbled tobacco juice on to her hand. She called up Kennedy, saying: "Our director is a madman."

For his part, Von Stroheim claimed the shoot was abandoned purely because the coming of sound rendered this expensive silent film obsolete. Whatever the reason, Swanson and Kennedy cut their losses, which totalled a reputed $800,000.

Von Stroheim was unceremoniously removed from the project. He would never complete a film as director again, although he would continue to find success as an actor, dubbed the "The Man You Love to Hate" for playing German villains, most notably in Jean Renoir's 1937 classic La Grande Illusion.

Swanson and Kennedy tried to complete the film as a talkie and even a musical. A 1932 cut of Queen Kelly was shown in a few countries, but this was essentially only the film's first half. Fast-forward to 1950, when Swanson staged her own glorious comeback, playing washed-up silent film star Norma Desmond in Billy Wilder's black comedy Sunset Boulevard. None other than Von Stroheim was hired to play Norma's butler, the man who keeps her fantasy of enduring fame alive. And when Wilder needed to use a scene from one of Norma's old movies? A clip of Queen Kelly was chosen.