

Ninotchka



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I have a confession to make. For years, I had a secret crush on a much older woman. She passed away in 1990 at the age of 84. I was 34 at the time. I only knew her through her films, and one, in particular, stirred me. The woman was Greta Garbo and the film that burrowed a special place in my heart was *Ninotchka*. The script was written by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder and directed by Ernst Lubitsch and tells the story of a down to business, emotionally cold Russian official sent to Paris to check on the status of Russia's sale of the nation's former crown jewels which were being sold to help support Russia's recovery after the revolution. Upon arriving in Paris she finds herself involved in a legal battle with Russia's exiled Grand Duchess for possession of the jewels and finds that the Russian representatives sent originally to sell the jewels seem to have given in to the temptations and pleasures of the rich Paris life. Her mission is complicated by the attentions of Count Leon d'Algout (Melvyn Douglas) who after meeting her on the street is determined to win her heart. Unknown to her is that he is also the lawyer representing the Grand Duchess in court. Unknown to him at the time is her relationship to his case. Can the heart win over political philosophy and the law?

Garbo was not known for her comedy. In fact, as far as I know *Ninotchka* is the only comedy she ever made. Her role in *Ninotchka* is to a point a reinforcement of the stereotype Russian woman of the time, proud and unemotional while under that stern exterior a heart of a woman. In actuality, the film is not flattering to the Russian people or to women, but it is funny and Garbo seems to have a sense of comedic timing that serves her very well; though I've read that the cast believed that she didn't understand comedy at all. They believed her sense of comedic timing was more a matter of mechanics. Still, there is one scene, just one that breaks through everything else in the movie. She Laughs. Her eyes light up and she laughs and in that one moment, I saw a glimpse of Greta Garbo I will never forget. The storyline itself is to a point implausible. The situations are such that it is, in fact, really a piece of political propaganda masquerading as a romantic comedy. For all that, somehow, it works and after seeing her laugh, I really wish I had met her, just once.

Posted by Keith C. on September 14, 2016

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