

The Museum of Modern Art

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ASTA: THE TENTH MUSE

January 26 - March 15

A retrospective of Europe's first international film star, Asta Nielsen (1881-1972), opens at The Museum of Modern Art on January 26. With her expressive versatility, Nielsen created an astonishing range of individualized portraits of unconventional women, creating an acting style in which sensuality is matched by a powerful impression of intelligence. The thirty-nine films featured in **ASTA: THE TENTH MUSE** showcase all of the legendary actress's extant films. The exhibition continues through March 15.

Nielsen made more than seventy films between 1910 and 1932. Though her career emphasized passionate, dramatic roles, she also portrayed men and teenage girls with equal conviction in gender-bending, role-switching comedies. The influence of her hypnotic screen presence on a generation of silent screen actresses is particularly evidenced in the Soviet cinema. Greta Garbo, who worked with Nielsen in *Die Freudlose Gasse* (*Joyless Street*, 1925), later wrote, "she taught me everything I know."

Among the highlights of the exhibition is Nielsen's screen debut *Afgrunden* (*The Abyss*, 1910) made in her native Denmark. The film's scandalous and still erotic dance scene, together with Nielsen's subtle, yet powerful characterization, was the catalyst that led to a film career in Berlin, which in turn quickly propelled her to international stardom.

In many of her dramatic films including -- *Die Suffragette* (*The Militant Suffragette*, 1913), *Nach dem Gesetz* (*According to the Law*, 1919), *Erdegeist* (*Lulu/Loulou*, 1923), and *Die Verräterin* (*The Traitress*, 1911) -- Nielsen played strong, modern women full of initiative. Although these characters often came to an unfortunate end, it was always in pursuit of genuine passions and not because they were mere victims.

Nielsen's comedic timing was flawless. Among the best examples of her gift are *Das Liebes ABC* (*The ABC of Love*, 1916), about a young woman who teaches her boyfriend the ways of the world by going out on the town disguised as his brother; *Das Eskimobaby* (*The Eskimo Baby*, 1916), in which she plays an Eskimo brought back by a young Arctic explorer to his upper-class home; and *Engelien* (*The Little Angel*, 1913), in which her character, an eighteen-year old girl, whimsically contemplates drowning herself over unrequited love. *The Little Angel*, her most successful comedy, is consistently listed by German film critics as one the top-ten comedies of all time.

Nielsen exerted vigorous control over her own career: she chose her own roles and costumes, oversaw set decoration, and participated in the promotion of her films. She even formed her own production company in 1920 in order to play the title role in *Hamlet*.

Born in Copenhagen, Asta Nielsen attended the drama school of Copenhagen's Royal Theater, making her stage debut in 1902 at age twenty-one. She worked in the Danish theater for nearly a decade before turning to film. Her career was guided from the beginning by the Danish director Urban Gad, who later became her husband and directed her in thirty films. In 1911 Nielsen moved to Germany where she made most of her films and continued to work during the 1920s with many of the best directors of the German "Golden Age." She

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quit acting for the screen in 1932 after making her only sound film *Unmögliche Liebe* (*Impossible Love*, 1932). Returning to Copenhagen in 1937, Nielsen focused on writing and the art of collage. In 1968 she made her last film, *Asta Nielsen*, directing the short documentary of her career.

ASTA: THE TENTH MUSE was coorganized by Jytte Jensen, Assistant Curator, Department of Film and Video, The Museum of Modern Art; and Edith Kramer, Curator and Director, Pacific Film Archive, University of California, Berkley; in collaboration with Marguerite Engberg, author of the monograph *Asta Nielsen* (1966, revised and translated 1995), The Danish Film Museum, and George Eastman House.

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For further information or film stills, contact the Department of Communications, 212/708-9750.

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