

Blonde Venus

USA | 1932 | 93 minutes

Credits

Director	Josef von Sternberg
Screenplay	Jules Furthman, S.K. Lauren
Photography	Bert Glennon
Music	W. Franke Harling, John Leipold, Paul Marquardt, Oscar Potoker (all uncredited)

Cast

Helen Faraday/Jones	Marlene Dietrich
Edward 'Ned' Faraday	Herbert Marshall
Nick Townsend	Cary Grant
Johnny Faraday	Dickie Moore

In Brief

Marlene Dietrich is Helen, a former nightclub entertainer married to scientist Herbert Marshall. Their idyllic family life is shattered when he becomes disabled, and she must return to the stage to support him and their son (Dickie Moore). Enter millionaire Cary Grant, a man who will lavish any amount of money on what (or who) he wants. Dietrich is luminously hypnotic here, whether swimming nude or singing "Hot Voodoo" in a gorilla suit! One of the best of the von Sternberg/Dietrich collaborations, milking every bit of charisma from its two gorgeous stars and miraculously steering the high voltage melodramatics into poignant revelation by the last frame.



Josef von Sternberg's fifth film starring Marlene Dietrich, *Blonde Venus* (1932), is another one of his great expressionist fantasies. Like most of von Sternberg's work, the film is highly romantic and features a melodramatic plot that stretches all credibility. Yet von Sternberg's unique mise-en-scene pulls the viewer into a delirious world of romantic passions and their entangled worldly involvements that ultimately overcomes the ordinary demands for strict realism. As with others of his films, such as *Morocco* and *Shanghai Express*, you must approach *Blonde Venus* as you might an opera or a poem and allow yourself to succumb to its charms.

The never-more-alluring Dietrich gives one of her best performances, and her two male co-stars, Herbert Marshall and Cary Grant (in one of his first major appearances) also perform admirably, despite being cast in somewhat stereotyped roles. Other memorable performances include child star Dickie Moore, and the character actor Robert Emmett O'Connor. Despite von Sternberg's penchant for moody, lingering scenes that define and shift key interpersonal relationships, the plot covers a lot of ground, along with dramatic ups and downs, in reasonably short order. Here is an outline of the films sections:

1. Forest Flirtation in Europe. American students hiking in a German forest encounter some women theatrical performers swimming in the nude. One of them, Ned, engages in a jaunty, flirtatious conversation with a pretty bather, Helen.
2. Married in New York. The story cuts quickly to a scene about six years later showing Ned, a nuclear chemist, and his now housewife, Helen, now married and with a five-year-old son, Johnny. Ned has recently suffered radiation poisoning and has only months to live, unless he can find \$1500 (roughly \$25,000 today) for some new experimental treatment available in Germany. To raise the money, Helen goes back onto the stage as a cabaret singer, performing as the "Blonde Venus". She is an immediate hit when she performs the jungle-rhythm jazz song "Hot Voodoo" (one of the three songs she sings in the film). In fact she is such a hit that she attracts the amorous attentions of suave millionaire, Nick Townsend (Grant), who immediately gives Helen the money to send Ned overseas for the treatment.
3. Helen and Nick in NYC. With Ned away for six months, Helen is unable to resist Nick Townsend's dazzling charms and becomes his mistress. Meanwhile Ned has been cured in Europe and returns a couple of weeks earlier than expected, upon which he discovers Helen's infidelity. Enraged, he orders her out. She grabs Johnny and takes flight on the train.
4. Helen and Johnny on the Road. For the next thirteen minutes Helen and Johnny are only a step ahead of the Bureau of Missing Persons (Ned wants Johnny back) as they move from one town to another. Sometimes Helen gets some performing gigs, but she slips more and more into destitution and desperation. Eventually, the police catch up with her, and she has to surrender Johnny. Helen, now penniless, homeless, and with a scandalous reputation, has reached rock bottom and has turned to prostitution and alcohol.
5. Helen and Nick in Europe. But somehow Helen pulls herself together, and in a dramatic turn she manages to get to Paris and to revive her singing career. Soon she is a big cabaret star again – the "Blonde Venus" is back. Nick, having earlier fled to Europe to forget about Helen, shows up to one her shows, and in no time they are lovers again. He knows that she misses her son, though, and offers to bring her back to New York so she can be close to him.
6. Finale in New York. Back in New York, Nick escorts Helen back to her old apartment, where the still bitter Ned doesn't want her to see his son. But after a nasty exchange, he relents, and watches as the boy responds to his mother's tenderness. In a touching final scene, Johnny triggers the suppressed affections that Ned has for his wife, and the two become reconciled.

Blonde Venus

Consider the dramatic changes in Helen's fortunes over the course of the narrative. In section 1, she is an entertainer in Germany and probably a star. In section 2, she has been just a housewife in a lower middle-class family for six years, but then returns to the stage and becomes a big star again. In sections 3 and 4, Helen is gradually reduced to penury and shame. In section 5 she is a big star again, and in section 6, she goes back to being a housewife. These events are presented over a cinematic narrative that has amazingly dramatic speedups and slowdowns over the course of its 93 minutes. For example, the tender scenes with Ned, Helen, and Johnny are evocatively slow moving (the final scene lasts nine minutes). And there are three rousing Dietrich cabaret numbers also presented in the film (in sections 2, 4, and 5) that take up about a dozen minutes. But the dramatic circumstantial rises to glory can be covered quickly, because the main focus of the story is not so much on Helen's position in society, but on the way she engages in personal relationships.



It is worth remarking, for those unfamiliar, that Marlene Dietrich's sultry singing style, with its husky voice and allusions to untamed desire, was unique. It musically expresses the mysterious nature of her magnetism. In von Sternberg's films Dietrich is always the quintessential embodiment of feminine irony, with an intuitive compass that questions all rules and conventions. There are always those sly, watchful eyes, which mask deep unknowable and unquenchable passions. Most of her songs in these films reflect a carefree acceptance of her never-ending susceptibility to love and to falling in love. Of all her songs, my all-time favorite Dietrich song is in this film, "You Little So-and-So", which is performed while she is on the road in Section 4, and it is so enchanting that I reprise the lyrics here:

It isn't often that I want a man / But when I do, it's just too bad / I know you're acting hard to get, and yet// I've got the feeling you can be had.

You, so-and-so, you little so-and-so / Look what you've done to me / You're almost twice as bad as... Who's this again? / I ought to take you out and How have you been?

You, this-and-that, you got me you-know-what / Is that the way to be? / The Greeks have words for almost every thing I know / But you little so-and-so.

You, so-and-so, you little so-and-so / How did you get this way? / Although you know that I have lost my control / You sit and talk about my beautiful soul.

You, this-and-that, you've got me you-know-what / Is that the way to be? / The Greeks have words for almost every thing I know / But you little so-and-so.

Apart from Dietrich's specific seductive charms, however, what makes *Blonde Venus* particularly interesting is the perspective it takes on her character, Helen Faraday. It is a focus on life from the woman's point of view, but as with Mizoguchi and Bergman, it is a presentation as seen and interpreted by a sympathetic male, which encompasses not only elements of compassion, but also of admiration and wonder. In the eyes of conventional society (and also those of her husband Ned), Helen an immoral

hedonist. As soon as she was out of the sight of her husband, she succumbed to the charms and money of a notorious seducer. Then she kidnapped her son and exposed him to the dangers and improprieties of her notorious life on the road, while she descended into prostitution and drunkenness. She managed to return to stardom by "using" one man after another (presumably in return for sexual favours). When Nick Townsend visits her backstage dressing room in Paris (Section 5), he sees handwritten on her mirror Kipling's famous line and apparently Helen's new credo: "Down to Gehenna or up to the throne, he travels fastest who travels alone." Yes, it's a grim picture of a fallen woman, but thanks to von Sternberg's coloring, we see things quite differently. From the romantic slant as presented, we get a more sympathetic feeling how all these terrible things came about.

What we see is that Helen was a loving and selfless mother who returned to the stage in Section 2 in order to help save her husband's life. True, she was overwhelmed by the charms of Nick Townsend, but he was basically a gentleman and irresistibly attractive, as well. She vowed to break off the relationship and return to her husband, but her husband angrily threw her out. Her powerful attachment to her son drove her to take him with her, and she thereafter strove at all times to offer him what only a mother can give to a child. In all her circumstances she tried her best, given the limited resources that were available to her. But when she is finally hauled before a judge for vagrancy, she confesses society's stern judgement: that she is "just no good." But we don't think so. As with the women in Mizoguchi's films, we see the world from their angle.

Helen's husband, Ned, has the typical attitudes dominated by the conventional mores of society. The man must be in control. Ned doesn't want his wife to work, at all. When made aware of her affair with Nick, he sees her as a bad mother. When Nick finally offers him \$10,000 to let her see Johnny, Ned stubbornly retains his autonomy: he will cast aside the money and let Helen see Johnny for nothing. This is his final act of defiance. Throughout the film, Ned wants to retain some degree of control. But in von Sternberg's romantic universe, one must accept love absolutely and unconditionally, and this is what Ned ultimately does. This is what true love demands. In the final scene, Ned responds to his true, passionate love for Helen and embraces her. He never gets an apology or an explanation. What he does get is that final look in her eyes.

- Newland, www.avaxhome.ws/blogs

EDINBURGH
FILM
GUILD

Dietrich & Sternberg