

# *7th Heaven* (1927) and *Street Angel* (1928): two silent films by Frank Borzage

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*Murnau, Borzage and Fox Box Set* (2008), 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment

Like a number of his cinema contemporaries (Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford being among the most prominent), director Frank Borzage grew up in poverty and turned to acting and filmmaking at a young age. Born in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1894, he was one of many brothers and sisters (14, eight of whom survived to adulthood) attempting to live on their Italian-born father's pay as a stonemason.

By the age of twelve, Frank Borzage was himself laboring in a Utah coal mine. He subsequently pursued a youthful interest in acting to Hollywood in 1912 where he first worked as an actor and became an actor-director in 1915. Borzage's career flourished in the late 1920s and early 1930s in particular. In 1929, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts Association honored Borzage with its first Best Director award for *7th Heaven* (released in 1927). Borzage would also win the same award for *Bad Girl* in 1931.

Borzage had no problem adapting to sound, as he was also responsible for a number of memorable movies released during the 1930s, e.g., *A Farewell to Arms*, *History is Made at Night*, *No Greater Glory*, *Three Comrades*, and *I've Always Loved You* and *Moonrise* in the 1940s. Borzage's output declined in the 1950s, reportedly due to his distaste for the cynicism in many of the scripts he received.

Indeed, critic Andrew Sarris, in his *The American Cinema*, referred to Borzage as "that rarity of rarities, an uncompromising romanticist." Sarris went on, "He [Borzage] plunged into the real world of poverty and oppression, the world of Roosevelt and Hitler, the New Deal and the New Order, to impart an aura to his characters, not merely through soft focus and a fluid camera, but through a genuine concern with the wondrous inner life of lovers in the midst of adversity... *History Is Made at Night* is not only the most romantic title in the history of the cinema but also a profound expression of Borzage's commitment to love over probability."

The best available copies of Borzage's major silent films are to be found in the *Murnau, Borzage and Fox Box Set* (2008). This reviewer has chosen to look at two of those films, *7th Heaven* (1927) and *Street Angel* (1928), from the director's most productive period. Both films feature Borzage's mastery

of visual stylistics to convey his career-long theme of couples armed only with their love in a struggle against rigid, often irrational societal conventions and laws.

In *7th Heaven*, a young woman, Diane (Janet Gaynor), lives in penury with her sister (played by Gladys Brockwell), who regularly whips Diane to force her to trade stolen goods for absinthe. During one particularly vicious beating that ends outside their apartment in the street, Diane is saved from death by a sewer worker, Chico (Charles Farrell).

At first indifferent to Diane's obvious feelings, Chico begins to show a fondness for her after he is promoted to the position of street cleaner. When the police arrest Diane's sister for dealing in stolen goods and threaten to arrest Diane too as an accomplice, Chico tells them she is his wife to save her from imprisonment.

A brief but touching period of innocent, paradisiacal romance is interrupted by the declaration of World War I (although they do manage to marry before Chico leaves for the front lines). During the war, Diane takes a job at a munitions factory while awaiting Chico's return. The film's conclusion offers a typical Hollywood "surprise" ending, although presented in such a way that the viewer does not feel cheated.

By the mid-1920s, the lessons learned from D. W. Griffith's profoundly important contribution of montage (or "cross cutting") were being supplemented by a more fluid, moving camera. At the vanguard of the latter development stood the brilliant German director F.W. Murnau (*The Last Laugh* [1924], *Faust* [1926] and his masterpiece, *Sunrise* [1927]), also now at Fox, whose use of a moving camera influenced movie making in general and Borzage's work specifically.

About Fox, Dave Kehr of the *New York Times* noted in 2008, reviewing the Murnau and Borzage box set, "[William] Fox lost control of his studio in 1930 because of financial problems related to the stock market crash, but by that point had firmly established the Fox Film Corporation as the Hollywood enterprise most friendly to personal filmmakers."

Borzage's (and his cinematographer Ernest Palmer's) tracking shot of the elder sister whipping Diane out of their apartment and into the street serves double duty, i.e., it not only portrays the uninterrupted (and therefore realistic) brutality of the beating, but also the sense that there is no safe haven for the

victim.

Effective crosscutting also features in *7th Heaven*. A high angle shot from Chico's apartment of men responding to the declaration of war by marching through the streets is juxtaposed to Diane donning the wedding gown that Chico purchased for her and then crossing the little wooden bridge that connects her room to Chico's (as they are not married, they sleep in separate rooms).

The purity inherent in this scene is given a greater, poignant meaning when viewed next to the shots of men marching off to war, not only due to the realization that many of these men will not be returning, but also that the young couple's loving relationship will be interrupted (and perhaps ended) by the cold brutality of war. (The antiwar Borzage refused to film the battle scenes in this movie; fellow Fox employee John Ford filmed the scenes instead and the result is an antiheroic, realistic portrait of battle).

Borzage uses close-ups to capture the emotions on his main characters' faces. The diminutive Gaynor's doll-like face is capable of registering pure adoration when gazing upward to the 6' 2" Charles Farrell; that same face can also convey an aching numbness when called for.

The same use of close-ups on Farrell's face allows the actor to use his pliable face to full advantage, demonstrating a naturalness that was rarely found in male characters in the earlier silent films.

Borzage's *Street Angel* (1928) is a darker film that draws more heavily on Expressionistic lighting while incorporating a moving camera in even more innovative ways than *7th Heaven*.

Angela (Gaynor again) takes care of her dangerously ill mother in a tiny apartment on the foggy harbor side of Naples, Italy. The police arrest Angela for trying to sell sexual favors to a man on the street (unsuccessfully, due to her innocence), but she escapes while being led away to the workhouse.

Angela then joins a traveling circus as a stilt walker, where she encounters a vagabond painter named Gino (Farrell again). At first, Angela is indifferent to Gino, professing distrust of all men, but after he completes a painting of the "real Angela" behind her tough mask, she warms to him.

A fall from her stilts breaks Angela's ankle, causing her to travel by boat—with Gino to help her—to a doctor in Naples. Once there, Gino gains fame and money as a painter, asks Angela to marry him (to which she agrees) and the pair enjoy a moment of "heaven on earth" before the police come to their door and arrest Angela for her earlier attempt to sell herself on the street.

After her release from the workhouse, the climax pits a pleading Angela against a revengeful Gino (due to her supposed prostitution and imprisonment).

In *Street Angel*, Borzage constructs a moving floor for his nighttime crowd scenes in Naples, enhancing the effects created in *7th Heaven*. This same technique draws on Expressionism when Angela is being led to the workhouse amid the shadows

of human figures stretching high across a wall, evoking both a feeling of both fear and pity for her relatively tiny figure.

The scene where Angela is taken before a judge for sentencing is breathtaking. Shot from behind the judge (and thus from his perspective), Angela is a mere speck in the distance as she is led to the bench by two guards. Once there, she remains minuscule with her eyes barely visible above the bench. It is difficult to recall a scene that so immediately and convincingly depicts the insignificance of the individual in the eyes of the state.

Angela allows Gaynor to display a greater range than she displayed in her characterization of Diane. Angela is an independent, practical woman with a quick temper and sense of humor, qualities that, taken together, complement the idealistic, often impractical Gino.

Farrell's Gino is also more complicated than Chico in *7th Heaven*. In addition to an artist's idealism and whimsicality, he can also be despondent when his art is not appreciated or murderously angry when he confronts Angela about her past.

Because of his depiction of love as a force that can overcome any adversity, Borzage's work has been criticized for being sentimental. Gaynor took exception to this criticism of the director's work: "Frank Borzage directed from the heart, and so his pictures were—well, some people would say they were sentimental. For that time, *7th Heaven* was not sentimental. It was considered dramatic."

This reviewer would go one step further and argue that those who find Borzage's work sentimental are judging him from the fashionable chilly, cynical perspective that informs much of what is considered "serious criticism" today.

*Murnau, Borzage and Fox* is an important contribution to our understanding of filmmaking during the silent period. In addition to containing nine Borzage films, it also features two Murnau movies, *Sunrise* and *City Girl*; a booklet with text and stills from the films in the box set; a booklet with text and stills from Murnau's lost classic, *4 Devils*; and a fascinating documentary on the films of Murnau and Borzage, and producer William Fox's fight to liberate moviemaking's artistic possibilities from the stranglehold of the Thomas Edison trust companies.



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