



The Battle of the Sexes **By David Shepard**

D.W. Griffith is properly esteemed as the "Father of Film" from his years of discovery making short films at the pioneer Biograph Company and for such pioneering features as *The Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance*, *Broken Blossoms*, *Way Down East* and *Orphans of the Storm*, but his later films — several of them lost or almost unavailable — are often dismissed as back efforts of a talent in decline. Griffith's 1928 comedy-drama *The Battle of the Sexes* belies this perception.

The story involves a middle-aged magnate (humanitarian Jean Hersholt, whose film performances extended from *Greed* to *Dr. Christian*) who makes a fool of himself when he strays from his loving but frowsy wife (Belle Bennett, so unforgettable in *Stella Dallas*) and children (Billy Bakewell and Sally O'Neill) into the cynical arms of a gold digger (Phyllis Haver) and her dishonest lover (Don Alvarado). As these characters are hurt and healed, Griffith expertly draws fine lines between tragedy and comedy, and his skill makes all the difference between emotional satisfaction and formulaic melodrama. Like so many of Griffith's earlier films, there must be elements of autobiography in this one, for the 53-year-old filmmaker's sympathy is all with the middle-aged philanderer whose relationships with women are no less myopic than Griffith's own.

Coming in the year of transition to sound, *The Battle of the Sexes* was originally released with synchronized recorded music, including an obligatory song. Griffith is reported to have been critical of the music, which has been lost in any case, but compilers Rodney Sauer and Susan Hall worked the song into the new score prepared for this edition and recorded in digital stereo by the Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra. The image has been digitally mastered from a vintage print made directly from the original camera negative.

Producer Joseph Schenck and his silent partner, Mary Pickford, gave Griffith every chance of success by supplementing such longtime collaborators as cameraman Billy Bitzer and editor James Smith, both of whom had worked with the director since pre-feature days, with up-to-date technicians such as cinematographer Karl Struss (with such previous credits as *Ben-Hur*, *Sparrows* and *Sunrise*) and designer William Cameron Menzies (*The Thief of Bagdad*, *The Eagle*, *Cobra* and *The Beloved Rogue*). Their sparkling efforts helped make *The Battle of the Sexes* as adept as the best commercial movies being made by anyone at the time, and if it doesn't have any of the director's signature devices, neither does it have any heavy-handed carryovers from an earlier era, despite being a remake of a now-lost film made by Griffith some fifteen years before.

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