

## The Passion of Carl Dreyer



### A complete retrospective at BFI Southbank

This month BFI Southbank casts a spotlight on the Danish director **Carl Dreyer** (1889 – 1968), who during his extraordinary career made 14 films many of which are considered masterpieces. With this complete retrospective - **The Passion of Carl Dreyer** – new audiences may discover why he is one of the greatest masters of cinema standing alongside Bergman, Renoir, Ozu and others. His seminal silent films have presented audiences with iconic images: **Jean-Luc Godard** featured extracts from **The Passion of Joan of Arc** (*La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*, 1928) in his debut *À bout de souffle* (1960), and **Vampyr** (*Vampyr: Der Traum des Allan Gray*, 1932), Dreyer’s first talkie, is recognised as an innovative experiment with form. With the inclusion of an **Extended Run** of Dreyer’s classic **Ordet** (*The Word*, 1955), here is a very rare opportunity to witness the full catalogue by a true cinematic craftsman.

Dreyer’s early life could have provided the basis for a melodrama; he was born illegitimate in Copenhagen, to a housemaid and the married farmer who employed her. His father put him in an orphanage where he stayed for the first two years of his life, until he was adopted by a typographer and his wife. Their parenting was strict and emotionally distant, but provided him with a good education and when he had completed his finals, Dreyer left home, never to return. After a stint as a cleric, he became a journalist and at the same time took flying lessons and was the first passenger on a cross-Sound flight, but his ambitions to work in film led him to work as a script reader, in 1913, before ascending to the role of a successful screenwriter, until he was presented with the opportunity to direct his first feature film in 1918.

The season begins here, with Dreyer’s first silent film, the beautifully restored melodrama **The President** (*Praesidenten*, 1919), a sympathetic tale of female suffering at the hands of rich patriarchs – a theme that would inspire many of his films. A number of comedies and dramas followed such as his comedy of manners **The Parson’s Widow** (*Præstänkan*, 1920) set in 17th century rural Norway, a tale of anti-semitism in Russia with **Love One Another** (*Die Gezeichneten*, 1922) and comedy-drama **The Master of the House** (*Du Skal Aere Din Hustru*, 1925) – his first hit. In 1926 he went to Paris and began research for what would become his landmark telling of *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, which caused a sensation on its release.

Throughout the 1930s a number of projects were pursued but not completed, and for a while he returned to journalism. Then in 1943 he made **Days of Wrath** (*Vredens Dag*), which tells of 17th century witch hunts and is one of the greatest European films made during WWII, when Denmark was occupied by the Nazis. His short films from the 1940s, will receive a rare outing in this BFI retrospective and feature **They Caught the Ferry** (1948) (which was later to inspire **Jim Jarmusch**) and screen in their own programme. His final features **Two People** (*Tva Manniskor*, 1945), *Ordet* and **Gertrud** (1964) provide compelling portraits of human relationships, both romantic and familial, and with the inclusion of the documentary **Carl Th Dreyer, My Métier** (1995), this season is a must for fans of beautifully crafted, observational films.

– End –

### **PRESS CONTACTS:**

#### **BFI Southbank:**

Ilona Cheshire / Tim Mosley

Tel: 020 7957 8986 / 8918 or email: [ilona.cheshire@bfi.org.uk](mailto:ilona.cheshire@bfi.org.uk) / [tim.mosley@bfi.org.uk](mailto:tim.mosley@bfi.org.uk)

### **PROGRAMME INFORMATION**

#### **EXTENDED RUN: *Ordet* (The Word, 1955) NEW PRINT 9 – 23 March**

For many this adaptation of Kaj Munk's play about tensions within a Jutland farming family is the very greatest of all Dreyer's masterpieces, as suspenseful as it's emotionally devastating. Old Morten Borgen fears God has abandoned him. Though he adores daughter-in-law Inger, he wishes she could restore her atheist husband Mikkel to the family's traditional beliefs; Anders his youngest wants to marry the daughter of a tailor who preaches a detestably puritanical Christianity; and his middle son Johannes now believes he's Jesus. How could things be worse? Far from the miserabilist litany this brief character summary might suggest, Dreyer's penultimate film is at once a wise, even witty exploration of pride, prejudice and pretensions to devout faith, and a heartrending hymn to the power of earthly passion and love. In contrast to the performances' intimate naturalism, the exquisite lighting, camera movements, sets and sounds all add to the sense of a super-reality, strangely familiar yet informed by mysterious forces of dark, almost primal emotion. Truly a towering achievement.

Denmark 1955. With Birgitte Federspiel, Henrik Malberg, Emil Hass Christensen, 126min. EST. Digital. **12A**

#### **A BFI Release**

#### **Season Introduction: Two or Three Things I Know About Carl Dreyer: An Illustrated Talk**

Carl Dreyer has long been recognised as one of the very greatest of all filmmakers but, mainly because some of his films are seldom seen, he has often been saddled with the simplistic and erroneous reputation of a forbiddingly gloomy or 'difficult' artist. Geoff Andrew, Head of Film Programme at BFI Southbank, believes the truth is richer, more complex and more interesting, and in this talk will use a range of clips to examine what makes Dreyer's work so very special.

**Thu 1 March 18:20 NFT3 Tickets £5**

#### **The President *Praesidenten***

Denmark 1919. With Halvard Hoff, Elith Pio, Carl Meyer. c89min.

Dazzlingly restored a few years ago, Dreyer's first feature is a typically sympathetic tale of female suffering, with a series of 'commoners' left pregnant and otherwise betrayed by rich, powerful patriarchs. The melodrama is heightened by a complex interlocking narrative, but what impress most are the elegant compositions, the simple but meticulously detailed sets, and the careful selection of non-professionals with the 'right' faces for minor roles and crowd scenes. With live piano accompaniment.

**Thu 1 March 20:45 NFT2, Sat 3 March 18:20 NFT2**

#### **Leaves From Satan's Book *Blade af Satans Bog***

Denmark 1920. With Helge Nisse, Halvard Hoff, Hallander Hellemann, Clara Pontoppidan. c167min.

Like many, Dreyer was deeply impressed by Griffith's *Intolerance*, and this ambitious epic demonstrates the perils of temptation through four sequential stories set during the life of Christ, the era of the Spanish Inquisition, the French Revolution and the Russo-Finnish War of 1918. Dealing with lofty abstractions rather than illuminating details, the film may be at odds with the director's later work, but its sweeping landscapes and huge, solid-looking sets combine with a sure sense of pace to produce stirring spectacle. With live piano accompaniment.

**Sat 3 March 15:10 NFT2, Sun 4 March 15:10 NFT2**

**The Parson's Widow** *Prästänkan*

Sweden 1920. With *Einer Röd, Hildur Carlberg, Greta Almroth* c79min

Dreyer's first great film, a lovely comedy of manners set in 17th-century rural Norway, charts the intrigue that arises when a young curate awarded a living at a parsonage finds himself also having to wed his predecessor's widow. In pretending his fiancée is his sister and moving her in as housemaid, the new parson seriously underestimates his elderly wife... Inventive, often ribald comedy turns steadily into a lyrical, wondrously touching tale of bitter conflict yielding to compassionate understanding. With live piano accompaniment.

**Sat 3 March 20:40 NFT2, Tue 6 March 20:50 NFT2**

**Love One Another** *Die Gezeichneten*

Germany 1922. With *Polina Piekowska, Vladimir Gajdarov, Torleif Reiss, Richard Boleslawski*. c95min. Digital.

Like his second feature, this account of anti-semitic pogroms in 1905 Russia is, atypically for Dreyer, in the epic register, boasting a complex, condensed narrative packed with subplots, and impressive both for its turbulent crowd scenes and for its use of well chosen extras. Though some of the characters are broadly drawn, the recreation of turn-of-the-century St Petersburg again displays Dreyer's desire for authenticity. With live piano accompaniment.

**Sun 4 March 18:20 NFT2, Fri 9 March 20:40 NFT2**

**Once Upon A Time** *Der Var Engang*

Denmark 1922. With *Clara Pontoppidan, Svend Methling, Peter Jerndorff*. c75min. Digital.

Though, sadly, not all of this charming fable survives, the Danish Film Institute's restoration, making clever use of stills and titles to fill gaps in the narrative, lets us enjoy Dreyer's expertise in composition, lighting and visual textures. It begins as light-hearted fairy-tale, with the Princess of Illyria (complete with superbly OTT coiffure) endlessly rejecting suitors, but becomes more naturalistic – and still lovelier to look at – when the Prince of Denmark, posing as a beggar, educates her in the ways of rural living. With live piano accompaniment.

**Fri 9 March 18:20 NFT2, Tue 13 March 20:40 NFT2**

**Michael** *Mikaël*

Denmark 1924. With *Benjamin Christensen, Walter Slezak, Nora Gregor*. c89min. U.

Remarkable for its three leads (the director of *Haxan* and the barely recognisable future stars of *Lifeboat* and *La Règle du jeu*) and its near-explicit treatment of homosexual desire, this account of a love triangle (a painter, his muse/adopted son and a Russian princess) finds Dreyer using the claustrophobic, ornate interiors of the artist's home to Expressionist effect. With its array of ambiguous yet revealing looks and gestures, the film – shot by the dream-team of Karl Freund and Rudolph Maté – offers an unflinching but deeply humane look at blind passion and cool betrayal. With live piano accompaniment.

**Sat 10 March 18:20 NFT2, Wed 14 March 20:40 NFT3**

**The Master of the House** *Du Skal Aere Din Hustru*

Denmark 1925. With *Johannes Meyer, Astrid Holm, Mathilde Nielsen*. c107min. U.

By now, Dreyer was producing one gem after another, and this simple but supremely effective comedy-drama – virtually a proto-feminist manifesto – sees a devoted but much-nagged wife and mother persuaded by her own mother, her teenage daughter and (delightfully) her hubby's former nanny to take a break from domestic drudgery, in the hope that the couple will see the error of their ways. A forerunner of neo-realism in its focus on the ordinary lives of ordinary people, the film is both psychologically astute and utterly credible in its low-key naturalism. With live piano accompaniment.

**Sun 11 March 20:40 NFT2, Tue 13 March 18:20 NFT2**

**The Bride of Glomdal** *Glomdalsbruden*

Norway 1926. With Tove Tellback, Stub Wiberg, Harald Stormoen, Einar Sissener. c74min. Digital.

Shot during a Norwegian summer, this romantic drama – about a wealthy farmer's daughter falling in love with a poor farmer's son, despite having been promised to a rich suitor she dislikes – includes room for comedy and action (most memorably a thrilling climax involving a torrential river). But Dreyer's inspiration was the pastoral films of Sjöström and Stiller, and it's the way he combines his expressive sense of landscape with an attention to delicate emotional nuance that makes the film so affecting. With live piano accompaniment.

**Sun 11 March 16:10 NFT2, Mon 12 March 20:45 NFT2**

**Dreyer The Passion of Joan of Arc** *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*

France 1928. With Marie Falconetti, Antonin Artaud, Eugène Silvain, Michel Simon. c97min. PG.

Basing his script primarily on the records of Joan's trial, but condensing events so that the film covers only the final day of her life, with his last silent film Dreyer created a masterpiece at once highly experimental and utterly accessible. Indeed, what Tom Milne memorably called 'virtually a symphony of faces' remains extraordinarily moving; for all the dazzling camerawork, inventive editing and monumental sets, what dominates is Falconetti's performance, a flawless study of suffering, supplication and solitude. With live piano accompaniment.

**Mon 5 March 18:20 NFT1, Wed 14 March 18:30 NFT1**

**Vampyr** *Vampyr: Der Traum des Allan Gray*

Germany-France 1932. With Julian West, Henriette Gérard, Jan Hieronimko, Sybille Schmitz. 70min. Digital. EST  
Even more experimental than its predecessor, since the camerawork, cutting, sound, dialogue and overall narrative seem intended to render everything not only profoundly unsettling but ultimately inexplicable. As such the protagonist's experiences at a sinister chateau (the story is based on Le Fanu's *Carmilla*) are as nightmarishly strange as anything in a Lynch movie; suffused with a pallid, cloudy grey, the world of shadowy beings and deathly visions feels as eerily intangible as it is terrifying.

**Sun 11 March 18:30 NFT1, Mon 19 March 18:20 NFT1**

**Day of Wrath** *Vredens Dag*

Denmark 1943. With Lisbeth Movin, Thorkild Roose, Preben Lerdorff Rye, Anna Svierkier. 100min. EST. PG

Stylistically, this deeply moving tale of illicit passion and the persecution of witches in 17th-century Denmark may be Dreyer's most conventional film of the sound era; nevertheless, for the stark beauty of its imagery, its meticulously measured rhythms and its lead performance, it remains one of the great masterpieces of the war years, the more miraculous in having been made during the Nazis' occupation of Denmark. The pervasive atmosphere of fear, superstition, betrayal and cruel oppression is superbly sustained.

**Sun 18 March 19:30 NFT1, Wed 21 March 20:45 NFT1**

**Two People** *Tva Manniskor*

Denmark 1945. With Georg Rydeberg, Wanda Rothgardt. 74min. EST

Made in Sweden (Dreyer evading the Germans' response to his previous film), this chamber drama about a marriage on the rocks takes place in 'real time', entirely in one apartment, and has a cast of two. Though the director didn't get the actors he wanted (and it sometimes shows), the film – something of a rarity – remains fascinating for its use of formal elements to highlight the couple's sense of isolation and entrapment, and for having what was for Dreyer an unusually eventful narrative.

**Sat 17 March 18:10 NFT3, Fri 23 March 20:40 NFT2**

**Gertrud**

Denmark 1964. With Nina Pens Rode, Bendt Rothe, Ebbe Rode, Baard Owe. 116min EST New print

Though its Paris premiere provided a hostile reception, Dreyer's final feature was soon recognised as another masterpiece, a coolly stylised study of a proud and passionate married woman loved – but, she insists, not nearly enough – by four different men. Long, fluid takes and elegant lighting, teasingly oblique dialogue and deftly modulated performances together create a meditation on love and disenchantment that is at once insightful in its details and mysterious and affecting in its abstractions. Cinema as poetry, pared back but richly resonant.

**Sat 17 March 20:40 NFT2, Thu 22 March 18:10 NFT2**

### **Dreyer's Short Films**

A rare screening for the shorts Dreyer made in the 40s, which exhibit his interest in art, architecture and everyday life. Most famous (and much loved by Dreyer aficionado Jim Jarmusch) is the road-safety film *They Caught the Ferry* (1948); rarest is *Water from the Land* (1946), banned by the authorities who deemed it damaging to the reputation of Danish agriculture. The other titles include: *Good Mothers* (1942), *The Danish Village Church* (1947), *The Struggle Against Cancer* (1947), *Thorvaldsen* (1949), *Storström Bridge* (1950) and *A Castle Within a Castle* (1950). Total running time c87min

**Fri 16 March 18:20 NFT3, Tue 20 March 20:40 NFT2**

### **Carl Th Dreyer, My Métier**

Denmark-Norway-Iceland-Sweden 1995. Dir Torben Skjodt Jensen. 96min. EST

Boasting wonderful footage of Dreyer and quotations from his writings, especially those on the aesthetics of cinema, this look at the life, ideas and extraordinary achievements of a maestro renowned both for his modesty and for his quiet strength of will also features interviews with many who worked with him, including actors Lisbeth Movin, Birgitte Federspiel and Preben Lerdorff Rye and cinematographer Henning Bendtsen.

**Mon 5 March 20:40 NFT2, Sat 10 March 16:00 NFT2**

### **About the BFI**

The BFI is the lead body for film in the UK with the ambition to create a flourishing film environment in which innovation, opportunity and creativity can thrive by:

- Connecting audiences to the widest choice of British and World cinema
- Preserving and restoring the most significant film collection in the world for today and future generations
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

### **Booking information**

The BFI Southbank is open to all. BFI members are entitled to a discount on all tickets. BFI Southbank Box Office tel: 020 7928 3232. Unless otherwise stated tickets are £9.00, concs £6.65 Members pay £1.40 less on any ticket. Website [www.bfi.org.uk/southbank](http://www.bfi.org.uk/southbank)

**Tickets for FREE screenings and events must be booked in advance by calling the Box Office to avoid disappointment**

### **BFI Filmstore**

The BFI Filmstore is stocked and staffed by BFI experts with over 1,200 book titles and 1,000 DVDs to choose from, including hundreds of acclaimed books and DVDs produced by the BFI.

### **The benugo bar & kitchen**

Eat, drink and be merry in panoramic daylight. benugo's décor is contemporary, brightly lit and playful with a lounge space, bar and dining area. The place to network, hang out, unpack a film, savour the best of Modern British or sip on a cocktail.

There's more to discover about film and television through the BFI. Our world-renowned archival collections, cinemas, festivals, films, publications and learning resources are here to inspire you.

**\*\*\* PICTURE DESK \*\*\***

**A selection of images for journalistic use in promoting BFI Southbank screenings can be found at [www.image.net](http://www.image.net) under BFI / BFI Southbank /March 2012**