



## ***Cobra***

### **Essay by David Shepard**

Rudolph Valentino's first independent production, COBRA, was released less than a year prior to the actor's untimely death at age 31. It is an unusual and contradictory showcase for the actor who is remembered more than any other as the icon of irresistible sexuality in Hollywood silent film.

Beleaguered by women in his native land, a promiscuous Italian Count, Rodrigo Torriani (Valentino) escapes to New York to work for an elegant antiques dealer specializing in Italian *objects d'art*. The ambitious young man cannot suppress the Don Giovanni within himself and he is soon embroiled in a new series of romantic entanglements with secretaries, husband hunters and extortionists. But when his best friend's new wife captures suave Torriani in her Cobra-like gaze, he reforms just in time to avoid disgrace and even death-by-fire.

COBRA was made at a time when every element of the young star's professional life was controlled by his wife, Natacha Rambova. Imagining that Valentino would out-do Douglas Fairbanks in films notable for scenes of pageantry, athleticism, and derring-do, she wrote for Rudy a treatment for an enormous spectacle of medieval Spain to be called *The Hooded Falcon*. With proposed co-star Nita Naldi, the Valentinos traveled to that country where they spent more than one hundred thousand dollars of producer J.D. Williams' money on Spanish antiques and props. Rambova committed for the services of other actors. Joseph Henabery, who endured Rambova's interference with his direction of *A Sainted Devil*, was engaged for the same task. Also hired were cameraman Harry Fischbeck, whose photography of Valentino's previous two films had been much admired; and designers Adrian for costumes, and William Cameron Menzies (fresh from Fairbanks' awe-inspiring *The Thief of Bagdad*) for sets.

Although these major talents were attracted by the size and ambition of *The Hooded Falcon*, even June Mathis, esteemed scenarist for Valentino's breakthrough film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, proved unable to make a coherent script out of Rambova's Spanish story.

Faced with the pressing necessity of making something, Williams purchased film rights to a stage play by Martin Brown, COBRA, which had run for a season on Broadway with Judith Anderson and Louis Calhern in the leading parts. But Mrs. Valentino, who by contract enjoyed with her husband the last word on production decisions, was adamant that Rudy would not be presented either as beefcake or as an amoral Don Juan. Thus Torriani's torrid love affair all now occurred off-screen. Further, the fighting scenes called for in the original play were to be saved for *The Hooded Falcon*; in their place is an often-deliberate immobility!

Confronted in these difficult circumstances with a supporting cast hired for a completely different film and a star who was now to be dressed in a suit and tie with both feet on the ground at all times, Henabery & Company attempted with some distinction to make up in visual splendor for the lack of everything else. Menzies' night club set was bigger and more beautiful than any night club the director had seen in real life, requiring something like 150 lighting instruments to illuminate it. The library of an apartment used for two scenes is at least thirty feet high with a wall of leather bindings worthy of the Vatican. COBRA truly represents the visual richness of silent cinema at its peak. At the center of it all



is Valentino, charming and photogenically resplendent. But the absence of the other components of the star's appeal made of it in 1925 a complete and awful flop.

In some ways, however, time has given COBRA its revenge. Even with his stunning looks, Valentino's appeal as the Great Lover, enacted according to conventions of the 1920's, is often difficult for modern audiences to fathom. By contrast, his far more restrained performances in such films as COBRA and *The Conquering Power*, coupled with the pictorial beauty of these productions, makes them more accessible today than the great hits upon which the star's reputation was built.

A NOTE ON THIS EDITION: This DVD edition of COBRA is digitally mastered at the visually correct speed of 22 frames per second from a full aperture mint-condition 35mm master positive printed from the original camera negative, thus preserving intact all of the photographic beauty which is one of this film's most attractive qualities. The musical setting is compiled by Rodney Sauer and Susan Hall from period arrangements and is recorded in digital stereo by the Mont Alto Theater Orchestra.

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