



Joan The Woman **Abridged from an essay by Robert S. Birchard**

JOAN THE WOMAN (Cardinal Film Corporation, 1916) was Cecil B. DeMille's first great spectacle. In keeping with theatrical tradition, DeMille sought a more formal and stylized mode of acting from stars Geraldine Farrar and Wallace Reid - a technique he continued in his late historical films. Wilfred Buckland's art direction is outstanding, and DeMille's social comments are subtle but biting. The film also features a dramatic hand-colored climax utilizing the Handschiegl stencil-color process.

In 1915 D.W. Griffith's 12-reel epic *The Birth of a Nation* took the country by storm and convinced filmmakers that audiences would pay advanced prices for big pictures in exclusive roadshow engagements. The following year saw a number of productions designed to rival Griffith's success. Thomas Ince produced *Civilization*, Vitagraph brought out *The Battle Cry of Peace* and Griffith sought to top himself with *Intolerance*.

JOAN THE WOMAN was also planned as a special production with a huge budget for the time, and Jesse Lasky created the Cardinal Film Corporation solely to produce and exploit the picture.

The film became a prototype for DeMille's later spectacles. His handling of the large battle scenes (with the aid of seventeen cameras and a small army of assistant directors, including William deMille, George Melford and Donald Crisp) was exceptional - equal to Griffith's work in *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*. The real strength of the picture, however, is found in the director's provocatively compelling images:

- At Joan's trial by torture, officers of the Church are clad in white hooded robes with black holes for eyes. DeMille frames his shot so that the top of Cauchon's mitre is out of frame, and he looks like a black-clad grand dragon of the invisible empire surrounded by Klansmen and hiding behind a crucifix rather than a bishop of the Church...
- The empty town square on the morning of Joan's execution. An executioner drives a single horse cart piled with kindling to lay around the stake where Joan will meet her death. A lone dog is the only living thing, barking a futile protest...
- As Joan is led to the stake, the Bishop Cauchon seizes her ornate crucifix, and as the flames surround her, Eric Trent hands Joan a handmade cross of simple twigs which she carries to her death...

Unlike Griffith, DeMille shuns the use of florid agitprop subtitles to carry his message. Instead, he weaves a tapestry of highly complex images, calling on the audience to discover the symbolism and meaning without ever drawing attention away from the narrative.

For the first time DeMille and Wyckoff employed the Handschiegl color process in addition to the usual tints and tones. The Handschiegl process was an elaborate stencil-color system that was used to hand-color portions of the film - notably establishing shots and art titles that showed little movement on screen. The process was used to color the flames when Joan is burned at the stake.



Critical reaction to JOAN THE WOMAN was almost universally positive, and the picture did well at the box-office - but not nearly well enough.

In an effort to get more performances per day, the picture was drastically cut very early in the run, yet by March 13, 1917, Lasky reported that "JOAN is doing absolutely no business in New Jersey and indications are that state rights men will have difficulty in exhibiting JOAN at high prices..."

Ultimately, DeMille's big picture probably did no better or worse than its nearest competition, D.W. Griffith's massive four-story film fugue, *Intolerance*. While JOAN grossed double its negative cost, the picture did little more than break even by the time all the distribution costs were factored in.

The relative failure of JOAN THE WOMAN put Cecil B. DeMille in an awkward position. His agreement with Jesse Lasky allowed him to make lengthy "special productions" for roadshow release, but it was clear that the market for large-scale epics was nonexistent in 1917.

This DVD release offers DeMille's director's cut and the original hand-colored climax. William Furst's original 1916 score is performed by Christian Elliott at the J. Ross Reed Wurlitzer, Sexson Auditorium, Pasadena, California.

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