



# EYES OF YOUTH

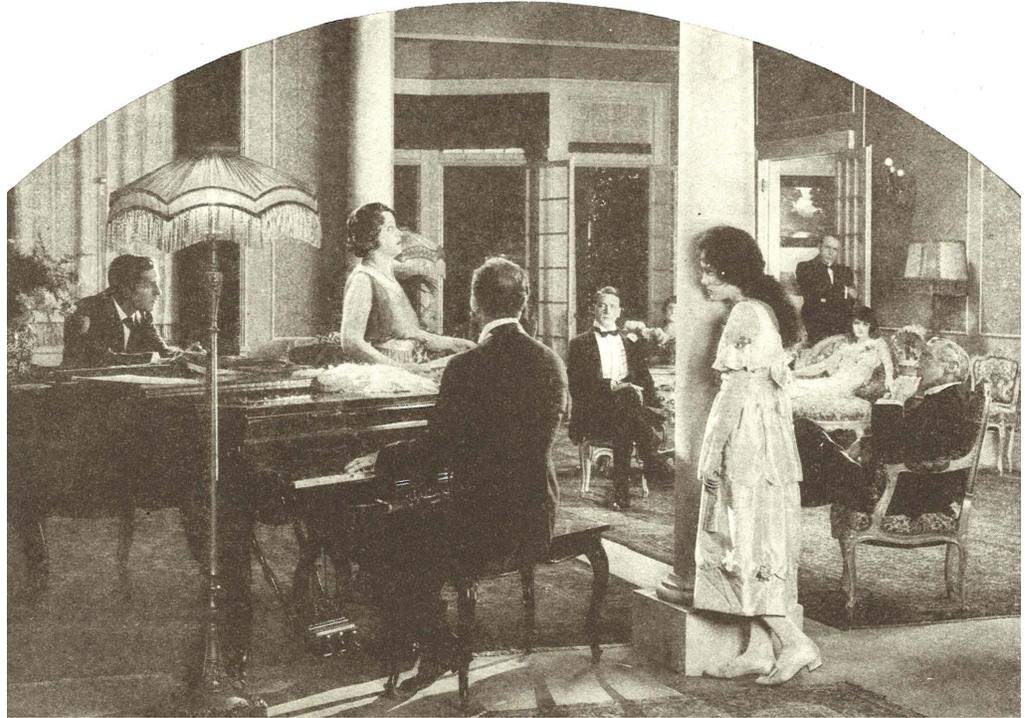
1919

## NOTES

**Presented by**..... Harry Garson  
**Directed by**..... Albert S Parker  
**Scenario by**..... Albert S Parker and (uncredited) Lenore Coffee  
**Adapted by**..... Charles E Whittaker  
**From the play by**..... Max Marcin and Charles Guernon  
**Camera:**..... Arthur Edeson  
**Art director:**..... John Voshell  
**Associate art director:**..... Ben Carré (for Himalayan scenes only)  
**Title writer:**..... Tom Geraghty  
**Art titles:**..... Carl Neuese  
**Editor (uncredited):**..... Violet Blair  
**Script girl (uncredited):**..... Lenore Coffee  
**Original length:**.....7 reels  
**Surviving copy:**.....6 reels

## CAST

Clara Kimball Young ..... Gina Ashling  
Gareth Hughes..... Kenneth, her brother  
Pauline Starke ..... Rita Ashling, her sister  
Sam Sothern ..... Asa Ashling her father  
Edmund Lowe ..... Peter Judson  
Ralph Lewis ..... Robert Goring  
Milton Sills ..... Louis Anthony  
Vincent Serrano ..... The Yogi  
Wm Courtleigh..... Paolo Salvo  
Norman Selby ..... Dick Brownell  
Rudolfo Valentino ..... Clarence Morgan  
Arthur Hoyt..... Board of Education official  
*with Edward Kimball, Clara Kimball Young's father, in a small role.*



## SPOILER ALERTS!

In the late 1950s, the director of *Eyes of Youth*, Albert S. Parker, lived in London, in the exclusive district of Mayfair. I had already made contact with him and paid several visits to his luxurious flat, for he had played the villain in the very first film I ever acquired, *American Aristocracy* (1916) starring Douglas Fairbanks. Parker later directed *The Black Pirate* (1926) for Fairbanks, the first two-colour Technicolor swashbuckler. Wiped out by the 1929 stock market crash, Parker changed careers and in 1931 went to work for Fox as a talent scout.

Albert Edwin Weir Parker (no 'S'!) was born in Brooklyn on May 11, 1885 and, embarking on a theatrical career, he married a student from the American Academy of Dramatic Art, Margaret Greene, in 1911.

Having accompanied his father on business trips to England, he became so keen on the place many thought he was English. In 1922, he crossed the Atlantic to shoot locations in London for *Sherlock Holmes*, with John Barrymore. In the mid-1930s he was sent by Fox to film Noël Coward's *Cavalcade* – literally to photograph a performance on the stage in London. Fox were so incensed when he filmed the play complete from both sides of the stage that they were ready to fire him. However, Parker liked London so much he cabled for permission to stay and Fox let him make quota quickies at their Wembley studios.

He changed careers again and became an agent -- discovering James Mason, Richard Attenborough and Helen Mirren en route. He thought he could do better than the average run of agents. As he told me in 1960: "There are too many guys around who sit in plush armchairs, their thumbs in their buttonhole minds, and don't do a goddamn thing for anyone without taking their ten percent, Well, I've got to live, but not that way."

He was an expansive, genial man, inclined to flare up, but if he liked you, he would do his best for you. Director Ronald Neame called him “Fierce-tempered, heart-of-gold Al Parker.”<sup>1</sup> He was full of wisecracks and catchlines: “I can’t remember the name,” he would say, “I’ll recall it when I’m sober.”

A few of his wisecracks dated from the silent era: “As Mickey Neilan used to say, there are more horses’ asses in the world than there are horses.” Richard Attenborough liked him; his film *Brighton Rock*, (1947) had a scene in a hotel lobby with a bellboy calling “Mr Al Parker, please!”

When I informed him that I had found a print of *Eyes of Youth*, Parker was delighted. He had bragged so often about discovering Rudolph Valentino – now he could prove it. His second wife, the Australian actress Margaret Johnston, organised a dinner party and invited me to show the film afterwards - as a surprise.

I was concerned about the reaction of the audience. I had shown them silent films before, but what they thought then didn’t matter, whereas it was important now that they didn’t ruin Al’s big night with titters. (For some reason, most people felt called upon to titter at silent pictures in those days.) *Eyes of Youth* was very much a film of its time, handsomely made, with charmingly illustrated titles, but undeniably heavy-handed. It was the sort of sanctimonious melodrama that demanded more seriousness than my audience was prepared to give it. I dreaded that first burst of laughter, but they were respectful – or were they just being kind? Probably both.

Among that exclusive group were members of Parker’s internationally-famous clientele - Trevor Howard, Hardy Kruger, Clive Brook and James Mason, together with their wives. As the lights went out, Parker intoned: “Ladies and gentlemen. you are about to witness an animated graveyard. Everyone appearing in the picture is now dead – except me.”<sup>2</sup> I switched on, and the main titles gave prominence to Harry Garson, producer. No mention yet of Valentino. From the audience, absolute silence. The atmosphere was slightly funereal. A heavy scent wafted through the smoke-filled room, - was it incense? Actually, it was the camphor. added to the print by Kodak as a preservative. The director’s name, splashed across the screen, brought warm applause.

Parker’s running commentary continued as the picture progressed. I don’t approve of people talking through films, particularly silent ones – it is distracting, unfair to the film and disturbing to the mood. But I could hardly object in this situation...! When Rita (Pauline Starke) leaves her husband (Milton Sills) and collapses, weeping, in the arms of her sister Gina (Clara Kimball Young), Parker said he had no trouble getting tears– the 19-year old had been jilted by her boyfriend the very day they shot the scene. He also recalled some intriguing technical points; the fades were important, he said, because they acted as curtains to emphasise the effect of the dramatic scenes.

The picture was based on a 1917 Broadway success starring Marjorie Rambeau. New York summers were so hot, he explained, that before air conditioning, most theatres had to close for the season. Thus his film, based in a studio close to Hollywood, California, had an all-star cast of top New York stage actors, only too happy to work in comfort and have a holiday at the same time.

An immensely popular film star, Clara Kimball Young played Gina Ashling, a successful opera singer who has reached a crossroads in her emotional life and yearns for some way to see into the future. A passing Yogi (Vincent Serrano) who has come to the West to seek dedicated souls, believes that in Gina he has found one. He carries a crystal ball to amuse the scoffers, but now finds it of genuine value, for it reveals three of the four paths open to her.

Clara must have experienced the same sense of déjà-vu as Gina Ashling, for her career followed an eerily similar path. She had started in pictures in 1909, and was voted the most popular screen actress by a fan magazine in 1914. A delightful comedienne in her youth, she specialised in more serious roles in her later years and now her career was on the wane. Publicist Harry Reichenbach, who worked on this picture, wrote in his 1931 memoir, *Phantom Fame*:

<sup>1</sup>Ronald Neame with Barbara Cooper Roizman, *Straight from the Horse’s Mouth*, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen. N.J. 2003

<sup>2</sup>Footnote: He was pessimistic – still alive were Gareth Hughes (d.1965), Pauline Starke (d.1977) and Edmund Lowe (d.1971). Parker himself died on August 10, 1974.

"I first saw her in a Vitagraph comedy, *Goodness Gracious!* She was only getting \$150 a week then. Later she came to the World Film Company where I handled her publicity and then she went over to Lewis Selznick [David's father]. This was not a very fortunate association, but in spite of many handicaps she managed to become [one of] the biggest stars in pictures.

"Selznick had three other women whom he starred. Elaine Hammerstein, the grand-daughter of Oscar, and Norma and Constance Talmadge. Clara's prestige was so great that if an exhibitor wanted her picture, he had to take with it films featuring the other three women. In this way, Clara swung the whole company for Selznick and helped develop the careers of the Talmadge sisters. Later on she did the same for Olive Thomas. By 1916, Clara was getting \$1000 a week, a fabulous sum at that time. [Although Mary Pickford earned \$10,000 a week.] Later, her contract was sold to Equity Picture Corporation which produced *Eyes of Youth* – one of the biggest money-makers in moviedom up to that period.

"We never had to mention her full name. She was known and beloved by all movie fans. When Clara, my wife and I would travel about, it would be impossible to move without a heavy bodyguard of police. The crowds gathered in thousands to admire and worship her. In the dining room of the St Francis Hotel, they stood on their chairs to look at her.

"One day in Detroit, at a big charity affair, she met Mr Z [code for producer Harry Garson] She took a fancy to him and shortly afterward he took charge of her business affairs. Nothing seemed to work out successfully under his magic touch and Clara went steadily downward. She had arranged to pay Selznick \$25,000 a year for ten years to obtain her release but no longer had the means for it. Everybody began to clamor 'Get rid of Z!'

"I met Selznick and he told me, 'If she keeps away from Z. I'll give her all the time she wants to pay off her indebtedness to me, otherwise, I'll sue.'

One day I met Adolph Zukor [head of Paramount] at the barber-shop in the Belmont Hotel. 'What are you going to do with Clara?' he asked me.

'I don't know.'

'I'll tell you what I'll do,' said Zukor. 'I'll give her \$7000 a week and 25% of the profits for two years. But on one condition – Z can't come into the studio.'

I called her up and told her both propositions.

'I should say not,' she said. 'They can't pick my admirers for me!' And that was that.

"Selznick got his judgment against her and Zukor didn't give her the contract. Z. started a Clara Kimball Young company and I was engaged at \$1000 a week with an interest in the firm. It was only the deep personal interest that I had for this magnificent woman that held me in the service of the firm.

"Z. would sit at table with us and humer Clara. She was very anxious to buy the play *Romance* and Z promptly told her he had bought it. She knew he was humoring her because United Artists had bought it the day before but she wouldn't let anybody else know. Unfortunately for herself, Clara was one of those fascinating women who was too beautiful to be calculating or practical.

"In her early days she had had a hard life. All this that she attained was fairyland and unreality and she lived through it in a stupor. A Los Angeles merchant, a millionaire, worshipped the dust of her steps. He arranged to have her adorn his store window with the costume she wore in *For the Soul of Rafael* in order to make her acquaintance. After that he proposed to her every week for five years. He wanted to place a million dollars in her name as a trust fund. But he touched no responsive chord in her heart and she refused the gift.

"In the meantime, the company went on the rocks. Clara pawned her jewels to meet the bills, the studio was mortgaged from roof to cellar, and to top off her misfortunes she came down with an attack of appendicitis. After that, the crash downward was terrifying. Clara grasped at every straw to remain in the public eye. Z. arranged a stock company play for her in his home-town. The opening night looked promising but after that there was emptiness. Clara grew ill and went back to her home in Hollywood. Three years later I tried to induce her to play matron parts. Though she never wanted to abandon the role of eternal youth, she was forced by poverty to consent. I spoke to an officer of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and he asked how much she would take. 'Seven hundred dollars a week,' I told him. It was a fast descent from seven thousand.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'We can get all the character women we want at \$200 a week.'"

Clara Kimball Young had allowed Garson to take over as producer and director. – not to mention husband. (She had divorced director James Young in 1916) She carried on making pictures until 1923 but their quality deteriorated. She played in a handful of talkies and a couple of sound serials, and retired in 1941.

The end came in 1960, said Gareth Hughes. "She had two strokes and faded away. At the funeral, the place was packed. There were so many old-time stars, old women but also teenage girls. They'd brought along their grandchildren."

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Toward the end of the projection, the eagerly awaited moment arrived. Credited as 'Rudolfo,' Valentino was introduced as 'Clarence Morgan, a cabaret parasite' Parker chuckled. "He had to get that overcoat he's wearing out of hock," he told us. "He earned \$150 for the role but he bellyached that he didn't get more." Parker touched upon a blackmail case Valentino had been involved in and how the New York police had offered him the fare to go anywhere he liked. He had chosen Hollywood.

He said he tried interesting Rex Ingram, who was to direct Metro's huge production *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, (1921) and then June Mathis, who had written the scenario, but according to him, neither thought much of Valentino's talent. He then met Joseph Schenck and showed him the roughcut of *Eyes of Youth* and since Schenck was an associate of Marcus Loew, part-owner of Metro, and Mathis was also supervisor, Valentino was finally signed for the leading role.

Parker claimed to have discovered the young Italian while he was still a dancer, yet by the time of *Eyes of Youth* he had already appeared in nine pictures. However, Al did give him the role which led directly to his great starring part. But June Mathis was the one who cast him.

After Parker and Mathis, Harry Reichenbach was another claimant for the title of Chief Discoverer of the Great Star. "I first met Valentino in the tea room at the Alexandra Hotel, Los Angeles. He functioned as a dancing partner for girl patrons of the hotel, a hanger-on, one of the myriad hopefuls that one day dreamed to be used as an extra on the movie lots close by. He came over to greet me, anxious to introduce himself, saying he had heard a good deal about me. It happened that Clara Kimball Young needed a handsome straight man in *The Eyes of Youth* – a sort of gigolo, and I told Herb Sanborn, her manager, to come and have a look at Valentino. At first Herb turned Rudolph down flat, for his left ear was cauliflowered, but after I convinced him that Rudolph didn't have to be photographed with a left profile, he agreed to take him on."<sup>3</sup>

My audience in Al Parker's flat, absorbed and sometimes amused by the story, impressed by the pictorial quality, fascinated by the fact that they were personal friends of the man who had made it, were enjoying the film for its own sake. And for the first and probably the last time, they were seeing their predecessors – the great stars of forty years before – none of whom had made it into the current cinema.

<sup>3</sup>Reichenbach went on to say: "Valentino never photographed with a left profile throughout his entire career on the screen." See Donna Hill's pictorial biography *Rudolph Valentino - The Silent Idol* (Blurb.com 2011) for that theory to be blown out of the water!



While the director was reliving an almost forgotten period of his life... At the end of the show he sat ruminating for several minutes. Then he turned to the audience. "What a terrible picture," he said, to our surprise. "That was no animated graveyard. That was just a graveyard."

The guests told him how much they had enjoyed it, and how surprised they had been by the overall look of the film. After all, it had been made 45 years before!

Parker sighed. "They were romantic days, the silent days," he said. "There's no romance today. It's just a business." Then he grinned. "But when you start reflecting on the past, you're in the old poop class."

Cecil B DeMille once wrote that no episodic picture had ever been successful – he had made enough to know. Yet this one made a tremendous profit; its success may well have encouraged DeMille to keep making his own marital pictures.<sup>4</sup>

Clara would have attracted a fair turnout by herself, although she looks older than twenty-nine, but she had the support of Edmund Lowe (he would play Sgt Quirt in *What Price Glory?* in 1926), Pauline Starke (at her best in the films of Borzage and Tourneur), Milton Sills (another Tourneur veteran, soon to become more famous through films like *The Sea Hawk* (1924) and *Valley of the Giants*, 1927), Rudolph Valentino, (about to become the superstar of silents), Ralph Lewis (a reliable support from Griffith films) and Gareth Hughes (selected to play *Sentimental Tommy* by J M Barrie himself) – all famous, or about to become famous.

But the players are only required to stand or sit and speak the titles. This is a silent talkie, very much the kind of thing people imagine all silents to look like – and while there certainly were a lot of hokum melodramas, many were imbued with more energy and ideas by their directors. For all its careful photography, it hasn't much production value. John Voshell's sets are restricted to offices, apartments and a courtroom - with very little shot outside. Reichenbach's publicity department claimed that sixty-one sets had been constructed for the film, which included scenes shot on the docks and coastline of San Francisco.

<sup>4</sup>FN: Telegram Cecil B DeMille to Jesse Lasky, Mar 3 1923, Brigham Young U.

Gareth Hughes had fond memories of Al Parker as director: "He was such a nice person, young, pacing the floor, brooding, thinking what to do next." Parker was given a hard time by producer Harry Garson ("A terrible, horrible person", said Hughes, in his Welsh accent.)

After almost a hundred years, it is all too easy to pick holes in *Eyes of Youth*, but it's worth remembering that feature pictures in America had been in existence for a mere seven years.

It has to be admitted, however, that the film has a plot which, in the words of Valentino's biographer Emily Leider, "sounds silly enough to have been invented by Monty Python."<sup>5</sup> It might have passed muster had it had a more imaginative director – a Maurice Tourneur, for instance. There are too many titles and the acting is sometimes unconvincing. Clara Kimball Young gives a mechanical performance, quite unlike her warm and vivid characterisation of Trilby in the 1915 Tourneur film.

Just occasionally, it goes so far into bathos that one is astounded. In the last of the glimpses into the future, Gina Ashling, abandoned by her lovers, has become a drug addict and we see her, a wretched streetwalker, trudging through the rain. The makeup man has done such a job on her – and Clara adds a facial tic and a ghastly cold - that you are utterly repelled. So when Edmund Lowe takes her in his arms and declares: "There is happiness still for us both", one's rule against laughing at silent films is severely tested.

And yet the scene was hailed by *Variety* (Nov 7 1919): 'Her makeup in these scenes is truly masterful and she has not hesitated thoroughly to disguise the personal beauty for which she is famous.' Yet in the same review, *Variety* advocated that the final few hundred feet 'should be entirely scissored' to avoid anti-climax 'If the distributor does not apply the scissors themselves, the wise exhibitor will undoubtedly do so.' While *Photoplay* thought that as the drug addict, Clara achieved the most convincing work of her career, even though they dismissed the rest of her characterisation as singularly uneven. 'As a forlorn drug wreck, she is absolutely true to all of cocaine's symptomatology... She is a pitiful thing of twitching muscles and lack-luster eyes, a creature of the living dead.'

*The Eyes of Youth* is an example of the mystical films that appealed so much to audiences at the end of the war – *Broken Blossoms* and *The Miracle Man* were both released that same year of 1919, when people who had lost loved ones were tempted to embrace the spiritual world. Griffith/De Mille flashbacks are here transformed into flash-forwards, depicting the fates awaiting Gina if she chooses to follow the Path of Purity, the Path of Ambition, or the Path of Wealth. Straightforwardly shot, some of it is undeniably corny –yet all of it provides engrossing entertainment and is a perfect reflection of its period, especially in its somewhat hypocritical condemnation of Money - the least of life!

"*Eyes of Youth* was hailed as "a knockout," wrote Emily Leider, "and became a box-office hit after opening to the trade in the grand ballroom of New York's Hotel Astor, where thirteen hundred viewers sat for the screening, another several hundred stood, and afterward all danced to Irving Berlin's *Eyes of Youth* Waltz."

The critics were kind. *Photoplay* (February 1920 p71) called it 'a picture triumph', saying that while it contained no new philosophy of life, 'it is one new-fangled narrative fabricated out of three or four of the oldest in a hard-worked business'. *Motion Picture Magazine* (April May 1920 p75) thought it 'decidedly well-produced' but complained that the Oriental seer needed something more – something of the altruism of Richard Barthelmess as the Chinese mystic in *Broken Blossoms*. While *Variety* (Nov 7 1919) would have preferred 'a more clean cut characterisation' for the Indian – rather than a Gregory Peck, I think they wanted much the same as *Motion Picture Magazine*.

Of course, the film is watched today only because Valentino makes an appearance in the penultimate reel . But in the final reel, appears another famous – or more accurately. infamous - character: Norman Selby. He was better known as Kid McCoy, the champion boxer, married nine times, and imprisoned for murder - ironically, he plays a police detective. How curious that no one thought his story might attract bigger audiences even than Clara's....

<sup>5</sup>FN: *Dark Lover, the Life and Death of Rudolph Valentino*, p 96, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, NY 2003

The Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck, a Nobel laureate and author of *The Blue Bird* (filmed by Tourneur) was a great admirer of American motion pictures. He thought they were America's most original and significant contribution to art. 'Of all the cinemas I have seen, the Americans are incomparably the best' (NY Times Jan 18 1920). He singled out this film, 'for it contained a beautiful conception, at once original and searching'. Modern audiences might be surprised by such enthusiasm for what is, after all, a fairly routine high-anxiety marital melodrama. But Maeterlinck added a sting: -- it was 'apparently not unfolded as adequately as might be, and lacking in grace, good taste and feeling' (*Photoplay* April 1921 p 36).

An all-black version of *Eyes of Youth* appeared in 1920, starring Abbie Mitchell. This would have been seen exclusively by black audiences.

It was also remade by United Artists as *The Love of Sunya* in 1927, starring Gloria Swanson in her first independent production. It was again directed by Albert Parker, and the Valentino part taken by the little-known Ivan Lebedeff (the sequence was almost identical). Alas, the film was a flop – unlike its fascinating if eccentric original.

**Kevin Brownlow**

*London, Jan 21 2018*