

Grand Hotel



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Edmund Goulding. Produced by Irving Thalberg. Screenplay by William A. Drake. Based on the 1930 play *Grand Hotel* by William A. Drake and the 1929 play *Menschen im Hotel* by Vicki Baum. Cinematography by William H. Daniels. Art Direction by Cedric Gibbons. Title music by William Axt, performed by Charles Maxwell. Edited by Blanche Sewell. Key Costumers: Eugene Joseph and the women's gowns are by 'Adrian'

Cinematic and DVD length: 112 minutes. Distributed by Metro Goldwyn Mayer. Cinematic release: April 1932. DVD release: 2005. Check for ratings. Rating 90%.

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Written Without Prejudice

Cast

Greta Garbo as Grusinskaya

John Barrymore as Baron Felix von Geigern

Joan Crawford as Flaemmchen,

Wallace Beery as General Director Preysing

Lionel Barrymore as Otto Kringelein

Lewis Stone as Doctor Otternschlag

Jean Hersholt as Senf, the porter

Robert McWade as Meierheim

Purnell B. Pratt as Zinnowitz

Ferdinand Gottschalk as Pimenov

Review:

Grand Hotel is an ensemble piece, the film follows the lives of two of the staff and five guests for a few days in an elite Berlin hotel. The era is Weimar, some years after World War One and the subsequent troubled times of the early 1920s. Despite being filmed in 1931 the film remains surprisingly undated. The first reason must be because it focuses so very well on what never dates: human character and believable situations. The strict 1930s censorship codes are another problem with credibility which are deftly circumvented with Lubitsch touches conveying sexual involvement or hidden motivations that adults can read but children or simpletons (including many a censor) miss. The usual 1930s dated Hollywood contrivances used to sustain cardboard characters who proceed through adventures, threats and resisted temptations towards their happy ending may work in bubbly comedies, cartoons and Broadway musicals, but in drama at best these scenarios and tactics cause a sense of being dissatisfied for the viewer. Obvious cinematic plot contrivances and didactic scenes create distance between the film and its viewer. Frequently such distancing leads to disbelief, boredom and contempt.

These problems do not arise in *Grand Hotel*. For starters the screenplay by William A. Drake combines perfect pacing with a strong sense of place, flowing, believable dialogue and situations in the hotel which overlap but do not crowd each other. The filmmakers show the Grand Hotel to be more than just a lavish setting; it is a highly organized machine with a carefully maintained efficiency level. Director Edmund Goulding conveys this in several shots of busy switchboard operators, the hotel Doctor Otternschlag (Lewis Stone) discussing hotel matters and the activities of the chief porter Senf.

Another strong advantage is the way the characters are rounded, plausible, varied, complex and at times ambiguous. This can be unusual in ensemble pieces, where characters are quickly delineated and then used to embody a type or symbolize a quality. Not here, although initially it seems that way when at the film's start Doctor Otternschlag philosophically introduces the hotel and the principal cast with the idea that they are welcome in the place where nothing ever really changes. The famed ballerina Grusinskaya (Greta Garbo) and her entourage arrive in a flurry. The aristocratic Baron Felix von Geigern (John Barrymore) seems to have something vaguely untrustworthy or calculating about him. Flaemmchen (Joan Crawford) is a would-be actress, appears in the hotel to work as

a stenographer. Otto Kringelein (Lionel Barrymore) a middle aged bachelor, has a fatal disease. After living a quiet life saving wages, he now wants opulence and extravagance and with his savings at the Grand Hotel he can get that in abundance - and he does.



A lobby card showing one of the film's pairings

Kringelein seems an everyman figure, embodying good hearted, unsubtle decency and some naïveté, but like many naïve people he can have moments of shrewd insight and also like many naïve people he loudly blasts those insights to the roof, heedless of their potential effects. Is he being naïve when he agrees to take Flaemmchen (Joan Crawford) with him as he travels on to a health spa? He has just told her he has ample money for them both and that she “will like him better” than his former boss General Director Preysing (Wallace Beery). He says

this in his naïve way, without a trace of lechery or innuendo. Doubts for the audience arise because of the flickering doubts that dart across Flaemmchen's face, but then she suddenly seems relieved, even carefree. This can be interpreted different ways. The most likely is that she is happy to be with a wealthy, likeable man who presents no danger or sexual involvement. Another interpretation would be that she is relieved to be off on an affair with someone rich but obviously preferable to Preysing. Suddenly Kringelein's words that she "will like him better" take on perhaps subconscious overtones of revenge. Preysing was Kringelein's hated, exploitative, bullying boss who publicly humiliated him.



Flaemmchen and Preysing in the bedroom scene

Did taking Preysing's human object of desire work as a subconscious form of revenge? Other aspects of this relationship are made much clearer. Flaemmchen is not some innocent being led into corruption. When Preysing propositions her, making it clear that her stenographer's new high wages and expense account are for sexual favours, her *almost* expressionless face gives both her knowledge and acceptance of the situation away. This is underlined by Preysing asking her if she

understands the situation and she responds with “Perfectly” delivered in a matter of fact tone. When he tells her they should use first names, she laughingly says no, as they might meet in the street ten years later, he would be with his wife and greetings with first names would give their fling away. Fortunately this film does not go into punishing the sexually involved woman scenarios which were almost compulsory for culture before the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Flaemmchen leaves the hotel with Kringelein; both are smiling. Preysling also leaves calmly, but definitely not smiling, being in handcuffs.



Joan Crawford in the 1930s. Her face could be enigmatic or nakedly expressive



While not from the film, this portrait of Greta Garbo was taken in the same year that it was made

Grusinskaya also leaves smiling, although we wonder for how long that smile will last. Initially depicted as a petulant, insecure celebrity worried about her dwindling audiences, love brightens her life to the point of exuberance. She thinks she will leave with her lover, the Baron. Reality however, awaits, but the audience is not shown how she will react, just as we are not shown if Kringelein will recover if Preyling will be jailed or what the future holds for Flaemmchen. As these five depart in their different ways new arrivals make it clear that new narratives - or rather fragments of them will unfold at the hotel, where as Doctor Otternschlag noted, nothing ever really changes. What he did not say was that nothing ever changes for the Grand Hotel: considerable changes come for people there. In the middle of the hotel being flown into a flurry by the death there, Senf the porter has a moment of joy as he gets a phone call that his wife has given birth. For the guest Otternschlag introduced there is a death, an arrest, love, work and hope of a cure.

The film captures only a brief moment in their lives and the filmmakers make that clear, avoiding the cliché of the neatly made ending where everything is displayed and explained, as if time can be held still with the words “The End.”



Edmund Goulding 1891-1959