Applause (1929)

Stefanie Diekmann

dir. Rouben Mamoulian; prod. Monte Bell, Jesse L. Lasky (uncredited), Walter Wanger (uncredited); screenplay Garrett Ford, Beth Brown; photography George J. Folsey. 35mm, black/white, 80 mins. Paramount Pictures, distrib. Paramount Pictures.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Applause is one of many films from the 1920s which chose the backstage as their main setting and the idea of hidden drama as their main trope. Other examples from the same decade include *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), *Nana* (1926), → *The Blue Angel* (1929), and → *Pandora's Box* (1929). *Applause* remains one of the earliest films to associate the backstage with the spectacle of female suffering which, located behind the scenes and in the dressing room, remains unseen and unnoticed, except by the cinema audience. At the same time, it is also a film about the power of the (male) gaze and a fitting example to illustrate the discomforts of cinematic spectatorship.

Director Rouben Mamoulian is mostly remembered today for his critically acclaimed film *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) and for his second melodrama, *Queen Christina* (1933), with Greta Garbo as the eponymous queen. *Applause* was his Hollywood debut, filmed and premiered in 1929. Until that year, Mamoulian had almost exclusively worked in the theater (with the exception of a two-color short film for the Eastman School of Music and Drama), first as a stage director in London and later as a director and producer of very successful Broadway plays such as *Porgy and Bess* or *Oklahoma*. Musical would also play a role in his filmography as a Hollywood director, alongside romantic adventure films like *The Mark of Zorro* (1940) and *Blood and Sand* (1941), before his career started to peter out in the 1940s. However, notwithstanding his interest in musical, comedy, and melodrama, he is less remembered for an affiliation with any particular genre than for his unconventional use of camera and sound, already visible in *Applause*. (With the advent of Technicolor, color schemes also came to play an important role in his films, starting with *Becky Sharpe* in 1935). Mamoulian's is a cinema marked by its proximity to theatrical settings and to drama as a mode of interaction. His films are above all con-

cerned with intensity: Locations, decor, backdrops as much as camera, sound, and color are employed to heighten the potential of cinematic expression.

Applause was by no means an immediate success. Instead, the film, made before the Production Code, was lauded for some of the performances (Helen Morgan as the aging vaudeville star, Joan Peers as the young daughter who is urged to succeed her, Fuller Mellish Jr. as the nasty paramour and artistic manager), but also criticized, both for the supposed sleaziness of its backstage drama and for the introduction and staging of an unusual assortment of locations and settings. Several critics remarked that the film's plot represented a curious mixture of sentimentality and cruelty, focusing on the struggles of Kitty Darling (Morgan), single mother, burlesque dancer, and singer, exploited by her unfaithful lover, and, for most of her time on screen, presented as a performer unable to realize that she is long past her prime. In contrast, the story of April Darling (Peers), her daughter, is told as a straightforward compassionate tale, from innocence to peril, from peril to suffering, and from suffering to rescue; innocence and rescue both being associated with ordered life (a convent, a marriage) and rural environments, while peril is clearly located in the city, in the theater, and in the show business.

Indeed, pre-code or not, the plot of *Applause* contains little to offend self-appointed moral guardians. If it knows a thing or two about show business, that knowledge is used to present vaudeville as a place where misery starts early, a world associated with illegality (in one of the first scenes, the protagonist receives a telegram announcing the execution of her daughter's father in prison), exploitation, loose morals, and the ruin of many a poor girl. The daughter, who has spent her childhood years in the countryside, comes into contact with this world belatedly and all the more brutally, as a witness to her mother's decline and public ridicule and as the near-victim of a scheme to replace the aging body of the mother-performer with the young one of the daughter—a drama of succession and a crude but effective twist on the concept of succession which has been described in the famous study of *The King's Two Bodies* (Kantorowicz). From this fate, she will be rescued by a young man who will marry her and take her away from the city (theater, stage, backstage) and back to the countryside.

If these aspects (especially the daughter's struggle to remove herself from the world of burlesque performance) can be read as attempts to mark a certain distance between *Applause* and the world of ›cheap‹ entertainment to which cinema originally belonged (as part of fairground attractions and vaudeville shows), that distance is by no means stable. Moments of uneasy proximity between Mamoulian's film and the theatrical setting which it purports to investigate can be found throughout the story. This becomes particularly obvious in one scene, early on in the film, in which Kitty Darling appears in front of a male audience whose derisive and distorted faces are shown in a long series of close-ups, while the film cuts back and forth between the audience, clearly marked as voyeuristic and malicious, and the performer on stage who, just as clearly, is presented as a woman unable to judge her own appearance.

The film's mixed attitude towards its vaudeville protagonist, at once destructive and empathetic, is just as ambivalent as its attitude towards theater and showmanship. Vaudeville, as it is represented in *Applause*, may be exploitative, cynical, and misogynist. At the same time, as scene after scene makes evident, the film shares the idea that the downfall of Kitty Darling is that of a protagonist who has just missed the right time to step out of the limelight. The humiliation she experiences on stage, at the hands of the

audience, is continued off-stage, in the dressing room and in her hotel room where she is followed not just by various characters but also by the camera which observes the various stages of her disintegration and, finally, her collapse when she realizes that her career is over and that she is no longer wanted or desired.

In its representation of the backstage and the theater performer, *Applause* takes a different approach from many films of the 1920s and is actually closer to feature films from the 1930s onwards. In many of the earlier works, the dressing room is still a place of seduction and mastery, governed by a sovereign and sometimes mischievous performer firmly in control of the impression she makes and of the schemes and intrigues behind the scenes (a motif still to be found in the backstage scenes of Lubitsch's *To Be or Not To Be* from 1942). It is only in the 1930s and 1940s, with films like *Stage Door* (1937) or *Entrée des Artistes* (1938), that the backstage and particularly the dressing room will be reconfigured as backgrounds to hidden suffering and desolation, an element that is both essential to many backstage movies and to the melodrama.

Indeed, the undeniable affinity that exists between backstage films and melodrama well into the 1970s and 80s may be explained by the fact that melodrama is a genre which tends to privilege the interior (closed spaces, walls, the private sphere) and by the tendency of many films about the theater to represent the dressing room as the sealed space *par excellence*, accessible only to the film camera, and, by mediation of that camera, the cinema audience. This approach goes hand in hand with the notion that hidden drama should be regarded (or represented) as more interesting than any drama that takes place on stage, just as the suffering behind closed doors promises to convey a higher state of intensity and authenticity than any public spectacle, be it located on a theater stage or elsewhere.

In short: Melodrama loves the dressing room, and the dressing room attracts melodrama, at least in cinema (Diekmann). In *Applause*, this liaison is used to create a number of scenes in which the stage performer, who is no longer fit to perform, will be submitted to a gaze that is at the same time compassionate and destructive (an observation which may be true for many film melodramas). It is also an essentially male gaze, endowed with the power to either affirm or negate the spectacle of the female body (Mulvey); and Mamoulian, in spite of his contemptuous attitude towards the men who visit the vaudeville *enfer*, fully subscribes to the idea that women of a certain age should best stay out of view if they want to stay out of trouble. Kitty Darling, the stage performer who has remained in the picture too long, is punished by an extended death scene, surrounded by photographs that depict her former, attractive stage persona. And if that spectacle of loneliness, despair, and bodily decline is drawn out to maximum effect, it also indicates that, in its attitude towards female protagonists, melodrama is rarely without sadism.

To establish the possibility of escape from the theatrical environment of closed spaces and hidden misery, *Applause* chooses the obvious way out: to encounter her young savior, the daughter first has to leave the theater building and step out into the city streets, and once the encounter has taken place, it is followed by a rather astonishing episode of outdoor scenes that take the lovers to various landmarks in New York City. If the film's ending with its promise of marital bliss in the Midwest remains a little bleak, there is no doubt that Mamoulian both excels and delights in the filming of these intermediary and semi-documentary outdoor scenes, mostly shot on location (with the exception of one scene on Brooklyn Bridge), with natural lighting, offering

spectacular views of cityscapes and the most striking contrast to the lugubrious rooms which are so present in the film's other episodes.

In many ways, *Applause* can be regarded as a good example of Frieda Grafe's observation about (middlebrow) cinema: It is often neither the story nor the message that constitute the value of a film. Instead, the interest lies in the images that tend to grow and unfold beyond the storyline. In the case of Mamoulian's Hollywood debut, these images may include: the intense observation, both relentless and compassionate, of a body in decline; the repeated focus on appearances on and off stage; the extended death scene, in which not even those who are in the same room pay attention to the protagonist; the extravaganza of the New York City shots; and the final scene which positions the young couple, firmly committed to a future in the Midwest, in front of a large poster that shows Kitty Darling, former vaudeville star, in all her splendor and glory, clearly designed to outshine the two and to destabilize any closure that may have been implemented by the plot (Kappelhoff).

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