



The Chase after Millions

Dir. Max Obal | Germany | 1930 | N/C PG | b&w | German intertitles with English surtitles
1h 28m

Performing live: Günter Buchwald (piano, violin), Frank Bockius (percussion)

5pm on Saturday 22 March 2025

Screening material courtesy of Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum

*When we think about German silent cinema, invariably titles like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920), *Nosferatu* (1922), and *Metropolis* (1927) are among the very first to spring to mind. While such films have rightly earned their status as canonical masterpieces and cult classics, they nevertheless represent the mere tip of the proverbial iceberg when it comes to what German production companies were churning out and German cinema-going audiences were consuming on a daily basis in the 1920s. That which we might choose to describe as the German “popcorn cinema” of the time – which included everything from costume dramas to thrillers, comedies to melodramas, popular stage adaptations to action-adventure films – went overlooked for decades mainly because the films didn’t fit the pattern of what post-WWII film historians considered of high artistic or socio-critical value. And since historians didn’t find the films interesting, film archives didn’t prioritize them for preservation, creating an obstacle for subsequent generations of film historians to “rediscover” them – the vicious circle of film historiography! Thankfully, recent decades have seen increased efforts by historians, scholars, preservationists, programmers, and boutique labels to bring lesser known or forgotten German silents to light through preservation activities, screenings at specialized festivals and other venues, and even occasional DVD and Blu-ray releases.*

*Particularly beloved by cinema goers in the 1920s was the unique German brand of action-adventure film known in the vernacular as “Sensationsfilme”. One of the poster boys for the genre was Italian actor Luciano Albertini (1882-1945). A former athlete and trapeze artist, Albertini began appearing in films in his native Italy in the mid-1910s, when Italy ranked among the foremost production countries in the world. Following the success of *Cabiria* (1914) and the subsequent *Maciste* off-shoot series, there was a demand for likeable brawny (anti-)heroes, and Albertini, with his athletic physique and affable appearance, fitted the bill. From 1917, he appeared as *Sansone* (Samson) in his own successful series. When the local film industry fell into economic collapse following the end of the First World War,*



Albertini, alongside countless other Italian actors and filmmakers, came to Germany where the film industry was flourishing and working conditions were much better. It didn't take long for Albertini to establish himself as one of the top stars of the Sensations film genre, alongside home-grown actor-auteur Harry Piel, Austrian-American cowboy star Eddie Polo, and Albertini's fellow countryman Carlo Aldini.

Die Jagd nach der Million (released in Britain in 1931 as The Chase After Millions) was destined to be the last of the 18 silent starring vehicles Albertini made in Germany between 1920 and 1930 (his career was tragically cut short two years later by a nervous breakdown, from which he never recovered). The film contains all the ingredients of a typical Albertini film, "Suspense, breathtaking speed, a plethora of daredevilish stunts and superhuman feats (often playing out against the backdrop of picturesque outdoor shooting locations), an ample portion of self-deprecating humo[u]r and – last but not least – a love story with the obligatory happy ending."¹ Here Albertini plays an Italian nobleman and heir to a fortune, Count Francesco Sandolo, who has unwittingly fallen victim to a case of identity theft and who basically spends the entire film (as the title implies) hot on the heels of the imposter. The screenplay is based on the 1928 novel Lord Spleen by prolific pulp author Ludwig von Wohl (1903-1961), who became something of an in-demand screenwriter in the sound era. Von Wohl, who emigrated to Britain in the mid-1930s, changing his name to Louis de Wohl, re-established himself as a bon vivant and amateur astrologer, gaining notoriety in high society circles, and (in)famously becoming involved with MI5 during World War 2 (a tale worthy of a novel in itself that wouldn't half resemble one of Von Wohl's own pulpy novels!).

Shot partly on location in the Dalmatian region of Croatia, The Chase After Millions was produced by the Berlin-based A.A.F.A. company, for which Albertini had worked since 1926. Albertini's films for A.A.F.A. stand out from his earlier efforts for their emphasis on story over stunts and for sporting decent supporting casts with more to do than just serve as extensions of the scenery. Here Albertini is joined by a roster of competent performers, many of whom were familiar faces in popular German films at the time, including Austrian actor Harry Hardt as the imposter, Italian actor Raimondo van Riel as the crooked baron in cahoots with the phony count, Austrian actress Gretl Berndt as his baron's ward and Albertini's love interest, as well as the Hungarians Elza Temáry (as the imposter's girlfriend and bad-girl-who-turns-out-good-in-the-end) and Ernö Verebes, who very much steals the show with his comic turn as Albertini's kleptomaniac side-kick Carlos. It comes as no surprise that

¹Oliver Hanley, Anke Mebold, "Rediscovering the Sense in the Nonsensical. Luciano Albertini and His Action-Adventure Film *Mister Radio*", in the accompanying booklet to Edition *filmmuseum's* 2024 DVD release of Albertini's film *Mister Radio* (Germany, 1924, director: Nunzio Malasomma), no page number [= p. 6].



Verebes would soon after become a popular leading man, and when he appeared alongside Albertini again in *Es geht um alles* (1932), the roles were reversed, with Verebes taking the lead and Albertini (in his swansong) reduced to a small supporting part.

When *The Chase After Millions* premiered in Berlin on 31 March 1930, "talkies" were all the rage. And while cinema was still in the midst of the transition, the way of the future was clear. In their annual report to their stakeholders for their meeting on 25 June 1930, the A.A.F.A. board of directors announced *The Chase After Millions* would be one of their final silent productions, and they would from now on only be producing sound films. The film was nevertheless released in certain territories with a synchronised music-and-effects track on shellac discs akin to the American Vitaphone process to pass it off as a sound film (of sorts). Miraculously, the soundtrack has survived, albeit incomplete (4 of the 10 discs are still missing).

Albertini's huge popularity around the world has ensured that vintage prints of most of his German silents have survived in film archives in different parts of the world. While several have undergone active preservation at some point or other, *The Chase After Millions* was (to this author's knowledge) the first to be properly restored including comparing and piecing together no less than four surviving foreign release prints to create the most complete version possible, recreating missing intertitles from primary written sources, and – most complex of all – synchronizing the image to the surviving parts of the soundtrack. Since the film remains in essence a silent film, it is possible to screen it with live musical accompaniment, just as it was presented at its Berlin premiere in 1930, and how it will be shown now at HippFest.

OLIVER HANLEY

Oliver Hanley is a film preservationist and curator. Among other things, he serves as co-artistic director of the Bonn International Silent Film Festival since 2021 and curates the "One Hundred Years Ago" section of Bologna's *Il Cinema Ritrovato* film festival since 2023.

