



## The Pleasure Garden

Dir. Alfred Hitchcock | UK | 1925 | N/C 12A | b&w, tinted & toned | English intertitles

1h 32m + short

Performing live: Jane Gardner (piano), Hazel Morrison (percussion)

3pm on Friday 21 March 2025

Screening material courtesy of the BFI National Archive

### (These programme notes contain spoilers)

*The Pleasure Garden* has an important place in film history as the directorial debut of Alfred Hitchcock, and it also offers an intriguing checklist of future “Hitchcock-isms”. Based on a 1923 novel by Oliver Sandys, it tells the story of two chorus girls, Patsy (Carmelita Geraghty) and Jill (Virginia Valli), who represent those two common tropes of womanhood; the virtuous and the corrupt. It was also the first of Hitchcock’s series of movies with a theatre setting, including *The Lodger*, *Downhill* (both 1927) and *Stage Fright* (1950).

The film opens with showgirls skipping down a spiral staircase onto a stage, wearing skimpy costumes and blonde wigs to transform their appearance. Leering men ogle them through opera glasses, and this first Hitchcock moment sets up reoccurring themes across his 53-film resumé, of staircases, theatre, voyeurism, blonde hair, and the use of disguise through costume.

A young woman, Jill, arrives at London’s Pleasure Garden with a letter of introduction for the manager. But when she is robbed of all her belongings outside the theatre, Patsy, one of the chorus girls, offers her a place to stay. Patsy also helps Jill to get a role in the chorus line, and after wowing the audience with her Charleston dance, Jill becomes the toast of the show.

Jill has a fiancé, Hugh, who is travelling to Africa, but while he’s away, she is seduced by the high life and takes up with an immoral prince. While Jill is more interested in the luxury trappings, Patsy is preyed on by Hugh’s friend, Levet (Miles Mander), a smooth operator with a villainous moustache. They marry, but Levet is quick to join Hugh in Africa and has an affair with a local girl. She is a disposable “exotic” prop, and after being drowned by Hugh in a moment of tropical fever madness, she returns as a vengeful spirit.



Patsy follows Levet to Africa, where she finds her husband and Hugh seriously ill. She also discovers that her husband cheated on her, so Patsy chooses to take care of Hugh instead. In a fit of jealousy, Levet tries to kill Patsy too, but he is shot just in time. Hugh then realises that Patsy, the “pure” chorus girl, is who he wants to be with.

Hitchcock's entry into the film business was as a title card designer and art director at Famous Players-Lasky in the early twenties. When the studio closed its London outpost, he worked as assistant director for producer Michael Balcon's new company, Gainsborough Productions, and Balcon offered the enthusiastic young man the chance to direct. Balcon had arranged a co-production deal with a German studio, Emelka, for *The Pleasure Garden*, set to star two important American actresses, Virginia Valli and Carmelita Geraghty.

On a shoestring budget, Hitchcock travelled to Emelka's Munich studios in spring 1925 with his small team, including assistant director Alma Reville. Working closely together on adventurous location shoots around Europe, the two fell in love, and they married in December 1926. Alma was an experienced screenwriter and editor, and she would continue to play an important background role in helping to develop all of Hitchcock's films.

While Alma met the two American stars off their ship at Cherbourg, Hitchcock travelled to Lake Como for location shooting with a small unit of just his leading man Miles Mander, his cameraman, and a German actress who was to be drowned in the sea by Mander.

The journey from Germany to Italy was filled with mishaps. Mander had to race back to Munich station after realising he left his makeup box in the taxi. Hitchcock attempted to



smuggle the cameras and film across the border without paying duty, but the film was seized and they had to buy new expensive film stock. To be able to travel onto Lake Como and back to Munich again, he was forced to beg the production office for more money.

Once at Lake Como, there was a further setback when the German actress refused to go in the water for the crucial scene, and with the hotel bill and production expenses mounting up, Hitchcock recruited a waitress at the hotel to perform the role instead.

During his time in Munich, Hitchcock learned the techniques of German Expressionism, and it would influence his experimentation with light and shadow, and with the use of double exposure for the ghostly apparition effect. He also played with points of view, where we see the chorus girls through the lens of the lecherous audience members' opera glasses.

Even in this debut work, Hitchcock believed in the importance of costume and style. Alma took the actresses shopping in Paris, selecting a modern, stylish wardrobe that reflected the flapper trends for pleated skirts, cardigans, and sparkling evening gowns. At first Jill and Patsy look so similar it's difficult to tell them apart, but through their costume the difference in their moral values and success will be revealed.

*The Pleasure Garden* is the first of a series of Hitchcock's silents in which a young flapper is corrupted by glamour and fame; a similar character arc is shown in *Easy Virtue*, *The Ring*, and *Champagne*. The dual nature would also be a common theme in Hitchcock's future work, as seen with the two Mrs Max de Winters in *Rebecca*, Madeleine and Judy in *Vertigo*, and the double-sided nature of Marion Crane in *Psycho*, to name a few examples. It also boasts the first Hitchcock murder, and a ghostly apparition that is as haunting as *Vertigo*.

## CAROLINE YOUNG

*Caroline is the author of Hitchcock's Heroines and Single & Psycho: How Pop Culture Created the Unstable Single Woman.*