



## Smouldering Fires

Dir. Clarence Brown | USA | 1925 | N/C PG | b&w, tinted | English intertitles | 1h 20m + short

Performing live: John Sweeney (piano)

5pm on Sunday 23 March 2025

Restored by The Packard Humanities Institute

A century before *Babygirl*, Pauline Frederick plays a female executive in love with a younger male employee in Clarence Brown's sophisticated, and remarkably modern, Universal drama *Smouldering Fires*. Frederick plays Jane Vale, the fortysomething boss of a large textile factory, who embarks on an affair with a much younger man who works there, Robert Elliott (Malcolm McGregor). When Jane's younger sister Dorothy (Laura La Plante) arrives home from college, the scene is set for heartbreak, and self-sacrifice.

A plaque hanging in Jane's office declares, "Let No Man Be Necessary to You", supposedly her professional motto, and her late father's, which was also used as the film's promotional tagline. Flyers bearing those words were distributed by young women in Pierrot costumes on New York's Broadway, and the director and Frederick were photographed together with the plaque. Further promotional activities included the distribution of leaflets containing fire prevention tips, "Smouldering fires always result from carelessness" and 5,000 postcards sent to "professional women" – defined by *Motion Picture News* as "milliners, public stenographers, manicurists" – who might like to see themselves represented on screen.

Frederick was by this time a veteran actress of the stage and screen, having taken leading roles in films such as *Madame X* (Frank Lloyd, 1920) and Ernst Lubitsch's *Three Women* (1924). However, she suffered terrible stagefright on set, even though the role had apparently been written for her, by screenwriters Sada Cowan and Howard Higgen, dab hands with films about marriage and infidelity. Brown recalled, "the first two days on this one, I thought she was going to give up. But she was a great artist and pulled through bravely." No trace of fear remains in her performance. Her nuanced portrayal of





of the factory and Jane's expensive home. In this he is ably assisted by Jackson Rose's cinematography, and a generous budget, which facilitated filming in Yosemite National Park. While there, Brown was irked by a tree that ruined his favoured composition. Frederick volunteered, successfully, to use her star power to charm the hunky park ranger into allowing its destruction.

When it comes to his 1920s career, Brown is best known now for his string of collaborations with Greta Garbo, and in a similar vein, *The Eagle* (1925) (HippFest at Home 2021), starring Rudolf Valentino. This is, however, part of a loosely linked pair of outliers. Also in 1925, Brown directed another tragic drama about an older woman in a very different milieu: Louise Dresser played a reclusive, impoverished alcoholic who tells tall tales about a murder in *The Goose Woman* (HippFest 2013).

*Smouldering Fires* tells a contemporary story with a touching sensitivity, and an awareness of the persistent sexual double-standards. Thanks in particular to some witty edits and Dwinelle Benthall's snappy intertitles, it also has a wry sense of humour. It is a film of its era, all right, not least because the studio cut Brown's final scene, with its hint of a happy ending – of sorts. Its plot was loosely repeated in 1933's *Female*, a racy Pre-Code film starring Ruth Chatterton, and if the film were remade again now, further changes still would be required. Still, *Smouldering Fires* is a film ripe for rediscovery, a work of humanity and humour, with an indelible protagonist, played superbly by Pauline Frederick.

## PAMELA HUTCHINSON

*Pamela is a freelance critic, curator and film historian. Her publications include BFI Film Classics on The Red Shoes and Pandora's Box, and her website SilentLondon.co.uk is dedicated to silent cinema.*