

Remaking Silent Film History with "Nasty Women," New Music, and a Reckoning with Racism

by Catherine Russell

Cinema's *First Nasty Women* presents a rambunctious roster of talented ladies from the silent era challenging gender norms from every direction. They turn households inside out; they invert class and racial hierarchies; they do everything that men do, and they do it all in high spirits. These women actors and characters, who are white, Indigenous, Asian, and African American, are brought together in a groundbreaking Kino Lorber box set of ninety-nine films made between 1899 and 1926, constituting more than fourteen hours of running time. Based in equally significant scholarship by Maggie Hennefeld, author of *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* (Columbia University Press, 2018) and Laura Horak, author of *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908–1934* (Rutgers University Press, 2016), this collection remakes and expands the living history of the silent period. Hennefeld and Horak are the Project Directors, with archivist Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi from Amsterdam's Eye Film Museum as cocurator.

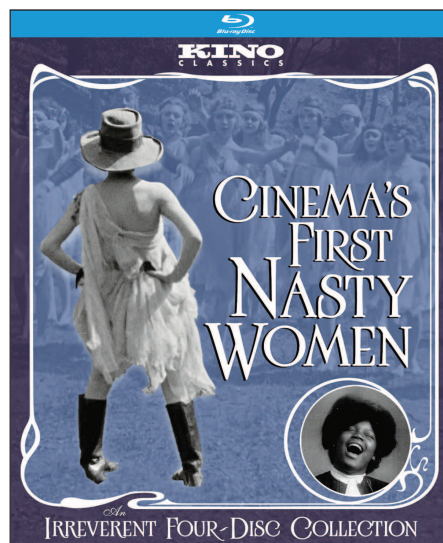
The proud nastiness of these performers, characters, and writers has become legible in light of Hillary Clinton's appellation by a former president. The "nasty woman" epithet was quickly appropriated in 2016 by international women's movements as a term for women who challenge dominant social norms: women who are threatening, clever, and outrageous. The women in these films are not literally nasty, but their unruly behavior needs to be recognized as a real intervention into the patriarchal status quo. As a metaphor, "nasty women" appropriates the insult and turns it into the comic grotesque gesture of a slap in the face. The curatorial project of this box set is a unique collaboration between feminist scholarship and archival media practice.

In addition to digitizing the films, most which have rarely been screened since their birth, the project directors have commissioned new scores that bring the films to life in exciting ways. They also assembled an antiracist panel that helps to contextualize difficult images of racialized people with commentary, introductory talks, a roundtable discussion in the accompanying booklet, and content advisories when needed (which is often). The package is thus a multilayered offering with historical, aesthetic, scholarly, entertainment, social justice, and pedagogical value.

The ninety-nine films included in *Cinema's First Nasty Women* are divided into four Blu-ray or DVD discs, and the 114-page booklet includes credits and descriptions, plus restoration and music credits for each title. The first two discs featuring comedies are labeled "Disastrous Domesticities and Anarchic Tomboys" and "Queens of Destruction," highlighting the turbulent effects of nasty women's disruptive antics. The second two discs, featuring cross-dressing and gender play, tend more toward the dramatic, although not without more high jinks, and are labeled "Gender

A variety of female pioneers upend long-held notions of femininity in a new box set of films which abandon decorum in favor of socially empowering portrayals and storylines.

Rebels" and "Female Tricksters." The series is roughly chronological, with some overlaps between discs, and run from a one-minute fragment (*Nellie the Beautiful Housemaid*, 1908) to two eighty-two-minute features (*The Snowbird*, 1916, and *Phil for Short*, 1919). Some films have commentaries in English, Spanish or both, some have alternate music tracks, and they all credit which of the thirteen international archives and libraries are responsible for the copy. The films themselves are all from Europe and North America, even though archives as far ranging as Istanbul and Mexico contributed films.



The Anonymous Comediennes of Silent Cinema

The inclusion of a fragment of a film otherwise lost is indicative of the approach of the curators who did not let missing information or film materials prevent them from compiling this feminist film history. Two of the most anarchic performers in the collection—Léontine and Little Chryisia—remain unidentified beyond their stage names. Each of them starred in their own cycles of films for which they were undoubtedly often responsible for writing and staging, if not co-directing, in the D.I.Y. production methods of early cinema. Léontine starred in twenty-four popular Pathé Frères films from

1910 to 1912, which were released in the United States as "Betty" films and were far less popular among American critics, who dismissed them as vulgar. Léontine dresses in a little girl's dress, but her physical comedy has a grown-up energy. She is a compulsive prankster, untethered to any norms of domestic decorum. If she has access to a modern gadget like a battery or an air fan, she will misuse it. If she gets a job in a store or a restaurant, she will wreck the place. If she is left alone in a house, she will trash it. The chaos left in her wake is testimony to all the boring and stultifying routine conventions and trappings of everyday life in bourgeois France, as well as the untapped potential of modern conveniences. And at the end of each film, she gets a good close-up mug at the camera.

Little Chryisia, for her part, made at least fifty-two films between 1911 and 1915 for Lux in France, where she starred in different series under the names of Cunégonde and Gisèle and, at Pathé Comica, Zoé. The *Nasty Women* collection includes twelve of her films. Rongen-Kaynakçi has determined that this talented woman was an English stage actress who began by playing male actors in vaudeville theaters before getting screen roles in France, then Italy, and finally England. Her character is constantly running into trouble not of her own making necessarily, but because chaos reigns (and rains) all around her. The titles of her films point to her continuous casualties—*Cunégonde Is Too Curious*, *Cunégonde the Nasty*



Top: *Léontine's Boat* (1911).
Bottom: *The Maids' Strike* (1906).



Top: *Laughing Gas* (1907).
Bottom: *The Dranems* (1912).



Top: *Mary Jane's Mishap* (1903).
Bottom: *The Coachwomen* (1907).

Woman, *Cunégonde Is a Member of the SPCA*, *Cunégonde Loves her Employer*. Little Chrysia, whose real name remains unknown, excels at exaggerated facial expressions and clownish clumsiness. Whether she is a maid or a matron, she holds the gaze and centers the action as her character repeatedly upsets expectations and challenges social conventions.

Sarah Duhamel is yet another prolific comic performer of the era playing “Rosalie” at Pathé Frères, and “Pétronille” at Éclair from 1911 to 1914. Duhamel is a large comedienne who throws her weight around with gusto, breaking everything in her path. Her films involve lots of special effects and chase scenes as if she has some kind of magical power over everything and everyone, including her various husbands and suitors. The collection also includes three films featuring “Lea” played by Italian comedienne Lea Gionchi and many other films starring unknown and uncredited women who wreak havoc on homes, towns, and businesses. These women are far from the docile wives and daughters of Victorian morality, and they assert themselves physically into the mechanics of everyday life, exploiting the opportunities that cinema provided for upsetting social norms.

The two discs of silent comedy include lots of cross-dressing, including men playing women. Two French films, *The Maid's Strike* (*La grève des bonnes*, 1906) and *The Nurse Maid's Strike* (*La grève des nourrices*, 1907) may be satires on the labor movement, but they are also hilarious inversions of bourgeois life. In the latter film, the toddlers form a counterprotest against the police who act as strike-breaking babysitters. Many of the

striking women are played by poorly disguised men who move around as a delirious mob. As Hennefeld notes in her blurb on the film, despite its ostensible “travesty of working women’s activism, it survives today as an empowering document.”

Antiracist Historiography

The *Nasty Women* collection carefully negotiates a fine line between historical accuracy and contextualization on one hand, and contemporary feminist and antiracist perspectives on the other. This delicate balance is particularly important when it comes to the featured Black and Indigenous performers, several of whom are “spotlit” with introductory essays. Two Indigenous women are fea-

tured in the comedy discs: Minnie Devereaux (Cheyenne and Arapaho) and Lillian St. Cyr (Ho-Chunk), each of them remarkable performers in groundbreaking roles. Devereaux plays against Fatty Arbuckle in *Fatty and Minnie He-Haw* (1914) and totally holds her own, and not only because of her XL figure that dwarfs Fatty’s. Although she is the butt of many jokes about her race and her girth, she brazenly counters them with bluster, and lives to tell the tale of being married to and then being abandoned by Fatty’s character. Lillian St. Cyr (aka Red Wing), on the other hand, plays a cross-dressing action hero in *The Red Girl and the Child* (1910). She rides, she shoots, and is smarter and more agile than the white settlers and outlaws into whose war she bravely intervenes to save a child. St. Cyr was married to James Young Deer, who also identified as Indigenous, and she is thought to have made over seventy films. From the evidence of *Red Girl*, St. Cyr, like Devereux, was a talented performer and the loss of the rest of their films is one of the many tragedies lying behind the recovery efforts of this curatorial team.

The third disc in the set, “Gender Frontiers,” includes two additional Indigenous-centered films. Devereaux has a small role in *The Death Mask* (1914), which stars Japanese actress Tsuru Aoki as a princess passing as a male warrior, until she is found out by Sessue Hayakawa playing a suitor from another tribe. The redfacing was standard practice for the time, but it is instructive to see it layered onto the cross-dressing plot. The rampant role reversals that run throughout the entire collection indicate that while much of the laughter and dramatic action is predicated on obvious social inver-



Left to right, curators Laura Horak, Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, and Maggie Hennefeld in Pordenone, Italy, October 2021 (photo by Valerio Greco).



Top: *Daisy Doodad's Dial* (1914).
Bottom: *Fatty and Minnie-He-Haw* (1914).



Top: *Rosalie and Her Phonograph* (1911).
Bottom: *Cunégonde is a Woman of the World* (1912).



Top: *Pétronille Wins the Grand Steeple Chase* (1913).
Bottom: *Zoé and the Miraculous Umbrella* (1913).



sions, other modes of masking and passing went disguised. The prevalence and intersectionality of such masking and unmasking should reset our understanding of film history, particularly through the transitional teens. The cinema of the first three decades of the twentieth century clearly had a lot to say about social hierarchies, prejudices, and gender roles and fantasies.

The only Black woman actor in a leading role whose work seems to have survived is Bertha Regustus, who was an outstanding comedian plunging boldly through the color lines of the time. She is most famous as the Black maid in *What Happened in the Tunnel* (Edison, 1903), and in this collection she stars in *Laughing Gas* (Porter, 1907), again freely interacting with white actors. A visit to the dentist causes Regustus's character to laugh contagiously, injecting the whole town with uncontrollable laughter, effectively dissolving racial divides. Once again, like Léontine, Little Chryisia, Duhamel, and all the other leading ladies in this collection, Regustus holds the narrative together with outrageous physical comedy—quite a feat for a Black woman of that era.

In addition to the 114-page booklet, the box set also includes filmed interviews with scholars, curators, and filmmakers. Horak, Henefeld, and Rongen-Kaynakçi each appear, in addition to film scholar Jane Gaines, Black studies scholar Kyla Wazane Tomkins, Indigenous scholar Liza Black (Cherokee), Indigenous filmmaker Thrza (Macinam Jean) Cuthand, and gender studies scholar Susan Stryker. These interviewees offer informative framings of the films and provide biographical details about the performers and viewing strategies for racist

material. Tomkins, for example, eloquently describes Bertha Regustus as a woman who used performance and comedy as strategies of intervention into a racist culture, finding a certain freedom of expression that was rare in American film history, even if it may have been more prolific in the parallel world of African American entertainment.

The feminist antiracist historiography that underpins the *Nasty Women* collection is an interpretive method that is not without internal contradictions. For example, Thrza Cuthand's discussion of *An Up-to-Date Squ*w* (1911) is not the sort of endorsement that one expects in this kind of package. The short seven-minute Pathé-American Kinema film features an Indigenous woman played by an unknown actress (of unknown race) who is awestruck by the fashions of New York tourists and manages to acquire an outfit for herself, only to be pursued by a white gentleman. Her husband, the Chief, follows them, "scalps" the white man by removing his toupee, and recovers his wife. Included in the "Gender Frontiers" section, this film is an odd selection because, despite its theme of role reversal that is so pervasive in this collection, its anonymous star is disempowered and made a laughingstock.

In her short blurb, film scholar Joanna Hearne situates *An Up-to-Date Squ*w* within a discourse of women's culture: "Tourism itself is on display and shopping is front and center." We might add that the intrepid heroine demonstrates rare agency, mobility, and ingenuity for an Indigenous figure of the time, but commentator Cuthand seems distinctly unimpressed. Her commentary highlights the film's oppressive stereotyping of Indigenous people and points out that the "two worlds" depicted

in the film persist today, leading her to say that she "kind of identifies" with the woman who is so disrespected. She points out that Indigenous people are now flourishing in many ways and have more control over their representations, as artists, fashion designers, and as filmmakers.

Cuthand is a racialized viewer who has not drunk the scholarly Kool-Aid of historical revisionism. Whatever "nastiness" may be embedded in the Indigenous character's transgression of boundaries cannot compensate, in Cuthand's view, for the evident desecration of her ethnicity. The curators may well have included the short film along with Cuthand's perspective to underline the fact that racist images can be harmful (a point made repeatedly in the race warning text that prefaces so many of the films) and to highlight the double vision of speculative historiography in which endorsement does not preclude critique. The speculative method, based largely on Black studies, has proven to be an invaluable tool for film feminism. Constructing histories from incomplete, fragmented, misogynist, and racist archives, by providing new viewpoints and critical tools for the committed and imaginative historian, speculative historiography is an open and fluid process that is bound to have its contradictions and detractors. Overall, though, the acknowledgement of female performance and the appreciation of their contribution to silent cinema is critical to this method, offering a radical shift in perspective necessary for a feminist film history.

The most common trope of racist culture recurring in these films is that of "blackening," or white characters accidentally having their faces darkened with some black substance, like smoke, soot, or paint. It is surpris-



ingly widespread as a gag that repeatedly engages race for humorous effect—but also for transformative effects. As Charlene Regester writes in her contribution to the booklet, Blackness is “complex and contradictory” in early cinema. Rather than whitewash or cancel such racist humor, the curators have done well to include it as yet another instance of inversion, role-reversal, and masking. Sadly, there are very few instances of Black performers exercising their “nastiness” besides Regustus, and in fact many Black characters are actually played by white actors in blackface, further limiting roles for Black actors. Regester writes about Sul-te-wan, who famously worked with D. W. Griffith, and less famously (because she was uncredited) with Buster Keaton in *College* (1927), but none of her films are included in this box set.

Cross-Dressing in Silent Film

The theme of cross-dressing and gender variance dominates two entire discs, and, like the racial themes, it is thoroughly unpacked by the written and spoken supplementary material. Laura Horak points out that women masquerading as men was a very popular trope of nineteenth-century theater. Integrating it into cinema in the teens was an important component of the “uplift” agenda of narrative cinema to attract a “higher” class of spectators, especially women with spending money. Contemporary viewers may read trans and lesbian themes into these films, which the curators encourage us to do, and yet it is equally important to note that viewers of the time would not necessarily have seen cross-dressing that way.

Women dress as men in these films for various purposes, including employment, disguise, active heroism, and widespread trickery. In other words, it was more of a feminist trope than a sexual trope. For example, four “Girl Spy” films (of a total of six in the 1909–1910 series) written and performed by Gene Gauntier, feature a woman named Nan who cleverly spies for the Confederate Army. She is a quick-change artist, morphing from girl to boy, and from Confederate to Union soldier, as a means of crossing enemy lines. She is also so daring and risk-taking, fast on a horse and quick on her feet, that the generals repeatedly call on for her assistance in dangerous situations. The race warning in these films refers to the legacy of white supremacy signified by the Confederate Army, but again, the curators have chosen not to whitewash the context but to highlight it alongside Gauntier’s remarkable filmmaking.

The standout performer of the gender-bending portion of *Nasty Women* is Edna “Billy” Foster, who had at least twenty-five roles between 1910 and 1915, many of them in Griffith films as a teenager. (Horak refers to Edna/Billy as “they” because we don’t know what gender Foster identified as.) While audiences took them as “Billy,” Horak has traced their biography to learn that they were born female. Their brief career was cut short due to family troubles that saw them move East with their mother, having been abandoned by a delinquent father—yet another tale of an early film star who went unrewarded and unappreciated by the nascent film industry. In any case, Foster’s acting stands out for its pathos and Horak suggests that Griffith appreciated Edna/Billy’s facial expressions and overall

demeanor. Their charm may have evaded their male contemporaries, and yet some gestures subtly betray a kind of girlishness. “Billy’s” films include many adventures that take them outside the home, such as getting abducted by thieves, matchmaking, solving crimes, and acting like a jealous brother—melodramas of predictable Griffith-style virtue that are slightly destabilized by Billy/Edna’s coy performance.

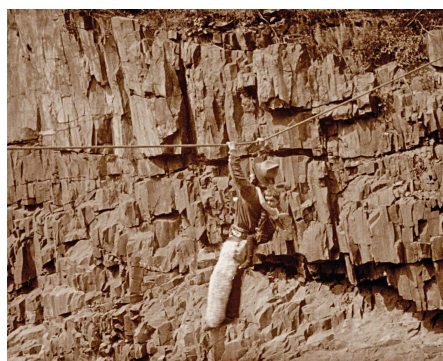
The “Gender Frontiers” section includes nine films set in the mythical “Wild West” where a series of clever women played by talented, boundary-crossing actresses run roughshod over naive cowboys, husbands, and backward institutions. In the West, employment comes to those who wear pants, as does heroism, although most of the films end up predictably settling on heterosexual closure—with a few exceptions. *Rowdy Ann* (1919), for example, features Fay Fincher as a troublemaking girl sent west by her father. The women’s boarding school doesn’t quite turn her into a lady, but she succeeds in teaching the other girls how to have fun.

Another frontier woman (who does end up married) is played by the famous showgirl Texas Guinan. She stars in *The Night Rider* (1920) outfitted in animal-print spurs right out of her nightclub act, and she collects and discards husbands at will, holding her own in dangerous frontier culture. The West provides a perfect setting for the various masquerades and transgressions in which the nasty women of silent cinema excel.

In the final disc, “Female Tricksters,” the gender play continues in a wide range of comedies and dramas, including *The Boy Detective* (1908) in which the unknown actor



Top: *Dollars and Sense* (1916).
Bottom: *A Range Romance* (1911).



Top: *The Girl Spy* (1909).
Bottom: *The Red Girl and the Child* (1910).

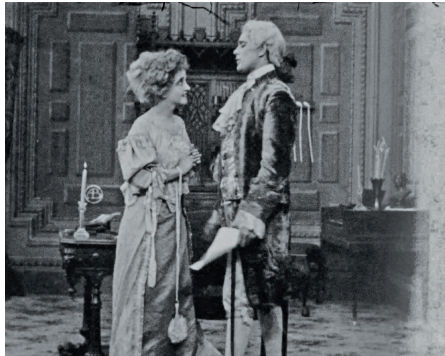


Top: *The Adventures of Billy* (1911).
Bottom: *Rowdy Ann* (1919).





Top: *The Boy Detective* (1908).
Bottom: *Taming a Husband* (1910).



Top: *Love and Science* (1912).
Bottom: *The Snowbird* (1916).



Top: *She's a Prince* (1926).
Bottom: *Phil for Short* (1919).



playing “Swiftly” is revealed in close-up at the end to be a woman. While this film plays on tricks of focal distance, *Love and Science* (*Amour et science*, Éclair, 1912) pushes the trickery of cinema even further. In a complicated plot involving a “video telephone” invention, the inventor’s fiancé Daisy (Renée Sylvaire) fakes a rendezvous with her girlfriend dressed as a man to make the inventor jealous and they “perform” for the video telephone, causing him to have a breakdown. Daisy then “cures” him by having a film made of her and her friend removing the disguise, both of them laughing hysterically as they did when originally donning the disguise. When the inventor sees that he has been tricked, all is restored in this unique display of filmic reflexivity, female agency, and intelligence grounded in female camaraderie.

In *Dollars and Sense* (1916) Ora Carew plays a young girl and her brother; and in the feature-length *Phil for Short* (1919) Evelyn Greely plays a girl who masquerades as her brother to escape an arranged marriage. Greely’s character is a forceful personality who manages to get her way despite having a taste for Greek sapphic dancing and being attracted to a women-hating man. Her last words to her misogynist suitor (who liked her more as her brother) is, “I knew I could make you love me if I made you mad enough.” They presumably live happily ever after (or not). *Phil for Short* (written by Clara S. Beranger) is in fact an extraordinarily rich film for queer film historiography and a prime example of a title that was given short shrift on its original release but is highly rewarding to contemporary viewers. In a recent prize-winning article, Maggie Hennefeld has elucidated the film’s themes of “Sapphic poetry and dance, male

impotence, and female wit” in an argument for “laughter as historiographic method.”¹

The last two films of the collection are fabulous comedies of gender reversals, revealing the imaginary possibilities and consequences of women’s power. *She’s a Prince* (1926), featuring Alice Ardell, involves a series of misadventures premised on mistaken identity that all begins with a “secret flapper society.” The seven well-dressed ladies are a fabulous gang of tricksters who create havoc in a fancy hotel. The last film in the collection, *Topsy-Turvy Gender Madness* (1926), says it all in the title. Set in futuristic 2026, the women are all tough and bossy, while the men are all wimpy sissies (women fare much better than men in the gender bending of the period). Homophobia may be deeply embedded in the farce, and yet, as Horak notes, it is not without a few “sapphic winks” between the butch women. All the “Female Trickster” films feature strong women protagonists who are able to transcend gender barriers with much more than a change of clothing.

The Snowbird (1916) was shot in northern Canada and features the best use of landscape and locations in the collection, along with a tight dramatic story. Starring Mabel Talia Ferro alongside Edwin Carew (Chickasaw) who also directed, in this case the woman conceals her gender to track down a man who lives in a remote cabin and who has the only documents that will save her father’s fortune. At first Jean (Carew), the Quebecker, takes the woman in as a boy to do his bidding, until she is accidentally found out. One thing leads to another and she is saved by her father, and falls in love with her former captor. Talia Ferro’s character may not be as nasty as some of the other women in this collection, and yet

the curators should be credited for reviving this relatively unknown film, which is newly digitized from a 35mm print held at the George Eastman House.

New Music for Old Films

The Snowbird comes to life in part because of the incredible score composed and performed by Dana Reason, who is also the music supervisor for this entire collection. Her jazz score, featuring mainly piano with sparse snare drum and other instruments opens and closes with a Native American flute played by Jan Michael Looking Wolf (Kalepuya). The music is spare, yet atmospheric and constantly moving and changing, providing both energy and melodramatic affect. The new soundtracks by a variety of musicians that have been specially commissioned and performed for this collection are among the real pleasures of the box set. Reason points out in her short essay that women were very present as accompanists during the silent era, even if there is little documentation of their names or recordings of their performances, so by way of compensation or speculative revision, eighty percent of the commissioned scores are by women and twenty percent are by people of color.

The selection of composers and the compositional principles are part of the project’s decolonizing mission, and they offer an excellent model of how soundtracks can be designed with antiracist objectives. A key element is avoiding stereotyped themes that tended to be attached to racialized people, but the project goes much further than that by using music as a kind of counterpoint to the visuals, providing new opportunities for composers to experiment with anachronistic instrumenta-

tion and sounds. One of the highlights of the musical component of this collection is Terri Lynn Cunningham's score for *Laughing Gas* (co-written with Edmar Colón). It starts with a typical ragtime piano that keeps hiccupping with jazz chords. With each change of shot another instrument is added until a full jazz quintet accompanies Regustus's performance.

Among my other favorite scores is Don Ross's soundtrack for *The Red Girl and the Child*, featuring an electric guitar playing Western Blues. The collection is full of such surprising musical interventions, underlining the historical revision and remediation that is taking place. Eliot Britton's score for *Fatty and Minnie He-Haw* uses drumming for the Indigenous community, but it is a heavy syn-copated rhythm that morphs into a very twenty-first-century dance beat that accompanies the scene of ritual "pow wow" dancing. Renée Baker's score for *A Terrible Discovery* (1911), one of the Edna "Billy" Foster films, is performed by the Chicago Modern Orchestra Project and it adds a critical experimental edginess to Griffith's predictable narrative form, complementing and "queering" the radicality of "Billy's" performance of boyhood. Baker's free-jazz score for *Cunégonde Is Too Curious* similarly complements Little Chrystia's playful antics. There are many more excellent scores that at once complement and contrast the films, providing a renewed energy that compensates for the

original live music and the novelty experienced by historical viewers. Reason plans to release a soundtrack album with a selection of these scores, and I have no doubt that there are enough great pieces that can stand alone as compositions. Viewers with a love of jazz will be easily distracted, in a good way, by these soundtracks. For those who prefer more traditional piano accompaniment, many films have alternate scores that are equally well done, if less avant-garde.

While a handful of films display signs of material degradation, which can at times be a form of ornamentation, most of them have been beautifully restored. Some titles from the Library of Congress paper print collection have a familiar fuzziness that is like looking at the films through a gauze veil, but I would prefer them that way than not to see them at all. The framing of the collection foregrounds the archival and curatorial work involved in the restoration and preservation of dozens of films that were at real risk of falling through the cracks of conventional film historiography and its outmoded paradigms of auteurism and aestheticism. By confronting the racism embedded in film history, the curators of this project, along with their many collaborators and consultants of color, have brought us face to face with it. By not whitewashing and censoring, viewers are challenged to see just how closely paradigms of race intersect with misogyny,

and how early film enabled fantastic, fluid, and nasty inversions of identities.

Cinema's First Nasty Women is a game-changer for teaching film history. It offers ninety-nine interventions into the canon and reveals the absolutely central role that women performers played in the silent period. We are beginning to learn more about the invisible throngs of women working behind the scenes of Hollywood through scholarly works such as editors Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight's *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future* (University of Illinois Press, 2015) and Jane Gaines's *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (University of Illinois Press, 2018), but these Nasty Women are in full view, working on screen. Their nastiness lies precisely in the counterhistory that they collectively embody. ■

Endnote

¹ Maggie Hennefeld, "Queer Laughter in the Archives of Silent Film Comedy," *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*, Eds. Ronald Gregg and Amy Villarejo, Oxford University Press, 2021.

"Cinema's First Nasty Women" was curated by Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, and Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi; produced for video by Brett Wood; music supervisor Dana Reason. B&W and B&W with color tinting, with a running time of approximately 875 min. This "Irreverent Four-Disc Collection" is available as either a Blu-ray or DVD box set from Kino Lorber, kinolorber.com and is also available for rental at <https://kinonow.com>.

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Sami (Alex Bakri) and other Israeli Arab citizens are indecisive about approaching the now opened barriers of the roadblock at the conclusion of *Let It Be Morning*.

Sami encounters his old friend Abed (Ehab Salami), a scruffy, portly sad sack who represents everything that Sami has chosen to leave behind: dreams fly no higher than owning a taxicab and winning back his estranged wife. Sami, who has no apparent political leanings, quotes his father lamenting the absence of combativeness in the town's inhabitants, saying that the townspeople should just march on the blockade: two or three will be shot, he asserts, but that will end the hell they're living under. But Sami also tells Abed that the town's residents are so spiritless that you can't even get two of them together to play a game of backgammon, much less fight for their rights. Abed takes Sami's call for resistance seriously. Inspired, Abed organizes a march on the roadblock—partly in hopes of impressing his estranged wife with his boldness and partly from sincere anger at the town's leaders, whose enforcer, Ashraf (Nadib Spadi), supports the loan shark Nashraf, who set Abed's beloved taxi on fire when he didn't repay the money he owed.

But only fifty people show up, and before they can set off, Ashraf and his henchmen roll up with machine guns drawn and order everyone to go home. The potential protesters sheepishly obey, their defiant chants silenced, leaving Abed to attempt to march on his own, carrying a Palestinian flag while singing the nationalist anthem "Biladi," until he, too, is stopped. Fatalism and cowardice easily swamp this halfhearted moment of revolt by the townspeople.

The Israelis are mostly faceless in *Let It Be Morning*, seen only in the distance, except for Elad (Costa Kaplan), a nebbishy young guard at the closed exit road. It turns out, however, that he is the younger brother of one of Sami's former classmates, and is willing to bend the rules, allowing Sami to call his office from the Israeli side of the blockade, where cell service is available. Sami phones his boss Zvika, whose relationship signifies so much for him, only to discover that his employer doesn't even seem to know who he is, and, in any event, has already fired Sami for missing work and an important presentation. His solid place in the Jewish Israeli world was built on

sand, and his two-day absence, through no fault of his own, has made this all too clear.

Elad is not a macho member of an elite unit: he's a scared kid who strums a guitar with a peace symbol on it while on guard duty. Sami eventually turns on him, calling him "the worst," precisely, we understand, because he represents a human face of an inhuman situation. It is tragically inevitable that it will be Elad who will fire the climactic rounds at Abed when, late in the night of the failed demonstration, he goes to the barricade on his own, a one-man intifada, and throws pebbles at the sleeping Israeli soldier.

After Abed has been buried, the townspeople see that newspapers are being delivered to doorsteps and realize the roadblock has been lifted. Silently, they walk down the road and see that the way is now clear. They stand there in wonderment, no one daring to approach the opened barriers. At this moment, they echo a moment during the earlier wedding—a scene in which Kolirin has skillfully planted many seeds of the film's plot. In that early scene, a cage of white doves is opened so the birds can take wing in celebration of the event. But they refuse to fly, instead preferring to huddle in their cage, having seemingly lost the will or the ability to find freedom. Like the doves, the Israeli Arabs of the village, with the gates now open, remain frozen in place. Although the gates of the external hell have now been opened, the internal gates remain firmly closed.—**Mitchell Abidor** ■



Israeli soldier Elad (Costa Kaplan) guards the roadblock in *Let It Be Morning*.

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