

# Salomé

By Martin Turnbull

Although little remembered today, Russian-born actress Alla Nazimova was a major star of Broadway in the early 1910s. Inevitably, her enormous success on the dramatic stage attracted the attention of the nascent film industry. It was Metro Pictures (later of MGM fame) who signed Nazimova in 1918 at an unprecedented salary of \$13,000 a week (at a time when the queen of silent cinema, Mary Pickford, was earning \$10,000) and lured her west to Hollywood. Setting herself up in a mansion that sat on a 2.5-acre block at Sunset Boulevard (which, ten years later, would be transformed into the Garden of Allah Hotel), Alla set about conquering Hollywood in the same way she'd set the Great White Way aflame.

At first, she did extraordinarily well, playing a gypsy in "Toys of Fate" (1918), a sheik's daughter in "Eye for an Eye" (1918), an unwed mother in "Out of the Fog" (1919), and Chinese half-sisters in "The Red Lantern" (1919). Other hits like "The Brat" (1919) and "Madame Peacock" followed (1920).

By the start of the 1920s, however, Nazimova grew restless with playing the puppet and wanted more control over the films she appeared in. On the set of "Billions" (1920) Nazimova met an equally ambitious and talented costumer / set designer / art director, Natacha Rambova, who created the art direction and costume designs for Nazimova's next vehicle, "Camille" (1921), in which Nazimova co-starred with Rambova's future husband, Rudolph Valentino. With its ultra-modern design—Nazimova and Rambova re-set the action from 19th century Paris to current day—the film was deemed ahead of its time and received varied critical reaction, but enjoyed only moderate success.

After its release, Nazimova and Metro went their separate ways, and Alla turned to producing her own films through her production company, Nazimova Productions. Although the history of early cinema is punctuated with the contributions of many women (including screenwriters Frances Marion, June



*This minimalist Art Deco promotional poster features a stylized illustration of Alla Nazimova as the title character. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection.*

Mathis, Lenore Coffee and Anita Loos; directors Lois Weber and Dorothy Arzner), Nazimova took charge of every aspect of her career, much in the same way as Fairbanks, Pickford, Chaplin, and Griffith did in 1919 when they formed United Artists.

Her first independent feature was a film of Ibsen's "A Doll's House" (1922), released through United Artists. Although it was a critical hit, it was far from a commercial success. However, Nazimova had tasted independence and wanted more of it, and set her sights on making what she wanted to be her greatest achievement: a cinematic adaptation of Oscar Wilde's "Salomé" (1923).

Inspired by the artwork of British illustrator Aubrey Beardsley (1872 – 1898), Nazimova and Rambova set about making a version of "Salomé" such as 1920s filmgoers had never seen. Even by today's standards, the film's art direction reached for the outer limits of avant-garde.

Nothing on screen was designed to suggest first-century Roman Empire. Instead, Nazimova sought to recast Wilde's one-act play in a world where the ruling aesthetic was Art Nouveau meets searing minimalism meets Hollywood decadence. This is a world where wigs come fitted with glowing baubles, actors wear stockings patterned in palm-sized fish scales, and king's yes-men don headdresses that resemble

giant, glittering conches.

Although it had its supporters—in its review, Photoplay Magazine said, “A hothouse orchid of decadent passion . . . You have your warning: this is bizarre stuff”—it’s not hard to see why moviegoers barely knew what to make of this astonishing spectacle. After all, this was 1923, and people wanted “The Hunchback of Notre Dame,” with Lon Chaney; “Zaza,” with Gloria Swanson; and Cecil B. DeMille’s “The Ten Commandments.”

In “Salomé” what they got was a 42-year-old lead actress playing a teenager sporting cinema’s first micro-mini skirt as she performed a dance of the seven veils accompanied by chorus girls decked out in two-foot-wide shoulder pads.

The world wasn’t ready for Nazimova’s inspired vision for “Salomé” and the film flopped badly. Consequently, Nazimova lost the ton of money she sunk into the film. She made a couple more movies, but was unable to recover financially, and left the movie industry in 1925, returning to the theater until the 1940s when she experienced a minor career second wind before her premature death in 1945.

The unfortunate irony of Alla Nazimova’s meteoric career is that, thanks to the accessibility of online video, she is best remembered for her greatest failure. If perhaps “A Doll’s House” had survived, rather than the exotic oddity of “Salomé,” Nazimova would be remembered as a bigger star.

Nevertheless, when seen through 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes, “Salomé” is a phantasmagoria of striking images, unbridled sensuality, and fearless storytelling. It also leaves the viewer with the lingering sense that if Alla Nazimova had the good fortune to come along a hundred years later than she did, she’d have found a world with its arms thrust wide open to embrace the groundbreaking artist that she was.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Martin Turnbull is the author of the Hollywood’s Garden of Allah novels, set in and around the Garden of Allah Hotel during Hollywood’s golden era.*