



Blind Ambitions: Selznick & the lady



By 1948 producer David O. Selznick was embroiled in a losing professional war on two fronts. His ambitious dreams for transforming wife, Jennifer Jones into an actress of Garbo's stature had met with increasing critical disdain from both the critics and audiences. Despite winning an Oscar for her first starring role in **The Song of Bernadette** (1943), Jones had quickly become queen of the B-flick, elevated to 'A' status by her husband's considerable faith and fortunes.

However, of a more immediate concern to Selznick was his own precarious financial situation. Always a meticulous and fastidious film maker, at the box office Selznick's latest ventures had fared poorly at the box

office. By 1948 Selznick was well into a period of economic decline from which he and his studio would never recover. His role as agent of packaged film deals had made other studios millions while Selznick reaped comparatively modest one time gains from the fees paid for these loan or sell outs. Into this climate of ambiguous suspicion that the Hollywood of yesteryear was slowly fading away Selznick made one last ditch effort to secure both his finances and Jones's place in the cinema firmament with **The Portrait Of Jennie** – a solemn, sullen fairytale, strangely void of the buoyancy and suspension in disbelief required to carry off such a venture.

PLOT: After an unusual absence of titles, a strange and haunting quotation accompanied by voice over narration open the story. We are introduced to embittered artist, Eben Adams (Joseph Cotten). Seems Adam's art lacks spark; that ability to live beyond the confinements of its canvases. Just as Adams is about to throw in, both the proverbial towel and himself into the east river, he sees a young girl, Jennie Appleton (Jones) seated on a bench in Central Park. Despite their age differences Jennie appeals to Adams with an inner maturity well beyond her years. Their meeting immediately stirs Adams to inspired enchantment.





This new interest in his work is noticed by concerted patrons of the arts - gallery owner, Miss Spinney (Ethel Barrymore) and her assistant, Matthews (Cecil Kellaway). But the seeming straight forward narrative takes a bizarre turn when Adams next encounters Jennie, looking more mature than when they first met. Again, Jennie inspires the best in Adams work and he continues to create fanciful art that is compelling and surreal.

With each subsequent meeting thereafter, Jennie grows more into the robust antebellum of femininity that Adams would want to possess for his own. Yet each time he gets closer to professing his love, Jennie suddenly vanishes without a trace. A chance meeting with a nun, Mother Mary of Mercy (Lillian Gish) reveals the shocking truth. Jennie is dead.

She has been appearing to Adams as a ghost of the unwanted orphan who drowned when her tiny boat was thrust against the rocks of a lighthouse during a hurricane. Adams is unable to fathom the tale. He journeys to the same craggy edge that claimed Jennie's life - finds his beloved waiting for him next to the abandoned lighthouse - only to have her swept into the sea once more, and forever out of reach.

In his attempt to hew romantic sentiment and ethereal bliss from this cloistered clunker, Selznick and director, William Dieterle employed gimmicky special effects which made some of the scenes between Jennie and Eben appear to be taking place on a canvas painting, or in some cases a deep fog. Short primarily in black and white, Selznick previewed the picture to disastrous results, recalled it for reworking and tacked on a convoluted resolution, employing green and sepia filters. In the final reel these monochromatic colors suddenly burst forth with a splash of subdued three strip Technicolor to reveal Adam's lasting masterwork - the gallery portrait of Jennie.

That The Portrait of Jennie failed to find its audience at the box office suggests more of the creep of post war cynicism and abandonment of embellished romantic subplots by audiences - all of which had been highly successful and in great demand during Selznick's 1930s tenure. Is the film indicative of Selznick's usual zeal for storytelling...hardly. In fact, 'Jennie' is horribly flawed. At its worst it is stoic, dismal and odd. However, at its best, there is some unsettling evocative quality that permeates the very essence of the tale. It stirs the heart to curiosity rather than emotion. However, at the time of its release 'Jennie' did nothing to alleviate Selznick's fiscal crisis.

THE TRANSFER of 'JENNIE'

MGM's DVD is fairly impressive. The gray scale is smooth, with solid blacks and very clean whites. Age related artifacts are present throughout but do not distract. Some minor edge enhancement crops up but pixelization is kept to a minimum. Overall the picture will surely not disappoint. The audio is mono but more than adequate for a film of this vintage. There are no extras. **BOTTOM LINE:** Maybe not a 'must have' but well worth a second glance on DVD!