

Valentino

The name still means "romance" to countless devotees of Hollywood's silent silver screen

By Julia Ann Charpentier

Rodolpho Alfonzo Raffaello Pierre Filibert Guglielmi di Valentina d'Antonguolla, better known to American audiences as Rudolph Valentino, was born in Castellaneta, Italy, on May 6, 1895. He emigrated to the United States in 1913 and worked the New York cafes as a dancer, paving the path to his success in Hollywood. In the beginning he landed roles in musical comedy stage productions.

His career in motion pictures, encompassing thirty-two films, started with numerous bit parts. Valentino was often cast as the "heavy" because of his tough, foreign appearance. Interspersed with small parts were dance engagements and some lead roles.

His big break came when he was cast by Metro as an Argentine gaucho in *The Four Horsemen Of The Apocalypse* (1921). A memorable scene where Valentino dances the tango showcased his lithe, sexy movements and his sensual appeal.

During the same year leading parts followed in three films. One led to the end of his contract with the company because Valentino was dissatisfied with a change in the role written for him. He signed with Famous Players-Lasky.

His most memorable performance for Famous Players was *The Sheik* (1921) with Agnes Ayres, a film that catapulted him into

eternal fame. Soon after release of the movie the actor's personality and that of the character became entwined. Valentino's magnetism and continental charm contributed to box office success. Though sadistic elements are prevalent, the movie's acclaim did not stem from the hero's cruelty. Rather, it was the actor's understated manner of playing the famous role of a seductive abductor. Ahmed Ben Hassan was not an easy part to portray without losing all sexual appeal and alienating the male portion of the audience.

Though not as popular, his role as a Spanish bullfighter in *Blood And Sand* (1922) was his best performance. With Nita Naldi as society temptress and Lila Lee as adoring wife, Valentino demonstrated the emotional pain of competing love interests.

In 1923 he refused to fulfill his contract, instigating an injunction preventing him from appearing on stage as an actor or making movies for another company. Valentino claimed he was forced into cheap productions. During the hiatus he gave dance exhibitions throughout the country.

When the dispute was settled he did two more films for Famous Players. In 1925 he made one film for Ritz-Carlton Pictures, then gave his last two performances for United Artists.

In *The Eagle* (1925) Valentino is a Russian



Valentino is best remembered for romantic, dashing roles like *The Sheik* (1921).

Cossack with a warrant out for his arrest and a sworn vendetta against the father of the woman he loves. The heroine is played by Vilma Banky. They exhibit a strong rapport—their chemistry is palpable.

She teams up with him again in *Son Of The Sheik* (1926), sequel to the 1921 production. He brings to life a younger version of the

original role, kidnapping Yasmin, his leading lady, in retaliation for a presumed offense. The shadow of revenge darkens this sinister plot, giving Valentino the opportunity to display the depth of love and the violence of hatred toward his screen lover.

In 1926, Valentino died of a ruptured ulcer. He was thirty-one years old. MM