





VALENTINO

The Silver Screen's First Sex Symbol

**When you hear the name
"Valentino," you instantly think of
passion and romance. But how
much do you know about the man
behind the steamy image?**

By JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER

His full name was Rodolfo Alfonso Raffaello Pierre Philibert Guglielmi di Valentina d'Antonguolla. Silent film audiences knew him simply as Valentino.

In the 1920s, Rudolph Valentino was *the* screen star. It is said that during screenings of *The Sheik*, women would literally faint in the aisles. (When was the last time you heard of anyone fainting at the sight of Robert Redford or Mel Gibson?) When Valentino died in 1926, at the age of just 31, there was a near-riot in the streets of New York.

Valentino was born on May 6, 1895, in Castellaneta, Italy. His father, an Army veterinarian, might have had hopes for his son in the service, but they were dashed when instructors at the military academy young Rodolfo was attending failed to see officer potential. Unable to gain entry into a Naval academy, the 17-year-old traveled to Paris, where he was soon begging on street corners.

In December 1913, Valentino left France and arrived in New York, where he found work as a gardener, and shelter and friendship with the Italian immigrants in Brooklyn. The gardening job didn't last long, though, and soon Valentino was balancing odd jobs such as dishwashing and waitering with legal trouble on charges of theft and blackmail. When he couldn't afford a room, he slept in Central Park.

Before long, Valentino became a cafe dancer. He took the art seriously, and toured with well-known professionals of the day like Bonnie Glass and Joan Sawyer. He was earning as much as \$25 an hour, a remarkable sum in those days, and an abrupt change from his prior condition of being penniless.

But even before he reached high-ranking dancer status in New York, Valentino saw the drawbacks to making a living escorting women across the ballroom floor. He felt like a high-class prostitute. He related an incident in which a woman complimented him on his dancing, then suggested he teach her the

A Valentino Filmography

Valentino participated in musical comedy stage productions before he started in film with bit parts. Between 1918 and 1920, he played dancers, bad guys, and a few romantic leads. In all, he appeared in about three dozen films, roughly a third of which—including *The Sheik*, *Blood And Sand*, *The Eagle*, and *Son Of The Sheik*—are currently available on videocassette.



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- A Rogue's Romance* (1919)
- A Sainted Devil* (1924)
- A Society Sensation* (1918)
- Alimony* (1918)
- All Night* (1918)
- An Adventuress* (1920)
- Beyond The Rocks* (1922)
- Blood And Sand* (1922)
- Camille* (1921)
- Cobra* (1925)
- Eyes Of Youth* (1919)
- Frisolous Wives* (1920)
- Monsieur Beaucaire* (1924)
- Moran Of The Lady Letty* (1922)
- Once To Every Woman* (1920)
- Out Of Luck* (1919)
- Passion's Playground* (1920)
- Stolen Moments* (1920)
- The Big Little Person* (1919)
- The Cheater* (1920)
- The Conquering Power* (1921)
- The Delicious Little Devil* (1919)
- The Eagle* (1925)
- The Eyes Of Youth* (1919)
- The Four Horsemen Of The Apocalypse* (1921)
- The Home Breaker* (1919)
- The Isle Of Love** (1922)
- The Married Virgin* (1920)
- The Sheik* (1921)
- The Son Of The Sheik* (1926)
- The Tempest* (1927)
- The Wonderful Chance* (1920)
- The Young Rajah* (1922)
- Uncharted Seas* (1921)
- Virtuous Sinners* (1919)

*A revised version of *An Adventuress*, including outtakes from that 1920 film.

It was that dancing ability that won him bit parts, usually as a dancer or villain, in a series of films beginning with *Alimony* in 1918. Three years later, thanks to the efforts of screenwriter June Mathis, Valentino won the lead in what would become a huge box-office hit: *The Four Horsemen Of The Apocalypse*.

Reluctant Superstar

Valentino's impact on audiences was unquestionably sexual. His screen persona conjures up visions of a playboy, a womanizer, and a gigolo. But the man was much deeper than the image.

Laced with emotion and sexual innuendo, the Valentino image was one the young immigrant hated. His conquests boast of his skill as a lover, but those who knew him well say he was a quiet intellectual, fluent in several languages, a man who cared more about artistic achievement than money, more about integrity than passion.

After the release of *The Sheik*, a story based on a novel by E.M. Hull, Valentino's personality and his on-screen persona became inextricably entwined. His popularity and foreign appeal contributed to the film's box-office success. Though sadistic elements are prevalent in the movie, acclaim for Valentino did not stem from the hero's cruelty. Rather, it was the actor's understated manner of playing the role of Ahmed Ben Hassan.

But Valentino hated the character that helped bring him his enormous fame. He wrote in his journal, "I was forced by censors, my director, and Mrs. Hull's original creation to play this wild Arabian charmer as though he were an associate professor of history or English literature at Oxford."

But audiences loved the lover, and Valentino received more than 1,000 letters a week: passionate professions of love that included lipstick prints, requests for photos, and appeals for autographs. Of his voluminous fan mail, Valentino once said: "One intelligent letter of praise for whatever ability I possess as an actor means more to me than the million gush notes that have been sent."

more "intricate steps" after he kissed her hand. He wrote in his journal, "I discovered in her eyes only lust and low cunning."

Valentino joined the cast of a touring musical, but the show folded in Utah. He left the troupe and moved on to San Francisco, where he worked as an instructor at a dance

academy. His awkward encounters with some students seemed to increase in severity. In one embarrassing incident, a frustrated student held him too close and stepped on his feet. He ordered her out as she spat in his face.

Valentino's enjoyment of dance was waning, but his efforts paid off.

If Valentino was ambivalent at best about his fan mail, he was intolerant toward the behavior of his admirers. Autograph hounds he understood, but intruders he couldn't put up with. One woman broke her leg climbing into his dressing room. Others would pay his valet \$20 for a vial of his bathwater. At the Waldorf Hotel in New York, porters escorted a girl out of his room as she bitterly cried, "You're a hell of a sheik!"

By 1926, the year of his death and the release of his final film, *The Son Of The Sheik*, Valentino was more annoyed than flattered by all the attention. He'd reached the breaking point, but he understood the source of his fame.

"I had to pose as a sheik for five years!" he said with disgust during an interview for *Collier's* in January 1926. "A lot of the perfumed ballyhooing was my own fault. I wanted to make a lot of money, and so I let them play me up as a lounge lizard, a soft, handsome devil whose only aim in life was to sit around and be admired by women."

Charisma And Technique

Watching Valentino's movies, one can still see his charisma. Ben-Allah Newman, author of *Rudolph Valentino: His Romantic Life And Death* (1926), described the appeal of the actor's face. "It was the baffling air of serenity mingled with fire; the indefinable passion without lust, the understood emotion of love, though it enmeshed with the vague suggestion of a something that could not be understood." Newman thought the star was capable of expressing more with his eyes than he could with a gesture.

Valentino himself certainly agreed. He once noted, "In my country, young girls are so carefully guarded that a man is not free to speak to them of love except through the eyes, the expression of the face, or some other form of subtle pantomime."

In an interview for *Movie Weekly*, Valentino spoke of his acting technique. He said he would disassociate himself from the portrayal and live and love as he

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imagined the character would. "While I am making a picture, I cease to be Valentino and become the character I am playing until the picture is finished."

In his 1977 biography about the star, Vincent Tajiri wrote, "A full year before Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theater was to appear before the American public, and a full decade before Lee Strasberg's Group Theater was to be formed, Valentino had begun to adopt some of the principles of 'method' acting."





"Women do not become infatuated with Rudolph Valentino. They are infatuated with what he stands for. They are in love with love."

As people dubbed him "The Great Lover," Valentino recoiled and wished to do something serious. "Women do not become infatuated with Rudolph Valentino," he said. "They do not love him. They are infatuated with what he stands for. They are in love with love."

Valentino wanted to move beyond the infatuation, and dreamed of playing roles such as Cesare Borgia and Christopher Columbus. He wanted to portray men who had accomplished great things, and his typecast role as the romantic lover didn't fulfill his personal artistic

criteria. Actor Francis X. Bushman encouraged Valentino to take the leading role in *Ben-Hur*, but the star feared that if he did, he'd have no place to go but down.

Natacha Rambova, Valentino's second wife, also believed Valentino deserved more prestige. In her memoirs, she wrote that she "could not understand why, with his ability, romance, magnetism, and proven

drawing power, Rudy should not have the best—why he should continually be thrust into small, trifling, cheap, commercial pictures, while other artists of much less ability and popularity were given big stories and big productions."

Extravagance And Dreams

Because of his monumental success, Valentino was wealthy and enjoyed an extravagant lifestyle. He purchased a home in Beverly Hills, California, and became a leading figure in Hollywood society. But he wasn't money-hungry. He believed money to be a hollow thing, unless it bought a dream. "And dreams," he said, "are so priceless that when one is living a dream, money ceases to figure."

Valentino was a complex man. He could be charming and outgoing, or cool and aloof. Some saw a serious actor who cared little about financial status and social standing; others saw a temperamental artist who was demanding and difficult. His generosity was well-known, his way with women more than rumor. His smile was given freely to most, and he showed a sense of humor, on stage and off.

That sense of humor was evident during one film opening, for example, at which Valentino appeared on stage wearing pajamas. He apologized for oversleeping, then stripped off his night clothes to



Among the thousands who came to pay their last respects to Valentino (right) was Eva Miller (opposite page).

Fascinating Facts

Many myths and legends have sprung up around the way Valentino lived and died, but some of the truths of his brief time on this earth are at least as interesting as fiction:

- In November 1919, Valentino married actress Jean Acker. Ironically, she locked the screen's great lover out of the hotel bridal suite on their wedding night. The marriage was never consummated, and they separated a month later.

- While on vacation aboard the cruise ship *Leviathan*, Valentino took a stroll on deck. So many women rushed to his side, the captain feared the ship was listing too dangerously!

- Valentino's second wife, actress and set designer Natacha Rambova, helped make Valentino's on-screen image more effeminate, to the point where the *Chicago Tribune* wrote in an editorial that carried a "Pink Powder Puff" headline: "When will we be rid of all these effeminate youths, pomaded, powdered, bejeweled, and bedizened, in the image of

Rudy—that painted pansy?"

- Valentino was charged with bigamy for marrying Rambova, as his first marriage had not yet been dissolved when they wed; the charge was later dropped. Rambova was such a strong presence in Valentino's career, studio executives refused to sign a contract with him unless it was provided that Rambova be banned from the set.

- Valentino's last will and testament left Rambova (whom he divorced in 1925), with just \$1. His estate, estimated at \$1-million, was split equally among his brother, sister, and Natacha's aunt. Litigation tied the estate up for years, with lawyers ultimately claiming most of the money.

- For many years, on the anniversary of Valentino's death, a mysterious woman dressed in black would appear at Valentino's crypt in Hollywood to place flowers near the vault holding the star's ashes. Her identity was never revealed.

—Craig Peters



The mysterious "woman in black" visits Valentino's crypt in 1938.

reveal a white tie and tails.

In his spare time, Valentino played with his dogs on the beach and loved dismantling one of his cars. He possessed an aptitude for the piano, and had planned on taking lessons, but music was only one of the many dreams he would never have the opportunity to fulfill.

In August 1926, Valentino was traveling the country promoting the film, *The Son Of The Sheik*. While in New York, he was hospitalized with appendicitis and a perforated ulcer. A little more than a week later, on August 23, Valentino died from peritonitis.

A crowd estimated at 100,000

fans—mostly women—lined up for 11 blocks to pay their last respects at the Campbell funeral parlor. Police had trouble with the crowd, and about 100 people were injured. In Hollywood, all film production was suspended for two minutes in the star's honor.

For all the acclaim and hysteria, though, Valentino maintained a thoughtful outlook on his celebrity. In a 1923 serial of his life for *Photoplay*, he commented, "I don't advocate the romantic life I lead on the screen. My own has been too adventurous to be altogether comfortable, and I suppose it always will be. Yet I know that every one of my experiences, tragic or comic, was given me for a reason. You have to know life to be an artist. You have to experience emotions actually in order to give them realistic expression."

In the expression of love on screen, Valentino will always remain a singular and powerful artist. ★



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