

The Great Gabbo

The Great Gabbo (1929) is an American Pre-Code early sound musical drama film directed by James Cruze, based on a story ("The Rival Dummy") by Ben Hecht and starring Erich von Stroheim and Betty Compson.^[1]

As originally released by Sono Art-World Wide Pictures, the film featured sequences in Multicolor. The current prints, restored by the Library of Congress and released by Kino International on DVD, now exist only in black and white.

Footage from the film was used on *Fractured Flickers* in the segment "Hymie und Me" (Episode 14), in which the dummy is presented as a real living comedian with von Stroheim as his straight man.

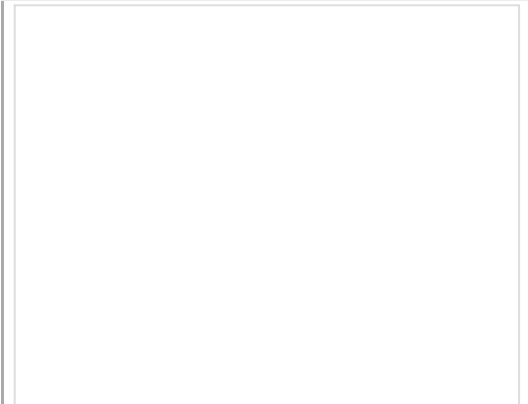
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Plot

The film follows brilliant ventriloquist "The Great Gabbo" (Stroheim), who increasingly uses his dummy "Otto" as his only means of self-expression—an artist driven insane by his work.

Gabbo's gimmick is his astonishing ability to make Otto talk—and even sing—while Gabbo himself smokes, drinks and eats. Gabbo's girlfriend and assistant Mary (Betty Compson) loves him, but is driven to leave him by his megalomania, superstitions, irritability, and inability to express any human emotion without using Otto as an intermediary. In Otto's voice, Gabbo accepts the blame for Mary's leaving and recounts all the things she did for him, but as Gabbo he denies his feelings and tells the dummy to shut up.

The Great Gabbo



Original theatrical poster

Directed by	James Cruze Uncredited: Erich von Stroheim
Produced by	James Cruze
Screenplay by	Hugh Herbert
Based on	"The Rival Dummy" (1928) by Ben Hecht
Starring	Erich von Stroheim Betty Compson
Music by	Howard Jackson (musical arrangement) Songs: Lynn Cowan Paul Titsworth Donald McNamee King Zany
Cinematography	Ira H. Morgan
Production company	James Cruze Productions
Distributed by	Sono Art-World Wide Pictures
Release date	September 12, 1929
Running time	96 minutes
Country	United States
Language	English

Two years later, Gabbo has become a nationally renowned ventriloquist. He is revered for his talent, even as he is ridiculed for his eccentricity: he takes Otto with him everywhere he goes, even dining out with him, providing much entertainment to the restaurant patrons. Despite his success he continues to pine for Mary, who is now romantically involved with another singer/dancer, Frank (Donald Douglas). With both Mary and Frank performing in a show in which Gabbo is the headliner, he attempts to win her back. Mary is charmed by Gabbo's new romantic behavior, driving Frank to angry fits of jealousy. As his courtship meets with continued success, Gabbo increasingly expresses his emotions to Mary directly, without using Otto.

One day Gabbo finds that in his absence, Mary has straightened up his dressing room the way that she always used to. Convinced that she wants to come back to him, he confronts her with his feelings, admitting his loneliness without her and in the process revealing that he has grown past many of his old failings, such as his superstitions and obsession with his personal success. However, Mary tells him that she loves Frank, and has been married to him since before Gabbo came back into her life. She says that she missed Otto but not Gabbo, and in a last farewell she says "I love you" to Otto.

In profound frustration at this, after Mary is gone Gabbo punches Otto in the face, but immediately apologizes and embraces the dummy, weeping. He then storms onto the stage during the finale and loudly rants at the performers. He is forced off the stage and fired from the show. Mary tries to confront Gabbo afterwards, but he only looks at her sadly and walks away. The film ends with workers taking down the letters of "The Great Gabbo" from the marquee as Gabbo looks on.

Cast

- Erich von Stroheim as The Great Gabbo
- Betty Compson as Mary
- Donald Douglas as Frank
- Marjorie Kane as Babe
- George Grandee as Otto (voice) (uncredited)
- John F. Hamilton as Neighbour (uncredited)
- Harry Ross as Performer (uncredited)
- Marbeth Wright as Dancer (uncredited)

Production

Touted in advertising as an "all-dialog singing, dancing and dramatic spectacle", this early sound film oddly interleaves stark drama with gratuitous full-length, large-scale, on-stage musical production numbers such as "Every Now and Then", "I'm in Love with You", "The New Step", "The Web of Love", and the now-missing "The Ga Ga Bird", which was filmed in color. The "Web of Love" number, in which the performers wear stylized spider and fly costumes, is occasionally shown on Classic Arts Showcase. Footage from the dance sequences was re-used with different music in *The Girl from Calgary* (1932).

The public domain version available on Internet Archive runs 68 minutes, while the original film ran 96 minutes, including the exit music. The opening credits mention "Color sequences by Multicolor", but those sequences are now either lost or have survived only in black-and-white form. Multicolor, based on the earlier Prizma color process, went out of business in 1932; its assets were bought by Cinecolor.

The quality and clarity of the film sound is notable.

A 94-minute public domain version is now available.^[2]

Response

The Great Gabbo opened to lukewarm reviews. Stroheim received good notices, but the film did nothing to further his career.^[3] *Photoplay* called the film "a bitter disappointment... Cruze seems to have lost his sense of humor, and the lighting and scenario are terrible."^[4] The *New York Times* review commented unfavorably on the technical quality of the color sequences. Historian Arthur Lennig wrote that *The Great Gabbo* "betrays little inventiveness and shows few of its actors to advantage." He notes that, due to obvious budget constraints, several line-flubs by cast members made it into the final cut.^[5]

Soundtrack

- **"Every Now and Then"**

Sung by Marjorie Kane and Donald Douglas

- **"I'm In Love With You"**

Sung by Betty Compson and Donald Douglas
Written by Lynn Cowan and Paul Titsworth

- **"The New Step"**

Sung by Marjorie Kane and chorus
Written by Lynn Cowan and Paul Titsworth

- **"I'm Laughing"**

Sung by Otto the dummy, with Erich von Stroheim
Written by King Zany and Donald McNamee

- **"Icky"** (the lollipop song)

Sung by Otto the dummy, with Erich von Stroheim

- **"The Web Of Love"**

Sung by Betty Compson and Donald Douglas
Written by Lynn Cowan and Paul Titsworth

- **"The Ga Ga Bird"**

(missing from known prints but major production number glimpsed among Gabbo's hallucinations)

See also

- *Dead of Night*, a 1945 British film
- *Knock on Wood*, a 1954 film
- "The Dummy" a 1962 episode of *The Twilight Zone*
- "Caesar and Me", a 1964 episode of *The Twilight Zone*
- *Devil Doll*, a 1964 film

- *Magic*, a 1978 film
- *The Ventriloquist*, a nemesis in *Batman* comics, first appearing in 1988
- "Krusty Gets Kancelled", a 1993 episode of *The Simpsons*
- List of early color feature films

References

1. The AFI Catalog of Feature Films: *The Great Gabbo* (<http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=9486>)
2. "The Great Gabbo" (<http://www.publicdomaintorrents.info/nshowmovie.html?movieid=215>). *Public Domain Torrents*. Retrieved July 1, 2018.
3. Lennig, Arthur. *Stroheim* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky) p 295. ISBN 0-8131-2138-8
4. Kreuger, Miles ed. *The Movie Musical from Vitaphone to 42nd Street as Reported in a Great Fan Magazine* (New York: Dover Publications) p 111. ISBN 0-486-23154-2
5. Lennig, p 292.

External links

- *The Great Gabbo* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0019946/>) on IMDb
- *Synopsis* (<https://www.allmovie.com/movie/v20668>) at AllMovie
- *Still* (<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/146154>) at moma.org
- *The Great Gabbo* (https://archive.org/details/great_gabbo) is available for free download at the Internet Archive

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