

Girl With A Hatbox

BORIS BARNET

1927

Natasha, the titular Girl with a Hat Box, is a wide eyed beauty. She is also absolutely ferocious. Like her grandfather, she is a milliner. She works as hard as he does, and given her grandfather's age, it falls to her to make the trek across the ice and snow with a large wooden hatbox to catch the train to Moscow. Disturbed by dangling boots on the train, she encounters Ilya - a student who is attempting to sleep on the rack above her. She scowls and reprimands him with utter vitriol.

Boris Barnet, a highly adept filmmaker, successfully merges the slapstick and the beautiful. As smitten rail clerk Fogelev rushes to catch up with Natasha, she nimbly bounds ahead whilst he slides comedically through the snow. In this film we can see the imprint of Charlie Chaplin and the legacy of Lev Kuleshov, an innovator of film and in particular comedy. Barnet studied under him for many years. Shari Kizirian for Senses of Cinema notes, 'Arriving at the horizon where a blazing expanse of white snow meets a cloud-frosted sky, Fogelev stumbles in the distance. This stark, graphic composition recalls a scene in Kuleshov's, *By the Law*.' Another example of cinematography and humour's convergence is when Natasha chases Ilya. The beauty of Moscow is presented against the comedic caper as she runs through the snowy city with her hat box. It is as highly stylised as it is funny.

The camera work in *A Girl with a Hatbox* is accomplished, especially for a 1920s film. Barnet uses a variety of techniques to tell his story and keep it visually compelling. As Natasha searches the streets, he shows her vision through binocular like circles looking from side to side. This is a technique that has been used in countless cartoons. Barnet also uses double exposure to show Madame Irene's husband, the cruel bourgeoisie woman that Natasha works for, listening to the radio. Not only was double exposure an advanced technique for the time, the nature of being in one's own world and listening to something that takes us to somewhere in our imagination is conveyed beautifully. As he reclines on the coach his face is displayed under images of an orchestra and an opera singer. Natasha herself is beautiful but hilarious. The actress who portrays her, Anna Sten, has enormous ability as a character actress. In close ups of her face, or even when she's not the focus of a scene, she

is prone to contorting her face into incredible expressions. In the face of courtship, annoyance and a brush with authority she plays her character with remarkable presence and hilarious nonchalance. When she finds the authorities questioning Ilya, whom she has married so he can live in her flat, she reacts quickly: her face spreads from suspicion to a grin at her husband of convenience. She lavishes kisses on him. As soon as the authorities leave she pushes him off, her face immediately reads disgust.

In a trope as old as time, circumstances force Ilya and Natasha to spend the night together. In a display of non vanity she places her hair into makeshift curlers, the effect is absurd and hilarious. She makes a bed for herself and a barrier: the bed is a thin sheet on the floor and the barrier is two hat boxes and a pair of boots. She peaks at Ilya, her face visible just above the boxes. He looks back at her. The longing and tension between the two is obviously building. To cut through it she makes the bizarre and incredibly funny decision to play a practical joke on him. She tells him there is a mouse in the room and that she is scared. He jumps up to protect her and finds there is no mouse. After they're settled the mouse returns, but this time he doesn't believe her.

Slapstick aside, Barnet depicts a very serious and specific social issues that pervaded the 1920s- that is New Economic Policy, the housing crisis and corruption inherent in society. The divides in Moscow and the exploitation by the wealthy of this crisis is displayed through the villainous figures of Madame Irene and her husband. Where Natasha is hardworking and ambitious, they are lazy and inept. *Girl with a Hatbox* was well received by the public at the time of its release, who adored the realness of the subject matter explored and also the lightness with which it was handled. Beyond this, Anna Sten's performance as the indomitable hat box girl captured many hearts. Kirizian stated, 'She is no damsel in distress; she doesn't need a male arm to guide her down the icy path and, when men foolishly engage in fisticuffs, she doesn't stand by in awe, with useless hands to her gaping mouth. She instead gets herself and her hatbox out of the way and takes a well-earned, comical rest.'