



THE CURSE OF QUEEN KELLY

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REVIEWED BY IMOGEN SARA SMITH

When a film contains an abduction from a convent, a forced marriage in an African brothel and a mad queen who saunters around her palace wearing nothing but a Persian cat, it's hard to believe that the story behind the production could be even more eventful and lurid than what's on screen. But such is the case with the legendary fiasco of *Queen Kelly*, the unfinished silent masterwork from 1929 directed by Erich von Stroheim, starring and produced by Gloria Swanson, and financed (sort of) by her then lover, the tycoon and future political patriarch Joseph P. Kennedy. Pamela Hutchinson unearths the full saga in a crisply written page-turner, coinciding with the release of a stunning new restoration from Milestone Films, perhaps as close to a definitive version as we'll ever have.

Hutchinson gives the tale a novelistic propulsion by structuring it around the three protagonists – she calls them Gloria, Joe, and Von – whom she follows from their arrivals in Hollywood to the ends of their lives. Who was the film's real author? Although Hutchinson leaves the question open, her true protagonist is Swanson, the radiant "diva" who sought to wrest control of her career from the studios. Certainly, she became the film's owner (after the millionaire Kennedy, whose generous gifts to her turned out

to have been billed to her production company, left her to pay off the loans when he abandoned the project), and its champion, presenting it on television and at public screenings, where she savvily cast it as an underground film. Stroheim comes off as both tyrant and victim: his self-destructive insistence on filming outrageously sordid and provocative scenes that could never pass the censors, more than his blithe disregard for budgets and schedules, seems to have been what doomed the film. Hutchinson nonetheless sides with him as the visionary artist who could, if given a little more money and time, have brought the movie to some kind of completion, had the others not panicked and pulled the plug.

What emerges most powerfully is the universe of contingencies in the creation of a work of art. Though I knew all the common wisdom and oft-repeated anecdotes about *Queen Kelly*, I was enthralled by the multitude of different unrealised versions from pre-shooting drafts to a wild array of proposed salvage jobs after Stroheim was fired – those include everything from tacking on a *Romeo and Juliet* ending to converting it into an operetta to adding a framing story filmed decades later. Hutchinson beautifully captures the enduring hold the project had on its creators – and now has on us.

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