



## Valentino, Rudolph (1895-1926)

by Peter J. Holliday

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The most popular of silent-screen stars, the darkly handsome Valentino gazed at his heroines with a mixture of passion and melancholy that sent chills down female (and some male) spines. To American women he represented mysterious, forbidden eroticism, the fulfillment of dreams of illicit love and uninhibited passion; but most male moviegoers found his acting ludicrous, his manner foppish, and his screen character effeminate.

His androgynous persona, at once assertively virile and gracefully sensitive, threatened traditional images of American masculinity in a crucial period of cultural change.

Born Rodolfo Alfonzo Raffaele Pierre Philibert Guglielmi in Castellaneta, Italy in 1895, Valentino emigrated to New York in 1913. There he took a succession of jobs, including dishwasher and waiter, and was booked by the police several times on suspicion of petty theft and blackmail.

In 1917 he traveled to Hollywood where he landed bit parts in the movies, mostly as an exotic dancer or villain. He married bisexual actress Jean Acker in 1920, but the marriage was never consummated.

Valentino's big break came in 1921 when Metro screenwriter June Mathis insisted that director Rex Ingram give him the lead in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. The film catapulted Valentino into stardom.

He reached new heights with *The Sheik* (1921) for Paramount. During the film's exhibition women fainted in the aisles. Such was the film's influence that Arab motifs suddenly pervaded American fashion and interior design.

Valentino also scored sensationally with *Blood and Sand* (1922) and *Monsieur Beaucaire* (1924); and in 1923 his small volume of mawkish poetry, *Day Dreams*, sold hundreds of thousands of copies. But soon his career began to turn downwards.

While they have never been documented, rumors of Valentino's bisexuality have persisted. Certainly, it is true that the women in his life dominated him. His ambitious second wife, actress and set designer Natasha Rambova (1897-1969, born Winifred Shaunessy), a former lover of Alla Nazimova, took charge and (mis)guided his career.

His screen image became increasingly effeminate, and Rambova's interference strained his relationship with studio executives. Just when he seemed to be recovering his popularity with *The Eagle* (1925) and *The Son of the Sheik* (1926), he was blasted in a venomous Chicago Tribune editorial, headlined "Pink Powder Puff." The writer lamented, "When will we be rid of all these effeminate youths, pomaded, powdered, jeweled and bedizened, in the image of Rudy--that painted pansy?"



**Top:** A Paramount Pictures poster for *The Sheik* (1921).

**Above:** Rudolph Valentino (left) with Elinor Glyn.

Valentino's death in 1926 at the age of 31 of a perforated ulcer brought on a wave of mass hysteria among female fans.

Although the actor still commands a high position in American culture as an icon of the silent screen, film specialists hold him in rather low esteem. Kevin Brownlow, however, argues that although Valentino made more bad films than good, the force of his personality nevertheless transcended the "romantic kitsch" of his material.

Unlike that of a later screen icon, James Dean, Valentino's body of work died with silent pictures. To the modern viewer, his acting style is incomprehensible.

Valentino's significance lies not in his having created an artistic legacy, but in how his dubious image-- especially his dark sensuality and foreign, somewhat androgynous looks-- challenged the way a parochial America looked at its heroes, both on and off screen. Valentino opened the door for new models of masculinity.

John Dos Passos included a brief biography, "Adagio Dancer," in his trilogy *U.S.A.* (1936). Anthony Dexter portrayed the star in one film biography (1951) and Rudolph Nureyev in another (1977).

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