



L'INFERNO

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY THE MATTI BYE ENSEMBLE
WITH NARRATION BY PAUL MCGANN**

**DIRECTED BY FRANCESCO BERTOLINI, ADOLFO PADOVAN, AND GIUSEPPE DE LIGUORO,
ITALY, 1911**

CAST Salvatore Papa, Arturo Pirovano, Giuseppe De Liguoro, Attilio Motta, Emilise Beretta, and A. Milla
PRODUCTION Milano Films **PRINT SOURCE** Cineteca di Bologna

With its horned demons, headless specters, and winged harpies, 1911's *L'Inferno* revels in the grotesque, the feudal, and the macabre. Like a fairy tale gone wrong, or a Hieronymus Bosch painting set in motion, the canonical work of Italy's early silent era infused biblical subject matter with fantasy, the Gothic, and the delightfully obscene. Featuring heretics, adulterers, gluttons, and misers, with cameos from the vixens of antiquity—Cleopatra, Helen of Troy, and Dido—*L'Inferno's* preponderance of naked flesh (reportedly featuring the first ever scene of full-frontal male nudity) was about as lascivious as early silent film came. Yet, for all its sensationalism and carnality, Milano Films' production of the first cantica of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* legitimized cinema as a "seventh art," both in Italy and abroad. Flaunting impressive special effects, extraordinary production design, and costing an unheard-of 100,000 lire, *L'Inferno* was truly the first super-production—an international blockbuster running some three hours long, making it the second feature-length film in cinema history after Australia's *The Story of the Kelly Gang* in 1906. And while only a third of that runtime survives, *L'Inferno*, under the direction of Francesco Bertolini, Giuseppe De Liguoro, and Dante expert Adolfo Padovan, endures as one of the era's most intriguing and entertaining literary adaptations.

Italy's film industry was relatively nascent when *L'Inferno* went into production in 1909. While cinema flourished in France, Germany, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, Italy arrived to the scene relatively

late—it wasn't until 1903, some seven years after the Lumières debuted their cinematograph in Rome and Milan, that a national industry began to take shape. The release of Filoteo Alberini's *The Capture of Rome* in 1905 is largely regarded as the first distinctly Italian narrative film, and from there the industry blossomed, led by the country's major studios, Cines, Ambrosio Film, Itala Film, and Milano Films founded in 1908. By 1911, Italian film production was fervent—with three titles released each day. Harnessing Dante's international renown proved a sound strategy as Italy's reputation for quality films spread around the globe, ushering in a golden age of Italian silent production, with the likes of *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1913), *Cabiria* (1914), and *Assunta Spina* (1915) soon to follow.

Considered one of the foremost artists of the Late Middle Ages, the Florentine Dante was proudly celebrated as Italy's national bard and his *Divine Comedy*, completed a year prior to his 1321 death, adapted for a variety of media throughout the centuries. The paintings of Sandro Botticelli, the sculptures of Auguste Rodin, the musical compositions of Franz Liszt, and the watercolors of poet William Blake are just a few Dante-inspired works. It is no wonder then, that the nascent industry looked to its country's most bona fide cultural export to legitimize film as a high art. Milano Films' production, which premiered in Naples on March 1, 1911, was just one of eleven films released in Italy between 1908 and 1911 based on the works of Dante or inspired by his life (the Helios studio rushed their inferior and much





shorter version of *L'Inferno* into production to beat Milano Films by two months). Further, at a time when the Vicar of Rome forbade priests from entering movie houses for fear of cinema's penchant for the lurid, not even the Church could object to such sacred subject matter. Its graphic and mesmerizing depictions of Hell and Purgatory, with bodies torn limb from limb, the devouring of souls by gargantuan beasts, and heretics burning in lakes of boiling pitch, upheld Catholic doctrine. Indeed, to attract believers to the film's release in the United States, *Moving Picture World* published an exaggerated, if not apocryphal, testimonial to the film's persuasiveness, reporting that a lawyer jumped up in the middle of a screening confessing aloud to being a sinner.

Dante's descriptions of the nine circles of Hell informed visual art, in particular painting, throughout the Renaissance and beyond. Both Salvatore Papa and Arturo Pirovano were cast in the film for their respective resemblances to Dante and Virgil in art. And while *Moving Picture World's* W. Stephen Bush imagined the filmmakers sitting "at [Dante's] feet like docile scholars," in truth, Bertolini, Padovan,

and De Liguoro followed the visual cues of French artist Gustave Doré whose engravings illustrate an 1857 edition of *The Divine Comedy*. The directors effectively distilled Doré's vision of winged demons, the horned Pluto, and pestering Furies for the movie screen, adding an alluring color scheme to the famed artist's black-and-white renderings—deep indigo for Pluto's eerie, icy realm, fiery reds for the suffering of burning souls, and a golden tone for the heavenly realm. For Doré's cavernous crags of rock and rivers of filth, the production shot on location in Milan's neighboring lake district. Technical director Emilio Ronsardo balanced each of Hell's nine circles with a bravado indebted to the trick films of Georges Méliès, making the most of superimpositions, double, triple, and even quadruple exposures. Under Ronsardo's skilled hand, *L'Inferno* became a medieval painting in ballet form—carnal souls violently flung about by Hell's gusting winds in an impressive use of multilayered superimpositions. In this, *L'Inferno* not only distinguished film from the theater with its baroque, lavish visuals, it also married special-effects laden Bible stories with box-office success—a



marriage that prospered well into the late silent era and beyond, in particular with the super-productions of Cecil B. DeMille to come.

Released in the U.S. by Monopol Films, *L'Inferno* garnered praise for making Dante "intelligible to the masses," from perhaps the film's greatest state-side booster who also went on tour with the film. Like his Italian counterparts, W. Stephen Bush had been using the pages of *Moving Picture World* to advocate for not only longer films but films adapted from classical works. When *L'Inferno* came out he couldn't say enough good about it, encouraging exhibitors to book it and, presumably, engage him to lecture on it. "The immortal work," he asserted, "whose beauties until now were accessible only to a small band of scholars, has now after a sleep of more than six centuries become the property of mankind." *L'Inferno's* Italian publicity campaign had been even more extravagant. Launched by Milano Films' producer Gustavo Lombardo—the editor of *Lux* film magazine and future founder of the stalwart Italian studio Lombardo Film—the film was teased

some four months prior to its premiere, an unusual practice for the period. Impersonating Dante in his magazine, Lombardo claims to have been given the bard's highest approval for the film, lending *L'Inferno* legitimacy, even if contrived.

A landmark in so many ways, *L'Inferno* predicted the ingredients to mega-blockbuster success of the future—targeted publicity, elaborate production design, astounding special effects, and above all, entertainment. It effectively launched the narrative art film, luring intellectuals and artists to its premiere at the Regio Teatro Mercadante in Naples. Declaring it a triumph, respected novelist and intellectual heavy-weight Matilde Serao claimed that *L'Inferno* "rehabilitated the cinematograph." Today, the more than century-old film still reads as fresh. Like the appeal of Méliès, *L'Inferno* offers unparalleled visuals that transcend curiosity or nostalgia—like a restorative tonic, its eternally appealing subject matter and style is proof positive of Italy's immense contribution to the history of film.

— Alicia Fletcher