

THE THIEF OF BAGDAD

Douglas Fairbanks Productions 1924
Directed by Raoul Walsh



Cast

Ahmed the Thief: Douglas Fairbanks
His Evil Associate: Snitz Edwards
The Princess: Julianne Johnston
The Mongol Slave: Anna May Wong
The Mongol Prince: So Jin

Photography: Arthur Edeson
Story: Elton Thomas
Art Director: William Cameron Menzies
Film Editor: William Nolan

A tinted print.
Duration: 146 minutes plus interval
Projection speed: variable
Aperture: full

Score by Carl Davis (70 players)
based on the music of
Rimsky-Korsakov



LIVE CINEMA

THE THIEF OF BAGDAD

an entrancing picture, wholesome and beautiful, deliberate but compelling, a feat of motion picture art which has never been equalled.
New York Times, 1923

'Happiness must be Earned' is the moral of *The Thief of Bagdad*. Ahmed triumphs over the mysteries and magic of the East. Harnessing his nimbleness of wit and body against evil, he progresses from thief to hero and finds himself worthy of a beautiful princess and heir to a great kingdom. Much like the film's star, screenwriter and producer, Douglas Fairbanks, who around the time of making *The Thief* found himself to be the uncrowned king of Hollywood. With the help of his movie-mogul wealth, Fairbanks was able to create a veritable 'Arabian Nights Fantasy'. At its premiere a reviewer wrote that the film would 'some day show some prying generation of the future how far Americans came in ingenuity and sensitiveness.'

The Thief is packed with tricks and special effects making it the best pantomime ever: a magic army, an all-seeing crystal, a cloak of invisibility, a magic carpet and even a flying horse. Fairbanks himself was a one-man special effect. His stunts were rehearsed as carefully as any Fred Astaire dance routine. His son explained that Fairbanks 'saw himself as an athletic dancer leaping with graceful movement across the adventures of history.' Fairbanks was dubbed 'the movie Nijinsky' after the legendary dancer who appeared to be suspended in the air.

The Russian ballet influenced the film's other great star, its designer William Cameron Menzies. Menzies looked to the Russian artist Léon Bakst's designs for the ballet *Scheherazade* for their sense of splendour and sensuality. However, to avoid bringing the fairy-tale down to earth, Menzies needed to make huge sets appear weightless. Inspired by the illustrators Edmund Dulac and Aubrey Beardsley, he created an art nouveau landscape of spiraling staircases, suspended balconies and floating bridges. Using polished floors, he built the sets on glossy black plinths so that the tops of the buildings reflected clearly in the polished surface. The illusion is of a city suspended in space. Menzies said, 'Realism is so unnecessary when we have at our disposal all the resources of the camera to produce effects that can only be rivalled by dreams.'

When preparing the music to accompany the restoration in 1984, Carl Davis chose to make a compilation score, taking as his source material the music of the Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov. He explained, 'the film is influenced by what I'd call Russian Orientalism – there is exoticism and myth intertwined with virtuosity; all echoed in Rimsky-Korsakov's music.' The choice of themes is a perfect match for the magic on the screen. As the Thief and his Princess soar on the flying carpet over the minarets of Bagdad into their romantic future, the splendour of Rimsky-Korsakov blazing from the orchestra tells us that they have truly earned their happiness.