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PICCADILLY WITH ANNA MAY WONG

By Grace Lee Boggs

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Nowadays, because we are the country's fastest growing minority, Asian Americans see ourselves all over the place, in commercials and sitcoms on TV, in newspaper ads, as stand-up comics, and even in a recently released movie, Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle, which is about the escapades of two Asian American youngsters, one of Korean and the other of South Asian ancestry.

When I was a teenager in the 1920s and 1930s, however, we were such a tiny and invisible minority that there was only one well-known film actress, Anna May Wong, who looked something like us. She even resembled my sister who was so pretty that people used to tell her she should be in movies. So I used to keep my eyes peeled for her fleeting appearances on the screen.

That is why I leapt at the opportunity to go to the Detroit Film Theatre recently to see Piccadilly, a feature length film in which she stars.

Piccadilly was made seventy-five years ago in England where the Chinese American actress had to go in order to be given a leading role. Recently restored by the British Film Institute, it is well worth seeing. At the end nearly everyone in the audience (which, as far as I could see, included few Asian Americans with my special interest) gave it a standing ovation.

The plot centers around Piccadilly, a posh night club in London where lovely ladies in floor length evening gowns do the long, gliding and graceful steps of the Peabody on a huge dance floor with handsome gentlemen in black tuxedos.

Business at the Piccadilly, owned by Valentine, a suave man about town, has been declining because Mabel, the busty blond dancer in the club's floor show who is also Valentine's lover (played by Gilda Gray), is no longer attracting customers. So Valentine decides to replace her with Shosho (played by Anna May Wong) whom he accidentally discovers entertaining her fellow dishwashers by shaking her booty on a tiny table in the club's scullery.

By contemporary standards, the dancing of both Mabel and Shosho is rather sad. But flimsily covered in a pseudo Asian costume, Shosho's exoticism lifts her overnight to stardom and wealth. However, she soon comes to a violent end because, emboldened by her triumph over Mabel, she decides to seduce Valentine at the risk of arousing the fierce jealousy of both Mabel and her own Chinese lover.

I was especially struck by the creativity of the German director, E.A. Dupont, in showing the contrast between the three layers of the night club: the top layer where lovely ladies and handsome men do gliding dances, smoke long

thin cigarettes, and pick at their food; the kitchen or middle layer where chefs take pride in preparing the cuisine; and the scullery where a motley crew washes dishes and takes out the garbage.

The contrast between the posh Piccadilly and a bar in Limehouse, where Shosho and her friends hang out, is also revealing, especially a scene where the owner throws a black man out of the bar because he is dancing with a white woman.

The piano accompaniment brought back fond memories. I was amazed at the skill and energy with which for an hour and a half David Drazin kept up with what was happening on the screen, switching to different tunes, including some from Chinese folk music, to go along with the developing story. Back then we took it for granted, maybe because playing the piano then was as common as playing the guitar is today.

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