

# Shiraz

Franz Osten IN/UK/GER 1928 97m



**The London Film Festival Archive Gala was an extraordinary experience.** Regularly a highlight of the silent film year, previous galas have showcased glistening restorations of old and faded movies paired with fresh scores of mostly excellent quality. This year's event was an exercise in enchanted restoration – with makeover and music transforming a simple film into something entirely wonderful.

Shiraz: A Romance of India was an Indian/British/German co-production from the late silent era. You might know two more films by the director Franz Osten: A Throw of Dice and Light of Asia. Shiraz is a shamelessly romantic and fairly romanticised, telling of the love affair honoured by one the most beautiful mausoleum in the world, the Taj Mahal in Agra.

Shiraz (Himansu Rai, who also produced the film) is a humble, but exceptionally talented potter, who has a deep love for his adopted sister Selima. When Selima (Enakshi Rama Rau) grows up, she is sold as a slave into the royal court and they are separated. What's more, a love affair slowly begins to spark between Selima and Prince Khurram (Charu Roy) ... Meanwhile, general's daughter Dalia (Seeta Devi) is plotting to get her own hands on the prince.

The story may seem paper-thin, but it has a beautiful surface. The romantic leads are very sweet, with the halting love story between Selima

and the Prince always believable and Devi delightfully minxy. The location backdrops of the mountains and palaces are ravishing – a testament to the art direction of Promode Nath and cinematography by Henry Harris and Emil Schünemann that makes the most of natural light.

The action sequence that opens the film, with a caravan raided on its way across the desert, leaving the baby Selima behind, is brilliantly staged. Frequent cuts to her nurse anxiously peeking out at the incoming danger ramp up the tension. There are moments of violence elsewhere too, notably two gruesome threats lobbed at Shiraz himself – the “elephant’s foot” moment caused many in the audience to audibly gasp, and understandably so. It’s a fairly dark story, in truth, with poison, plotting, torture, vengeance, heartbreak and loss on the cards for our group of amorous young things. If you know anything about Indian film, you may be surprised that the lovers share a passionate clinch – and they do.

**With such a beautiful film, the restoration work has its chance to shine.**

Working from an original copy of the film, the BFI has removed scratches, blotches, tremors and flickers, leaving Shiraz unblemished, stable and luminous. Watching the film, simply gazing at it, was a pure pleasure. A fairytale such as this repays the polish.

Performing alongside the film, however, was an ensemble led by Anoushka Shankar playing a sensational new score that she had composed for the film. At this gala, the standing ovation was no mere matter of politeness. Multilayered, pulsing with energy, weaving a selection of Indian and European instruments together with, I think, a foley track, Shankar’s score invigorated the film and hinted at its own “fusion” history as a co-production.

Shankar’s sitar playing alone was pretty exceptional, but the score overall was one of the best I have ever heard by a non-

specialist Saturday night’s London Film Festival Archive Gala was an extraordinary experience. Regularly a highlight of the silent film year, previous galas have showcased glistening restorations of old and faded movies paired with fresh scores of mostly excellent quality. This year’s event was an exercise in enchanted restoration – with makeover and music transforming a simple film into something entirely wonderful.



**Pamela Hutchinson**

*Himansu Rai was an important figure in Indian cinema, credited with modernising it and bringing it into the talking pictures era, and was fond of putting himself in his own movies as the leading man; he was in charge, so why not? Almost all the silent movies from the subcontinent have been lost, destroyed or have deteriorated, far more than many nations' silent archive, yet as Rai was a pivotal character perhaps that was why his work was more likely to be preserved: Shiraz, where he took the protagonist's role, was doubly interesting as it was shot in actual locations around India, including the palaces and notable buildings he had access to.*

*The story of Rai was a positive one for the Indian film industry, or at least it was until the Second World War broke out and his German colleagues fell foul of the ruling British, ruining his studio, sending him into a mental breakdown and eventually his death not long after his carefully cultivated empire was broken apart. Another reason why it was important to continue to watch his projects, the ones that survived, because it would be even more tragic if all his work had been forgotten - Bollywood owed a debt to what he started and his vision for an Indian film business to rival the other centres of film production across the globe.*

*He got his wish, even if it was too late for him to capitalise on it, but what of Shiraz, possibly his most famous film, was it actually worth seeing for more reasons than its historical value and interest? The answer was a guarded yes, as aside from a rare glimpse of the country during a century that would see huge upheavals for its population in a period that was not often recorded (or preserved) on film, you were offered a sweeping epic with what looked like a cast of thousands, thousands of extras at any rate, and a love story that purported to tell the tale of how the Taj Mahal, that tomb that became so emblematic of India, was created and the reasons why it was. It is Selima who the building is a tribute to, and this film served up a backstory that may or may not have been entirely accurate.*

*Rai, working with German director Franz Osten and a British studio, though otherwise this was an Indian effort through and through, gave himself the most to do in front of the camera as far as emoting went, going all out to wring the tears from the contemporary audience. The point of the melodrama was that life was cruel, and even love, which should have offered succour, could be the source of much misery, though as it was based in affection and romance this was far more acceptable than outright wickedness. Selima is sold into slavery and ends up at the palace of the Emperor (Charu Roy) who falls for her as all the while Shiraz tries to get her back; oddly, Enakasha Rama Rao, the star playing the object of these men's affection (in one of three films she made) was no great beauty, looking rather masculine for what was supposed to be the epitome of feminine pulchritude, especially when there were more attractive women in the cast. Maybe she had a great personality. Shiraz was a wallow in swooning anguish to an extent, but again, historically captivating.*

**Graeme Clarke -The Spinning image**

