
TRIANGLE / THE HALF-BREED

Douglas Fairbanks profited from his fame on Broadway when, in 1915, he signed an excellent contract with Harry Aitken's Triangle Films, placing his image under the aegis of D. W. Griffith, in charge of Triangle's Fine Art branch. The new star's first film, *The Lamb*, was one of the three Triangle films to be celebrated in a preview at the Knickerbocker Theatre in New York, in September 1915. The critics were dumbfounded, hailing the tour de force and enthusing over the actor's appealing personality and his exuberant taste for clowning around.

The Half-Breed is the ninth of Douglas Fairbanks's 13 films that Griffith supervised and the third directed by Allan Dwan. The production means were considerable, the original plot drawn from a best-selling short story by Bret Harte, *In the Carquinez Woods*, and owing to his solid experience, Allan Dwan was designated to make the film.

The Half-Breed is a fascinating tale about racial discriminations in the American West. The insert titles were intelligent and incisive, and the two female roles complex and nuanced. The sets and photography were, as described by the biographer of cameraman Victor Fleming, 'visually enchanting'. The shooting took place on location in Calaveras County, California, and, more precisely, a forest of sequoias where the crew filmed a real forest fire. The film cost \$22,906, practically twice Fairbanks's previous production (*Flirting with Fate*).

Contrary to all expectations, *The Half-Breed* turned out to be one of the actor's rare box office flops. Even though the film is interesting, daring and well directed, Fairbanks's customary enthusiasm was visibly lacking. Bret Harte's Lo Dorman is stoic, strict and impassive – the opposite of the star's personality, whose famous smile and stunts are rare here.

The film met with success as a tract against racism, as an adaptation of Bret Harte's story and the story of two complex female characters but, as his co-star Alma Rubens said two years after the film's release: 'Douglas Fairbanks in a profound, dramatic role! Can you imagine that today?'

Tracey Goessel, film historian
Robert Byrne, president of the San Francisco Silent Festival



The Half-Breed

United States, 1916 – 68 minutes

Direction: Allan Dwan

Script: Anita Loos, from *In The Carquinez Woods* by Bret Harte

Production: Fine Arts Film Company

Photography: Victor Fleming

Cast: Douglas Fairbanks, Alma Reuben, Sam De Grasse, Tom Wilson, Frank Brownlee, Jewel Carmen, George Beranger

Lo Dorman (*L'eau Dormante* or 'Sleeping Water') is born of an Indian woman and a white man. Rejected by her lover, the mother abandons the infant to a solitary immigrant before throwing herself off the top of a cliff. The orphan grows up, but when his kind guardian dies, he again becomes a dropout, the 'half-breed', and must exile himself to go live alone in the wood. In the neighbouring town of Excelsior, he meets Nellie Wynn, the preacher's daughter, who toys with his feelings. Another woman, Teresa, appears in her wake and, soon finding herself an outlaw, also seeks refuge in the forest.

Only two original 35mm prints of *The Half-Breed* have survived. The most complete is a Pathé five-reel diacetate print in the collections of La Cinémathèque française. It comes from a version rereleased in 1924 by Tri-Stone Pictures, but even though it offers superior visual quality, it lacks the original insert titles of 1916. The Library of Congress owns a print of the original 1916 version, but it is incomplete, and the remaining material is seriously damaged. That print was unearthed in the course of the sadly famous Dawson discovery in 1978 when hundreds of pre-World War I films were discovered in a swimming pool in this former gold-rush town in the Canadian Yukon, tucked away there following their distribution period. Finally, a short 16mm version from the collections of Lobster Films contains several original sequences lacking in the 35mm elements.

This new restoration, carried out in 2013 as a collaborative project between La Cinémathèque française and the San Francisco Silent Film Festival, reassembled the elements from these three sources. The print of La Cinémathèque française provided most of the shots, the Library of Congress print procured the original insert titles along with a few shots absent from the other sources, and the Lobster Films 16mm print allowed for retrieving a handful of shots unavailable elsewhere. The result is the most complete reconstruction possible of the original version of *The Half-Breed*, projected for the first time on 30 July 1916.