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THE NEW YORKER

MOVIES | JANUARY 19, 2015 ISSUE BY RICHARD BRODY

BABEL ON THE HUDSON

A Child of the Ghetto

USA, 1910, 15 min, Silent w/ English intertitles
Directed by D.W. Griffith

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Silent masterworks at the New York Jewish Film Festival.

This year's New York Jewish Film Festival, running Jan. 14-29 at Film Society of Lincoln Center, offers welcome restorations of several rare silent classics. D. W. Griffith's "**A Child of the Ghetto**," made in 1910, just two years into his directorial career, displays a playfully innovative movie technique. (The film screens on Jan. 24.) The ghetto of the title is New York's Lower East Side; the "child" is an unnamed, newly orphaned Jewish adolescent (Dorothy West) who takes in piecework for a garment factory. Falsely accused of stealing by her boss, and hotly pursued by the police, she ends up in the countryside, where the grown son of a farm family finds her and takes her in. Her hard-won new tranquillity is threatened, however, by a chance visit from a city policeman.



Dorothy West plays a Lower East Side orphan in D. W. Griffith's "A Child of the Ghetto," from 1910.

ILLUSTRATION BY NICOLE RIFKIN

Griffith packs a remarkable density of incident and emotion into a mere sixteen minutes. He delights in audacious editing effects—such as a jump cut, from the girl's arrival at home to her efforts at needlework—and surprising visual compositions. With a camera perched high above pushcarts in the teeming neighborhood, Griffith films West, in costume, jostling on Rivington Street amid a throng of passersby, some of whom stare curiously into the lens.

When the action shifts to the farm, Griffith elaborates his reactionary philosophy along with his daring artistry. As the young woman faces the probing policeman while fetching water from a well, the rope attached to the bucket looms behind her head, appearing as if tied around her neck. Her courtship by the farm boy of Christian charity plays like an updated "Merchant of Venice," with its depiction of a Jewish girl's redemption through marriage to a Gentile. In Griffith's vision, deliverance for a child of the ghetto is in leaving the cramped tenements, the depraved city, and her alien heritage for the American heartland and mainstream.