

This Day in History... May 6, 1895

Birth of Rudolph Valentino

Silent film star Rudolph Valentino was born Rodolfo Pietro Filiberto Raffaello Guglielmi di Valentina d'Antonguolla on May 6, 1895, in Castellaneta, Italy. Idolized as the "Latin Lover" of the 1920s, Valentino gained enormous fame for his passionate, romantic roles.

Valentino struggled in school as a child and was eventually sent to an agricultural school where he earned a certificate. He spent some time in Paris, but when he was unable to find work, he left for the US, arriving at Ellis Island in December 1913. Valentino worked a variety of jobs to support himself, including as a gardener, dishwasher, and vaudeville dancer. He joined a traveling musical to make his way to California, where he danced and taught dancing.

Valentino made his film debut as an extra in *Alimony*. He continued to receive small parts and was often cast as a gangster, which he grew to dislike. He got his big break in 1921 with *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. His portrayal of Julio made him an instant celebrity, especially among the women in the audience. It was one of the first movies to surpass \$1 million at the box office and the sixth-highest grossing silent film of all time. While *Four Horsemen* brought him fame, it was his role as the desert warrior in *The Sheik* (1921), that gained him a national following – making him the most popular romantic star of the silent film era. Following his lead, men learned to tango and tantalize women with smoldering, sensuous stares. And college men, imitating their idol, slicked back their hair and called themselves "sheiks."



Valentino was also a successful dancer off-screen.

In 1922, Valentino had leading roles in *Moran of the Lady Letty*, *Beyond the Rocks*, *Blood and Sand*, and *The Young Rajah*. After going on strike against his film studio, Valentino was not permitted to appear in any other films, per his contract. So he joined the Mineralava Dance Tour, in which he danced in 88 cities throughout the US and Canada. He also sponsored beauty products and judged beauty pageants.

In addition to acting, Valentino published a book of poetry, *Day Dreams*, in 1923. He also provided stories from his life for magazines, with those issues selling out quickly. Valentino also established his own award for filmmaking, a few years before the Academy Awards were created. In 1925, he gave the Rudolph Valentino Medal to John Barrymore for his work in *Beau Brummel*.

Valentino returned to acting in 1924 in *Monsieur Beaucaire* and *A Sainted Devil*. The following year he joined Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks's studio, United Artists. His first film there, *The Eagle*, earned positive reviews. In 1926, Valentino filmed *The Son of the Sheik*, though he greatly disliked the sheik portrayal, but needed the money for his many debts.

In August 1926, Valentino was on a promotional tour for *The Son of the Sheik*. While in New York, he became ill and required emergency surgery. He was diagnosed with a perforated ulcer that had the symptoms of appendicitis, which later became known as Valentino's Syndrome. The 31-year-old star died of an infection about one week later on August 23. Some 100,000 people took to the streets for his funeral, and a riot broke out when fans attempted to enter the small ceremony. Though his career was short, he had become a romantic legend and one of Hollywood's first heart throbs.



Valentino stamp from the 1994 Silent Screen Stars issue.

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