

The 19th British Silent Film Festival



THE LAST SILENT PICTURE SHOW

50 mins. Illustrated talk by Geoff Brown

Thurs 14 Sept 1.30pm

Turmoil hit the British film industry in 1929. Sound technology was beginning to make inroads into our film studios and cinemas, but where did that leave the silent features already completed and awaiting exhibition? Using extensive clips, film historian Geoff Brown explores the mixed artistic results of the industry's frantic attempts to remodel existing silent properties with synchronised dialogue and music. Hitchcock achieved a triumph in *Blackmail*, but was the same true of the sentimental drama *Kitty*, the steamy *White Cargo*, or the brooding dramatics of *The Informer*? And would exotic Mona Goya, brought over from France for *The Lady from the Sea*, ever feel comfortable pronouncing the word 'bungalow'?

The Cinema News and Property Gazette, 9 January 1929, technical section, p. iii:

"One thing seems absolutely certain: the silent film is by no means dead. There is not the least doubt that certain scenes are "got over" much better by silence than by dialogue. In a sense, dialogue is a limitation – it puts the issue pat, clear-cut and solid. It leaves nothing to the patron's imagination . . . And, of course, it does away very largely with the finest quality the film has ever produced – that of *suggestion* . . . We shall have the silent film and we shall have the "talkie" – and that's inevitable."

Kinematograph Weekly, 9 May 1929, p. 25:

Paramount's Jesse Lasky announced to exhibitors at a trade lunch at the Trocadero, London, that England was on the edge of the boom period with sound. "Take full advantage of it, and you cannot go wrong. The silent picture is dead for all time."

Chili Bouchier, *Shooting Star: The Last of the Silent Film Stars* (1985), pp 62-64:

"The writing was on the wall. Silent were dead. Talkies had come to stay. Either wisely (or unwisely) it was decided to add dialogue to *The City of Play*. I say unwisely because nobody had considered the rather odd assortment of sounds which would issue from the mouths of their leading players. There was the stage-trained dark brown bass of Lawson Butt, the regional accent

of the leading man, and my Minnie Mouse squeak.

On the first day of sound I arrived on the set to find my lover, my beloved camera, confined to a padded cell – swathed in layers of thick blankets which muffled the gentle and comforting whirr of his motor. The only part of him revealed was his little lens which looked out wistfully and forlorn. I was moved to kiss him on his little cold nose and to tell him that I still loved him. The microphone, which restricted our movements even more, hung above our heads like the Sword of Damocles. A new arrival, the sound man, was incarcerated in a glass booth at the other end of the studio. His voice was relayed through a loud speaker attached to the studio roof. At too-regular intervals, 'Speak up, Miss Bouchier,' boomed out like the voice of God . . . "

Picturegoer, February 1930, p. 58, P. L. Mannock:

'Thank goodness the terrible business of grafting talk on to silent films is now on the wane. It is an odd necessity to spoil good silent pictures in order to make them profitable.'

Kinematograph Weekly, 6 Feb 1930, p. 29:

Dan Benjamin, manager of Haymarket Picture House Ltd., complains in a letter about the quality of British silent films booked by renters for Quota and recently trade shown. "Their only possible chance of drawing is to cut them into short lengths, cover them with some adhesive substance, and utilise them for catching flies in the summer. To attempt to foist recently trade-shown British productions on the public is tantamount to closing the doors permanently of the cinema that ventures to show them. In pre-Quota days it was at least possible to book a British film on its merits, but at the present time there is so little choice that they could be handed over the counter at so much per foot, and their selection could safely be left in the hands of the blind, the dumb and the halt . . . "

Adrian Brunel writing to G. A. Atkinson, film critic of the Daily Express, 23 June 1930:

"I do appreciate your fight for the almost dead art of silent films. I am absolutely certain that there lie buried in the vaults of Wardour Street a great number of good silent films, which cannot get a showing. I know that my last silent film *The Crooked Billet* was very good of its kind – nothing pretentious or startling, I admit, but good fast moving entertainment; but so far as I know it has not yet been shown anywhere...

The introduction of talk has made us keener in detecting careless silent technique, particularly in regard to unnecessary mouthing and unnecessarily long sub-titles. I think, therefore, that many of the locked away films could be made much more attractive propositions if re-edited with this in mind, but the difficulty is to persuade distributors to spend any money in re-editing, because they all seem to have lost heart and hope in regard to the booking of silent films.

It seems to me that the silent film will eventually be relegated to the status of opera or ballet – that is to say its only hope lies in a subsidy from millionaires. I have one other faint hope, and that is, that occasionally something startling in the way of silent films may arise from amongst the vast and growing tanks of amateur producers . . . I now find it possible to enjoy a good talkie, for they have definitely improved, but nonetheless, I do regret most terribly the disappearance of the silent film."

Programme note compiled by Geoff Brown



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