

A COUPLE OF DOWN AND OUTS

WALTER SUMMERS, GREAT BRITAIN, 1923

Screening: Saturday 21 April, 5:30pm



Walter SUMMERS

A Couple of Down and Outs, released in February 1923 when the horrors of the Great War were still a relatively recent memory, was praised for its realism and also for the maintained sense of tension that permeates the plot throughout. The *Kinematograph Weekly*, ever conscious of its status as a trade organ, noted that cinema owners should 'stress the sentiment and the appeal to all animal lovers' in their exploitation, just as Dreamworks chose to do for Steven Spielberg's 2011 hit, *War Horse*. *A Couple of Down and Outs* is very much a precursor to *War Horse*; centred around the relationship between the two eponymous down-and-outs – the ex-soldier Danny Creath (Rex Davis) and his old artillery horse, who he prevents from falling into the hands of the knackers yard. The film highlights the crises of animal cruelty which took place upon the Continent in the immediate aftermath of the Great War where, a contemporary British film critic writing for Motion Picture Studio reminds us, the 'traffic in worn-out horses which are regularly shipped over from this country to the Continent,

there to be slaughtered for human food [was] a scandal'.

Despite the film's somewhat downbeat premise, *A Couple of Down and Outs* manages to be both heart-warming and positive, making use of realistic war scenes and melodramatic characterisation – particularly in the case of Rex Davis' character, whose make-up and facial expressiveness remind the modern-day spectator of the radically different art of acting in the silent era. *A Couple of Down and Outs* is the directorial debut of an unsung great of British filmmaking, Walter Summers. Summers was a remarkable character who served in both the First and Second World Wars and was responsible for an impressive corpus of films during the interwar period. His films bear the mark of the auteur, drawing on his first-hand experiences of the Western Front (*A Couple of Down and Outs*, Ypres (1925), Mons (1926)) and, less personally (one would presume), he developed a penchant for the crime melodrama, beginning in 1925 with his direction of *A Perfect Crime* for the Stoll Picture Company and ending with probably his most famous film, an adaptation of Edgar Wallace's *The Dark Eyes of London* starring Bela Lugosi, in 1939. Despite his auteuristic tendencies, Summers is, stylistically, difficult to pin down. Having made his name in the silent era with a series of war films, he launches his career in the talkies with a musical (*Raise the Roof*, 1929) and a highly controversial Anna-May Wong vehicle, featuring censor-baiting interracial love scenes (*The Flame of Love*, 1930).

CAST

Edna Best -
Molly Roarke
Rex Davies -
Danny Creath
George Foley -
P.C. Roake

CREATIVE
ENGLAND

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DE MONTFORT
UNIVERSITY
LEICESTER

KINEMATOGRAPH WEEKLY

November 22nd, 1923, page 63

Should be good anywhere.

We have seen a good many pictures with reproduction of war scenes, but never one with such a realistic impression as is afforded in this one. The story is a simple romance with plenty of sound sentiment which is far from being objectless, and while espousing the cause of the worn-out war horses which are being shipped to Belgium suggests that, like in France in 1918, one never knows when a turning-point in one's fortunes may be reached.

The whole production appeals to the imagination, and no exhibitor need fear for its drawing powers.

Scenario and Continuity

In spite of the fact that a number of flash-backs are used in the scenario, the story is well told and runs smoothly. This is a case where their use is entirely justified. There is a certain amount of symbolism in the retreat during the war and the final advance as applied to the case of the down-and-out which renders the war scenes entirely in keeping, quite apart from the fact that they are required to show the adventures of Danny and his horse.

Acting

Rex Davis is well suited to the part of Danny Creath. He has a difficult part in that he is required to express sentiment and yet not overstress it, and he is generally successful; but his make-up was rather too noticeable.

Edna Best is very well cast. She is natural and never looks like a chorus girl masquerading as a police sergeant's daughter, which is too often the case on the screen.

George Foley gives a fine character study as the police sergeant.

Marketing

WAR'S AFTERMATH.

Promise a simple romance with the brilliant war scenes. Stress the sentiment and the appeal to all animal lovers. Give the star publicity.

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*Rex Davies -
Danny Creath*

*George Foley -
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The original reviews may be abridged