

# The 15th British Silent Film Festival

## THE ONLY WAY

HERBERT WILCOX, GREAT BRITAIN, 1926

Screening: Thursday 19 April, 1.15pm (133mins)



Image courtesy of bfi Stills, Posters and Design

On Friday 28<sup>th</sup> August 1925, at the London Hippodrome, something remarkable happened in the history of British cinema. The British film industry of the time was 'dying', even according to the trade paper, *The Bioscope* – British producers were seen to have fallen behind their American and European counterparts, and the ailing industry was considered a problem. The Federation of British Industries – a manufacturing group which sought to support British growth and production – had attempted to prop up the home-grown producers by suggesting subsidies, but these options weren't considered by the government of the time.

Instead, the Home Secretary, William Joynson-Hicks, chose to attend the trade show of Herbert Wilcox's latest film, *The Only Way*. This was 'the first time in the history of British premieres' (*Bioscope*, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1925) that a serving front-bench minister had chosen to attend and give a speech, and it demonstrates the anxiety felt at senior policymaking level at the plight of the British film industry. That he chose to attend the premiere of this specific film was no coincidence; *The Only Way* was an adaptation of a British novel (Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*), financed and produced by British

companies, and staffed by British technicians, filmmakers and actors. Herbert Wilcox's film was held up, by Joynson-Hicks, as a model of British film production, and the answer to the British film industry's insecure position. "Our film industry", he stated, "had been in the van some twenty years ago", but the First World War had allowed the American film industry to progress at a faster rate than the British studios could match. The Home Secretary, however, believed that films of the quality of *The Only Way* would allow Britain to "resume her position in the van of film manufacture".

*The Only Way* received excellent reviews in the British press and so, it would seem, the Home Secretary's enthusiasm was not misplaced. *The Bioscope* pointed out that the commercial success of *The Only Way* both at home and in export markets proved that the British film industry wasn't that far behind Hollywood. *Picturegoer*, upon the film's general release in February 1926, reserved particular praise for *The Only Way*'s director:

*The Only Way* is a great story – in its way a masterpiece. Herbert Wilcox (how largely that man's name will figure in the history of British pictures if it ever comes to be written!) has picturised it how it should be picturised – the result is a curiously satisfying blend of sheer drama and pictorial beauty, a film that grips and holds us spell-bound.

The film also benefitted from Sir John Martin Harvey's starring role. Harvey had first played the role of Sidney Carton in an 1899 stage adaptation of *A Tale of Two Cities* and, when Harvey retired, he claimed that he had played this role on stage over 3,000 times. Harvey was one of Britain's biggest theatrical stars – the *Stoll Herald* claimed



## CAST

Ben Webster - Marquis  
St Evremond  
Jean Jay - Jean Defarge  
John Martin-Harvey -  
Sidney Carton  
Mary Brough - Miss  
Pross  
Clarence Burton -  
Jacques Defarge  
J. Fisher White - Dr  
Manette  
Gordon McLeod - Ern-  
est Defarge





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that 'all the best acting traditions, all the art and artistry essentially British, have found their home in this fine actor' (February 1926). *The Only Way*, surprisingly, is one of only six films in which Harvey played a part. The film provides the modern-day audience the opportunity to see what poli-

ticians, producers and stars of stage and screen thought the future of the British film industry should be, while also affording the opportunity of admiring the qualities of relatively-late British silent film at its most picturesque.

## KINEMATOGRAPH WEEKLY

September 3, 1925, pages 65&66

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From every point of view a very fine version of a classic subject which will attract everywhere; and an achievement which should do more to inspire faith in British production than any picture seen for at least two years. Its imperfections are quite minor, and the gripping work of the celebrated actor is backed up by other clever performances. Its merit and obvious appeal should nullify all the customary objections to costume subjects.

### Acting

First-class work is contributed by the strong supporting cast. That talented young stage actor, Frederick Cooper, makes a successful screen debut as Darnay, and is a welcome recruit to the now attenuated ranks of juvenile leads. It is only fair to mention several quite small but outstanding performances – the sinister Barsad of Gibb McLaughlin, the beefy counsel of Judd Green, and the effective work of Jack Raymond, Fred Rains, Harold Carton, and Michael Martin Harvey.

### Production

Herbert Wilcox is a far better director than many of us realised, and his handling of the plot, both as regards script and direction, is sincere, assured and smooth.

In general there is a real power in the direction. It is fitting to accord credit here to Arthur Barnes and N. G. Arnold, Wilcox's able assistant and art director.

### Settings and Photography

Both are above reproach. Excellent sets help the period atmosphere without smelling of the studio, and the lighting is notable. Claude McDonnell's camera work is brilliant and splendidly matched.

### Marketing

A sale attraction everywhere on the fame of subject and star, in addition, the most polished British picture seen for many a day. Exploitation possibilities are exceptionally strong.

The original reviews may be abridged.