

HIPPODROME silent film festival

Our 10th festival celebrating silent film with music

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Sparrows (1926)

Closing Night Gala: Sunday 21 March 2021

Music composed by: Taylor and Cameron Graves

Sparrows, released in 1926, marks the final time Mary Pickford plays a youngster on the big screen and it was her next to last silent film. She was 33 years old and had already starred in 40 features and more than 100 short films. Over the 17 years she had been making movies, she had become a creative producer, a savvy businesswoman and the highest paid and best-known actress in the world. She was also one of the hardest working people in the business.

Between 1912 and 1919, Pickford jumped between a variety of studios, increasing her paychecks astronomically each time until she risked it all to produce her own movies and join with Douglas Fairbanks, D.W. Griffith and Charlie Chaplin to form United Artists to distribute them.

She married Fairbanks in 1920 and they ruled the filmmaking world from their Beverly Hills home dubbed Pickfair. They built their own Pickford Fairbanks studio on Santa Monica Blvd and on those 18 acres, they each had their administration offices as well as crew and craftsmen to write, direct and film their movies. Mary had her own bungalow where Doug often joined her for lunch and they came to the studio together in the morning and went home – often very late – together at night.

Only a few months before deciding on *Sparrows*, Mary's portion of the lot had been a turn of the century, New York tenement for her film *Little Annie Rooney*. Now her crew, headed by the art director Harry Oliver, cleared out several acres to build an ominous southern swampland from scratch. Six hundred trees were planted, many of which were scorched and then branches added to be laden with moss creating the dark, almost gothic milieu. Cork was ground up and then mixed with sawdust and water to create the quicksand that threatened anyone trying to escape.

The hostages in *Sparrows* were a dozen children – with Mary as the oldest who tends to the younger ones. They are being held at what was then called “a baby farm” where children of unwed mothers or deserted wives were deposited and then often sold illegally to adoptive parents or as slave labor. With this Dickensian melodrama, Mary helped call attention to the fact that such places still existed and increase public awareness and outrage.

The original story was written by Winifred Dunn who said she got many of her ideas from reading the newspaper. C. Gardner Sullivan is credited with adapting the story that began life entitled *The Baby Farm*. Then the name was changed to *Scraps* before finally settling on *Sparrows*, inspired by the Biblical quote: “Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God.”

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(Luke Chapter 12 to be exact.) The numerous title cards also feature a large amount of Bible quotes – and attempts at humorous misquoting.

The set is spectacular and is brought to life by three, world class cinematographers - Charles Rosher, Karl Struss and Hal Mohr. Each brought their own styles, equipment, and experience to the project and then melded it all together to create a beautifully stylized film.

Mary brought back William Beaudine, who had directed *Little Annie Rooney*, to oversee *Sparrows*. She had been impressed with how he handled young actors and he was pleased to be asked to work with her again. He was under contract to Warner Brothers, but they quickly agreed to loan him for the job, probably because another Pickford hit would only enhance his value to the studio. Around the same time, Beaudine was elected president of the Motion Picture Directors Association; he had clearly hit the big time.

When *Sparrows* was released, The Los Angeles Times declared it “not only a remarkable triumph for its star - it is one of the most human and thrilling experiences that has ever been offered on the screen.”

There are many reasons *Sparrows* stands out in Pickford’s filmography and one is that it is the least glamorous of any of her roles. She wears the same tattered clothes and goes barefoot throughout much of the film; it takes a very talented and confident actress to play such a part.

By **Cari Beauchamp**

Cari Beauchamp is the author of *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and The Powerful Women of Early Hollywood* and five other books on film history. She is a Vanity Fair contributor and has written for a variety of magazines and newspapers. She has written and produced documentaries and her work has been nominated for an Emmy and a Writers Guild award. Cari is the only person to twice be named an Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Scholar and she is the Resident Scholar at the Mary Pickford Foundation.

Dir. William Beaudine, (and Tom McNamara – also credited as 2nd unit director) | USA | 1926 | N/C U | 1h 49m

Producer: Mary Pickford

Writer: Winifred Dunn (story), C. Gardner Sullivan (adaptation) George Marion Jr (titles)

Cinematography: Charles Rosher, Karl Struss, Hal Mohr

Art Decorator: Harry Oliver

Editor: Harold McLernon

Distributed by United Artists

With: Mary Pickford (Molly), Roy Stewart (Dennis Wayne), Mary Louise Miller (Doris Wayne), Gustav von Seyffertitz (Mr Grimes), Charlotte Mineau (Mrs Grimes), Walter “Spec” O’Donnell (Ambrose), Lloyd

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Whitlock (Bailey), Monty O'Grady (Splutters), Unnamed children: Billy Butts, Jackie Levine, Billy "Red" Jones, Muriel McCormac, Florence Rogan, Sylvia Bernard, Seessel Anne Johnson, Cammila Johnson

Music Accompaniment: composed by **Taylor and Cameron Graves**

Performed by: Taylor Graves (piano, violin, cello, contra bass, flute, trumpet, percussion, guitar, harp and brass); Cameron Graves (piano, violin, cello and contra bass); Rachel Grace (violin); Artymom Manukyan (cello); Sean Sonderegger (clarinet, bass clarinet, flute, and contra clarinet).

Screening material courtesy of the **Mary Pickford Foundation**

Sparrows was reconstructed by the Library of Congress from the best quality film elements, a 35MM nitrate print and a 35MM safety dupe negative. Additional lab work was performed by Colorlab,

The **Mary Pickford Foundation** scanned the preservation elements in 4K, and worked closely Roundabout Entertainment, Inc. to complete all digital work, addressing imperfections to ensure that Sparrows is presented in its best possible form for a modern audience. Since this film is known for its stunning visuals, we worked hard to ensure that audiences today can enjoy it in all its splendor.

The Mary Pickford Company commissioned a new, original, orchestral score by the Graves Brothers, which was produced and recorded at the Savannah Studios in Los Angeles.


Mary Pickford Foundation