



HippFest

18 — 22 March 2026



April Fool

Dir. Nat Ross | USA | 1926 | N/C U | b&w English intertitles | 1h 15m

With: Alexander Carr, Mary Alden, Snitz Edwards, Baby Peggy (Diana Sera Carey)

Performing live: Meg Morley (piano)

Programme notes: Jay Weissberg

Fri 20 March 12:30 - 14:00

Restored by the Library of Congress.

Ethnic stories were more than simply a mainstay of American entertainment in the first three decades of the 20th century: they were a vital means for immigrant communities to feel a part of their adopted home. To modern eyes they pander to stereotypes, reinforcing the otherness of non-WASP identities, yet their refusal to align with the heavily promoted construct of the United States as a great melting pot offered a far more compelling sense of recognition than being subsumed into the collective. Irish-American, Italian-American, even Scots-American narratives filled vaudeville programmes, were regularly seen on Broadway stages, and represented a significant chunk of screentime from the very birth of motion pictures and well into the 1930s. Jewish-American, specifically East European Jewish-American stories, formed a genre in itself, allowing immigrant communities to feel seen while serving to normalize their distinct presence within the fabric of American society.

I've often imagined that for my great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents, coming from Gdansk, Kherson, Białystok and other points in the Pale of Settlement and beyond, watching their identities on the stages and screens of Manhattan and Brooklyn must have given comfort, no matter how typecast the characters, at a time when it was well-known that many apartment buildings in New York's posher sections enforced a "no Jews" policy. When watching *April Fool* we do well to keep this in mind, notwithstanding the clichéd nature of the plot; sometimes what feels like pandering can actually be a way to make viewers feel included.

Any discussion of *April Fool* needs to begin with the star and co-writer Alexander Carr, born Pinchus Krechevsky in Romny, Ukraine (about 140 miles east of Kyiv) in either 1876 or 1878. Carr always claimed his father Israel was a rabbi, though ship manifests, census records and newspapers from before he became famous prove his dad was a grocer who moved his family to Winnipeg in 1887. Whether or not Carr's story that he ran away to join the circus is true, we do know that by 1899 he was performing comic songs in Jewish venues, and one year later was making a name for himself as "a Hebrew mimic/comic/impersonator." His rise to the top was quick: in 1908 Carr was earning a whopping \$1,500 a week in vaudeville, the equivalent today of about £39,000. Performing Jewishness could be very profitable.

Carr's ascent fortuitously coincided with the publication in 1909 of a series of short stories called "Potash and Perlmutter," set within the Jewish community of New York's Lower East Side yet written by transplanted Mancunian Montague Glass. For the 1913 stage adaptation, Carr nabbed the part of Mawruss Perlmutter, cementing his fame and elevating the usually one-dimensional nature of heavily accented Jewish immigrants to a new level; as the critic Montefiore Bienenstock wrote of Glass' characters in 1910, "Potash and Perlmutter are the only Jews I know of who have come out of American literature, not as representatives of their race, but as flesh and blood, human, thinking, and working beings." Statistics don't exist breaking down the audiences along ethnic lines, but the vehicle's enormous impact clearly went far beyond Jewish communities, helping to bring Yiddishkeit into mainstream American life.

The next step was to tailor-make a role that would play to Carr's strengths, so in 1915 he partnered with popular vaudeville sketch writer Edgar Allan Woolf – later one of the screenwriters on the 1939 *The Wizard of Oz* – in co-writing a one-act play called *An April Shower*. Carr starred as Jacob Goodman, an umbrella peddler whose canny business acumen has earned him a nice nest egg. Financial security means he can propose to his longtime lady friend and provide for his niece on the eve of her wedding, but then her fiancé confesses he's embezzled \$30,000 and breaks off the marriage. To save his niece from a broken heart, Goodman tells her it's all an April Fool's joke, secretly paying off her beau's debts and bankrupting himself in the process. It's a tale of self-sacrifice using humour and pathos in equal measure grounded in the problematic trope that Jews are good with money. Not that anyone complained – the 30-minute playlet was a huge hit, touring for the next six years, even reaching the Alhambra in Glasgow in February 1921.

Movie recognition came to Carr in 1923 with Sam Goldwyn's production of *Potash and Perlmutter*, prompting the star to look into bringing *An April Shower* to the screen. Given the vehicle's proven track record it's unclear why he struggled to find a producer, finally contracting with low-budget studio Chadwick Pictures. Rechristened *April Fool*, the original play was expanded, allowing Goodman's lady friend a more substantial role in the guise of hard-working character actress Mary Alden, changing the niece to a daughter, and crucially solving the play's ethical glitch: his daughter's beau is no longer an embezzler but rather is framed for the theft.

Appearing alongside Carr are noted comedian Snitz Edwards (born Emil Neumann), WAMPAS Baby Star Duane Thompson, pretty boy actor Raymond Keane (born Raymond Kortz) and the always marvellous Baby Peggy in a too-brief role as daughter Irma when a child. By 1926 Baby Peggy's stardom was already in decline thanks to her parents' shocking mismanagement; as Diana Serra Cary, "the former Baby Peggy" writes in her clear-eyed 1996 memoir, the family needed the money, but the child star felt shame at being on Poverty Row. Imagine, she was only six. Sadly the film didn't kick-start her career, but it was generally well-received in both the U.S. and Europe. Many critics praised James Madison's comic intertitles (though I find them overblown), and while director Nat Ross is never more than workmanlike, unable to hide the low-budget sets, Carr does indeed create a character of flesh and blood, giving his sacrifice genuine emotional weight. Towards the end, note Chadwick's self-promotion outside the People's Theater, with lobby cards from their recent films including *The Unchastened Woman* with Theda Bara, *Some Pun'kins* with Charles Ray, and *American Pluck* with George Walsh.

JAY WEISSBERG

Film historian and critic Jay Weissberg has been the director of the Giornate del Cinema Muto/Pordenone Silent Film Festival since 2016 and has written widely about multiple aspects of silent cinema, while as a film critic he was attached to Variety for 18 years.