

# HIPPODROME silent film festival

Ten years celebrating film and live music

WEDNESDAY 18 MARCH - SUNDAY 22 MARCH 2020

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## Filibus: The Mysterious Air Pirate

Saturday 14 March & Friday 20 March

**Performing Live: Jane Gardner (Sat 14 March)  
Jane Gardner and Hazel Morrison (Fri 20 March)**

From cinema's earliest days, proprietors sought to counteract the perception that picture houses were seedy and scandalous by convincing women to attend. To entice them, filmmakers created dramas featuring the "modern woman." These heroines were adventurous, bold, did not take a back seat to men, and, they were on both sides of the law. As the suffrage movement gathered momentum in the 1910s, the action heroine film became an increasingly popular genre. Filibus thus takes her place alongside the popular serial queens of the day like Pearl White and Ruth Roland (star of *The Timber Queen* serial \*).

Filibus is not just a modern woman... she is a modern villain. In the course of the serial's five episodes Filibus robs banks, steals diamonds and runs rings around the great Detective Kutt-Hendy. To carry out her joyful crime sprees Filibus deploys a number of gadgets that would be the envy of Bond's Q... she travels about in a futuristic airship (complete with a proto-mobile phone) and operates a tiny camera, a miniature gun, soporific drugs, something called a heliograph and futuristic finger printing technology. The special effects are perhaps a bit clunky for today's viewers but all is forgiven in the face of Filibus's playful high-spirits, sense of humour, and delight in her stolen riches.

The popular figure of the female criminal represented not the new constraints of modern society, but its new freedoms. She is a female 'gentleman thief', in the mould of Raffles (as created by A. Conan Doyle's brother-in-law, E. W. Hornung) and Sherlock Holmes' arch-rival Irene Adler. Like any self-respecting super-villain, Filibus is a mistress of disguise, posing as the Baroness Troixmond for a visit to the detective and later insinuating herself into his household camouflaged as the aristocratic dandy Count de la Brive. Filibus is an all-powerful female character, in full control of her life and actions, able to move fluently between gendered identities as easily as she floats through the skies above the Italian Riviera in her zeppelin.

"Who is Filibus???" In 1915, adverts for the film's release posed this intriguing question, hinting at the mysterious multiple personas of the main character. Since the film's release, and now its rediscovery and restoration, she has been described variously as one of the first lesbian characters in the history of film and a champion of transgenderism. But that early advert tagline has now taken on an ironic overtone, thanks to a case of mistaken identity. The name of the superb Italian actress who portrayed Filibus was never revealed. Her performances as Filibus, the Baroness Troixmond, and the cross-dressing Count de la Brive were subtle, brilliant, and decades ahead of her time. She would have become an international star - if the start of World

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War I a few months after the film's release had not cut short her career. For the past half-century, the starring role in *Filibus: The Mysterious Air Pirate* has always been credited to the actress Cristina Ruspoli; her remarkably modern performance has been extolled in books and articles.

But doing research at the Eye Filmmuseum during the summer of 2018, intern David Emery made an astounding discovery. After reviewing photos of Ruspoli, he realized with astonishment that she was not the star of the film, but instead played Leonora, the detective's sister! So, 103 years after the film was released, the original question took on a deeper meaning... Who was Filibus?

Emery had to become a detective himself to discover her true identity. Luckily, in its vast silent film collection, the Eye Filmmuseum had a number of other films by the Torino-based producer, Corona Films. Going through the collection, Emery screened an obscure film, *Signori Giurati* (Gentleman of the Jury), and discovered in the minor role of the young daughter Helene, the actress who had starred in *Filibus: The Mysterious Air Pirate*! Luckily, on the film print, she was credited as Valeria Creti, a little-known actress of her day. Now, more than a century after her mysterious starring role, the work of the amazing Valeria Creti will be recognised.

(\* Screening during HippFest 2020 at our *Platform Reels* event on Saturday 21st March at the Bo'ness and Kinneil Railway)

With thanks to **Milestone** whose Press Pack provided the content for this programme note.

Dir. Mario Roncoroni | Italy | 1915 | N/C U | English intertitles | 1h 11m + short accompanied by **Forrester Pyke**

With: Valeria Creti, Cristina Ruspoli, Giovanni Spano, Mario Mariani and Filippo Vallino

