

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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WEDNESDAY 20 MARCH - SUNDAY 24 MARCH 2019

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The Blot (1921)

Silent Women Film Pioneers – Lois Weber: Friday 22 March 2019

Performing live: Lillian Henley

At one time the highest paid director in Hollywood, Lois Weber (1879-1939) made over 40 features and 100 short films. An American silent film actor, writer, producer and director, Weber was also a Christian evangelist who was originally drawn to filmmaking as a way of communicating her moral messages. In her pursuit of social justice, she began her career by writing and directing a series of controversial films dealing with socially important themes such as abortion and birth control, prostitution, drug and alcohol addiction, poverty and capital punishment. By 1916 she had become the top director at Universal Film Manufacturing (now Universal Studios), the top studio in the United States at the time. In 1917 she founded her own independent production company, Lois Weber Productions - the first American woman director to do so.

At her own production company, Weber began to move away from what she called the “heavy dinners” she had produced at Universal, side-stepping the censorship troubles she had endured in favor of more intimate productions focused on marriage and domesticity, concentrating her creative energies more than ever on the lives and experiences of women in films such as *What Do Men Want?* (1921), *Too Wise Wives* (1921), and *The Blot* (1921). In an attempt to transcend the factory-like mass production techniques employed at the major studios, Weber also experimented with different working methods, shooting on location as much as possible and often in narrative sequence (Weber 1917, 417).

The end of the silent era heralded a more formal production setup in Hollywood, with more rigidly defined roles. Director became established as the top job – and one no longer credited to women. As Pamela Hutchinson explained in *The Guardian*: “From that point on, the studio [Weber] worked for, Universal, which had hired so many women in the teens, would not credit a single female director until 1982 when Amy Heckerling made *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*”. Sadly, Weber had been right to advise prospective women filmmakers in 1927: “Don’t try it ... You’ll never get away with it”.

According to Anthony Slide in his book *The Silent Feminists: America’s First Women Directors*, “Along with D W Griffith, Weber was the American cinema’s first genuine auteur, a filmmaker involved in all aspects of production and one who utilized the motion picture to put across her own ideas and philosophies”. Interestingly, with Weber and others taking on so many directing roles, he goes as far as to say: “for the first three decades of its existence, the American film industry was, in many ways, a woman’s world”.



By the time Weber died in 1939, at the age of sixty, she was eulogized chiefly as a 'star-maker,' a director notable only for fostering the talent of young starlets. Weber herself was 'rediscovered' in the 1970s by historians like Anthony Slide, who dubbed her "the director who lost her way in history" (1996) and Richard Koszarski, who remarked that "the years have not been kind to Lois Weber" (1977). It is now time to ask what a history rewritten with Weber's legacy in mind might look like.

By Rosie Meachin and Shelley Stamp

Dir: Lois Weber | US | 1921 | cert U | b&w | English intertitles | 1h 33m

With: Claire Windsor, Philip Hubbard, Margaret McWade

Presented in partnership with South West Silents: Established in 2015 South West Silents aims to celebrate the history of cinema and share our passion for silent film with the wider cinema-going audience by producing eye-opening silent film events not only in the South West of England but throughout the United Kingdom.

www.SouthWestSilents.com

