

# HIPPODROME silent film festival

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WEDNESDAY 21 MARCH - SUNDAY 25 MARCH 2018

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## The Penalty (1920)

Performing live: Graeme Stephen & Pete Harvey

HippFest Commission: Saturday 24 March 2018

Lon Chaney was born to be a silent film actor, even though the movies didn't exist at the time of his birth on April Fool's Day 1883: since his parents were both deaf, he learned to communicate by pantomime from an early age. Becoming an actor, he used make-up and a powerfully expressive face and body in his performances.

Working his way up from supporting roles in the movies, he showed an ability to steal the show with eye-popping characterisations, eventually bringing to Hollywood a taste for the grotesque hitherto unknown, which would mutate in the coming years and decades into a whole new genre: the horror film.

But in Chaney's day, these were merely melodramas, often with crime themes. But the versatile star's use of the make-up kit, along with other, more novel tricks, brought to these movies a rogue's gallery of physical deformities and disabilities, served up with lurid brio.

Wallace Worsley would direct Chaney in one of his signature roles, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, but the two were already regular collaborators, uniting for the first time on 1920's *The Penalty*. For this film, Chaney undertook the eye-catching role of Blizzard, a double-amputee gangster running San Francisco's underworld without the benefit of lower legs.

Within the limits of 1920s special effects, there was no way to show an anatomically whole man moving about without legs, but Chaney undertook the task, strapping his legs up behind himself and walking on his knees, a classic instance of the love of suffering at the root of his art. Audiences of the day shuddered as he strutted about with the aid of canes, gasped as he climbed a wall, and winced as he jumped off a table. They still do.

The star's masochism is served up with ample sadism too (a perversion that usually has more box office appeal). From its opening maiming, the movie serves up relentless displays of violence: a knifing, vicious hair-pulling, and the savagery of Chaney's own performance, which dominates the whole film even though he's nominally the villain.

Blizzard's megalomania, the result of a cranial injury sustained at the same time as his loss of limb, has led him to plan to loot the whole of San Francisco. His villainy goes beyond normal mob boss ambition and into Bond villain territory. He even has an underground lair and a secret laboratory, but to what malign end?



What all this suggests, apart from an uproarious good time, is that the horror movie as we know it today evolved not purely from Gothic fiction or ghost stories, but from the gangster picture. Chaney's films (see also *The Unholy Three*, *The Blackbird*, *Outside the Law*) united the dubious pleasures of that form – violence, sadism, law-breaking – with grotesque disfigurements and disguises which could exploit his mastery of make-up and willingness to subject himself to painful transformations. What unites the crime thriller with the monster movie is a thoroughly anti-social appreciation of destruction, mayhem and ugliness, not for their own sake, but as liberating escapes from the strictures of normality, peace and civilisation.

All this unalloyed evil must be punished at the end, of course, to allow the audience to feel virtuous in spite of the vicarious pleasure they've just experienced at wanton acts of cruelty and pillage. And so the penalty must be paid, though just how the movie-makers tried to achieve this, and what alterations they had to make to appease the censors, is best discovered by watching the movie. It turns out, however, that the arbiters of morality could be even more blood-thirsty than the filmmakers...

### **Credits**

Director: Wallace Worsley  
Original novel/adaptation: Gouverneur Morris  
Scenario: Charles Kenyon  
Scenario (uncredited): Philip Lonergan

### **Cast**

Lon Chaney (Blizzard), Charles Clary (Dr. Ferris), Ethel Grey Terry (Rose), Doris Pawn (Barbary Nell), Jim Mason (Frisco Pete), Milton Ross (Lichtenstein), Kenneth Harlan (Dr. Wilmot Allen), Claire Adams (Barbara Ferris)

**Running time:** 1h 29m

Programme notes by David Cairns. David blogs about silent film at Shadowplay

<https://dcairns.wordpress.com/>

The HippFest commission of the new score by Graeme Stephen for *The Penalty* will tour selected Scottish venues in Spring/Summer 2018. For more details visit [www.hippfest.co.uk](http://www.hippfest.co.uk)

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