

THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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WEDNESDAY 16 MARCH - SUNDAY 20 MARCH 2016

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Friday 18 March | 19:30

Exit Smiling

Dir: Sam Taylor | US | 1926 | 1h 17m

With: Beatrice Lillie, Jack Pickford

Accompanied live by Neil Brand

Screening material courtesy of BFI National Archive

After you have seen this film you will be asking why, oh why, didn't Beatrice Lillie make any more silent films? The fact is MGM probably couldn't have got her even if they had tried – Bea Lillie was a busy Lady (in a real sense too, she had married in 1920, Sir Robert Peel a baronet with a great pedigree but no money) and she spent her prime travelling back and forth from Britain to America starring in popular revues and stage shows and was famous, primarily, for being herself. She was one of those unique individual comedy performers like Joyce Grenfell or Danny Kaye, who were natural clowns with the charm to put it across.

Her obituary in The New York Times sums up her qualities:

"Anyone who ever saw her sketch about a slightly tipsy, tongue-tied Mrs. Blagdon Blogg turning Harrods department store in London into a state of havoc, would consider her an adorably nutty fool. In the sketch, Mrs. Blogg tried, unsuccessfully, to buy "two dozen double-damask dinner napkins," a request that soon started coming off her thickened tongue as "two dazzle dimask dibble dimmer napples," and so forth."

In her sketches and songs, most of which were constructed to puncture the pompous, Miss Lillie could send her audiences into fits of laughter by merely lifting an eyebrow, twitching her nose as she spoke a certain phrase or turning her longish face into a rubbery U-shape with a somewhat equine smile. With great ease she seemed able to contort and mold that face into a thousand shapes.

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Often it was not precisely what she said or sang that garnered so many laughs, but the way she delivered the material. As the critic George Jean Nathan put it, "With one dart of her eyes, she can spare a skit writer a dozen lines."

This ability is very evident in her only silent film where that quality is gold dust. She went on to make two or three sound films, most notable is her unforgettable turn as the sinister Mrs Meers in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1967). She was in her 70s then, in *Exit Smiling* she is a very bright young thing and completely mesmerizing. The story might have been written for her it is so appropriate, for a girl so imbued with the theatre (as Lillie was from infancy) it would have been impossible to imagine her doing anything else. She plays Violet, the maid of all work, of a hopeless theatrical company, touring rural towns so remote that the troupe's reputation can't have preceded them, delivering dreadful melodramas to audiences that will watch anything out in front of them. When we are introduced to her in the film an intertitle reads: "Violet the drudge of the troupe... who also played parts, like *Nothing* in *Much Ado About Nothing*." She dreams of getting her chance to play the lead, when, in the way of dreams, she will turn out to be a natural star. But the chance never comes and she irons and cleans and cooks for the company from one town to the other, in a converted train carriage.

Things can surely only change for the better when Jimmy, (played by Mary Pickford's brother Jack) a young man, on the run for some misdemeanor, joins the cast. Violet falls for him and must play the role of a lifetime to save him from his past. Her facial gesture and slapstick timing are impeccable but she can also express hidden depths and great pathos, making this film genuinely moving. Bring a hankie.

by Bryony Dixon - Curator of Silent Film BFI

Produced by: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Script by: Sam Taylor, Tim Whelan (from a story by Marc Connelly)

Photography: André Barlatier

Cast:

Beatrice Lillie, Jack Pickford, Doris Lloyd, DeWitt Jennings, Harry Myers, Tenen Hooltz, Louise Lorraine, Franklin Pangborn, D'Arcy Corrigan, Carl Richards, William Gillespie