

# THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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WEDNESDAY 16 MARCH – SUNDAY 20 MARCH 2016

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Sunday 20 March | 20:00

## Stella Dallas

Dir. Henry King | US | 1925 | 2h 6m

With Ronald Colman, Belle Bennett, Alice Joyce, Lois Moran  
Accompanied live by Stephen Horne (piano, accordion, flute) and  
Elizabeth-Jane Baldry (harp)

Screening material courtesy of the Royal Belgian Film Archive

“How could she – oh, how could she have become a part of the picture on the screen, while her mother was still in the audience, out there in the dark, looking on?” *Stella Dallas*, Olive Higgins Prouty

Olive Higgins Prouty’s 1923 novel *Stella Dallas* was destined to become a great movie. In fact, it has been adapted for the screen three times: in 1937 with Barbara Stanwyck in the lead role and in 1990 with Bette Midler, but before both of those in 1925 starring Belle Bennett as the unforgettable Stella. It’s the first, silent *Stella Dallas* that we’ll be watching tonight.

Prouty’s novel is very cine-literate. It describes exactly the pleasure of a trip to the movies, but also the way that we can look at our real life as if it were a film. Sometimes we feel like an actor who is part of the spectacle, but at other times an onlooker, observing the action but not truly involved. Teenage Laurel, who is used to “standing on the outside” recognises true love in real life because she has seen it in the movies: “Laurel had seen too many close-ups of faces not to recognize that look!”

The genius of this filmed *Stella Dallas* (Henry King, 1925) is that it captures the poignancy of watching life from the dark of the auditorium, but its emotional reach is so strong that even from the back of the balcony, we are immersed in the story. On its release, the Manchester Guardian’s film critic CA Lejeune described the “painful beauty” of *Stella Dallas*, saying: “We are stirred into sympathy with all these people because we cannot help identifying ourselves with them ... the whole picture is full of the half-tones of which ordinary life is composed.” In the New York Times, Mordaunt Hall praised one of the romantic scenes in the strongest terms:

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“It is all so natural, so sweet and genuine, so true to life, so fervent and sincere, so tender.

*Stella Dallas* is one of silent Hollywood’s finest moments, and key to its success is Frances Marion, the woman who wrote its sophisticated screenplay. Marion takes the events of the novel, which are jumbled by flashbacks to create the drama of suspense and revelation, and straightens them out into a flowing narrative that begins in a garden in spring and ends on a city street in the cold. She also takes a few discreet liberties, rearranging scenes and editing them slightly to emphasise the agonies that plague Stella and her daughter Laurel. And the film is beautifully directed by Henry King, who tells the story visually, exploring the novel’s concern for appearances both contrived and mistaken, but who also coaxes excellent performances from his cast.

For audiences in 1925, the biggest star in this film would have been Ronald Colman, the English smoothie who plays Stephen Dallas, Stella’s unhappy husband. His poise and gravitas suit the privileged but heartbroken Stephen perfectly. Nowadays, we may be more familiar with Douglas Fairbanks Jr, who appears here in one of his first adult roles: a handsome, happy diversion for young Laurel, played by Lois Moran. According to F Scott Fitzgerald (with whom she had an affair), Moran was “the most beautiful girl in Hollywood” and *Stella Dallas* is the most celebrated performance of her short career.

The crucial piece of casting is Stella herself, the blowsy, big-hearted girl from the wrong side of the tracks, who becomes a woman that other women talk about. Mogul Samuel Goldwyn considered 73 actresses before choosing Bennett, an experienced if undistinguished film actor who began her career as a child performer in the circus. He made the right choice. Bennett’s brilliantly vulnerable performance here may reflect the fact that she was suffering her own private tragedy during the shoot. Just like Stella, Bennett had secrets: she was 34 years old but passing as 24 for her film career, claiming her two teenage sons were her brothers. But the day before she was cast, her 16-year-old died of injuries sustained during a riding accident. For better or worse, after *Stella Dallas*, Bennett was typecast in maternal roles. She played a succession of mothers on screen, shadows of Stella, until her early death in 1932.

By Pamela Hutchinson

Pamela blogs about silent cinema at [silentlondon.co.uk](http://silentlondon.co.uk)