

THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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WEDNESDAY 16 MARCH - SUNDAY 20 MARCH 2016

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Saturday 19 March | 18:45

THE WRECKER

Dir. Géza von Bolváry | UK | 1929 | 1h 8m

With: Carlyle Blackwell, Benita Hume, Joseph Striker

Accompanied live by Forrester Pyke

Screening sponsored and made possible by Film Mobile Scotland and
Bo'ness and Kinneil Railway

Screening material courtesy of The Archive Film Agency

Arnold Ridley, (*Dad's Army's* Private Godfrey and great-uncle of *Star Wars VII's* "Rey", Daisy Ridley) had an earlier and even more widespread success as a playwright who could be relied upon to fill theatres in the 1920s. The play that made his name, and is revived to this day, is *The Ghost Train*, a spooky mystery that cleverly uses stage sound and lighting effects to create the impression of a full-size train running across the back of the set. Keen to follow up his 1923 success with that play he wrote *The Wrecker* in 1924, which set much of the action of unmasking a terrorist at the highest echelons of British society in a fully-working signal-box, also a ground-breaking stage effect for its day. Although not the triumph *Ghost Train* had been, it did well enough and Gainsborough director Géza von Bolváry turned to it as film material in 1929 following a superbly moody adaptation of *Ghost Train* the previous year.

Michael Balcon, head of Gainsborough Pictures, shared his morning commute from deepest Sussex to London in First Class with the head of Southern Railways. Balcon persuaded him to let Gainsborough shoot a costly train wreck on a working length of his track near Basingstoke, the same track Balcon would return to in 1937 with Will Hay for *Oh Mr Porter*. Southern said OK, the only caveat being that filming had to happen on a Sunday when the line was unused and had to be cleared before the first train at 6am Monday. The result you can see in this film, a condemned steam engine and coaches ploughing at full-speed into a Foden steam lorry on a level crossing, filmed by 22 cameras, one of which is clearly in the path of the oncoming wreck. It is the

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single most expensive shot in British silent film, and its footage was reused in many later Balcon films, most notably *Seven Sinners* (1936).

But that was by no means all of the Southern Railway's co-operation - unique shots in working stations, cameras mounted on an engine, carriage roofs and even a moving shot from outside a carriage into the interior through a window give this film a rare authenticity, which helps the frankly laughable plot no end. Von Bolváry gives some real tension to scenes of assassination and disaster that run through the film, there are good performances from Joseph Striker and Benita Hume as the young leads and venerable American silent star Carlyle Blackwell (who had begun his career in silents as early as 1910) reliably chews the scenery. The film adaptation by Angus McPhail (who would go on to write *Spellbound*, *Dead of Night* and *Whiskey Galore*) can't entirely hide the film's West End origins but does a great job of opening up the action to London locations, including some wonderful shots of 1929 Waterloo for us railway nuts.

The version we have is a unique print owned by collector and historian Bob Geoghan which may not be complete, although there is nothing obvious missing. I was delighted to score the DVD release of this film a few years ago and still enjoy playing it - I have to say I envy Forrester Pyke playing it on the platform at Bo'ness - the perfect surroundings to take us into the murky world of corporate intrigue and high-speed railway disaster, the luxury of first-class saloon coaches and the romance of a steam railway living through its golden age. Enjoy.

By Neil Brand – Neil is a composer, writer and presenter and one of the UK's most established and respected silent film accompanists. His new youtube channel *Bells and Whistles* explores the relationship between music and film.

