



# HIPPODROME silent film festival

Our 10th festival celebrating silent film with music

## HippFest at home: *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1920)

In the annals of silent horror, this American take on Victorian Gothic is often overshadowed by the work of Expressionist directors who were conjuring visions of despair and insanity across the Atlantic in Germany. However, John S Robertson's 1920 *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is a remarkable film, both genuinely scary and thoughtfully introspective. Not least among its recommendations is its leading man, John Barrymore, who plays the dual role with unforgettable panache and a wallop of star power.

Wid's Daily decreed that "it is the star's picture from the very outset, and it is the star that makes it", describing Barrymore's performance as "a thing of fine shadows and violent emotions". John Barrymore, Philadelphia-born thespian of the legitimate stage, played Robert Louis Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde for the Paramount cameras at the age of 37 while he was starring in *The Jest* with his brother Lionel each night and rehearsing for Richard III, his first Shakespearean role. If he thought this film the lesser of his three gigs it doesn't show. Viewers who remember the lurid tales of Barrymore's alcoholic carousing, or his hammier turns in 1930s cinema may be impressed by the nuances in his portrayal of the virtuous slum-doctor Jekyll. This is Barrymore without self-parody and only a scrap of self-indulgence. That said, no one will leave disappointed by the gruesome display of his sinew-popping transformation scene into the monstrous Hyde: the sight of an actor who knew full well how to turn his performance up to 11, and that this was an occasion that demanded it. The initial stages of the transformation are achieved without makeup, though watch out for a flying finger in the reversal. True Barrymore devotees will be pleased to note that his beloved profile is photographed beautifully.

Barrymore had been appearing in films since at least 1913; Canadian director Robertson was a little newer to the game, having debuted as an actor in 1916. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is by far the best-known of the many features he directed between 1917 and 1935, though it's worth remembering that Alfred Hitchcock was a fan. Asked to name his 10 favourite films in 1939, Hitch nominated two of Robertson's films: *Sentimental Tommy* (1921), a lost film, and *The Enchanted Cottage* (1924).

The scenario is by Clara Beranger, a versatile screenwriter whose career highlights comprise Baby Marie Osborne comedies, literary adaptations such as this and 1915's *Anna Karenina*, as well as a long run in collaboration with William C. DeMille, whom she married in 1928. Her adaptation of

Stevenson's 1886 novella incorporates changes made in Thomas Russell Sullivan's stage version of 1887, including the introduction of Jekyll's fiancée Millicent (Martha Mansfield). Her version veers a little towards Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Grey* and exploits the story's potential as a morality play in which the forces of good and evil compete for a man's soul – an aspect of the film expanded on in the elegantly composed and illustrated intertitles.

Beranger gives extra emphasis to the role of Jekyll's friend (and Millicent's father) George Carewe, played here by English actor Brandon Hurst, who was noted for playing villains – he's not so innocent here either. Nita Naldi, one of the original vamps of the silver screen, plays Gina, doyenne of the dance hall. Barrymore claimed to have discovered Naldi (born Mary Dooley in New York) dancing in the chorus at the Winter Garden and recommended her for the role. The two actors remained friends, while Naldi went on to find her own success in the cinema, playing opposite Rudolph Valentino in *Blood and Sand* (1922) and *A Sainted Devil* (1924) as well as in Hitchcock's lost silent *The Mountain Eagle* (1926). Louis Wolheim, the rather rough-featured actor who plays the owner of the musical hall was also encouraged into the movies by the brothers Barrymore, and had a busy career on camera from 1914 to 1931, when he died, aged 50.

*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was a box-office hit and there were news reports of punters damaging property to get into the cinema. Some critics feared it was dangerously scary, though, and not suitable for viewing by pregnant women and children. The film celebrates its century this year, but it still delivers all the Gothic thrills you could desire, from the over-reaching scientist playing God in his shadowy laboratory, to a medieval poisoning and violent goings-on in the gaslit streets of London – not to mention one unforgettable arachnid nightmare. Are you brave enough to watch?

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