

THE 5TH HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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WEDNESDAY 18TH MARCH - SUNDAY 22ND MARCH 2015

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Friday 20th March | 18:30

Synthetic Sin

Dir: William A. Seiter | US | 1929 | 1h 12m

With: Colleen Moore, Antonio Moreno, Edythe Chapman

Accompanied live by Neil Brand

'Synthetic Sin' is an artefact from a time long gone. That is to say that this film is delightful, glamorous, witty... And they really don't make them like this any more.

When the twenties roared, there was mischief to be made. In the inner cities, in real life, gangsters took advantage of the prohibition laws to make plenty of illicit cash hawking illegitimate booze. But in the movies, and in the anxious imagination of Middle Americans, the flappers, a new breed of confident young women with bobbed hair and short hemlines, were wreaking just as much havoc.

'Synthetic Sin' has all the hallmarks of a classic flapper film, even though its heroine, aspiring actress Betty Fairfax, is really quite an innocent. Betty is played by Colleen Moore, an impish natural comedienne who was the first of Hollywood's bright young starlets to bob her hair and embody the newest, freshest way to negotiate the path between girlhood and womanhood. If any writer encapsulated the spirit of the Jazz Age, it was F Scott Fitzgerald, and he doffed his fedora to our star. "I was the spark that lit up Flaming Youth," he said. "Colleen Moore was the torch." And if you love Louise Brooks, Clara Bow or Jean Harlow, then you need to know Moore.

Preternaturally youthful and vivacious, Moore defined the flapper, the modern, sexually liberated young woman, in terms that high-school girls could love and

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emulate. She was unthreateningly friendly and funny, but a beauty too. After Moore's mother cut her hair into her trademark fringed bob ("whack, off came the long curls. I felt as I'd been emancipated"), teenage girls across the US rushed to the salon. "Moore created comic heroines who are as engaging in their failures to be glamorous as they are in their often accidental triumphs in love and career," wrote Molly Haskell. That's 'Synthetic Sin' in a nutshell.

Here she plays a young girl desperate to grow old too quickly, to become a "woman of the world" with the necessary life experience to be a serious dramatic actress. All flappers want to push the boundaries imposed by their old-fashioned parents, so Betty runs away from her comfortable home to a fleapit hotel in the big city, in the name of art, and of love. The audience is in on the joke from the beginning: Betty is wonderful just as she is. Her improvised show at the family piano early in the film is Grade A comedy, and the steps she takes to widen her horizons bring her into dangerous territory: grubby, sleazy, violent. A place where this flapper might just encounter a gangster or two.

We sympathise with Betty though, the chap she wants to impress with her newfound worldliness is playwright Donald Anthony, played by the dashing Antonio Moreno. And Moore is perfect in this role: she was a Betty once, a film fan who aspired to act from a early age, practising the art of "spontaneous" tears on the walk to school.

There is a sour note in 'Synthetic Sin', whose sexual and racial politics are woefully outdated. It's deplorable that this film includes a scene where Moore dances in blackface, and African American actress Gertrude Howard is saddled with a character that is little more than a stereotype.

When we talk about 'Synthetic Sin' as a twenties film, we must remember that the date is 1929. The clock is ticking on the Jazz Age, the Depression is looming, and Hollywood's silent era is on its very last legs. In fact Synthetic Sin, while shot as a silent, was released with a Vitaphone soundtrack on disc - music and sound effects, to play alongside the movie in the cinema. We're lucky to have 'Synthetic Sin' at all, as most of Moore's films have been lost, and it is tantalising we have just one disc of the soundtrack for this film - a fragment of the joyful noise made when the movies were young and the flapper epitomised their mood of youthful experimentation.

By Pamela Hutchinson. Pamela blogs about silent cinema at silentlondon.co.uk