

THE 5TH HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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WEDNESDAY 18TH MARCH - SUNDAY 22ND MARCH 2015

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Thursday 19th March | 19:30

Hell's Hinges

Dir: Charles Swickard | US | 1916 | 1h 4m

With: William S. Hart, Clara Williams, Jack Standing

Accompanied live by The Dodge Brothers (Mike Hammond, Alex Hammond, Ali Hirji and Mark Kermode) and Neil Brand

These programme notes contain spoilers

There were two traditions in the early Western film. One drew, albeit fancifully, on the realities of Western life, particularly on the experience of the cowboys who drove cattle up the trails in the post-Civil War period. Although such stars as Tom Mix and Harry Carey were not born in the West, they had associated with cowboys at an early age and continued to be friends with the bona fide cowboys who were drawn to the bright lights of Hollywood in the 1920s. Mix in particular stood for a flamboyant and boisterous view of the West, hard-riding, quick to fight, laugh and love.

William S. Hart, by contrast, began his career as a stage actor, playing Shakespeare on Broadway. His acting style was honed in the tradition of Victorian melodrama, with its extravagant gestures and intense, brooding looks. The performances of Mix and Carey had a freewheeling style, with plenty of comedy, while Hart focused on the stern morality of the 'code of the West'. Paradoxically, perhaps, since he emerged from a theatrical background, his films aimed at a more 'realistic' look in terms of setting, décor and costume. Hart dressed in sombre colours, a hat like something a boy scout might wear and with curious leather arm guards like a kind of armour. Mix, on the other hand, though more conversant with the lifestyle of working cowboys, favoured elaborately hand-tooled boots, wide Stetsons and patterned shirts.

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Tom Mix always got the girl by virtue of his debonair charm; Hart's character tended to be solitary, unsmiling and grimly dedicated to his purpose. He particularly favoured a type of persona known as the 'good-bad man'. This was a character who, often through no fault of his own, as a result of some injustice, lived outside the law. But as the film progressed he would fall under the influence of a pure and lovely girl and find redemption, usually in the last reel, through the performance of some heroic act of self-sacrifice.

Released in 1916 when Hart was at the height of his popularity, 'Hell's Hinges' is entirely typical of his best work, a film both artistically and commercially successful. Hart plays Blaze Tracy, a gunfighter with a fearsome reputation. When a preacher arrives in town, Hart comes under the influence of Faith, the preacher's saintly sister. The preacher is subverted by the local saloon interests, who fear reform; first his reputation is destroyed by a saloon girl, and then he descends into alcoholism and near-dementia. In a final apocalyptic scene, the townspeople burn down the church and Hart in turn burns the town itself before leaving with Faith.

The film was produced by Thomas Ince, a major player in the early silent Western, whose studio at Inceville in California was an important centre for Western production. Hart himself had an important though uncredited role in directing, and carefully protected his image into the 1920s, playing essentially the same role time after time. But eventually his stern, unyielding persona fell out of favour; audiences in the twenties wanted a hero who was more fun. Hart would not, or could not, change and persisted with his vision of grim morality tales. By the middle of the decade, however, the studios would no longer finance his films. His final picture, 'Tumbleweeds' (1925) was produced with his own money; when it failed he retired to his ranch home in Newhall, just north of Los Angeles. Now a museum, it's well worth a visit if you are in the area. It has been carefully preserved, complete with Hart's furnishings, books and pictures (he was a good friend of cowboy artist Charlie Russell). It feels as if Hart has just stepped out, perhaps to take his famous horse, Fritz, for a ride.

By Edward Buscombe, Editor of 'The BFI Companion to the Western'