

# THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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Wednesday 13th March – Sunday 17th March 2013

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The Hippodrome, 10 Hope Street, Bo'ness EH51 0AA

Thursday 14 March 2013 | 19:30

## BABY PEGGY, THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Dir. Vera Iwerebor | Netherlands | 2012 | 58m

**Short:** *Peg o' the Mounted* | Dir. Alfred J. Goulding | US | 1924 | b&w | 12m

Pre-recorded music by Günter A. Buchwald

Earlier this year nine year-old Quvenzhané Wallis became the youngest ever recipient of a Best Actress Oscar nomination. The acclaim for her extraordinary performance in *Beasts Of The Southern Wild* is just the latest evidence of Hollywood's admiration for precociously talented youngsters. Wallis is now set to star in a remake of the musical *Annie*.

The public's love of child stars was at its height in the 1920s and 1930s when Shirley Temple, Deanna Durbin and Mickey Rooney were frequently voted the biggest box-office attractions in America. The irrepressible, 92 year-old Rooney began his film career in 1926 and is now one of the few survivors of the silent era.

Baby Peggy had already passed the peak of her popularity when Rooney arrived in Hollywood. A cute, talented tot who many considered the precursor of Shirley Temple, Baby Peggy appeared in around 150 short films in the early 1920s and received over a million fan letters in 1922 alone. We are accustomed to the merchandising and hard sell that surrounds an X-Factor winner but the managers of Baby Peggy might even have taught Simon Cowell a thing or two. In 1924, she signed a contract for \$1.5 million earning herself the name of "The Million Dollar Baby". Fans could purchase Baby Peggy music, jewellery, milk and, of course, a Baby Peggy doll. We are told that a Baby Peggy doll was among the treasured possessions of the young Frances Gumm, later rather better known as Judy Garland.

The giddy rise and fall of Baby Peggy is beautifully told in the documentary *Baby Peggy, the Elephant In The Room*. Peggy, now known as Diana Serra Cary, is a spry 94 and looks back with affection and insight on her long ago brush with fame, winning fans and breaking hearts in features like *Captain January* (1924) and *Helen's Babies* (1924) with Clara Bow.



Silent Cinema Festival



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Among the silent era child stars who rivalled Baby Peggy, Baby Marie and Jackie Coogan were the most successful. Baby Marie died in 2010 not long after her 99th birthday and was best known for *Little Mary Sunshine* (1916). Jackie Coogan soared to fame when Charlie Chaplin chose him to co-star in *The Kid* (1922) and Scottish director Frank Lloyd selected him for the title role in *Oliver Twist* (1922) opposite Lon Chaney Senior. Coogan also inspired a small industry of merchandise that included dolls and his own brand of peanut butter.

The intense popularity of child stars in the 1920s was part of a nostalgia for the values of the Victorian era. Adorable little girls with cascades of curls, tough little rascals in knickerbockers and damsels in distress were all key ingredients of Victorian melodrama. Movies carried those values into the next century.

Often referred to as America's Sweetheart, Mary Pickford became one of the greatest of all silent screen stars with her golden curls and mischievous manner. She was not a child star but her popularity was based and sustained on films like *Rebecca Of Sunnybrook Farm* (1917) and *Pollyanna* (1920) in which she played characters considerably younger than her actual age.

If some of the child stars of the period seem a little too sweet and calculating for a modern audience then there were those who felt that way at the time. Hal Roach is said to have grown weary casting a picture from an assembly line of all-singing, all-dancing tots made-up for the camera and accompanied by a bossy parent shoving them into the limelight. The legend goes that Roach was looking out of the window and caught sight of some children playing in the street. The dynamics of the group kept him spellbound for a good fifteen minutes and inspired him to create the hugely popular series of *Our Gang* comedies about everyday kids and their adventures.

There was inevitably a darker side to being a child star. Long before legal protection and health and safety, young actors were expected to work long hours, neglect their studies and frequently perform their own dangerous stunts. They were never shielded from the greed of parents only too happy to exploit their popularity. Baby Peggy may have been the Million Dollar Baby but the money all disappeared, squandered on a lavish lifestyle by her parents. Jackie Coogan may have earned as much as \$4 million in the 1920s but he only received \$6 a week as pocket money. Eventually he sued his mother and stepfather in a bid to recoup his assets. The case eventually led to a change in the law and the California Child Actor's Bill that required a child actor's employer to set aside 15% of their earnings in a trust fund. The legislation is often called the Coogan Act.

Coogan enjoyed a second flush of fame as Uncle Fester in the 1960s television comedy *The Addams Family*. Baby Peggy never found the opportunities to sustain her stardom into her adult years and later became a historian, author and activist, living long enough to savour the renewed interest in her childhood fame.

**Allan Hunter is Co-Director of the Glasgow Film Festival and national film critic for The Daily Express.**