

THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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Wednesday 13th March – Sunday 17th March 2013

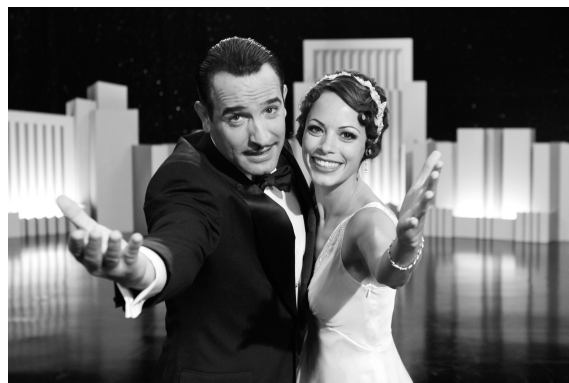
Box office: 01324 506850 | hippfest.co.uk
The Hippodrome, 10 Hope Street, Bo'ness EH51 0AA

THE ARTIST

Dir. Michel Hazanavicius | France | 2011 | b&w | no dialogue | 1h 40m
With: Jean Dujardin, Bérénice Bejo, John Goodman

Note: These programme notes contain spoilers.

Is it safe now, a year after it won so many Oscars and turned a dog called Uggie into a bona fide celebrity, to talk frankly about *The Artist*? By the time Michel Hazanavicius's modern silent first screened in the UK, at the London Film Festival in October 2011, it had done its time on the international circuit and been loudly championed by what the Guardian's Peter Bradshaw called "a global legion of jabbering evangelists" – and he included himself in that number. More to the point, it had been snapped up by the legendary Harvey Weinstein, and already seemed set for awards-season glory.



Meanwhile, those of us who had long nailed our colours to the silent film mast, who love the early days of cinema in all their strange and slightly mysterious beauty, approached with caution. Could *The Artist* really be a fitting tribute to the greats of silent Hollywood? Would it turn audiences on to the joys of early cinema, or would it be a hollow pastiche that only served to make those films seem more distant and curious than ever? And if it were to be the smash hit that was predicted, would we see a subsequent upturn in the money lavished on silent film – from preservation to re-releases to grants for events such as the Hippodrome Festival of Silent Cinema?

That's a lot of pressure to pile on any movie, and happily, *The Artist* resists such ponderousness. It is defined by a lightness of touch, one that skates dangerously close to flippancy. This featherweight film pays tribute to silent Hollywood but, with a shrug, refuses to take responsibility for saving it.

In fact, *The Artist* is not about the revival of silent cinema, but its sorry end – the arrival of synchronised sound that brings down its suave movie-star hero George Valentin (Jean Dujardin) and gives his ingenue sweetheart Peppy Miller (Bérénice Béjo) her big break. Ultimately, redemption for Valentin comes not from a retreat into the past, but his fleet-footed embrace of the future. The silent film he makes is a feeble joke, a naff and unconvincing vanity project; his Fred-and-Ginger routine a triumph.

If you're a film lover you will recognise, as you watch *The Artist*, a clutch of cinematic references that meander from the *Keystone Cops* to *Citizen Kane*, as well as a now-notorious musical quotation from Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. If you are silent-savvy, you'll smile to see nods to the films of Frank Borzage, Josef von Sternberg or Fritz Lang. You'll understand too that these ingredients do not belong in the same recipe and you could leave the cinema arguing over whether *The Artist* is even a silent film at all. Some know-it-all may interrupt you in the bar to tell you about the hybrid part-talkies that appeared in silent cinema's final days, the very era depicted in this film. But still, you'll soon get the feeling that, thankfully, this is an emotional rather than academic exercise. Why torture yourself by asking whether *The Artist* ascends to the greatness of the films it imitates, when you could wallow in its unabashed nostalgia for the golden age of silver nitrate? That look in Peppy's eye when she holds the film of her first scene with Valentin up to the light; the transformation of the frames into stilted moving images; the delight in cinema in its simplest form.

If *The Artist* has a gift for silent cinephiles it is this: the welcome reminder that all modern film-making is built on what came before – that the purity of one frame flickering into another is at the heart of everything we see on the screen. Silent cinema needs no revival, because it never went away.

Pamela Hutchinson is a journalist who blogs about silent film at silentlondon.co.uk