



HippFest

18 — 22 March 2026



Kidnapped

Dir. Alan Crosland | USA | 1917 | N/C PG b&w, tinted | English intertitles | 1h 4m

With: Raymond McKee, Robert Cain, Joseph Burke

Performing live: John Sweeney (piano)

Programme notes: Fritzi Kramer

Thu 19 March 14:00 - 15:15

Screening material courtesy of the Library of Congress and Fritzi Kramer
moviessilently.com

By 1917, the Edison film studio was a shadow of its former industry dominance. The filmmaking patents wielded to crush rivals had expired and moving pictures were not the novelty they were, audiences wanted to see stars. Newer upstart movie enterprises were on the rise with flashy, big budget, feature-length films, studded with big names to match. However, while the Edison company was declining and would be shuttered by 1918, it was not entirely out of the game. It wasn't producing mega-epics, or chasing the vamp craze, and it didn't have a roster of superstars but it aimed to succeed in the underserved family film market. A young Edison employee, Alan Crosland at just twenty-three, was handed the assignment to direct Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*.

Film industry trade ads hailed *Kidnapped* as a surefire boy's adventure: "Lives there a man or boy who has not thrilled to the famous story by Robert Louis Stevenson titled *Kidnapped*?... Now in motion pictures it is doubly attractive." The novel was indeed ideal for the purpose: it was full of action and suspense but nothing that would frighten children or censors too much. This matched the stated goal to make "red-blooded" and "clean" films put forth by the production's distributor, Forum Films. Forum's mission statement published in a full-page industry ad summarized its aims: "The First Definite Contribution in the Propaganda to Popularize Clean and Wholesome Films for All Right Thinking Americans." The company declared that *Kidnapped* fit their goal "to eliminate all objectionable handling of the sex question" as it had no major female characters at all.

Censor-proof it may have been it also had to be cheap as the Edison company was not interested in chasing the epic craze by rebuilding Babylon or staging costumed mass combat. World events also played a role in the creative decisions of the production team. Prior to the First World War, American studios had sailed for the British Isles in search of realistic scenery to add prestige to their releases. The Kalem company regularly shot in Ireland prior to the war, John Bunny had set out for England to shoot scenes for *The Pickwick Papers* (1913), and the ambitious new Universal company had waged battle all over Chepstow Castle in Wales for *Ivanhoe* (1913).

In 1917, there was a war on but *Kidnapped* was a stubbornly outdoorsy book that required at least some location shooting. New Jersey was the obvious solution. The state had doubled for Cuba and Korea in the early days of Edison, so why not Scotland? And no need to build shipboard sets, the production hired an old-fashioned brig and set sail from Sandy Hook. Thanks to Gilded Age millionaires, New York and New Jersey were conveniently filled with castles ready for cinematic Scottish intrigue, and Edison's Bronx studio likely served for the interiors. The Moving Picture World, an industry magazine, approved: "The necessary local color is maintained correctly, a number of winter scenes in the Scottish Highlands being counterfeited with beautiful effect."

In fact, *Kidnapped* was met with enthusiastic reviews generally, with praise for the smooth direction, the strong performances, and the family-friendly atmosphere. Motography magazine declared, "Robert Louis Stevenson would undoubtedly enjoy his "Kidnapped" on the perpendicular stage." However, when the Edison company closed shop a year later and *Kidnapped* fell into obscurity, surviving in the personal collection of producer George Kleine. After his death, the Library of Congress obtained his films and papers, including the only known copy of *Kidnapped*. As part of a fire safety effort, the movies were transferred to 16mm safety film and the flammable nitrate originals were destroyed. It has rested, unwatched and unscreened, for over a century after its initial release.

Those enthusiastic reviews from 1917 proved to be accurate. *Kidnapped* is a tight, fast-paced picture that uses every penny of its modest budget wisely. Raymond McKee, one of the last Edison stars, is suitably boyish as David Balfour, the young hero of the story who is kidnapped so that his uncle can steal his inheritance. Joseph Burke chews the scenery whole as the vicious uncle, at one point filling the frame with his howling face during a nightmare sequence.

However, the novel and the film's main attraction is the historical figure Alan Breck, Jacobite, rogue and suspected murderer. Stage veteran Robert Cain, who found a career playing onscreen cads and bounders, clearly savors the role. Stevenson described Breck's eyes as having "a kind of dancing madness in them, that was both engaging and alarming" and Cain convey this well, joyously engaging in sword fights and derring-do and finally saving the day with a bold bit of trickery.

FRITZI KRAMER

Fritzi Kramer is the founder of Movies Silently online and has contributed essays to the San Francisco Silent Film Festival, as well as the Keaton Chronicle, and Smithsonian websites.