



Wed 22
- Sun 26
March 2023
hippfest.co.uk

BOX OFFICE
01324 506850



HIPPODROME
silent film festival
celebrating film with live music

SUN 26 MARCH | 17:30

HIS MAJESTY THE BARBER

Dir. Ragnar Hyltén-Cavallius | Sweden | 1928 | N/C U | 1h 25m

With: Enrique Rivero, Brita Appelgren, Hans Junkermann, Maria Paudler

Short: *Out For Value* | Dir. Isaac Benzie | UK | 1931 | 1m 20s

Screening material courtesy of the Swedish Film Institute (Feature) and the
University of Glasgow Archives & Special Collections (Short)

Performing Live: John Sweeney (Piano)

For fashionable young ladies in the 1920s, a short haircut wasn't just a trend, it was a heated debate. Nothing was more audaciously modern than a boyish bob, as worn by screen sweethearts such as Colleen Moore. Nothing that is, except the shorter, sharper shingle cut, which left the ears and neck much more exposed – as worn by more daring actresses such as Louise Brooks. Fashions such as these spanned the globe thanks to the domination of Hollywood movies, and Hollywood stars, across the world in 1920s.

This is the context for the shingling craze that obsesses the young women of a small seaside town in this gleeful Ruritanian-inspired comedy, a Swedish-German co-production. Adding to the appeal of a new hairstyle: the handsome young barber Nickolo. He is played by Chilean actor Enrique Rivero, touted in the Swedish press as a Rudolph Valentino type, who went on to have a substantial career in French art cinema, notably starring in Jean Cocteau's *The Blood of a Poet* (1932). Nickolo has returned to work in his grandfather's business after studying at university in the big city, where he picked up modern ideas about hair fashion. Nickolo is an intriguing character, who raises eyebrows by choosing the family business over a graduate career and his

★ HIPPODROME 10 HOPE STREET BO'NESS EH51 0AA ★

keenness to specialise in ladies' hairdressing. Soon the salon is full of scissor-happy young women clamouring for a new do. But not everyone embraces the new styles. Nickolo's trendsetting raises the wrath of a local fat cat, Sophie Svensson (the wonderful grande dame of Swedish cinema, Karin Swanström, who later became head of production at AB Svensk Filmindustri), who has made her fortune selling hair tonics to women with flowing "Gibson Girl" curls. Surely her fiery granddaughter Astrid (Swedish Brita Appelgren, still in her teens) can defy her peers and resist the charm, the cheekbones and the even sharper scissors of Nickolo?

Don't be so sure. But the salon flirtations, and the clash of cultures old and new, are only the beginnings of this film's manic plot. Reviews of the time may have sighed at the repetition of Ruritanian mistaken-identity narratives, but they were hugely popular with European audiences, and cashed in on the contemporary fascination with the love lives of the young Swedish royals. Nearly a century later, it continues to be a subject that provokes endless speculation. Here the Ruritanian romp is updated with a modern cynicism that neatly punctures the film's farcical tone. Could Nickolo be the prince of a lost kingdom and just a *coup d'état* from greatness? Could anyone? There will be several twists and turns before all is revealed – and plenty of great gags. You may particularly enjoy the expressive Maria Paudler, a German comic actress, who steals several salon scenes as Karin, Nickolo's most enthusiastic new client.

Director Ragnar Hyltén-Cavallius was a successful Swedish screenwriter with a knack for directing hilarious comedies, including this and another riotous Swedish-German co-production, *A Sister of Six* (1926) with the British star Betty Balfour. The preoccupations of *His Majesty the Barber* mean it bears comparison to such pointed comedies about the American influence in Europe as Ernst Lubitsch's *The Oyster Princess* (1919), which screened at HippFest in 2013. They even share a cast member. German Jewish comic Julius Falkenstein gives a fabulously funny performance here as a drippy count, and you may also have seen him in films by those other German masters of silent film: Fritz Lang and FW Murnau.

For now, *His Majesty the Barber* remains an underseen film, but its cheeky wit and culture-clash humour offer a window on how the Twenties really roared in continental Europe. Referring to the film's international mindset, one Swedish film critic described it this way: "A mixture of American farce and German comedy, of Swedish archipelago comedy and Viennese opera with a touch of American gunplay." This hair-raising comedy is really a tonic.

★ HIPPODROME 10 HOPE STREET BO'NESS EH51 0AA ★

PAMELA HUTCHINSON

*Pamela Hutchinson is a freelance critic, curator and film historian. Her publications include BFI Film Classics on *The Red Shoes* and *Pandora's Box*, and her website SilentLondon.co.uk is dedicated to silent cinema.*

★ HIPPODROME 10 HOPE STREET BO'NESS EH51 0AA ★