



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

BOX OFFICE
01324 506850



HIPPODROME
silent film festival
celebrating film with live music

BARONY THEATRE COMMUNITY SCREENING: SAT 18 MARCH | 19:30

HIPPODROME SCREENING: SAT 25 MARCH | 21:15

THE MAN WHO LAUGHS

Dir. Paul Leni | US | 1928 | PG | 1h 50m

With: Conrad Veidt, Mary Philbin, Brandon Hurst, Cesare Gravina, Olga Baclanova

Screening material courtesy of Park Circus/Universal

Performing Live: Mike Nolan (Barony), Meg Morley and Frank Bockius (Hippodrome)

The effect of *The Man Who Laughs* on popular culture is incalculable. It didn't just inspire the look of Batman's nemesis the Joker, it created the Universal horror cycle's original house style.

The discovery of a Scottish scientist who revolutionised medicine could have saved the life of a German director who revolutionised American cinema. If only Paul Leni could have held off getting an infected tooth that became sepsis for another fifteen months, when the first official cures by Alexander Fleming's discovery, penicillin, took place. Sadly, life, death and showbiz are like that. One minute you're the toast of Hollywood, the next minute a failure in dental care in 1929 consigns you to oblivion at the age of forty-four.

But five years previously, and with his teeth in tip-top condition, Leni had already made *Waxworks* (1924) in Germany, which adapted the stylisation of expressionism to commercial cinema and brought Leni to Hollywood, where 1927's *The Cat and the Canary* (previously screened at HippFest in 2019) confirmed him as the master of shadowy, eerie, supremely stylish comedy thrillers.

Universal's giant success with *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) led them to adapt another Victor Hugo novel with an outsider hero. But *Hunchback* star Lon Chaney, who also created his own spectacular makeups, had left for MGM. Who could possibly fill his shoes?

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

Enter a tall, dark, unearthly figure. Stepping out of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), shrugging off the regal robes of Ivan the Terrible in *Waxworks* and of Louix XI in *The Beloved Rogue* (1927), Conrad Veidt had come to Hollywood to play John Barrymore's antagonist, and found himself contorting his six-foot-three form into a crouch to stop himself towering over the leading man. Reteamed with Leni, he was placed in the hands of Jack Pierce, the brilliant make-up artist who would go on to create the Frankenstein monster, the Wolf Man and the Mummy.

Audiences still marvel at and puzzle over the makeup Pierce designed for Veidt. A set of false teeth covered his real ones, attached to hooks which pulled up the corners of his mouth. "No pretty dancer ever worked harder to learn to kick than I did to grin," he reported. "But learning to acquire a grin was not as difficult as trying to relax it!"

And so the story of Gwynplaine, a traveling entertainer whose face has been carved into a permanent smile, reached the screen as a historical romance with the look and feel of a horror film (a genre that did not yet officially exist). Leni's visual panache, revelling in chiaroscuro lighting, tremendously dynamic camerawork, Felliniesque use of caricature, and glorious sense of melodramatic excess, combined with Charles D. Hall's enormous, looming, ominous sets.

Hall was another émigré, from England, and he too would go on to work on all the Universal horrors from *Dracula* (1931) on. Leni and Hall created a very European style that was palatable to American audiences. Leni had been a graphic artist and a film production designer himself so he could communicate visually, overcoming any language barrier.

To make the film even more lavish, Hall cannibalized the existing sets from *Hunchback*: the vile King James' bedchamber is lined with statues culled from the façade of Notre Dame Cathedral, to bizarre and sinister effect.

Chaney's "monster" characters, with their very human desires and weaknesses, always attain some hold on the audience's sympathies. But as Gwynplaine, Veidt surpasses this: with a painful makeup restricting his mouth, he's left with the top half of his face, primarily his eloquent eyes, to express emotion, and they say more than pages of dialogue ever could. His performance is one of the greatest in silent cinema, but perhaps because it came from an expensive Hollywood production, just as sound was making its initial impact, it hasn't been seen as such. It's so striking it stands comparison with Falconetti's in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, or Lillian Gish's in *The Wind*,

both from the same year. Veidt was always effective in outsider roles, with his extraordinary appearance and his charismatic, eccentric personality. History would continually make him a stranger in a strange land.

“In the middle of my third Hollywood picture, the earthquake hit Hollywood. Not the real earthquake. Just the talkies,” the star recalled. Concerned that his English wasn’t good enough, Veidt returned to Germany, only to flee to Britain with his Jewish wife when Hitler came to power, ultimately taking British citizenship. Then he returned to Hollywood, where he could command a higher salary, playing Nazi villains (for instance in *Casablanca*, 1942), the money going towards the British war effort. He died there, still an exile.

Most audiences at the time saw *The Man Who Laughs* in a less-than-ideal form. After a brief release as a silent film with live accompaniment, Universal pulled it and added a musical soundtrack with sound effects, background babbling, and a ghastly saccharine song which killed the emotion in the film’s most vital scene. Fortunately, today we can appreciate Leni and his collaborators’ achievement without such distractions.

“At the end of that film, when I first saw it, when I was I think six or seven, I was in tears,” recalled author Ray Bradbury in 1998, “and I went to see it again a couple of years ago, and the darned thing *works*. Because you are the person in need, you are the person in agony, you are the person with the permanent smile.”

FIONA WATSON

Fiona Watson is a screenwriter (Let Us Prey 2014), film historian and video essay maker. In 2020 she co-wrote and presented an essay on The Man Who Laughs for Masters Of Cinema. As a result she fell in love with Conrad Veidt and now ignores her husband. Fiona was once caretaker of The Worst Cat In Scotland. She’s always been the caretaker.

HIPPFEST AT HOME: Look out for our ‘As Live’ streamed talk *All Faces are Masks: Visible Difference in Silent Cinema* coming soon on the Falkirk Leisure & Culture YouTube channel. Led by critic and filmmaker David Cairns and Chris Heppell, campaigner from Changing Faces, the UK charity providing support and promoting respect for everyone with a visible difference, the talk explores silent cinema’s portrayal of visibly different characters, portrayals pertinent to *The Man Who Laughs*.

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

Also, Veidt's Gwynplaine is not only the bravura performance in *The Man Who Laughs*, with the film featuring a triumphant star-turn by Zimbo the dog! Watch HippFest's illustrated talk [Gone to the Dogs](#) via the Falkirk Leisure & Culture YouTube channel to learn more about cinema's earliest canine celebrities.

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