



HippFest

18 — 22 March 2026



The Bat

Dir. Roland West | USA | 1926 | N/C PG | b&w | English intertitles | 1h 27m

With: Emily Fitzroy, Eddie Gribbon, Jack Pickford

Performing live: Stephen Horne (piano)

Programme notes: Allan Hunter

Sat 21 March 21:45 - 23:15

Screening material courtesy of Undercrank Productions / UCLA Film & Television Archive.

Not every bat man is a caped crusader, fighting crime and roaring through town in a souped-up automobile. In Rowland West's old dark house mystery, *The Bat* is a notorious criminal noted for his daring robberies and macabre disguise. Premiered in New York one hundred years ago on March 14, 1926, *The Bat* was long thought lost and unavailable to modern audiences. It has been enjoying a well-deserved revival in recent months, thanks to a 2K digital restoration by Undercrank Productions and an eerie new organ score composed by silent music specialist Ben Model. The HippFest screening has the added attraction of live accompaniment performed by Stephen Horne.

The Bat began life as the 1908 novel *The Circular Staircase* by Mary Roberts Rinehart, a popular thriller writer often described as the American Agatha Christie. Roberts Rinehart collaborated with Avery Hopwood to transform the novel into a play that became a Broadway sensation in 1920, running for 867 performances and subsequently becoming a staple of touring companies across the world. Audiences cherished its deft blend of horror and hi-jinks as a collection of the good, the bad and the gullible gather one stormy night in a gloomy mansion where the proceeds of a recent bank robbery may be hidden. The location alone is a star with its hidden rooms, secret passages, menacing shadows and flickering lights. It is very much an establishment where things go bump in the night. Director Roland West embraces rather than attempts to disguise the theatrical origins of *The Bat*. The old dark house is like one vast set with multiple rooms, passageways and vast staircases to accommodate the entrance and exit of screaming maids, helpless innocents and dastardly schemers.

West was already established as a master of the spine tingler before he tackled *The Bat*. The now lost *The Unknown Purple* (1923) was an invisible man revenge thriller whilst *The Monster* (1925) was an influential chiller in which he had directed Lon Chaney. West is renowned for his use of light and shade, marking him as influenced by German Expressionism, and an early figure in the development of what would become film noir. The central house in *The Bat* is full of shadowy corners, candles that are extinguished at key moments and lights that dim as dark deeds unfold in murky spaces. Determined to create the right atmosphere for his cast, West is said to have filmed many scenes at night when the studio was deserted and just that little bit more creepy.



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One of West's great skills lies in the way he surrounds himself with a remarkable crew. The spectacular city rooftops and lofty sets were created by William Cameron Menzies who would subsequently win the first Academy Award for Best Production Design and go on to make essential contributions to the likes of *Things To Come* (1936), *Gone With The Wind* (1939) and Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945). West also knew the dramatic value of a close-up and the way to create mood and tension through the lighting of a scene. The camera crew on *The Bat* included 21 year-old Gregg Toland who worked as an assistant cinematographer to Arthur Edeson. Toland would later shoot *Citizen Kane* (1941), receive six Oscar nominations and earn Orson Welles approval as "the greatest cameraman who ever lived".

The Bat is a class act all the way, with a sprightly screenplay in which the men take fright and the women take control. Best of all is Emily Fitzroy as Miss Cornelia Van Gorder, the mystery writer who has rented the spooky house for the Summer and remains the calm centre of the mayhem as all around her panic and shake. Fitzroy plays her with the sardonic aplomb of Golden Girl Bea Arthur and the kind of knitting skills that Tom Daley might envy.

The Bat was a commercial success in 1926 and paved the way for a whole genre of scary house chillers that would include the screen version of *The Cat And The Canary* (1927) and the *The Old Dark House* (1932) with Boris Karloff. West himself returned to the material for a sound feature *The Bat Whispers* (1930). *The Bat* was even said to be an influence on Bob Kane when he came to the creation of comic book hero The Batman, and there are some striking similarities: from the masked disguise to an early appearance of the bat signal and some batarangs. Kane once claimed that two silent films had an influence on Batman - *The Mark Of Zorro* (1920) with Douglas Fairbanks Sr. and *The Bat*.

West went on to direct the Oscar-nominated *Alibi* (1929) and *Corsair* (1931), both crime dramas starring Chester Morris. His career came to an end with the scandal surrounding the mysterious death of actress Thelma Todd in 1935. West had been her lover and was always considered a person of interest in the case. *Corsair* was his last feature. He retreated from the public arena and was an increasingly reclusive figure in the years leading up to his death in 1952 aged 67.

The Bat was remade in 1959 but despite an enticing cast that includes Vincent Price and Agnes Moorehead, it can't hold a flickering candle to West's original. West's version of *The Bat* is spooky silent cinema at its best.

ALLAN HUNTER

Critic and film historian