



HippFest

18 – 22 March 2026



The Crowd

Dir. King Vidor | USA | 1928 | N/C PG b&w | English intertitles | 1h 41m

With: James Murray, Eleanor Boardman, Bert Roach

Performing live: John Sweeney (piano)

Programme notes: David Cairns

Sun 22 March 20:30 - 22:30

Screening material courtesy of Park Circus/Warner Bros.

Director King Vidor wanted to make a film about the trials and tribulations of ordinary people. Since he was at MGM, the swankiest of all studios, this seemed an unlikely idea to win favour. “I told Thalberg [head of production at MGM], ‘This may not pack the theatres as much as we hope, I can’t tell.’” Thalberg replied: “Well, I think MGM is making enough money that they can afford an experimental film every once in a while.” Vidor’s track record, including 1925’s groundbreaking WWI picture *The Big Parade*, was so impressive, they could hardly refuse him. Perhaps to ensure some kind of saleability, they did more than consent: they made the film on a tremendous scale – a sweeping drama of ordinariness.

This could have been a grotesque mismatch of form and content, but it winds up being an uplifting saga that can make the viewer feel that their own life is not so humdrum after all, that the most modest existence has an epic dimension. With scenarist Harry Behn, and then playwright John V.A. Weaver, Vidor crafted his story, not lacking in melodramatic incident but nevertheless ordinary enough to pass as a slice of life.

Vidor picked his star, James Murray, literally from the crowd – Murray, employed as an extra, caught his eye. He made an appointment with Murray, who didn’t show. Vidor had to track him down. “We made a test, and he was miraculous... One of the best natural actors we had the good luck to encounter.” His leading lady, Eleanor Boardman, was an established star. “I didn’t care about ordinary people,” she would say, “Suddenly I was cast in this downtrodden story, and I didn’t like to be so drab and unattractive.” But she trusted Vidor, who had directed her before, and anyway, her natural beauty is not susceptible to suppression.

The film follows its protagonist, Johnny – what Vidor called an “anyman” character – from birth (on the fourth of July), through boyhood, to marriage to Mary (Boardman), employment and fatherhood – and finally to a tentative stab at emotional maturity. The story is timeless and universal and at the same time absolutely of its time and place. Johnny’s Average Joe persona is confirmed by his playing of the ukelele, something absolutely everybody seems to have taken up in the ‘twenties. The film never states that



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our hero is struggling with perpetual adolescence, he is a man at last. Vidor was a great believer in “the fourth dimension,” a dimension he had called “the script, not for the eye, but for the heart.”

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identifiable in any visual element, but adding depth and meaning to the succession of images.

And what images they are – the high angle looking down at the hero as a boy as he mounts the stairs to the room where his father is dying, shot in forced perspective to create an expressionistic effect – the sightlines refuse to diminish in perspective – the image becomes graphic, abstract, except for the suffering child in the centre. When Vidor revisited the house he was born in, he suddenly realised he had duplicated the stairway in dreamlike, distorted form.

Vidor introduces New York, the third main character, with an extraordinary flying shot that soars up the side of a building and through a window into a giant open-plan office – Billy Wilder surely remembered this for *The Apartment* (1960). The trick department built a giant model skyscraper and had to devise an elaborate camera rig to shoot it. For huge sets like the office interior and the hospital where Mary gives birth, forced perspective was again used to make the spaces seem bigger than any studio could contain: desks, doorways, and even people got smaller the further they got from the camera.

The couple’s first date at Coney Island (American cinema’s romantic Forest of Arden) saw Vidor and cameraman Henry Sharp plunging down bumpy slides along with their actors. The director had been impressed by recent German cinema from Lang, Murnau, Dupont – particularly “the unchained camera,” which swept through scenes with whirlwind energy to create emotion, highlight story points, animate space and make it seem three-dimensional, or simply to express unhinged filmic *joie de vivre*.

Vidor was a master of melodrama – the emotions in many of his best films border on hysteria, frenzy. But here he walks a tightrope, enlisting the powerful drama that silent cinema excelled at, via exquisite pantomime, but never tipping over into unacceptable exaggeration. The title cards add details of speech and some charming 1920s humour, but leave the big moments to the actors, and Vidor’s framing of them.

Vidor is also noted for his nature-worship – his respect for elemental forces may have come from the fact that his hometown of Galveston was mostly destroyed by a hurricane when he was six. The couple’s honeymoon at, of course, Niagara Falls, allows Vidor to enlist scenery as an erotic force. As the newlyweds embrace before the cataract, the deliberately banal intertitle “You’re the most beautiful girl in all the world,” becomes oddly touching.

The film’s acceptance of ordinary lives, and the hero’s downward spiral, have been seen as an attack on the Horatio Alger school of delusional optimism, but Vidor, a Christian Scientist, was to some extent a believer in the power of positive thinking, and even flirted with Ayn Rand’s objectivism. And yet he could also project himself emotionally into the lives of people who dream big but come crashing down to earth when waking reality hits. “Not everybody can be winners,” he remarked. John Baxter identifies the film as personifying in one character “the cruel deception of the American dream.”



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Seven endings were considered – since real lives only end one way, and that way is not box office, the task of concluding the story was a tricky one. Vidor's final choice is beautiful – poetic, epic, and hopeful rather than "happy" – every other choice had seemed phony, but this one returns the protagonists to the crowd they came from, and holds a mirror up to us, their audience.

The Crowd wowed the critics (and even turned a modest profit) and James Murray became a star, very briefly, which enabled him to concentrate on his drinking. Within five years he was an extra again, back to the crowd. Within eight, he was dead, aged just 35. Vidor managed to weather the coming of sound, which struck just as he would make many more outstanding films. But he always said that he wished the silent cinema had lasted another ten years. He felt the filmmakers were just starting to get good.

DAVID CAIRNS

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