



HippFest

18 — 22 March 2026



Saxophone Susy

Dir. Karel Lamač | Germany | 1928 N/C PG | b&w | German & French intertitles with English surtitles | 1h 23h

With: Anny Ondra, Mary Parker, Olga Limburg

Original title: *Saxophon Susy*

Performing live: Jane Gardner (piano), Hazel Morrison (percussion), John Burgess (saxophone, clarinet)

Programme notes: Pamela Hutchinson

Sat 21 March 19:00 – 21:00

Screening material courtesy of Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum, Frankfurt.

Anny Ondra, the rowdy and radiant star of German comedy *Saxophon Susy* (Karel Lamač, 1928), was a celebrated Czech actress now best remembered for two of her British films, made right at the end of the silent era. By starring in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Manxman* (1929) and *Blackmail* (1929), this doe-eyed, flaxen-haired star qualified as the first ever Hitchcock Blonde.

In fact, Ondra's pan-European career had already brought her, and her team, to Berlin in the late 1920s, which is where they made *Saxophon Susy*, the best surviving example of her skills in physical comedy, and proof, if it were needed, that Ondra had genuine star power before she ever met the Master of Suspense. She plays the loose-limbed heroine of this bewitching jazz-age caper, a comedy of switched identities, which is a kind of silent musical complete with showstopping solo dances and full production numbers.

The plot mechanics give Ondra's character, an upper-crust baron's daughter from Vienna, the chance to become the star attraction at a West End jazz club. As German film magazine *Der Kinematograph* put it, the story "is as whimsical as possible, which means that the most impossible situations arise, but they are effective and give the young Czech comedienne the opportunity to show her film talent in the right light." Her character's glory comes despite, or perhaps because of, Ondra's brilliantly executed repertoire of endearingly eccentric dance moves. And her extravagantly happy ending arrives amid a slew of slapstick, witty visual gags, and a little pointed commentary on the foibles of predatory men. It's a joy to watch from start to finish.

Ondra made her movie debut in 1920 and rapidly became a sensation in Czech cinema. Because she specialized in comedy, she was marketed to the public as "Buster Keaton in skirts", "Woman-gag" or more poetically, because of her sleepy eyes, bee-stung pout and cloud of blonde curls: "the Czech porcelain doll". The director of *Saxophon Susy*, Karel Lamač, was also her boyfriend and colleague during this period, directing and/or acting



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with Ondra in numerous Czech silents. Long after their romantic relationship ended, their professional association, and their friendship, continued.

Together with cinematographer Otto Heller, and screenwriter Václav Wasserman, Lamač and Ondra formed a group known as the “Strong Four” in Czech cinema, making films that were popular at home and abroad. After a string of successful international co-productions, Ondra and Lamač made a permanent move to Berlin, founding Ondra-Lamač-Film, and teaming up with the German company Hom-Film.

It was as part of this collaboration that they made *Saxophon Susy*, with Heller as director of photography. This adaptation of a play by Hans H. Zerlett follows the antics of two Viennese girls. The first, Susy (Mary Parker) is studious, but so poor that she has been pushed into a career as a chorus girl. The other is posh, flirtatious, extroverted, longing for the footlights: this is Ondra’s impish Anni, whose leering father is played by Gaston Jacquet. On the boat to England the girls swap places, so Susy takes Anni’s place at an elite boarding school and Anni can learn the ropes at the famous Tiller School of dancing, a formidable institution where the staff spend as much time keeping men out as rehearsing the dancers (all played by members of Berlin’s Haller Revue).

The film exists in a slightly truncated form, and it seems likely most of the lost scenes are those to do with the real Susy and her adventures in academia. This has the effect of making *Saxophon Susy* even more of a showcase for Ondra’s acrobatic comedy chops, from the moment Ondra makes her entrance, legs appearing in a basement window, to her happy-ever-after finale.

PAMELA HUTCHINSON

Pamela Hutchinson is the author of The Curse of Queen Kelly (Sticking Place Books) and BFI Film Classics on The Red Shoes and Pandora’s Box. Her website SilentLondon.co.uk is devoted to silent cinema.