



HippFest

18 — 22 March 2026



High Treason

Dir. Maurice Elvey | UK | 1929 | N/C U b&w | English intertitles | 1h 15m

With: Benita Hume, Basil Gill, Humberstone Wright

Performing live: Mike Nolan (piano)

Programme notes: Laraine Porter

Fri 20 March 15:30 - 17:00

Screening material courtesy of BFI National Archive. Supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

High Treason started life as a silent film in April 1929 directed by prolific British veteran Maurice Elvey and produced by Gaumont at their Shepherd's Bush studios. Meanwhile, young wunderkind Hitchcock was shooting *Blackmail* in both silent and sound versions for rival company British International Pictures at Elstree. By late Spring 1929, audiences were clamouring for Hollywood talkies and British films produced as silents during this period were quickly becoming anachronisms. By April, it was clear that the talkies were here to stay and Elvey too was persuaded to shoot a sound version of *High Treason*.

Hitchcock managed to get *Blackmail* released in June 1929, achieving the accolade of Britain's first full talkie, but Elvey was slower in getting to grips with the new technology and *High Treason* was not completed until the end of July, just in time for its trade screening in August. *High Treason*, like *Blackmail*, was released in both silent and sound versions as only a few major cinemas had converted to sound. It is the superior silent version that we are seeing here.

High Treason is a hybrid of early sci-fi and anti-war film, based on the play by controversial politician, aviator and inventor Noel Pemberton Billing. It looks forward to 1950 (or 1940 in the sound version and 1995 in the French release) in which a Channel tunnel links Britain to its allies, the United States of Europe. But there's a tetchy relationship with the United Atlantic States of America which threatens to escalate into full-scale world war. International borders of indeterminate geographical location, are dangerous flashpoints as insurgents smuggle arms and booze from Europe to Prohibition-era American states.

Often compared to Fritz Lang's earlier *Metropolis* (1927) which inspired Pemberton Billing's play and designer Andrew Mazzei's futuristic sets, the film imagines a stylish future where men and women wear lame tunics and jumpsuits, daily news bulletins are broadcast on television alongside bizarre interludes of bathing beauties playing beachball. People video call one another, drive space-age, torpedo-shaped cars and the London skyline resembles Manhattan with light aircraft buzzing around above the Thames.



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International politics are unstable and much depends on the success of the Peace League in preventing another world war. Benita Hume stars as Evelyn Seymour, the daughter of Dr Seymour (Humberston Wright), president Vicar of the Peace League. In an unlikely pairing, Evelyn's boyfriend Michael Deane (Jameson Thomas), is commander of the European Air Force and compelled to fight if war breaks out, bringing the couple and the League into direct conflict. Deane refuses to wear the Peace League badge, preferring to parade his military medals instead. It is worth remembering that WWI was very much in living memory when this film was produced, and it is only around 1928, a decade after the end of the War, that British cinema had started to seriously address it on film. *High Treason* looks to the future, but is clearly mindful of conflict in the recent past and sadly presages a world thrust into new turmoil in the 1930s with the rise of Fascism in Europe.

The film's cast features some of the elder statesmen of British silent cinema who had been born in the 1860s-1870s and honed their skills on the London stage. Humberston Wright, Henry Vibart, James Carew and Basil Gill bring a gravitas to their performances. Jameson Thomas, as the romantic lead, had started his career in 1923 and soon became a mainstay of restrained, moustachioed British masculinity having recently starred in Hitchcock's *The Farmer's Wife* and Victor Saville's *Tesha* (both 1928). At the other end of the career scale, a young Raymond Massey made his first screen appearance as a cabinet maker. Benita Hume, had started her silent film career in 1925 and would later marry that other moustachioed British romantic lead, Ronald Coleman. Hume who looks amazing in her space-age outfits, was compared unfavourably with German actress Brigitte Helm who plays (arguably, her opposite number) Maria in *Metropolis*, but American critics – always disparaging of British films, appreciated her looks if not her acting abilities.

Andrew Mazzei's designs are an elegant mish-mash of modernist Art Deco and Art Nouveau styling, and although also compared unfavourably with *Metropolis*, are a highlight. Mazzei, from a long line of Italian plaster artists, is worthy of much more attention. His career spanned over 60 films alongside work on Blackpool's Tower Ballroom and Winter Gardens.

Playwright Pemberton Billing is also noteworthy in that he was a, frankly weird, far-right agitator who spearheaded a 'Vigilante' campaign to clean up Britain's morals which he imagined were being compromised by both a homosexual conspiracy and a 'Cult of the Clitoris'. A casual internet search of Pemberton Billing will reveal the extraordinary and lurid 1918 court case in which he was sued for Libel by the Edwardian 'Salome' dancer and actress Maud Allan who he had accused of leading a lesbian conspiracy to bring down the British Establishment. He was convinced that Allan was in league with Germany to convert the British male elite to 'perverse' sexual practices and render them susceptible to blackmail. Ironically, Oscar Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, testified in his favour and even more bizarrely, Pemberton Billing won his case.



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Another eccentric also got involved, cashing in on the film's popularity, this time by repurposing its sell-through theme song, 'March on to Peace'. The square-jawed Tory politician Commander Oliver Locker-Lampson was inspired to re-write the lyrics for his 'Awake England' rally at London's Albert Hall in June 1930. The film's original anti-war lyrics sold publicly as sheet music were; 'Fulfil Humanity's call. The martial cry of war must die when hearts beat nobly for all...' Locker-Lampson, a committed anti-communist, re-penned these into: 'March on, march strong! Honour and liberty call. Sons of the free our duty be to fight for freedom for all ... Let others scream their hymn of hate and work to undermine the State ...'.

High Treason occupies a fascinating place in British film history for many reasons. It was produced at a tumultuous time for the industry on the cusp of its transition to sound, amid frenzied attempts to wire studios and cinemas, and to train directors, screenwriters, technicians and stars in the new technologies. These were turbulent political and social times too, with the American economy about to crash in the autumn of 1929 and world recession imminent, women had recently been given full suffrage and Communism was considered a threat to democracy by the political right. The future, as imagined by *High Treason* is an ambivalent place where technology is both a threat and a promise, international politics are unstable and war omnipresent. *Plus ça change!*

LARAINÉ PORTER

Laraine Porter is an independent researcher, writer and co-founder of the British Silent Film Festival. She was the Principal Investigator on the AHRC-funded project British Silent Cinema and the Transition to Sound 1927-1933.