

HIPPODROME silent film festival

Our 10th festival celebrating silent film with music

ONLINE FROM 17-21 MARCH | HIPPFEST.CO.UK



Underground (1928)

Friday 19 March 2021

Music Composed By: **Neil Brand**

Performed by BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Timothy Brock

Underground was one of the first of the BFI's digital restorations, the first of a successful annual series of silent film restorations. Unsurprisingly, the early works of Alfred Hitchcock appear in this list, but also up there is the work of his contemporary, another talented young director, Anthony Asquith. Few British productions have been received into the international canon of silent classics but we can confidently elevate a number of our titles to world-class status and the silent films of Anthony Asquith have earned their place.

Underground is Asquith's second film but the first he directed by himself. It tells the story of the life and loves of four young working people in 1920s London. Brian Aherne as Bill, an Underground guard and Elissa Landi as Nell, a shopgirl star as the nice young couple whose 'meet cute' on an underground escalator sets off a chain of events that turn deadly. Nora Baring and Cyril McLaglen are the unluckier, more troubled duo, a poor seamstress desperate for affection and a womanising electrician who rejects her when he meets Nell on the tube. Their lives revolve around the Underground offering us a wonderful chance to observe life for ordinary folk in the capital of the 1920s. The parallels with life in the metropolis today, well at least till before the pandemic, are poignant and it is fascinating to see location footage of the 1920s Underground network, the behaviour of the passengers, old London pubs, department stores and of course the climactic chase through the Lots Road Power station in Chelsea. The filmmaking is assured, efficient and spare with the occasional impressive flourish, (watch for the mirror shot in the pub fight-scene) a trademark of Asquith's style, which, like Hitchcock's, had been influenced by European and Russian cinema. Asquith had a remarkable ability to portray the lighter and darker aspects of life through staging and cinematography.

The restoration:

For many years restoration of *Underground* was unfeasible. It was felt that not enough improvements using photochemical methods could be made to the existing film materials to justify the work. With recent developments in the technology available to the film restoration team it was possible for the first time to make a significant improvement. We were fortunate to find a nitrate print of the French version of *Underground* (*Cri dans le Métro*) in Brussels' Cinémathèque Royale, which despite missing some sequences, performed well enough in scanning tests that we chose to use it as the basis of the restoration, using three other nitrate sources in our own collection to achieve the full UK release length. This played a vital role in eradicating the solarisation effect in the final reel, originally caused by poor chemical fixing which had already started to destroy the original negative as early as 1948. Other material that we used were the only two surviving reels of camera negative and a UK print from 1929, previously considered too battered for anything other than reference. We successfully incorporated the various source materials to eliminate dirt, damage and severe emulsion scratches, frame by frame. The original main titles and ten missing intertitles have been reconstructed and seamlessly re-integrated.



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Anthony Asquith [1902 –1968]

Anthony 'Puffin' Asquith was born in London in 1902, the son of the Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith and Margot Tennant a socialite and member of the intellectual group, the 'Souls'. He overcame some resistance to his chosen career to become one of Britain's best known directors. Although more often remembered for his later sound films such as *Pygmalion*, *The Demi-Paradise*, *We Dive at Dawn*, *The Way to the Stars*, *The Winslow Boy*, *The Browning Version* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Asquith deserves to be better known for the three important silent films which he made at the beginning of his career: *Shooting Stars*, *Underground* and *Cottage on Dartmoor*. The young Asquith, like Hitchcock, was influenced by the German UFA productions which in the 1920s were the most highly developed in the world and excelled in film lighting. He made a three-month visit to Fairbanks' studios in Hollywood to learn how things were done in that flourishing environment. Asquith was also a founder member of the London Film Society and experimented with a variety of techniques culled from Russian and German films and also wrote his own original scripts. Somewhat ironically he became known in later years for the more static filming style associated with adaptations of stage or literary works. His early films, however, show all the grace and inventiveness that were characteristic of the best late silent films.

Asquith's crew on *Underground* included cameraman Stanley Rodwell with lighting by Karl Fischer and art direction by Ian Campbell Gray, who worked on all of Asquith's silent films and went on to work on some of Michael Powell's early films.

Cast:

Elissa Landi (Nell) was born in Venice in 1904 and educated in England. After an acting career in Germany, France and Britain, she went to Hollywood. She played opposite stars such as Cary Grant, Robert Donat, Warner Baxter and Charles Farrell, but also wrote novels and books about poetry. She retired from acting in 1943 and died young from cancer in 1948. Her ancestry has always been the subject of some speculation – involving illegitimate descendants of the Austrian royal family – but this could account for her aristocratic good looks.

Brian Aherne (Bill) was born near Birmingham in 1902 and enjoyed early success on the stage which led to a long career in film in Britain and then Hollywood. He played twice for Anthony Asquith, in *Shooting Stars* and *Underground*, and secured leads in many other silent films of the period. In 1933 he crossed the Atlantic and played a variety of roles, earning an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor in 1939 in *Juarez*, but was pipped to the post by Thomas Mitchell in his role as the drunken doctor in *Stagecoach*. He was married during the War years to Joan Fontaine and took up farming but continued to act on occasion. He appeared in several TV series, notably in *The Twilight Zone* and in 'The Incident of the Gentleman's Gentleman', an episode of *Rawhide*. He died in 1986.

Cyril McLaglen (Bert), the only Londoner in the cast, was born in 1899 into a family of actors including his older brother Victor McLaglen. He played many roles in British film and some minor roles in Hollywood in the 1940s. McLaglen tended to play villainous or unsympathetic roles and had a particularly good frown, perfect for this role.

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Norah Baring (Kate) had a relatively short acting career, retiring in the mid- 1930s. During the Second World War she ran a home for orphaned children and wrote a book about her experiences. She took the lead in Asquith's next film *Cottage on Dartmoor* and again, as in *Underground*, gave a finely nuanced performance. She is probably best known now for her role as the actress Diana Baring in Alfred Hitchcock's 1930 film *Murder!*

By **Bryony Dixon** – curator of silent film BFI National Archive

The BFI is grateful for the support of Simon Hessel in the restoration of this film and many others.

Dir. Anthony Asquith | UK | 1928 | BBFC cert PG | b&w and tinted | 1h 33m | English intertitles
With: Brian Aherne, Elissa Landi, Cyril McLaglen, Norah Baring

Music Accompaniment: Score by Neil Brand, performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra,
conducted by Timothy Brock

Screening material courtesy of British Film Institute