

# HIPPODROME silent film festival

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WEDNESDAY 22 MARCH - SUNDAY 26 MARCH 2017

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## Closing Night Gala Sunday 26th March | Screening 20:00 Chicago

**Dir. Frank Urson & Cecil B. DeMille (uncredited) | USA | 1927 | 1h 58m**  
**With: Phyllis Haver, Victor Varconi, Virginia Bradford**

**Performing live: Stephen Horne (piano, accordion) & Frank Bockius (percussion)**

*Chicago* is the thoroughly modern tale of a publicity hungry, headline grabbing anti-heroine, as addicted to her own reflection as today's popular culture is to the Selfie. Roxie Hart is the iconic free-spirited 1920's flapper transformed into a destructively willful, reckless, self-centred and amoral media darling. Taken to the extreme, she's the troubling threat to the establishment posed by a generation of young women flaunting social conventions, dress codes and manners, enjoying sexual freedom, self-determination and demanding what they most want out of life. Phyllis Haver (1899-1960) plays Roxie to perfection in a sparkling performance of devious charm, ruthless determination and brilliant comic timing. Tonight is a rare opportunity to rediscover her talent and celebrate the work of an almost forgotten star.

Haver began her career in cinema accompanying silent films on piano, became a Mack Sennett Bathing Beauty and then got her big break as an actress, appearing in over 35 films for the Sennett Studios from 1916-20 before signing with DeMille-Pathé. She worked with some of the most revered artists of her day including Buster Keaton, Lon Chaney, Howard Hawks, Raoul Walsh and D.W. Griffith. There's no doubt that Haver's star quality and comedic flair elevate *Chicago* above a simple black and white morality tale. Her career defining performance was praised by critics as "astoundingly fine", an impressive combination of "comedy and tragedy". Unfortunately for the world of Cinema two years later she married a millionaire and retired from film, sadly ending her own life in obscurity.

The story of *Chicago* is perhaps best known to contemporary audiences as a musical. Bob Fosse's 1975 stage production was revived in 1996 to become the longest running American musical in Broadway history. The 2002 Hollywood film starring Renee Zellweger, Richard Gere and Catherine Zeta-Jones cemented its popularity by winning six Oscars. Before these adaptations, the 1942 film *Roxie Hart* starring Ginger Rogers sanitised its subject in line with Hays Code Hollywood censorship of the day. The original story is more cynically told, an exposé of the power of publicity and mass media in protecting the guilty. Maurine Dallas Watkins' 1926 Broadway play, *Chicago /aka Play Ball* was based on two separate real life murder cases Watkins covered as a journalist for the Chicago Tribune in 1924. Her archived news reports provide sensationalised, but historically fascinating accounts of the two women at the centre of these crimes, both charged with murdering their lovers.



Beulah Annan “whose pursuit of wine, men and jazz music was interrupted by her glibness with the trigger finger” provided the inspiration for Roxie Hart, while cabaret singer Belva Gaertner, a “twice divorcée of page one notoriety” became Velma Kelly. In tonight’s film the character of Velma is billed as “The Perfect Lady”, a minor character played by co-director Cecil B.DeMille’s mistress Julia Faye. In real life both Beulah and Belva were miraculously acquitted of murder. Like Watkins’ news reports the Silent Film version of the story makes a mockery of the all-male “beauty proof” jury. The audience is cast as an alternative jury as we are left in no doubt of the character’s guilt. However the whole play act of innocence is delivered with such knowing comedy that we can’t condemn Roxie completely. After all her greed, desire and ambition are very human flaws, universally celebrated in the 21st Century. In 2017 as in 1927 it doesn’t really matter what you’re famous for as long as the story sells and the adoration is public. Transplant “*Chicago’s* most beautiful murderess” to present day and she’d have millions of followers on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, You Tube, her own Reality TV Show and be shamelessly milking her story for royalties on TV chat shows both sides of the Atlantic! Our global obsession with celebrity transforming real life crimes into entertainment is as comic and tragic as Roxy herself. *Chicago* is sharply relevant and blissfully entertaining as ever!

By Georgina Coburn

Georgina Coburn is a writer, Arts correspondent and critic

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