

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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WEDNESDAY 22 MARCH - SUNDAY 26 MARCH 2017

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Wednesday 22nd March | 19:30 HippFest Commission Opening Night **The Grub Stake**

Dir. Nell Shipman & Bert Van Tuyle | USA | 1923 | 1h 40m

With: Nell Shipman, Hugh Thompson, Alfred Allen, Lillian Leighton

Performing Live: Composer Jane Gardner (piano), Nico Bruce (double bass), Beth Morrison (accordion) and Hazel Morrison (percussion)

**Commission made possible by funding from the Community Schools 2008 Charity
Screening material courtesy of BFI archive**

Every prospecting drama needs a little fool's gold and *The Grub Stake* (1923) is no different. This "Tale of the Klondike" introduces us to a band of dreamers, with their eyes fixed on the end of the rainbow. The old digger clinging to his memory of a lost gold mine and the spectre of his departed dog; a land-locked former sea captain who fantasises that he is still on deck; the young artist who believes his mother is a postmistress and not the doyenne of a sleazy saloon; and most of all young Faith, a city girl who dreams of a fresh start in the north and trusts in the kindness of a stranger to get her there.

All that glitters is not gold, however, and certainly not the wedding ring that the stranger offers. Faith, played by the film's producer, co-director and screenwriter Nell Shipman has been led astray, and Mark Leroy (Alfred Allen), the man who offered her the "grub stake" to create a new life for her and her father, has a far less romantic and respectable proposition in mind. Faced with this grim scenario, Faith will prove herself an action heroine rather than a damsel in distress. When she strikes out on her own, she might just find the independence and the fresh start she was looking for – not to mention a few pots of gold.

The Grub Stake is filled with plenty of action, including some full-on fist-fighting, cliff-side stunts and a shootout, combined with a softer touch and some autobiographical flourishes. Shipman's love for animals is best expressed in the scene in which Faith comes to live in harmony with her new surroundings and her furry neighbours. "They are all scene-stealers," she said of her studio menagerie, "and we give them full stage, which will earn us a million hearts on screen." Shipman's Faith isn't the only strong woman on screen either. Dawson Kate, the "hard-boiled he-woman" who has a nifty knack for rolling cigarettes, played by Lillian Leighton, will reveal another more maternal side soon enough, but retains enough moxy to "handle a pack of curs" when she needs to. There's a touch of humour in the film, too. Shipman was known for pioneering on-screen nudity with a tasteful swimming scene in *Back to God's Country* (1919), and you'll see a modest reference to that at the start of the film. You will also see that her hair hasn't quite grown back to its full length after the flu, giving her the look of a backwoods flapper.



Canadian-born Nell Shipman worked outside of the studio system as an independent filmmaker. She had been a stage actress, a novelist, a screenwriter and movie star, but when she was recovering from a near-lethal bout of Spanish Influenza in 1918, she decided to go into business for herself. After divorcing her husband Ernest, she set up a company called Nell Shipman Productions with her new partner and co-director Bert van Tuyle. They made films that capitalised on the stunning scenery surrounding their new Idaho home (“the loveliest, wildest, most perfect place on earth”), their personal zoo, and Shipman’s capacity to play action heroines that were as romantic as they were capable.

As independent producers, Shipman and Van Tuyle struggled, however. “The Picture! Anything, everything, for the Picture!” Shipman recalled in a memoir. “Of course, others put something in too – ten thousand here, five there, twenty in another quarter – it takes big money to make movies. But with us it was more than money; it was heart’s blood ...” When *The Girl from God’s Country* (1921) was re-edited by investors against their wishes, Shipman lambasted the culprits in vicious trade paper advertisements. Having spent so much on their new venture and having made so many industry enemies, they went bankrupt shortly after making *The Grub Stake*, the last feature film they shot together. Their final years in Idaho were financially and personally difficult, fraught with danger and disaster. At one point, Shipman wrote in her autobiography, she contemplated drowning herself but she was saved at the last minute by her young son – exactly the sort of crisis and rescue she staged so well on screen. In the end Shipman lived to be 77, and she continued to write and pitch ideas to Hollywood, but with little success.

By Pamela Hutchinson

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