

# HIPPODROME silent film festival

Where movies and music come alive!

WEDNESDAY 22 MARCH - SUNDAY 26 MARCH 2017

BOX OFFICE: 01324 506850 | HIPPFEST.CO.UK



**Friday Night Gala**  
**Friday 24<sup>th</sup> March | Reception: 18.30 | Screening 19.30**

## The Patsy

Dir. King Vidor | US | 1928 | 1h 28m

With: Marion Davies, Orville Caldwell, Marie Dressler

Music & arrangements: Maud Nelissen

Accompanied live by Filmorchestra The Sprockets: Daphne Balvers (soprano sax), Frido ter Beek (baritone, altsax), Marco Ludemann (mandolin, banjo, guitar), Jasper Somsen (double bass), Rombout Stoffers (percussion, accordion), Maud Nelissen (piano)

**This presentation of *The Patsy* is by arrangement with Photoplay Productions and Warner Brothers.**

Orson Welles belatedly apologised for his cruel depiction of 'Susan Alexander' as a shrieking ignoramus in *Citizen Kane*, but can such damage ever be undone? Marion Davies has remained a laughing stock ever since – the irony being that she was in reality one of the finest comediennes Hollywood ever produced. She may have been generous, charitable and warm-hearted – but who can forget that she was also mistress to William Randolph Hearst? And so her memory is clouded by myth.

Hearst, a regular theatregoer, had a fondness for showgirls. He and Marion Davies had a relationship lasting 35 years. Marion remained loyal in her fashion, bailing him out with tremendous sums of money when necessary. Hearst put a studio at her disposal. His reign as her producer lasted twenty years. Her sixth film was a comedy, but he loved to see her in historical epics. He thought that male attire brought out an erotic quality so she was often filmed in uniform. Critics quickly realised that light comedy was her forté but it took a long time before Hearst was persuaded to allow her to play full length comedies rather than brief sequences. Hearst advertised Davies so relentlessly, boasting how much he had invested in her pictures that he put people off. He cast her in deadly serious historical spectacles which further damaged her reputation. Even when he realised how well audiences responded to her comedies – Vidor's trio *The Patsy*, *Show People* and *Not so Dumb* were the high point of her career – he was reluctant to change. Vidor had to get Hearst out of the studio before he could restore the gaiety to *Show People*.



Marion was insecure about her acting ability. Hearst hired Roscoe Arbuckle, presumably at her behest, when he was out of work after his trial to direct *The Red Mill*. With the rushes not up to standard, King Vidor was brought in. Marion loved his *Big Parade* – it was her favourite film– and the combination was so successful Vidor stayed on to direct the other comedies. He only stopped because he was worried about being typecast with comedy for the rest of his career.

Marion Davies performs imitations of Pola Negri, Mae Murray and Lillian Gish, capturing the mannerisms of each to perfection. Yet here was the greatest hostess in California. How could she look these people in the eye when they next arrived at San Simeon?! She would follow this with a charming screwball comedy, *The Cardboard Lover*, and then embark on another King Vidor masterpiece called *Show People*, in which she would mimic Gloria Swanson.

The cinematography was the work of John Seitz, Rex Ingram's cameraman. He was an odd choice for a comedy. One of the most brilliant of all American cinematographers, he specialised in highly pictorial and heavily dramatic subjects like *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921) and *Scaramouche* (1923). Apparently, Thalberg considered his work still a bit too dramatic for he had called him into his office on the previous Davies film and told him he was wonderful cameraman, but this was about youth and jazz, and what about some backlighting on the blonde hair? *The Patsy* is a superb example of how a play can be transferred to the screen without one being aware of its origins. But sound had arrived the year before. You would think that film-makers would struggle to reduce the titles, whereas so often the opposite happened. There are a hail of titles in *The Patsy*, most of which, luckily, are very funny. They were the work of the top title-writer of the day, Ralph Spence, although he had a Connors play to provide extra ammunition. Admittedly, one of the best ever made, this is a silent talkie. And one can imagine audiences in 1928 longing to hear their favourites actually speaking these witticisms.

*"After two or three reels of this one,"* said Photoplay, *"the director tossed away his script – maybe his megaphone too – and turned the picture over to Marion Davies. Which was a very smart thing to do, for when Marion cuts loose with clowning the result is that sort of comedy which reflects its results in crowded theatres."*

When Hearts was in his seventies, Marion realised he needed companionship more than she needed to act. She quit and devoted herself to him for the rest of his life. She also involved herself in charitable work and put on salary many employees who fell ill or who were injured. Incidentally, Charlie Chaplin voted *The Patsy* the best film of the year.

**By Kevin Brownlow.**

**Brownlow is a British film historian, television documentary-maker, filmmaker, author, and film editor, best known for his work documenting the history of the silent era. In August 2010, Brownlow received an Honorary Academy Award for his role in film and cinema history preservation.**



---

**We're raising money for a piano for HippFest - donations of any size and help spreading the word greatly appreciated [Justgiving.com/fundraising/hippfestpiano](https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/hippfestpiano)**