

# THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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Wednesday 12th March - Sunday 16th March 2014

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The Hippodrome, 10 Hope Street, Bo'ness EH51 0AA

Saturday 15 March | 13:30

## THE GHOST TRAIN

Dir. Géza von Bolváry | Germany/UK | 1927 | 1h 33m  
Accompanied live by Stephen Horne and Hazel Morrison

Based on Arnold Ridley's popular 1923 stage play, Géza von Bolváry's *The Ghost Train* is an excellent example of a late silent film produced under the trend known as 'Film Europe', in this case a German-British co-production between Gainsborough in the UK and Fellner and Somlo in Germany. Film Europe aimed to combine talent and resources from different countries to produce films with pan-European appeal and to maximise financial returns from international box office revenues. As a silent film, *The Ghost Train* would simply have had different language inter-titles inserted according to the country in which it screened – a relatively inexpensive process soon to become impossible with the coming of synchronised sound. The film is a relatively late silent (the first popular 'talkie' *The Jazz Singer* was made in Hollywood the same year), produced during what is often referred to as the 'mature silent period' when silent film as an art form reached its peak in terms of storytelling, style and inventiveness. These qualities are clearly visible in *The Ghost Train* with its sophisticated lighting and special effects and a story conveyed largely through visual style, rather than relying overly on explanatory inter-titles.

The film has an international cast and crew. Director Géza von Bolváry was born in Hungary in 1897 and directed around 100 films between 1920 and 1958 working across Europe in Austria, Germany, Italy and the UK. He brings the best of his European training to *The Ghost Train* combining expressive lighting, associated with German Expressionist cinema; animation and sophisticated special effects with the kind of realism and character acting associated with the best of British cinema. The film succeeds in conveying a tone somewhere between thriller, ghost story and witty spoof with some excellent performances, notably from stalwart of the British silent cinema, actor-director Guy Newall, who plays the 'Silly Ass' character, Teddy Deakin.



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It's the tale of a group of travellers marooned overnight at a remote railway station called 'Hellbridge' when Teddy Deakin pulls the alarm cord and the ensuing fracas means the passengers miss their connecting train. As its name infers, the station is the site of a previous train crash, whose victims haunt the vicinity, and any living soul unfortunate enough to witness the ghoulish spectacle, will inevitably drop down dead. Or so the story goes... The film picks up on a number of popular conspiracy themes involving anarchists and spies infiltrating British society and according to some film historians, relates to the traumatic experiences of World War I. Certainly, both director and writer had seen active service with Ridley invalided out of the army in 1917.

The play was enormously popular with audiences – running for over 600 performances on its release at St Martin's Theatre in London, despite being panned by theatre critics who considered it to be 'mere fifth-rate claptrap spoof'. It has more or less played continuously ever since. This popularity ensured the success of the film, produced only two years after the play, and the film was more generously received by film critics, with the *Kinematograph Weekly* declaring that: "Undoubtedly, this is one of the best "night of scares" pictures ever produced (with) brilliant camera angles and most telling dissolves...as good as anything America has produced."

Ridley's later play, another 'train-themed' thriller *The Wrecker* (1924) was also made into a film by the same production team in 1929, but did not achieve the longevity of its predecessor. Arnold Ridley went on to find fame as Private Godfrey in *Dad's Army* and von Bolváry to direct a further 83 films. Actor, Guy Newall played in a further four films before his premature death in 1937. *The Ghost Train* was remade by Walter Forde in 1931 and again in 1941.

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