

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

Friday 14 March | 19:30

LUCKY STAR

Dir. Frank Borzage | US | 1929 | 1h 35m

Accompanied live by Neil Brand

Lucky Star, one of a trio of films with *Seventh Heaven* and *Street Angel*, represents both the pinnacle of silent filmmaking as the talkies were about to take over, and a blueprint for thousands of Hollywood romantic dramas to come. Instantly recognizable as classic Hollywood films, they were the work of poor-boy-made-good, Frank Borzage (pronounced BorZAYgee) the son of Swiss and Italian-Austrian immigrant parents who arrived in Hollywood at a time when it was possible to move seamlessly from acting into directing. That early training gave him a facility with actors that proved essential in putting over the stories that he favoured - intense dramas about innocent characters who share an unshakeable bond in the face of poverty and adversity and who can somehow create a private world where the harsh dictates of society are kept at bay. His background gave him a penchant for working class stories - in *Seventh Heaven* his hero and heroine live on the top floor of a rickety seven-storey building in Paris, in *Street Angel* they are carnival vagabonds - in *Lucky Star* they are rural poor in the American Midwest.

In all three films Borzage cast two of the handsomest stars of the period: Janet Gaynor (some will remember her from *Sunrise*) and Charles Farrell, and their on-screen chemistry enabled him to produce a pared-back story of almost fairy tale minimalism that relies for its emotion and drama on the performance of the actors. Having established the characters their little paradise - humble as it is - in our minds, the forces of the outside world conspire to wrench the lovers apart leaving us actively rooting for them to get back together, with its near inevitable pay off in the form of the happy ending. It's the emotional blackmail Hollywood has been using ever since and which has delighted and infuriated generations of cinema viewers. It is a tribute to Borzage's talent and the charm of his actors that we don't mind in the least. As Janet Bergstrom puts it in the booklet that accompanies the BFI DVD of *Lucky Star*:



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"The way that Borzage draws us into the transcendent side of the story is very different from the usual treatment of screen longing. His couples are chaste and restrained, yet with a suppressed inner life that emerges little by little, swelling to a climax of pure emotion that we are asked to share, not only to witness. The ending of *Lucky Star* evokes King Vidor's WWI epic melodrama *The Big Parade*, but Borzage keeps the story at the small, human scale. We have the privilege of watching a private miracle."

That human scale is the key device that Borzage adopts for his *mise-en-scène* in *Lucky Star* and what gives it its charm - the opening scenes in which the gamine Mary takes milk to sell to the work camp where Tim works as an electrical line repairman could be a set from *Babes in the Wood* with its winding path bringing her horse-drawn trap from the back of the stage into the foreground, and Tim's house in the trees with its little stream and waterfall is, of course, the American rural idyll - a private spot where the two can be free and untroubled, where Tim, his legs paralysed in the War, can build ingenious inventions to overcome his handicap and where he washes Mary's hair with eggs to reveal the beautiful woman hidden in the grubby tomboy. Likewise the battlefield scenes where Tim is injured are very simplified - ending with just a close up and the occasional glow from the artillery fire of the battle lighting up his face. It's a beautifully constructed film - a simple heart-felt and intimate story with compelling images that linger long in the mind.

Bryony Dixon is Curator of Silent Film at the British Film Institute National Archive.