

Thursday 13 March | 19:30

BEGGARS OF LIFE

Dir. William A. Wellman | US | 1928 | 1h 21m

Accompanied live by The Dodge Brothers (Mike Hammond, Alex Hammond, Aly Hirji and Mark Kermod) and Neil Brand

These screening notes contain spoilers.

According to the account given by Louise Brooks, the atmosphere on the set of *Beggars of Life* was clouded with resentment, hostility and aggression. Brooks, the radiant star of this rail-riding caper, was unhappy in Hollywood and increasingly of a mind to leave town and wriggle out of her Paramount contract. Never one to play the schmoozing game, Brooks didn't just have to be persuaded to take the role on – she had to be tracked across country, with studio operatives finally discovering her in Washington DC, where she was visiting her paramour George Marshall, the notoriously racist owner of the Redskins. Director William Wellman was put out by her reluctance, and as Brooks recalled: “A coldness was set up between us which neither of us could dispel.” Brooksie was in turn miffed both by the requirement that she take a screen test for the film, and by writer Benjamin Glazer's remarks about her “too high” forehead.

She was only further dismayed to discover that her co-star would be Richard Arlen. They had worked together before, on the comedy *Rolled Stockings* (1927), and the experience had not brought them close. Arlen was a handsome actor, and a chum of Wellman's (they had worked on the first-world-war blockbuster *Wings*), but not the most expressive of leading men. Brooks's recollection of Arlen on *Rolled Stockings* wraps one insult coolly around another: “his vanity had made him quickly aware that I did not admire his acting”. Later, in a rage, Arlen would return the favour: “You're a lousy actress and your eyes are too close together.”

Brooks was enraptured by one member of the cast at least: Wallace Beery, who thrilled her by driving her to the movie's mountainous location at reckless speeds in his open-topped car. Brooks, unusually, thought Beery a sweetie, but conceded that he was a devil to work with: “Away from work a honey bear, Beery was the

meanest bear alive on the set.” The pair had little opportunity to socialise anyway, as Beery returned to Hollywood and commuted to the set by private plane each day.

Just to pile on the tension, the cast was fleshed out with a collection of “riotous” Hollywood boozers playing the hoboes, which ruffled the feathers of the locals in Jacumba, California, no end. A mean-spirited macho atmosphere prevailed among the crew, with practical jokes and humiliations par for the course, and “Wild Bill” Wellman’s directorial style captioned by Brooks as “quiet sadism”.

But what emerges from this Hollywood hell is a remarkably fresh and captivating movie. Brooks plays a farm girl who goes on the run after murdering her foster father when he tries to molest her. The attack is shown in flashback, superimposed on Brooks’s distraught face – an arresting opening sequence. Palling along with Arlen, a tramp who discovers the aftermath of the crime, and disguised as a boy, she descends into a messy, violent “hobohemia” where Beery, needless to say, plays the bully-king of the rail-riders.

Kevin Brownlow described *Beggars of Life* as “brilliantly thought out and superbly made”, praising its “astonishing elegance” and noting the influence of European cinema. The stunt work in the train scenes is energetic, and breathtakingly high risk; the tramps are an unforgettably villainous bunch of grotesques marshalled by Beery’s loutish Oklahoma Red. Even the romance between Brooks and Arlen convinces most of the time: two beautiful people in an ugly place. And yes, Brooks is still her gorgeous, spiky self in a flannel shirt and peaked cap. There’s a piquant dash of realism enlivening *Beggars of Life*, too. The film is based on Jim Tully’s hard-boiled hobo memoir of the same name; Brooks herself was molested as a girl; Beery had lived on the streets. In the “kangaroo court” sequence, when Red advances upon the girl in a freight car crowded with leering derelicts, the threat is horribly palpable.

A story of desperation and poverty released just before America sank into the Great Depression, *Beggars of Life* has a vitality that trounces its own sanitised ending. It’s one of the last great pictures of Hollywood’s silent era.

References

Louise Brooks, ‘On location with Billy Wellman’, *Lulu in Hollywood*, 1982
Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade’s Gone By*, 1968

Pamela Hutchinson blogs about silent cinema at silentlondon.co.uk