

# THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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Wednesday 13th March – Sunday 17th March 2013

Box office: 01324 506850 | [hippfest.co.uk](http://hippfest.co.uk)  
The Hippodrome, 10 Hope Street, Bo'ness EH51 0AA

Friday 15 March 2013 | 19:30

## STAGE STRUCK

Dir. Allan Dwan | US | 1925 | b/w & Technicolor | 1h 18m  
Accompanied live by Neil Brand

The opening scene of *Stage Struck*, a vehicle for the great silent screen star, Gloria Swanson, is an exotic, part-colour spectacle in two strip Technicolor. The first title before the appearance of the actress in a sumptuous velvet gown and a huge jewelled headdress, says simply “The greatest actress of all time”. For those who know Gloria Swanson from her defining role as Norma Desmond in the 1950 film *Sunset Boulevard* her connection with the glory days of the silent screen (“We didn’t need dialogue. We had faces”) might seem fitting until we realise that this opening sequence, during which she acts the part of a glamour queen is pastiche. In *Stage Struck* Swanson is ridiculing her real life penchant for fine clothes and ambitions to be a serious actress. Portraying herself as Salome and holding aloft the head of John the Baptist on a platter, a match shot dissolves to “Jenny Hagen whose dreams were all of triumphs as an actress and whose life was all long hours for poor pay in a cheap restaurant” holding a tray with plate of beans.



The object of Jenny’s affections is the handsome short order cook, Orme, played by Lawrence Gray. He is obsessed with actresses and seems barely to notice Jenny and so she is learning to be an ‘emotional actress’ by correspondence course. This manual of bad acting gives instructions to be practised at home where, over the ironing she must “Register the look of a contented wife” and “Throw yourself at the door. You cry abandoned!, abandoned! Then faint.” She’s terrible at it and it’s a nice twist – the Swanson of glamorous diva Norma Desmond portrayed as a talentless skivvy, desperate to impress the boy next door with her artistry but getting only laughs.



Silent Cinema Festival



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The famous Desmond line from the final shot of *Sunshine Blvd* is “I’m ready for my close up Mr DeMille” reinforces our association of the actress with great classical roles but she never played one of these roles in real life! Although she made several films with the legendary director, they were mostly marital comedies like *Male and Female* (1919) during which she famously had to act in a cage with a live lion. I’ve seen this clip described as ‘typical of DeMille’s brash and extravagant biblical epics’. Except it isn’t. It’s another fantasy sequence in a comedy – a version of J.M. Barrie’s *The Admirable Crichton*.



*Stage Struck* then, is Gloria Swanson doing what she does best as an accomplished comic actress at the height of her career, expressing through the character her desire to be a dramatic actress. It’s a good comedy and she is delightful in it, she even does some slapstick during the restaurant scenes, a form she claimed to despise. As a youngster in 1916 she once had a bit part in a Chaplin comedy (*His New Job*) but

didn’t stay on, as she didn’t want to become type-cast as a comedienne. In the end she spent most of her career playing in romantic comedy features and if she did eventually get to play a few serious roles it was because she took charge of her own career and produced them herself through United Artists. *Sadie Thompson* (1928) was the most successful. So, that pastiche opening sequence in *Stage Struck* looks forward to a Gloria Swanson that will never exist and 25 years later, she plays a Gloria Swanson that never was, but to such great effect that we are completely convinced – which has to be the sign of a great actress.

**Taken from *100 Silent Films* by Bryony Dixon (BFI 2011)**

**Bryony Dixon is curator with responsibility for the BFI National Archive’s extensive silent film collection. She has researched and written on many aspects of early and silent film, as well as programming for a variety of specialist film festivals and events worldwide. She also regularly contributes to BFI Southbank seasons and events and has co-directed the annual British Silent Film Festival for 16 years.**