


HIPPODROME
silent film festival
celebrating film with live music
WEDNESDAY 16 - SUNDAY 20 MARCH 2022
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The Unknown © 1927 WBEI

Dawn (1928)

Friday 18 March 2022

Performing Live: Stephen Horne and Frank Bockius

Plus short accompanied by **Forrester Pyke**: extract from *Scottish Women's Hospitals* (1917)
(National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive)

Dawn tells the story of Edith Cavell (Sybil Thorndike), the British nurse who was tried and executed in Brussels in 1915 by the occupying German forces. That may seem like a spoiler, but practically nobody in Britain in 1928 would have been unaware of Nurse Cavell's story. The tale of the saintly nurse, brutally murdered in cold blood by the dastardly enemy, had formed a central plank of allied propaganda during the war, and had already been the subject of several film treatments, notably *Nurse and Martyr* (Percy Moran, 1915), two Australian films, *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell* (John Gavin, 1916) and *Nurse Cavell* (1916), and an American film, *The Woman the Germans Shot* (John Adolphi, 1918). Cavell's body had been repatriated to England and interred in Norwich Cathedral in 1919 and the statue to her memory which still stands in London (just at the point where Charing Cross Road meets Trafalgar Square) had been unveiled in 1920.

Herbert Wilcox's film, then, rehearses a well-known story, although it strives (sometimes unsuccessfully) to distance itself from the sorts of nationalistic propaganda which had inflected earlier versions. The opening titles make a series of vague references to the rulers of Europe as 'the puppets of Carnage', all 'enslaved to the system of War' but the film itself is careful to celebrate the humanity of Miss Cavell at the same time as acknowledging the legality of her execution and the efforts of a variety of diplomats and civil servants – British, American, Belgian and German – to prevent the sentence being carried out. An early scene anticipates the main action by showing Cavell supervising a group of children playing soldiers. She hides one boy behind her skirts to protect him from his 'enemy' making the association between Cavell's duties as a nurse and a 'mothering instinct' explicit.

The film followed the convention of other British war films of the 1920s in striving to demonstrate the authenticity of its presentation of events via use of the exteriors of a medical institution where Cavell worked in Brussels, the use of original newsreel footage to illustrate refugees fleeing Belgium, and the deployment real people who had a part in the drama, re-enacting their role for the cameras – in the instance Madam Ada Bodart who was one of Cavell's chief assistants in arranging for wounded British soldiers to be smuggled back



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to Britain. Bodart appears in the film extensively, but also made personal appearances in cinemas introducing the film and recounting her experiences.

Two prints of *Dawn* survive – one in the BFI National Archive and one in the Belgian Royal Film Archive. The Belgian print is more complete and is the one you will see today. Although it contains several scenes that are not in the British print, it also omits a significant scene from the British print, which shows a young German officer visiting Cavell's medical centre and realising that some of the wounded men she is caring for are British. He chooses not to report her. The principle difference between the two prints comes in the final execution scene. The British print is truncated at this point so that the story of the member of the firing squad who refuses to shoot Cavell is omitted. This cut appears to have been made as a result of a struggle over the licensing of the film in 1928. Responding to diplomatic pressure from Germany, the Foreign Secretary Sir Austin Chamberlain attempted to suppress the film. The British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) intended to refuse it a licence on the grounds of taste, but Herbert Wilcox got one over on them by showing the film to the London County Council before a ruling could be made, and the LCC licenced the film on condition that the offending final scenes which suggested an equality in humanity between Miss Cavell and the (fictional) German soldier be cut.

Herbert Wilcox was already an experienced film director and producer by 1928 having produced a number of feature films such as *The Wonderful Story* (Cutts, 1922) and directing successful titles such as *The Only Way* (Wilcox, 1925) starring John Martin Harvey and *Nell Gwynn* (Wilcox, 1926) starring Dorothy Gish. In the sound era his name would become inseparable from that of his wife and star Anna Neagle, who appeared in his remake of the story of *Nurse Edith Cavell* (Wilcox, 1939).

By **Dr Lawrence Napper**. Lawrence is a senior lecturer at King's College London who has published widely on British and silent films including *Silent Cinema: Before the Pictures Got Small* (2017). Lawrence has appeared on BBC 4 television documentaries including *The Cinema Show: The Forgotten Decade*, and *Glamour's Golden Age: Hooked on Hollywood*. He also runs *At the Pictures* <https://atthepictures.photo.blog/> a blog about cinema-going in the past.



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Dir. Herbert Wilcox | Writers. Reginald Berkley, Robert Cullen, and Herbert Wilcox | Cinematography. Bernard Knowles | UK | 1928 | N/C PG | French and Dutch intertitles with English surtitles | 1h 31m

With: Sybil Thorndike, Ada Bodart, Gordon Craig, Marie Ault, Mickey Brantford, Mary Bourgh, and Richard Worth

Screening material courtesy of Belgian Royal Film Archive

BSL-English supported event

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