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HIPPODROME  
silent film festival  
celebrating film with live music

FRI 24 MARCH | 20:00

## What Happened to Jones?

Dir. William A. Seiter | US | 1926 | PG | 1h 1m

With: Reginald Denny, Marian Nixon, Otis Harlan, Emily Fitzroy

Shorts: *Prohibition: Bottles Of Wines And Spirits Destroyed* | US | 1929 | 35s

*The Weigh Of All Flesh (Eliminator!)* | UK | 1932 | 1m 59s

Screening material courtesy of Park Circus (Feature), Reuters and British Pathé (Shorts)

Performing Live: Neil Brand (Piano) and Frank Bockius (Percussion)

The appeal of *What Happened to Jones?* is not hard to place – as long as you are in possession of a funny bone. It's a cheeky, crowd-pleasing gag-fest, adapted from a Broadway farce of the same name that packed houses on Broadway and the West End in the late 1890s, even as it left the critics largely cold. *What Happened to Jones?* thrived in silent cinema, being adapted in 1915, 1920 and finally in 1926 – starring the fabulous Reginald Denny. It's a breezy tale of a chap called Tom Jones who goes out gambling with his friend Ebenezer Goodly the night before his wedding. Comic complications ensue, as you would fervently hope.

Reginald Denny, the dapper star of this farce, may now be best remembered as a character actor in talkies, but in the silent era he was a leading man, a comic star. Though in truth his heart belonged to aviation and athleticism as much as it did to acting. He was born into a theatrical family in Richmond, Surrey, and although he had some success as a child actor, he was sent to boarding school aged 11 after his mother died. He ran away from school to London as a teenager – that's where he took up boxing and eventually became a heavyweight champion.

Denny then returned to the stage as a singer, and in fact started his film career in the early 1910s, but he flew Sopwith Snipe fighter planes with the RAF during the First World War. That started an

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abiding passion. Later on in the 1930s he became interested in building radio-controlled model aircraft and in fact invented a drone that was used by the US Army during the Second World War. His granddaughter Kimberley Pucci's biography of Denny is titled [\*Prince of Drones\*](#).

Denny returned to film after the war, via Broadway, where he befriended John Barrymore and they would go on to work together many times. His breakthrough Hollywood role was as Kid Roberts, the lead in boxing serial *The Leather Pushers* (1922-23), which exploited his pugilistic skills, but it was comedy where he would find his forte. While shooting another boxing drama, *The Abysmal Brute* (1923), he began incorporating comic relief into a dramatic scene. It worked, and Denny the comedian was born.

From 1923 to 1929, Denny was Universal's biggest comic star, and he was the second highest-paid Englishman in Hollywood, after Charlie Chaplin. All through the silent era Denny played all-American types with a disarming grin, so well that audiences in the talkie era were shocked to hear his English accent. Universal never gave Denny his own studio unit, but he and director William Seiter formed a simpatico combination. His films with Seiter were his best, and funniest efforts, including *What Happened To Jones?* and *Skinner's Dress Suit* (also 1926). *Jones* was their third film together.

As Denny explained to film historian Kevin Brownlow, the two had a close working friendship. "[T]he great secret was that Bill Seiter and myself would get the script, and we'd make suggestions, and argue like hell. Finally, we'd get it right. You can't be a comedian unless you think what you're doing is funny." Those arguments were mostly about how to tone down broadly comic silliness, to suit Denny's more reserved British style.

Much to the chagrin of Universal executives, the duo's comedy stunts continued off-camera. If "Bill" Seiter and Denny wanted a break in filming, for example, Denny would use his comic chops to pretend to be having a dizzy spell. Filming would be shut down for the day and the two men would slope off for a spot of golfing. Sounds a little like the kind of naughtiness Tom and Ebenezer in *What Happened to Jones?* might concoct.

Otis Harlan, who plays Tom's partner-in-mischief Ebenezer, was a veteran of stage and screen comedy, and this was his third of eight movies with Denny. His most fondly remembered role is likely his voice work as Happy in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, but his CV lists

countless roles in silent cinema, including many collaborations with Seiter and Denny and early work from directors Tod Browning and John Ford.

Finnish-American actress Marian Nixon plays Denny's sweetheart Lucille. She was a regular in Seiter-Denny pictures too and in fact she married Seiter in 1934, after his divorce from Laura La Plante. They remained married until his death in 1964. Their grandson Ted Griffin is a Hollywood screenwriter, best known for *Matchstick Men* and the *Ocean's Eleven* remake. He was also a producer on Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* and appeared in the film as Agent Hughes.

If the theatre critics were non-plussed by *What Happened to Jones?* on stage, the same could not be said for the movie critics' reaction to Denny and Seiter's version. The *Los Angeles Times* called it the "greatest comedy success of the season", with critic Grace Kingsley enthusing: "If you don't laugh until you cry... you will be different from the gang including myself which yesterday simply howled with laughter all through the comedy's unrolling."

## **PAMELA HUTCHINSON**

*Pamela Hutchinson is a freelance critic, curator and film historian. Her publications include BFI Film Classics on The Red Shoes and Pandora's Box, and her website [SilentLondon.co.uk](http://SilentLondon.co.uk) is dedicated to silent cinema.*