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HIPPODROME  
silent film festival  
celebrating film with live music

WED 22 MARCH | 19:30

## THE BLUE BIRD

Dir. Maurice Tourneur | US | 1918 | N/C PG | 1h 20m

With: Tula Belle, Robin Macdougall, Edward Elkas, Emma Lowry, Edwin E. Reed

Screening material courtesy of the George Eastman Museum

Performing Live: Sonic Bothy

*The Blue Bird* (1918) is a true gem of silent cinema. This fantasy film gathers all the expressive, and artistic capabilities of early cinema and uses them to tell a feature-length fairy story. Made just ten years after Maurice Maeterlinck's enchanted tale debuted on the Moscow stage in 1908, *The Blue Bird* was already the second film adaption of the play, which had first appeared on Broadway and on US screens in 1910.

This American film of a story by a Belgian playwright had a French director, and a Norwegian-born star, making it a truly international affair, which offered a special appeal to audiences when it was released during the First World War. It was a prestige production, involving one of the largest film casts ever assembled and it was released at Easter with a cavalcade of publicity. Studio head Jesse L. Lasky claimed he spent two years negotiating the rights to the play, so sure he was that it would be a hit on screen. Although the studio splashed out, wartime austerity reportedly made itself felt during production – the coal shortage meant the New Jersey studio was a chilly workplace, and a costume decorated with sugar crystals had to be locked away overnight to avoid temptation.

The Frenchman was Maurice Tourneur, who also directed Mary Pickford in *The Poor Little Rich Girl* (1917) and the action adventure *The Last of the Mohicans* (1920). He was one of the most interesting artists of early American film and the beauty of his films inspired purple prose from the fan magazines. *Photoplay* magazine called him “the poet of the screen”, while *Picture-Play*

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opted for “weaver of dreams”. Born in Paris in 1876, he started his filmmaking career in France, for the Éclair studio, after previously working as a designer, illustrator and actor. He moved to the US in 1914, where he directed some of the American industry’s most highly acclaimed early feature films. His background in performance and his artistic eye are put to good use in his spectacular films, which employ all the special effects of the silent screen, including trick photography, tints, lighting and shadow animation, to create otherworldly spectacles – in this case, to reveal the souls of animals, objects and animals, to bring the dead back to life and to conjure fairies and spirits. Studio publicity for *The Blue Bird* boasted of a record-breaking number of “multiple, triple and quadruple exposures”.

Tourneur, as he admitted himself, did not like working with children (“Ah! They cannot be regulated!”), but you’d hardly guess it from this film. That Norwegian star was Tula Belle, the 11-year-old imp playing the little girl Mytyl, who along with her older brother Tylyl (Robin Macdougall), travels to the Palace of the Night in search of the Blue Bird of Happiness. Belle was born in Oslo, but moved to America as an infant and was already establishing herself as a popular child performer in the movies at this point. Her spirited performance is one of the film’s strengths, right up to the final frame. The studio claimed she was only eight years old when she made the film, and also that she was “the child prodigy of the screen” and “a daring youngster [who] can swim like a mermaid and is an accomplished dancer”. Further, that she even directed some of the scenes in the film, so that the allegorical story could be easily understood by children. Regardless of this hyperbole, Belle delivers a vivid, comic performance, which brings a touch of welcome humanity to the ethereal realm of *The Blue Bird*.

Critics and audiences were delighted by the film on its original release. “It is quite safe to assert,” wrote *Variety’s* critic, “that nothing quite like Director Tourneur’s work has ever been shown on the screen.” After the film’s premiere, one writer for the *New York Times* was moved to question even the studio’s immodest publicity: “There may be some who will talk of fadeaways and superimposing and all of the tricks of the motion-picture trade, but such are the kind of people who don’t believe that Things have souls. Mr Tourneur used magic, and that’s all there is to it.”

## 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.*

**HIPPFEST AT HOME:** Learn more about the life and career of Maurice Tourneur, whose influence spanned French cinema from its beginnings to the Golden Age. Watch [Maurice Tourneur: Franco-American Film Pioneer](#) via the Falkirk Leisure & Culture YouTube channel, an illustrated talk by his biographer Christine Leteux.