

HIPPODROME silent film festival

A world class festival for silent film, cultivating an international community with an adventurous appetite for extraordinary cinema.

MARCH 20 - 24 2024

Peggy

Dir. Charles Giblyn, Thomas H. Ince | US | 1916 | N/C U | b&w, tinted | 43m (incomplete)
+ short

Performing live: Stephen Horne (piano, flute, accordion)

2.30pm on Wednesday 20 March 2024

Restored in 2018 by the Academy Film Archive with restoration funding provided by the Louis B. Mayer Foundation.

(note: these notes contain plot spoilers)

*"O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!"*

One of the difficulties of writing about films that show Scotland or Scottishness in film is that we need to remember the fundamental point about films which is that they aren't real so it should not really matter. Of course this is utter hogwash, as any right-minded person knows, and so, much like any insults against the tap water, when something shows us the 'incorrect' version of Scotland, we get a bit cross about it.

Peggy is a film about a Scottish heiress who, whilst living the dream in the USA, is rudely awoken by her uncle who has taken guardianship of her and commands that she return to live in Scotland under his stewardship. Not one frame of the film was filmed in Scotland and only one actor claims connection to Scotland (William H. Thompson, who plays Uncle Andrew). But we could say the same about hundreds of films that have Scottish characters in main parts or locations as part of the story so let's look upon this as a work of fiction, first and foremost, and one that has chosen Scotland as the right place, the right setting and the right people for this tale to be told.

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And it is a film that presents an idea of Scotland and her people, and it opens with the titular character as a creature of myth and fantasy. We first see Peggy soaking partygoers, from a fountain by directing water at them. She is described in the first intertitle as a “Scotch witch” and follows this line by telling us that she was told to pretend to be a water nymph anyway, so the doused man got what he deserved. The next day, her uncle writes to command her to return to Scotland and there is a measure of cheeky fun as Peggy tells her maid to pack two porridge bowl and a bagpipe as they’re off to the old country!

The old country (according to the American Film Institute, Santa Monica, California) looks it: sunny, dry and dusty. Peggy is a thoroughly modern woman in this film and the old country is *old*. She drives a race car, wears trousers and is very much the odd one out in the old country. The old country is dominated by men, the church and not much else. But Peggy is a shining light, a force to be reckoned with and it’s no surprise that the working title for the film was *The Devil’s Pepper Pot*. She is popular, telling the village children the story of a prince and an evil witch in a fantasy sequence that is charming and frankly a little disturbing – you won’t forget Dr Goat, he’s incredible. But the film also has a moral centre: Peggy fools the village drunk after he throws his wife from the pub for begging him not to spend all their money and she stands up for the young woman in the village who is unmarried, but with child. It is Peggy who seals that young lady’s fate, as much as she is the mistress of her own



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destiny in the film, and there is, of course, a happy ending for Peggy who finds love with the minister of the village.

It is not too far removed from the plot of Barrie's *The Little Minister* (pub. 1891) but, as early cinema, *Peggy* marked the screen debut of the celebrated stage performer, Billie Burke. Burke most famously portrayed Glinda in *The Wizard of Oz* but as Peggy, in a film written for her (according to *The Billboard* (Jan 1., 1916, p. 28) she brings to the screen a thoroughly modern Scottish woman, comfortable with modernity (cars, travel) and not afraid to speak up for those in need of help or to challenge authority where it needs to be challenged.

She is the first properly modern Scottish character seen on screen up until circa 1935 and Robert Donat's portrayal of Donald Glourie in *The Ghost Goes West*, other Scottish characters being awash with tartan and cliché. Scottishness in *Peggy* is not screamed from the rooftops; Kailyard tradition is followed to a point as reported speech veers into Scotch (one intertitle refers to the 'meenister') but in terms of cinematic shorthand for Scotland, tartan is barely seen and, when it is, it is an adornment rather than a statement. The mythic, fantastical Peggy of the beginning ends the film as a fully rounded modern Scottish woman, unafraid to speak her mind or stand her ground. She's pretty awesome or to quote *Pictures and the Picturegoer* (Apr, 22., 1916): "Billie is good, Peggy is good, and all else connected with the picture is good."

JOHN RITCHIE

John is an academic, actor and performer. Currently best known for playing Fergus in the US version of The Traitors for NBC Peacock he has appeared in Monarch of the Glen, Jonathan Creek and Outlander as well as video games including GTA: Vice City.

He lectures Film and Media at the University of Stirling, has a spaniel with no off switch and is so busy he once had to eat yogurt with a fork. One of those horrid bamboo ones that makes it taste funny.

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