



## The Flying Scotsman

Dir. Castleton Knight | UK | 1929 | cert PG | 1h 25m approx.

Performing live: Jane Gardner (piano)

7.30pm on Saturday 16 March 2024 (Community Screening)

7.30pm on Saturday 23 March 2024 (Platform Reels)

Screening courtesy of Park Circus

It's typical, really. You wait ages for a film about the Flying Scotsman, and then two versions come along at once. Held at the junction between the silent and sound eras, British International Pictures (BIP) tried to hedge its bets via a kind of cinematic each-way, repurposing several of its newest Elstree productions for potential release in either format. Arguably, the most fascinating surviving example of this (unsurprisingly short-lived) practice was *The Flying Scotsman*, initially completed as a silent film in 1929 but not first shown as a 'part-talkie' until February 1930. For all their similarities, the two versions diverged in numerous ways - but perhaps the most noticeable was how they attempted to ride two (iron) horses: where the chief attraction of its silent version was intended to be its (quite literally) death-defying stunts, the sound version was widely sold around its use of sound itself.

Despite this, its stunts are one aspect of the film that remain largely identical in both versions. None betrays a hint of studio trickery, and Pauline Johnson's breathtaking work was paid due tribute in the press, with pictures of her balanced precariously on the side of a moving train appearing in daredevil photo-features alongside human cannonballs and alligator wrestlers. The editor of popular fan magazine *Picturegoer* (who bemoaned the fact that his 'long-cherished ambition to pull the right levers was not gratified' during his railway location visit) noted that Johnson was required to repeat each of her stunts several times: after she had walked along the outside of a carriage thundering past the camera at around 70 miles/hour, the train would reverse, and she would repeat her performance until director Castleton Knight was satisfied.

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Leonard Castleton Knight, better known as 'Mickey' (according to Chili Bouchier, at least), was a newcomer to directing, having spent several years as a London cinema manager before shooting to prominence with his remarkably macabre amateur short, *Prelude* (1927). Seemingly entirely off the back of this, and apparently with no professional filmmaking experience, he was given three BIP features to direct in quick succession, all of which began life as silent features, but were eventually released as either part- or full talkies.



It was Knight who had discovered one of the film's four leads, giving Ray Milland his first screen credits. 'Spike' Milland had already been making ends meet through odd jobs at BIP, including uncredited work firing trick shots for *The Informer* and appearing as an extra in *Piccadilly* (both 1929). Estelle Brody (of *Hindle Wakes* fame) secured him similar crowd work on Knight's Perthshire-set feature debut, *The Plaything* (also 1929), but the director was so impressed that he promoted Milland to a supporting role. Although the film is now lost, the actor's performance was apparently good enough for Knight to call on him as a last-minute

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replacement for *The Flying Scotsman's* original male lead, Cyril McLaglen, who left the production due either to influenza, diphtheria or a broken leg, depending on whose account you believe. Milland thus achieved his silent lead acting debut - but it was to be not his final such performance. That was to come two decades later in the Cold War spy thriller *The Thief*, a novel 1952 feature produced entirely without dialogue.

Brody was originally cast for Pauline Johnson's role in *The Flying Scotsman*, and while the reason for her dropping out is even less clear than McLaglen's, it was perhaps a wise decision, given the near-fatal accidents survived by both Milland and fellow actor Alec Hurley. But such dangers were probably all too familiar to many of the film's other cast members. Almost all the railway staff seen throughout the film are played by genuine LNER workers, who took the film very much to heart, even accepting Moore Marriott as a member of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen for his service in the character of veteran engine driver Bob White.

But this was not to be the only collaboration between LNER and the film industry of 1929. In December of that year, it was announced that the company was preparing to trial its newest service for customers on its longer routes. Its 'Cinema Coach' was to be specially adapted to reduce external noise to a minimum, and it was thought that upwards of sixty passengers on the Glasgow-to-London run might one day be treated to a complete double feature to while away the hours until they reached their destinations. No doubt BIP could have pitched this as the perfect opportunity for watching two versions of *The Flying Scotsman* back to back - although, by the end, audience members would surely have been tempted to look out their windows for a glimpse of Pauline Johnson clambering along outside.

### MARC DAVID JACOBS

*Marc David is a freelance film nerd who has been based in Scotland since 2011. After over a decade working in film exhibition, during which he co-founded the Scottish Queer International Film Festival, he left to focus on film history and research. He is currently writing a book on the first years of British sound cinema and, in October 2023, he gave a talk at the BFI Reuben Library on actors and creatives of colour from this period.*

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