



# RESEARCHING WOMEN IN SILENT CINEMA

NEW FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY MONICA DALL'ASTA, VICTORIA DUCKETT, LUCIA TRALLI

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
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## **Women and Screen Cultures**

**Series editors: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett**

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Women and Screen Cultures is a series of experimental digital books aimed to promote research and knowledge on the contribution of women to the cultural history of screen media. Published by the Department of the Arts at the University of Bologna, it is issued under the conditions of both open publishing and blind peer review. It will host collections, monographs, translations of open source archive materials, illustrated volumes, transcripts of conferences, and more. Proposals are welcomed for both disciplinary and multi-disciplinary contributions in the fields of film history and theory, television and media studies, visual studies, photography and new media.



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# 1

### **Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives**

**Edited by: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett, Lucia Tralli**

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# Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

## Peer Review Statement

This publication has been edited through a blind peer review process. Papers from the Sixth Women and the Silent Screen Conference (University of Bologna, 2010), a biennial event sponsored by Women and Film History International, were read by the editors and then submitted to at least one anonymous reviewer. When the opinion of the first reader was entirely negative or asked for substantial revision, the essay was submitted to a second anonymous reviewer. In case of a second negative opinion the essay was rejected. When further changes were deemed necessary for publication, the editors worked extensively with the authors to meet the requests advanced by the reviewers.

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## The Editors

Monica Dall'Asta is Associate Professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of Bologna, Italy. She is the author of the award winning book *Trame spezzate. Archeologia del film seriale* (2008) She edited a new Italian translation of Alice Guy's Memoires (*Memorie di una pioniera del cinema*, 2008) and the first collection on women filmmaking in Italian silent cinema (*Non solo dive. Pioniere del cinema italiano*, 2008).

Victoria Duckett teaches film history in the Centre for Ideas, Victorian College of the Arts. She has held posts in the University of Manchester (Department of Drama) and the Università Cattolica, Milan (Department of Communication and Performing Arts). She has published broadly in early cinema, has programmed films for Cinema Ritrovato, Bologna, and been involved in Women and the Silent Screen since its founding in Utrecht, 1999. She is currently completing a book that explores Sarah Bernhardt and early film (*History Fed By Fiction: Sarah Bernhardt and Silent Film*, University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).

Lucia Tralli is a Ph.D. Candidate in Film and Media Studies at the University of Bologna. Her main research focus is the re-use of media images in audiovisual productions. She received her MA in 2009 with a thesis about the practice of found footage and the work of two contemporary women filmmakers, Alina Marazzi and Cécile Fontaine. She is now writing her thesis on contemporary forms of audiovisual remixes, focusing especially on fan vidding and gender related issues in remix practices.

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Laraine Porter

## A Lass and a Lack? Women in British Silent Comedy

ABSTRACT: This chapter considers the role of women in British silent film comedy from 1895 to the end of the 1920s and their legacy into the early sound period. It argues that women comedians became increasingly marginalized as cinema developed into an industry, with the codes, form and style of the “mature silent cinema” restricting women into a narrow range of stereotypes that negated female agency and prioritized looks and glamour over personality or character. The dominance of a few male directors in British cinema, particularly Asquith and Hitchcock, narrowed opportunities for comedic women with their preponderance for objectifying women. It commences with a resume of women performing slapstick and physical comedy, using the Edwardian Tilly Girl comedies as case studies, arguing that women enjoyed relative comic freedom until the Great War, despite the plethora of stereotypes—coy young ladies, “old maids,” suffragettes, domineering wives etc—that characterized their representation in early cinema. Florence Turner is presented as a key figure in the pivotal period immediately following World War I, before falling victim to one of British cinema’s periodic recessions. Betty Balfour’s ingénue “Squibs” is emblematic of the early 1920s, but even her star wanes as she outgrows her youthful persona, becoming the butt of jokes around ageing in *A Little Bit of Fluff* (1928).

This chapter considers the significance of women performers in the development of British film comedy before 1930, and briefly their legacy into the 1930s, of which very little specific study has been made. The progress of film comediennes through this period can be described as one of overall decline, from relative prominence, success and power in the British film industry at the start of the 1900s to a diminution of roles and opportunities as the film industry consolidated by the mid-1920s. The main assertion here is that women comedic performers had considerably more scope and creative freedom to perform physical and anarchic comedy in the 1900s and 1910s, but after the Great War and by the mid to late 1920s this freedom gradually diminished, as women found themselves increasingly constrained and objectified by the language and form of the “mature” silent film. Other contributory factors to this decline in women’s creative comedic agency included the development of the longer feature film; a national preponderance for literary adaptations and performance styles developed in “respectable” theatre; the dominance of a few powerful male directors and producers, and the consolidation of film genres with specific character types and roles allocated to women. All of which will be considered below.

The framework for charting the decline in female comic agency between 1900 and 1930 is paradoxical to the progress being made elsewhere towards women’s suffrage. The Great War saw women experiencing social and economic freedom and the rise of the increasingly independent, sexually and socially confident New Woman through the 1920s. But women’s social progress is circumscribed by cinema’s consolidation into an industry, which largely

prioritized masculine agency at the expense of female autonomy and subjectivity at all levels of production, performance and creativity. Additionally, as it has through successive waves of feminism, cinema in the 1910s created a minor backlash to first wave feminism with the figure of the Suffragette parodied in films from the beginning of the twentieth century. Films such as Bamforth's *Milling the Militants: A Comical Absurdity* (1913) in which suffragettes are outwitted by a henpecked husband or *The Suffragettes and the Hobble Skirt* (1910) where a male character gives a group of women tight hobble skirts which then lead to their captivity, are typical (see also Bamforth's 1899 film *Women's Rights*). These "suffragette punishment" comedies, many of which are told from the perspective of the hapless husband, form part of the "henpeck" tradition, later popularized in British seaside culture by Donald McGill's postcards featuring the diminutive cartoon husband and his larger-than-life, overbearing wife.<sup>1</sup> These films, many of which result in female punishment or captivity, can be understood as reflections of male anxiety at the threat to Edwardian patriarchy posed by the emergence of economically and socially independent New Women.

At the start of the twentieth century, representations of independent women in cinema would have been understood alongside a range of pre-existing comedic stereotypes; suffragettes, "old maids" and harridans, mistresses, domineering wives, working women and saucy young servant girls, present in other forms of popular culture. Many of these became the butt of early cinema jokes and subject to some cruel comedy such as George Albert Smith's *The Old Maid's Valentine* (1900), in which Laura Bayley plays an older woman who is overjoyed when she assumes she has a love interest only to become totally dejected when she discovers her Valentine's card to be a joke. However, films in the pre-war period in which women and by definition, female desire, were punished were largely outnumbered by the ones in which their desires were allowed expression.

A broader survey of the changing roles of women in British popular entertainment between 1900 and 1930 would form a useful paradigm for understanding women's roles, representation and reception in film comedy, but such a survey is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, we do know that during the Great War over fifty five per cent of cinema audiences were women, and a further ten per cent were children, with men a clear minority and that women moved into essential positions as cinema operators during this time (Barry claimed that cinema existed for women during this period). In terms of source material, popular female writers provided considerable impetus and stories for film adaptations with authors like Elinor Glyn, Elizabeth von Arnim, Ethel M. Dell, and Edith M. Hull among many, producing a wealth of popular fiction that placed women at the centre of the drama. The British silent feature film was populated with adaptations from popular female writers whilst the Edwardian theatre up until the end of the Great War had a highly developed female culture, an Actresses' Franchise League and around four hundred female playwrights

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Gifford uses the term "henpeck comedy" to define this sub-genre of British silent comedy short films. The comedy invariably revolves around a husband taking revenge on his wife in retaliation for being forced to undertake domestic duties or for being subjected to suffragette-related power-struggles.

providing material (see Holledge).

In terms of antecedents for female comedians in cinema, we can look to the influence of music hall and the variety theatre where women flourished in almost equal numbers to men as comedic performers between the mid nineteenth and early twentieth century. Successful female music hall stars won fame and notoriety for their robust delivery of popular songs combined with a larger-than-life physical presence, able to engage an often raucous audience. Male impersonators like the cigar-smoking, cross-dressing Vesta Tilley; Ella Shields and Hetty King; “hard done by” working-class women such as Jenny Hill also known as “The Coffee Shop Gal;” Bessie Bellwood, Vesta Victoria and Nellie Wallace and serio-comedic performers such as Marie Lloyd, were as popular as their male counterparts Dan Leno, Little Tich and Harry Lauder. Many of these women were born around 1870 and their career maturity was contiguous with the emergence of cinema. It is perhaps surprising then, that only a handful of women or men made the transition between music hall into cinema and only a few phonophone films, survive as records of their performances from this period (see Fletcher). For example, there is only a very short extant film featuring Marie Lloyd the so-called “Queen of the Music Hall,” the 1920 Gaumont film *The One and Only “Marie Lloyd.”* This lack of attention from cinema is partly due to the fact that the heyday of music hall was already over by the end of the nineteenth century and from 1896 onwards, the Bioscope was increasingly infiltrating the kaleidoscopic programmes of the variety theatre. By the end of the 1920s, the women and men who had formed the backbone of the music hall had already slipped into nostalgia, invited to participate in various cinematic cavalcades marking the belle époque of the “Old Time Music Hall.”<sup>2</sup>

Coinciding with the infiltration of cinema into the music hall was the transition of music hall itself, from uncensored, largely unlicensed cheap entertainment to the increasingly middle-class, variety theatre; a transition that also coincided with the gradual decline of unbridled female performance. Women like Marie Lloyd and her “vulgar colleagues” were considered too risqué for Oswald Stoll whose increasing grip on the entertainment sector, from his arrival in the UK in 1902, steered the programme content towards fully-licensed and increasingly censored, family entertainment (see Mander and Mitchenson). Stoll inaugurated the first Royal Command Performance in 1911 and set out to attract more affluent, middle-class audiences by featuring the likes of serious theatre stars, Sarah Bernhardt and Helen Terry in his programmes. Such highbrow aspirations marked the death knell for working class eccentricity, the anarchic and suggestive comedy that had once characterized both male and female performance. But throughout the transition from music hall to variety in the 1910s, female artistes flourished in their own right and several female cinema stars such as Florence Turner and Betty Balfour, began their careers in this way.

The various forms of popular entertainment, music hall, pantomime, theatre, variety

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<sup>2</sup> See the feature film *Elstree Calling* (1930) directed by Andre Charlot et al.: an early British sound film and compilation of variety sketches.

and cinema, were simultaneously converging and diverging around the Great War. This was also the period of mass cinema building and the development of cinema into a distinct institution with the concurrent shift towards longer film narratives. Feature films required a more concentrated attention span and therefore a different relationship with audiences. The short comic “turn” did not integrate easily into new film programming structures and the comedic sketches performed on the stage did not always translate easily into silent cinema. Music hall was a medium dominated by vocal expression and a larger-than-life physicality whilst cinema required an increasingly finely-tuned and specific mimetic performance; hence the difficulty in defining a clear set of transitions from theatre to cinema in relation to female (or male) performers.

Nevertheless, the earlier “cinema of attractions” had embraced short, self-contained comedic turns and character studies. Women such as Mrs. Albert Smith (wife of George Albert Smith and a former variety actress herself) featured in early films such as *Mary Jane’s Mishap, or Don’t Fool with Paraffin* (George Albert Smith, 1903), in which the eponymous victim vanishes in a puff of smoke; and women worked alongside their male partners in almost equal numbers in early pioneer film comedies. Florence Turner’s “facial” sketch film *Daisy Doodad’s Dial* (Laurence Trimble, 1913), which derives comedy from exaggerated facial expression would have been equally appropriate to live performance. By the arrival of the Great War, music halls were already well in decline and along with them, opportunities for anarchic female performance of eccentric, working class characters for whom looks and glamour, which would later define their roles in film, were not the most important considerations for their comedic personas. By the end of the war and the inevitable dominance of Hollywood on British cinema, glamour and physical perfection, emphasized through increasing use of close-ups on faces and body parts, created new figures for identification and stardom and placed increasing pressure on female glamour and beauty.

#### *Women, Comedy and the British Film Industry During the Great War.*

Significant to the trajectory of women in British silent comedy are the changes brought about in the British film industry as a result of the Great War when ninety-five per cent of screen time was occupied by imported US films. The war effectively threw the British industry into a form of suspended animation, curtailing investment and infrastructural development, which inevitably had a knock-on effect in terms of opportunities for women performers. But if British women were looking for roles models and identification figures, then they had them in abundance from the emerging Hollywood star system with its vastly superior output of highly proficient and popular silent comedies featuring comediennes whose combination of glamour, lifestyle, looks, and sophisticated comedic acting abilities, offered more attractive role models than their domestic equivalents. Women like Mabel Normand who combined looks and comedy and the Bathing Beauties who formed a glamorous backdrop to the main

action in Keystone comedies. By the end of the war, the contracts made with American distributors during the conflict, ensured that Hollywood product continued to dominate the British market with comediennes such as Chaplin's leading female, Edna Purviance; Keaton's sidekicks Sybil Seely who co-starred in *One Week* (Edward F. Cline, Buster Keaton, 1920) and fellow co-star Phyllis Haver in *The Balloonatic* (Edward F. Cline, Buster Keaton, 1923). This first wave were followed by women like Ruth Hiatt in *Saturday Afternoon* (Harry Edwards, 1926) and Marion Byron and Anita Garvin, a female Laurel and Hardy duo who starred alongside Max Davidson in *Feed 'em and Weep* (Fred Guiol, Leo McCarey, 1928) before becoming the stars in Leo McCarey and Hal Yates' *A Pair of Tights* (1929). Not to mention funny women like Viola Richards, Edna Marian, Bebe Daniels, Colleen Moore and Clara Bow who had significant box office power and roles in slapstick, sex and flapper comedies, the likes of which were simply not being produced in Britain. Hollywood excelled at the global export of silent comedies dis-incentivising the development of the genre in Britain.

#### *Personalities and Stars: Case Studies and Career Trajectories.*

From the 1900s to the late 1920s, the progress of female performers in British comedy can be characterized by a series of chronological case studies. In the 1910s the anarchic Tilly Girls, Chrissie White and Alma Taylor, were given free reign with their youthful, physical slapstick in a series of nineteen or so comedies produced by the Hepworth Company. During the war, Florence Turner emerges in feature films, with a pivotal performance in *East is East* (Henry Edwards, 1916), which fuses an expository comedic acting style, developed on the variety stage, with a more nuanced style adapted the exigencies of the camera and the demands of a full-length film narrative. Turner herself had arrived in the UK to take advantage of the opportunities for work on the variety theatre and music hall circuits and *East is East* marks a shift between the use of music hall stars in filmed comedic sketches and a subtle and engaging feature film character study. Betty Balfour, the "Queen of Happiness" is Britain's exemplar female comedian during the early 1920s with her trademark cheeky attitude, dimpled, smiling face and vivacious mimicry. Balfour's career trajectory is also interesting as she shifts from street-girl and cockney flower seller in her early Squibs films to exotic dancer and flapper in later films such as *A Little Bit of Fluff* (Wheeler Dryden, Jess Robins, 1928). Balfour's career also reflects the aspirations for narrative control and agency of the 1920s comic actress, pitted against the increasingly circumscribed roles for women in silent feature comedies, which put constraints on female comic performance. The career paths of these comediennes are indicative of the shifts that take place for women in film comedy across the first three decades of the twentieth century; from significant comic agency to comic objectivity; from women being able to create their own comedy to increasingly becoming the butt of the joke. This is reflected by an attendant loss of female autonomy and control in the comedic narrative as cinema becomes increasingly concerned with looks and glamour

and displaying women as passive objects for masculine attention in the 1920s drawing room and sex comedies.

*The Bad-Girl, Madcap Tilly Comedies 1910-1915: Alma Taylor and Chrissie White*

If funny women can be considered the canaries of equal opportunities in the film industry, then the Tilly Girls thrived when the industry was at its most oxygenated. The Tilly comedies of the 1910s do not position women as passive objects designed for consumption, and the speed at which Chrissie White (1895-1989) and Alma Taylor (1895-1974) perform, defies their sexual objectification. They never remain stationary in the frame for long enough to be consumed by the cinematic gaze and their physical comedy is equivalent to male slapstick performance in its speed and agility. They are, by turns, amoral and innocent, committing acts of often surprising cruelty and overturning Edwardian codes of good behavior for young women. Their mischief knows no bounds and they usually escape unpunished and self-satisfied at the havoc they have created (see *Cento Anni Fa*).

Both White and Taylor were born in 1895 and were around fifteen years of age when they joined Hepworth's company and produced the first of the Tilly comedies in 1910. Both were attractive young women, as evidenced by their photographic portraits at the time, but director Lewin Fitzhammon and producer Cecil Hepworth do not concentrate on their faces. Instead they capture the totality of White and Taylor's comic performances by filming in mid and long shot rather than fragmenting their bodies or faces. The Tilly comedies offer a glimpse of the possibilities for female physical comedy, which are largely curtailed after the Great War. Such female anarchic comedy will not re emerge in Britain until the St. Trinians cycle of anarchic schoolgirl films in the 1950s, starting with Launder and Gilliat's *The Belles of St. Trinians* (1954). However, the latest manifestation of this franchise, *St Trinians* (Oliver Parker, Barnaby Thompson, 2007) and *St Trinians 2: The Legend of Fritton's Gold* (Oliver Parker, Barnaby Thompson, 2009) has replaced the asexual grubby-kneed protagonists of the 1950s with highly-sexualized, suspender-wearing teenagers, designed to evoke sexual responses.

The Tilly Girls were also a phenomenon of cinema as an emerging art form. Their madcap anarchic comedies were located within a cinematic aesthetic of continuity editing, the creative use of space, framing, action and movement. The plots of their films may have roots knockabout music hall sketches, but their realization is entirely cinematic with producer Cecil Hepworth and director Lewin Fitzhammon's talents clearly in evidence. The Tilly's performances are unabashed, physical and anarchic; drawing on some of the earlier trick films, which delighted in corporeal punishment such as Hepworth's *How it Feels to Be Run Over* (1900) and George Albert Smith's *Mary Jane's Mishap*. They also tap into early comedies involving out-of-control children such as Clarendon's eponymous *Did'ums* series (1910-1912) and Williamson's *Our New Errand Boy* (1905), which present a riposte to Edwardian ideals of well-behaved childhood. The Tilly films invariably involve acts of anti-social behavior



Tilly Girls publicity image. Author's collection.

with the girls causing havoc with objects at their disposal including fire engines, bicycles and boats. They delight in cross-dressing and their victims include an eclectic cast of largely innocent bystanders; a long-suffering uncle, hapless fire fighters, boarding house lodgers, their governess, a local politician, fishermen, a football team, elderly convalescents and a Mormon missionary.

After the war both White and Taylor abandoned their tomboy alter-egos in favor of dramatic and romantic roles in British feature films that favored more demure and mature female personas. By the early 1920s their screen personas were a far cry from their comedy roots, instead epitomizing the “English Rose” and occupying roles as society hostesses and wealthy country ladies in a film industry that now sought to represent idealized women as demure and middle-class (Bamford 43). Clearly, White and Taylor could not continue playing madcap tomboys as they matured, but so too the industry was changing around them. Alma Taylor married producer Walter West and pursued a patchy film career, a high point of which included the 1923 Hepworth film *Comin Thru the Rye* where she played a nobly-suffering heroine denied marriage to the man she loves by another woman. Chrissie White married actor/director Henry Edwards and abandoning her earlier comic persona, appeared in several of his films including *The Bargain* (1921) and *Lily of the Alley* (1923) until retiring from the screen in 1933.

#### *Florence Turner in Britain from 1913–1916 and 1922–1924*

The Vitagraph Girl, Florence Turner (1885–1946) came to England in 1913 to set up her own company, Turner Productions with Vitagraph colleague Larry Trimble as Head of Production and British actor, Henry Edwards as her leading male. Turner was lured to Britain by opportunities offered in the British music hall and variety theatres where her style of comedy and earthy charisma chimed with British producers and audiences across the country. She related to ordinary people by portraying the English working class, particularly the Cockney East Ender, and kept in touch with her roots by performing in regional music halls. Her return to the US in 1916 was mourned by Rachael Low as leaving a noticeable gap in British Film Production

Turner’s classic facial comedy, *Daisy Doodad’s Dial* referred to earlier, in which she practices gurning for a face-pulling competition, was essentially a vehicle for Turner to display her facial dexterity and comedic acting abilities within a loose narrative structure. This kind of comedic performance transferred from music hall sketches to the cinema via the comic sub genre of “facials” which became popular with the development of the film close-up in the early part of the century and was rooted in the cinema of attractions rather than narrative cinema. Turner’s feature film *East is East* directed by Henry Edwards, is one of her defining roles in which she plays Victoria Vickers, a working class East Ender who inherits a fortune from her estranged uncle, but for whom the delights of the posh and sophisticated West



Florence Turner and Henry Edwards in *East is East* (Henry Edwards, 1916).  
Image courtesy of BFI Stills and Posters

End cannot match the simple life working in the Kent hop fields with her faithful mate Bert, played by Henry Edwards. The film is part celebration of the English pastoral landscape, which features very prominently, and part comedy of class and manners. The characters are photographed in relation to their *mise en scène*, largely in full or mid shots, which allow full expression of their abilities for miming cockney mannerisms. The acting style is characterful and expository, but never exaggerated, and Turner's comedy in particular is delivered through a range of subtly changing facial expressions, arms-akimbo stances and a sophisticated use of body language. She utilizes her costume and props; hat, pinafore and worn old coat, with a finely tuned comic grace which would be recognizable to her working class audiences without alienating them through excessive mockery. Her down-at-heel shoes and her stockings, full of holes, are parodied in an intertitle describing them as "of an open weave that comes

from long wear.” Throughout the film, Turner and her co-star Edwards, share equal screen space and their relationship is developed through subtle gestures, body language and facial expression which mirror one another in a well-balanced double act. Turner’s comedy lies on the cusp between music hall performance, the early comic filmed “facials” which Turner developed into her own popular brand of impersonation films, and other representational forms of Victorian and Edwardian visual culture with echoes of Jenny Hill performing her “Coffee Shop Gal” in the 1860s music halls. Turner and Edwards effectively mime the Cockney accent and modes of speech by twisting their mouths and jaws into particular shapes and Turner also creates comedy with her eyes. As such *East is East* represents the apogee of a comedic performance style that simultaneously looks back to the nineteenth century music hall and forward to 1920s cinematic expression.

Turner’s film comedy is arguably more finely tuned in Manning Haynes’ 1924 film *The Boatswain’s Mate* where she co-stars with Victor McLagen as Mrs. Walters, a widowed pub landlady being wooed by local men who see the opportunity to “marry a pub.” Here, she is an independent, pragmatic and feisty woman living alone, running her own business and dealing with the unwanted attentions of her would-be suitors. She goes to bed reading *Frankenstein* and handles a shotgun like a Wild-West heroine. The comedy lies in the interplay between Turner’s performance, in which she portrays a combination of physical strength and resourcefulness with a more nuanced facial expression than her earlier films with witty proto-feminist intertitles that comment ironically on the action. Her large, expressive eyes and distinctive facial features that served her stage career are also very photogenic, communicating a range of emotions from fear to anger and resignation. Scriptwriter Lydia Haywood; Haynes’ co-producer on *The Boatswain’s Mate*, deserves recognition for her adaptation of British suffragette and composer Ethyl Smith’s 1916 one-act opera of the same name, in which the character of Mrs. Walters is loosely modeled on leading suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst.<sup>3</sup>

Turner made around thirty films in Britain whilst maintaining her music hall career, and included show reels of her popular filmed “impersonations” as part of her live act. But popular, indefatigable and talented though she was, Turner was a victim of the fragility of the British film industry. Her British career faltered during the Great War and she returned to the US in 1916 only to find that the industry there had outgrown her. She moved back to Britain in 1922, and continued to be massively popular, but returned to the US in 1924 when the British industry hit another of its periodic crises. Back in Hollywood in the mid-1920s, Turner, now aged forty, discovered that she was considered too old for the kind of roles in which she had once excelled and over taken by the new generation of young female starlets. She finished her career working as an extra in Hollywood and died in 1946. The following newspaper comment from 1932 is a tacit reminder of the lack of longevity for female stars and the ephemeral nature of cinematic fame, particularly for women.

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<sup>3</sup>The opera was written in 1913-14 but first performed on 28 January 1916 at the Shaftsbury Theatre in London.



Press book for Betty Balfour in *Squibs MP* (George Pearson, 1923).  
Image courtesy of Steve Chibnall archive.

Old Timer's faces are seen daily on the sets where extra and bit-work are giving the once famous their chance to earn their daily bread. Paramount seems to have more than its quota of former favorites. I discovered both Florence Turner and Florence Lawrence working in "Sinners in the Sun." Carole Lombard and Chester Morris, two players unheard of in the days when Florence Lawrence was the toast of the screen, were the leads (Merrick).

*Betty Balfour: "The Queen of Happiness"*

Born almost a generation after Florence Turner, Balfour's career exists entirely in the age of the cinematograph, but she too began her career in the theatre as a child entertainer, working with Karno and hosting her own revue. Balfour (1903-1978) was already a well-established and popular entertainer by the time she made her feature film debut in Welsh-Pearsons' production of *Nothing Else Matters* (George Pearson, 1920). Here, as seventeen year old actress, she plays a hapless but faithful servant girl with a comedic performance style derived from her early stage persona with funny walks, ungainly postures and her trademark facial expressions ranging from comedy to pathos. Director Pearson exploits Balfour's talent for physical comedy by photographing her in full-frame shots that gives her full mobility within the *mise en scène* and allow her to dominate the screen. As such, her performance is neither fragmented, to emphasize her face or a particular part of her body, nor sexualized. The four Squibs films, that develop her ingénue working-class, Cockney flower seller from 1922 to 1923, represent the highlight of a film career that spanned twenty-five silent features, a period working in Europe and eight sound films made between 1930 and 1945.<sup>4</sup> Producer/director Pearson had himself offered to divorce his wife and marry Balfour on the set of *Blinkeyes* in 1926, which effectively ended their working partnership when Balfour rejected him.

Despite being Britain's only truly international star, and the closest that the British industry produces to Hollywood's flapper comedienues such as Clara Bow and Colleen Moore, Balfour's career diminished rapidly from 1930 and she eventually attempted suicide in 1952 after a failed return to acting. Her film career follows a very telling trajectory, which starts to decline as she herself grows out of her gamine Squibs roles in the mid 1920s. By 1928, in Wheeler Dryden's Syd Chaplin vehicle *A Little Bit of Fluff*, she's become Mamie Scott, an exotic dancer described in an intertitle as "the actress whose head has been turned by press agents and peroxide" and who is "celebrating the tenth anniversary of her twenty fifth birthday." Already, aged twenty-five and playing a twenty-five year old character, jokes are being made at the expense of Balfour's character in terms of her fading looks and her age. This is indicative of British cinema's preponderance for very young women in ingénue roles, as Balfour had performed in her Squibs films. But now she has become the butt of the joke; the comic object rather than the comic subject. She is no longer allowed to create

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<sup>4</sup> *Squibs*, (1921) *Squibs Wins the Calcutta Sweep* (1922), *Squib's Honeymoon* (1923) and *Squibs MP* (1923)

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Press book for Betty Balfour in Wheeler Dryden and Jess Robins' *A Little Bit of Fluff* (1928).  
Image courtesy of Steve Chibnall archive.

and perform in her own autonomous comedic space, as she had in her earlier films, and the audience is encouraged to consider her as a slightly disingenuous, ageing female, unaware of her own diminishing looks but intent on remaining a party-girl. Her co-star, the forty three year old Syd Chaplin is, by contrast, given considerable screen space to perform rather clichéd, overlong and repetitive comedic routines which impede the film's narrative progress, but emphasize his dominant persona. this indulgence, which marginalizes Balfour at the expense of Syd Chaplin's second-rate comedy.<sup>5</sup>

It is not Balfour's skills as a comedienne that are diminishing by the late 1920s, but the changing narrative opportunities for women in British film comedy. In Hitchcock's 1928 film, *Champagne*, Balfour plays a vivacious society girl who defies her father and flies out to join her lover on his cruise, running into bad weather and carelessly ditching her airplane in the Atlantic Ocean en route. Balfour's role would have offered significant identification pleasures to female viewers with her combination of glamour, fun and social status. However, despite an energetic and spirited comedic performance, her comic objectification is evident from the start of the film when she is introduced disembarking the airplane with her aviation goggles having left her with two white circles around her eyes and a very dirty face. She is unaware of this, but the audience on the cruise ship that rescues her and in the auditorium, are aware of her predicament and encouraged to laugh at her. It is a small, but telling point and prior to her arrival, the tone of the film is also set as Hitchcock establishes a series of lascivious looks from a menacing and predatory male who eyes the young women in the room and starts to stalk Balfour's character as soon as she disembarks. There is also a fantasy moment, filmed through a champagne glass, where Balfour imagines herself sexually assaulted by her voyeur, adding to the film's uneasy combination of comedy and sexual threat revolving around Balfour's character.

In *Champagne*, as in her later roles, there is a certain tension between the narrative containment of Balfour's performance and her own attempts to transcend her comic objectification. By 1928, the consolidation of particular codes of film form and style in the mature silent cinema meant that the ways in which women were represented in classic film narratives were firmly in place. Female audiences were obliged to adopt particular spectatorial positions in identifying with the objectified status of female characters on screen or becoming complicit with their objectification. For female comedians working in British cinema during the 1920s, the shift to feature-length narratives and the dominance of particular genres also limited the range and nature of roles available to them and proscribed a particular set of desirable physical features and performance styles, considerably more so than it did for their male counterparts. The dominance of melodramas, literary adaptations and middle-class romantic comedies in British cinema tended to position women as dramatic and comedic objects, noble victims or quietly suffering wives and mothers, daughters and sisters—depending upon the genre.

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<sup>5</sup>I discuss Balfour in relation to British silent comedy in Porter, "From Slapstick to Satire." Some of the above is reprinted from this chapter.

These roles demanded a demure, restrained acting style which Christine Gledhill describes as requiring a considerable amount of “body draping” to facilitate the more static, *tableaux vivante* performance where the female character remains stable and more static within the *mise en scene*, displaying costume, styling and passive sexuality to the best advantage. The industry was also sensitive to media accusations that British stars were not sufficiently attractive to compete with their Hollywood counterparts and the trade press, in particular, picked up on the inferior attention to looks and glamour in the British industry. These qualities, particularly in its female stars, were not always compatible with comedy, which required unrestrained and characterful performance rather than glamour and beauty. Gracie Fields stands alone in the early 1930s as a British star who traded on her lack of physical grace and sophistication, echoing her silent cinema predecessors Florence Turner and Betty Balfour, but it would be television that later opened more opportunities for characterful and older female comics.

The arrival of sound cinema in 1929 also curtailed the careers of many British performers, men and women, whose accents, voice pitch or vocal delivery did not respond well to the new microphone technology. British cinema’s initial preference for the kind of upper-class, educated accents and “received pronunciation” developed in the theatre, also marginalised stars whose screen voices did not correspond with their screen images as envisaged by their fans and audiences. Anny Ondra, the female lead in Hitchcock’s *Blackmail* (1929), famously had her Austro-Hungarian accent replaced by British actress Joan Barry’s clipped upper-class tones in the sound version, for example; a voice which now seems at odds with Ondra’s spirited and lively performance.

### *Comedy and Class*

Central to the comedy that Turner and Balfour performed was the mimicry of working class characters through a lexicon of mannerisms and values and the mockery of “airs and graces” and arriviste lifestyles. Class was, and still is, fertile ground for British comedy. Working class eccentricity offered an attractive space for female performers to mimic and exaggerate and their characters could be eccentric, anarchic and physically unattractive, unlike their middle-class counterparts in feature films, for who looks, glamour and deportment were pre-requisite. For women performers in particular, this initially freed them from the pressure to be sexually alluring, passive objects of male desire and patriarchal protection. But as British cinema increasingly strove for middle class patronage and acceptance as a valid art form, roles for women became limited to stereotypical English Roses and heroines of literary adaptations. Put simply, it became more important for the female lead to look good, than to be funny or anarchic. The next generation of female comic performers, such as Beatrice Lillie, Cicely Courtneidge and Gertrude Lawrence, were able to pursue stage careers in revue and variety well into the 1930s, whilst British cinema was largely eschewing the kind of comedy that allowed women to display their physical comedic talents, with the

notable exception of Gracie Field's shrill, northern working class songstress. There was a re-emergence of working class female characters in theatre and TV variety acts in the 1940s and 1950s with people like Elsie and Doris Waters as Gert and Dais', Revnell and West, The Houston Sisters, Tessie O'Shea, Kitty McShane, Hylda Baker and Dora Bryan et al performing a variety of eccentric female comedy characters, but women would struggle to rival their male counterparts in film comedy as they had in the early twentieth century. For the most part, the kind of physical, working class comedy so popular in the music halls and earlier cinema now sat uneasily with British cinema's aspiration for Hollywood glamour and middle-class legitimacy.

British silent film comedy flourished briefly in the early to mid-1920s with the sophisticated short satires of Adrian Brunel, the situational slapstick of Walter Forde and his incompetent "Walter" character and Betty Balfour's Squibs series alongside the gentle observational comedies of Manning Haynes and Lydia Haywoods' adaptations of W.W. Jacobs' short stories. However, comedy ceased to be a major force in British feature film production by the late 1920s and the industry's comedic impulses become diffused across a range of genres. The dominant tendencies that emerged from this period were the comedies of sex and manners epitomized by Harry Lachman's *Weekend Wives* (1928) starring Estelle Brody and Monty Banks and Anthony Asquith's Ruritanian romance *The Runaway Princess* (1929) starring Mady Christians, both of which offered key roles for female performers. Alongside these were Alfred Hitchcock's comedic excursions in films like *The Farmer's Wife* (1928) and *Champagne* before his own darkly comic impulses translate more broadly into explorations of sexuality and female vulnerability.

THE AUTHOR: Laraine Porter is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at De Montfort University in Leicester, UK. Since 1998, she has directed the annual British Silent Film Festival, and associated conferences, organised in conjunction with the British Film Institute. Her research interests include British silent film and the film industry, silent film music, the transition between silent and sound film and the role of women in the British film industry. She has published several edited volumes on British cinema before 1930.

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