

Hands Up!

By Steve Massa

Raymond Griffith is one of silent comedy's unjustly forgotten masters, whose onscreen persona was that of a calm, cool, world-weary bon vivant – something like Max Linder on Prozac. After a childhood spent on stage touring in stock companies and melodramas, he ended up in films at Vitagraph in 1914 and went on to stints at Sennett, L-Ko, and Fox as a comedy juvenile. Not making much of an impression due to a lack of a distinctive character, he went behind the camera to become a gagman, working at Sennett and for other comics like Douglas MacLean. In 1922 he returned to acting and became the elegant, unflappable ladies' man. Stealing comedies such as "Changing Husbands," "Open All Night," and "Miss Bluebeard" (all 1924) away their respective stars Paramount decided to give him his own series, and he smarmed his way through ten starring features starting with "The Night Club" (1925).

"Hands Up!" (1926) soon followed, and is the perfect showcase for Griffith's deft comic touch and sly sense of the absurd. The expert direction is by Clarence Badger, who started in the teens with shorts for Joker and Sennett to become one of the top feature comedy directors of the 1920s working with Will Rogers, Mabel Normand, Bebe Daniels, and Clara Bow on popular hits on the order of "Doubling for Romeo" (1921), "It" (1927), "Senorita" (1927) and "Red Hair" (1928), plus helmed Griffith in another overlooked classic, "Paths to Paradise" (1925). The original story was supplied by Griffith buddy Reggie Morris. After working in front of and behind the camera for outfits such as Vitagraph, L-Ko, and Triangle, Morris became a producer/director in the early 1920s with his own companies through Special Pictures and also Arrow. Although the units ultimately folded he continued contributing to features like "Casey at the Bat" (1927) and "A Girl in Every Port" (1928), as well as directed shorts for Sennett and FBO, before his career was cut short by his sudden death at forty-one in 1928.

The supporting cast is top notch with Virginia Lee Corbin and Marian Nixon managing to be sweet, pretty, and funny as Griffith's dual love interests, and Mack Swain as their father is of course in a class by himself. Having started his film career in 1913 at Keystone, Mack worked frequently with Charlie Chaplin and Chester Conklin, becoming



ing very popular with his character of "Ambrose," a put-upon everyman with dark-circled eyes and a brush moustache. Leaving Sennett in 1917 he continued playing Ambrose for L-Ko, Fox, and the independent Poppy Comedies and Perry Comedies. His career stalled in the early 1920s when he was blacklisted by an influential producer, but his old screen mate Charlie Chaplin came to the rescue and made Mack part of his stock company in films such as "The Idle Class" (1921) and "The Pilgrim" (1923). At the time of Hands Up! Swain was riding the wave of a comeback thanks to his hilarious performance in Chaplin's "The Gold Rush" (1925), and went on to features such as "My Best Girl" (1927), "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" (1928), and "The Cohens and Kellys in Atlantic City" (1929) until his career petered out in the early 1930s and his death in 1935.

After "Hands Up!" Raymond Griffith continued with starring comedies such as "Wet Paint" (1926), "You'd Be Surprised" (1926), and "Wedding Bill\$" (1927), but the arrival of sound brought a premature end to his performing career. Due to having diphtheria as a child (although he claimed it came from screaming every night in a melodrama) his voice was a raspy whisper. He did make two sound shorts, "Post Mortems" and "The Sleeping Porch" (both 1929), for producer Al Christie where he played a man with a bad cold. Not a very workable comic character, he retired from acting after playing the dying French soldier in Lewis Milestone's "All Quiet on the Western Front" (1930). As he had before, he moved behind the scenes, and with help from his old writing chum Darryl F. Zanuck he became a producer at Warner Broth-

ers and Twentieth Century Fox on films such as “Les Misérables” (1935), “Heidi” (1937), and “Drums Along the Mohawk” (1939) before retiring in 1940. He died in Hollywood while having lunch at the Masquers Club in 1957.

At the time of his death Griffith’s starring career had long been forgotten. Because of the disappearance of the majority of his films, he is still the least known silent comedian that had his own starring series of features. In 1975 critic Walter Kerr rescued Griffith from obscurity in his influential book “The Silent Clowns,” writing incisively and persuasively about his work and career. Since then a few of his pictures have resurfaced and thanks to films such as “Hands Up!” and “Paths to Paradise” introducing people to his talents, a devoted band of followers continues to grow.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

*Steve Massa is the author of *Lame Brains and Lunatics: The Good, The Bad, and The Forgotten of Silent Comedy*. A librarian in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, he has organized comedy film programs for the Museum of Modern Art, the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Pordenone Silent Film Festival. In addition to consulting with the Eye Film Institute, Netherlands and other archives, and writing for film journals such as *Griffithiana*, he is a founding member of *Silent Cinema Presentations* which produces NYC’s *Silent Clown Films Series*. Steve has also contributed essays and commentary tracks to many comedy DVD collections such as “The Forgotten Films of Roscoe ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle,” “Harry Langdon: Lost and Found,” “Kino Video’s Buster Keaton: The Short Films Collection,” and co-curated “The Mishaps of Musty Suffer” DVD set.*