

Robert Shields

From: Jeff Rapsis <silentfilmmusic@gmail.com>
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Subject: Raymond who? Films of forgotten silent comedy genius at Town Hall Theatre on Sunday, Nov. 28
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Raymond who? Films of forgotten silent comedy genius at Town Hall Theatre on Sunday, Nov. 28

Double feature with live music resurrects work of Raymond Griffith, forgotten star of early cinema—who had a Granite State connection

WILTON, N.H.—He was a silent film actor who really couldn't talk, thanks to a childhood vocal injury.

He was Raymond Griffith, the "Silk Hat" comedian, whose film star popularity in the 1920s rivaled that of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton.

But Griffith's lack of a speaking voice prompted an abrupt end to his on-screen career when talkies arrived in 1929. Most of his starring feature films have since disappeared, causing Griffith to be virtually unknown today.

But the elegantly dressed comic, who as a youngster attended St. Anselm Prep School in Goffstown, N.H., will return to the cinematic spotlight once again this month with a double feature of two of his surviving works.

'Paths to Paradise' (1925) and 'Hands Up!' (1926), a pair of comedies regarded as his best, will be screened with live music on Sunday, Nov. 28 at 2 p.m. at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St. in Wilton, N.H.

The screening is free and open to the public; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming.

"Griffith's character was that of a worldly, shrewd, and quick-thinking gentleman, usually dressed in a top hat and a cape, who enjoyed outwitting con artists and crooks at their own game," said Jeff Rapsis, a New Hampshire-based silent film musician who will improvise scores for both films.

"It turns out he was very different from Chaplin or Keaton, and so were his films—they seem a bit more cynical and so perhaps more modern. But we've shown them before and they hold up well with a live audience today."

'Paths to Paradise' (1925) stars Griffith as a polished con man who competes with a feisty female jewel thief to steal a heavily guarded diamond necklace. The film finishes with a wild car chase through the California desert.

Unfortunately, all existing prints of 'Paths to Paradise' are missing the final 10 minutes, but the film ends at a point that completes the plot and provides a satisfying finish.

'Hands Up!' (1926) features Griffith as a Confederate spy during the Civil War whose mission is to prevent a shipment of gold from reaching Northern forces. The film survives complete, and is considered by most critics

to be Griffith's masterpiece.

Both films were produced and released by Paramount Pictures, where Griffith was under contract in the 1920s as one of the studio's leading stars.

"These films were designed to be seen in theaters by large audiences, not on a small television screen by people sitting at home," said Rapsis, who provides music for the Town Hall Theatre's silent film series.

Born in Boston in 1895, Griffith injured his vocal cords at an early age, rendering him unable to speak above the level of a hoarse whisper.

After appearing in circuses and attending at least one year (1905-06) at St. Anselm Preparatory School in Goffstown, N.H., he went on to serve in the U.S. Navy prior to World War I and in 1915 wound up in Hollywood, where the movie business was already booming.

Early on, Griffith worked at Mack Sennett's Keystone studio, where he developed a reputation as an excellent actor and a superb comedy writer and director. He eventually gravitated to behind-the-camera duties, serving as Sennett's right-hand man for a time.

He eventually moved to Paramount studios in the early 1920s, where he began to appear again in on-camera roles.

Griffith's mastery of character parts prompted Paramount to star him in his own movies starting in 1924. In the next few years, he completed a dozen feature films, most of which today are lost due to neglect or improper storage.

Following the arrival of sound pictures in 1929, Griffith's lack of a speaking voice forced a return to behind-the-camera work, with one notable exception: he played a non-talking role as a dying French soldier in Lewis Milestone's World War I classic 'All Quiet on the Western Front,' (1930) which won that year's Academy Award for Best Picture.

As a producer, Griffith's work included the classic family film 'Heidi' (1937) and 'The Mark of Zorro' (1940). He retired in 1940, and died in 1957 at age 62 after choking at a Los Angeles restaurant.

"Though he's not as well known today as Charlie Chaplin, Raymond Griffith was doing some really good work during the peak of his career," Rapsis said. "It's great that the public will get a chance to appreciate the two wonderful Griffith films as part of the Flying Monkey's series."

'Paths to Paradise' and 'Hands Up!' will be shown on Sunday, Nov. 28 at 2 p.m. at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St., Wilton, N.H.

The screening is free and open to the public; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming.

For more information, visit www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com or call (603) 654-3456. For more about the music, visit www.jeffrapsis.com.

—Review of 'Hands Up!':

"This is one buried treasure that deserves a wider audience. Griffith is thoroughly ingratiating; it's a pity that so many of his movies have disappeared and the survivors are so seldom revived." —Amazon.com

IMAGES ATTACHED

CAPTION A: Raymond Griffith and Betty Compson star in 'Paths to Paradise' (1925), to be screened with live music on Sunday, Nov. 28 at 2 p.m. at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St., Wilton, N.H. The screening is free; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming. For more information, visit www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com or call (603) 654-3456.

CAPTION B: Raymond Griffith and Betty Compson star in 'Paths to Paradise' (1925), to be screened with live music on Sunday, Nov. 28 at 2 p.m. at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St., Wilton, N.H. The screening is free; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming. For more information, visit www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com or call (603) 654-3456.

CAPTION C: An original promotional poster for 'Paths to Paradise' (1925), to be screened with live music on Sunday, Nov. 28 at 2 p.m. at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St., Wilton, N.H. The screening is free; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming. For more information, visit www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com or call (603) 654-3456.

CAPTION D: Raymond Griffith explores a valuable gold mine in 'Hands Up!' (1926), to be screened with live music on Sunday, Nov. 28 at 2 p.m. at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St., Wilton, N.H. The screening is free; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming. For more information, visit www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com or call (603) 654-3456.

CAPTION E: Raymond Griffith teaches some modern dance steps in the comedy 'Hands Up!' (1926), to be screened with live music on Sunday, Nov. 28 at 2 p.m. at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St., Wilton, N.H. The screening is free; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming. For more information, visit www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com or call (603) 654-3456.

CAPTION F: An original promotional pamphlet for 'Hands Up!' (1926) starring Raymond Griffith, to be screened with live music on Sunday, Nov. 28 at 2 p.m. at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St., Wilton, N.H. The screening is free; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming. For more information, visit www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com or call (603) 654-3456.

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Images attached.

More high-resolution digital images available upon request.