

Stella Maris

Dir. Marshall Neillan | US | 1918 | N/C PG | 1h 23m

Performing live: Meg Morley (piano)

5pm on Thursday 21 March 2024

Screening material courtesy of the Mary Pickford Foundation

Stella Maris is one of Mary Pickford's very best films of the 1910s, and one of the films that will make it clear to a 21st-century audience why the "girl with the curls" became the biggest female star in Hollywood. It also reveals quite how ambitious she was at such a young age, how capable she was of delivering a complex characterisation, and how well she worked with her beloved screenwriter Frances Marion.

Pickford was born Gladys Smith in Toronto, Canada, and her childhood was tough, marked by poverty and the early death of her alcoholic father. She first went to work as a child actress at the age of seven and after several years of treading the boards across the United States, she made her Broadway debut in 1905. She picked up the stage name Mary Pickford two years later, and she began her movie career in New York with D.W. Griffith in 1909, aged just 17, rapidly becoming a sensation. By 1913, she had turned her back on the stage and devoted herself entirely to the cinema, moving to the Famous-Players Lasky studio to work for Adolph Zukor, and hiring Frances Marion to join her.

At the age of 24 she was such a big star that she was able to negotiate a new contract with Zukor, which granted her complete creative control over the films she appeared in. After signing the papers, Pickford called Marion, and the director she worked with best, Marshall Neilan, to a meeting. "I will be good," she told them; "I will make good pictures."

Pictures like *Stella Maris*, based on a 1913 novel by British author William Locke, born in the West Indies but educated in England. Marion and Pickford were the best of friends, and Marion often read out loud to Pickford in the evenings while she washed and set her famous blonde ringlets. The subject matter of *Stella Maris* was far from Pickford's usual material:

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this heavy-hitting story is the tale of two orphans, one sickly rich girl, raised in the lap of luxury, pointedly ignorant of life's harsh realities, the other an abused child from an orphanage, adopted by an alcoholic woman who puts her to work and beats her savagely. Not only did Pickford surprise Marion by choosing the story for her next film, but she also opted to play both female leads, cosseted Stella and the urchin Unity. Marion wrote her roles that channelled the breadth of her own rags-to-riches life experience and allowed her to play the rowdy child and the romantic all at once. When Zukor saw Pickford in costume as Unity, her shoulders hunched, wearing her hair in a long braid, with minimal makeup and her mouth twisted he was horrified. But Pickford was the boss, and Unity did not get a makeover.

Neilan was a sympathetic director, who had shot some of Pickford's best films including her recent *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1917), and Marion's adaptation of the novel puts the two young women at the heart of the story, while updating it with references to the Great War. Later in the year, Marion went to Europe to work as a war correspondent. Playing the romantic lead John was Conway Tearle, another man educated in England, who had recently graduated from the stage to the screen. Perhaps the most intriguing member of the cast is Marcia Manon, elsewhere credited as Camille Ankewich, born in Paris as plain Marcia Harrison. She plays John's vicious alcoholic wife and is a compelling presence on screen. The fan magazines dubbed Manon "the film sphinx" and commented on her severe demeanour. Manon was proud of her villainous turn: "I don't suppose I shall ever do better work, for I put everything there was in me in that drunken, fighting tigress."

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There is one more scene-stealer of note, Teddy the Dog, a Great Dane on loan from Mack Sennett's Keystone studio, who leads one of the most lavish and adorable animal casts in any Pickford picture, comprising rabbits, kittens and a canine romance.

Stella Maris allowed Pickford to prove the extent of her acting skills, and to broaden the potential of her ingenue persona. The critics raved. *Photoplay* announced that it "should prove a turning point in the history of America's favourite star" while *Motion Picture Magazine* called it "the greatest personal triumph Mary Pickford has yet achieved in her consecutive list of pleasing photoplay productions... Congratulations, Mary; do it again." No one was immune to the charm of *Stella Maris*, it seemed. Thanks to the efforts of Pickford's canny publicist, President Woodrow Wilson personally endorsed the film, describing it as "a production which I am sure will hearten the nation at this time of crisis. Its theme of women's lofty ideals has an irresistible appeal and its portrayal of all phases of life must be an incentive for good and loving deeds."

PAMELA HUTCHINSON

Pamela Hutchinson is a freelance critic, curator and film historian. Her publications include BFI Film Classics on The Red Shoes and Pandora's Box, and her website SilentLondon.co.uk is devoted to silent cinema.

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