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THE PATSY

Musical Accompaniment by the Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra

Directed by King Vidor, USA, 1928

Cast Marion Davies (Patricia Harrington) Orville Caldwell (Tony Anderson) Marie Dressler (Ma Harrington) Dell Henderson (Pa Harrington) Lawrence Gray (Billy Caldwell) Jane Winton (Grace Harrington) **Production** Cosmopolitan Pictures Corporation and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures Corporation **Scenario** Agnes Christine Johnston, based on the 1925 play by Barry Connors **Titles** Ralph Spence **Photography** John Seitz **Set Design** Cedric Gibbons **Costume Design** Gilbert Clark **Editor** Hugh Wynn **Print Source** Library of Congress

King Vidor once said that the director was the channel through which a motion picture reaches the screen. With *The Patsy*, Vidor was tuned just right. It is a perfect film. There is not a scene, gesture, joke, intertitle, gag, bit of detail, or character out of place. Everything about it contributes. It is well paced and wonderfully acted. True to life and full of humanity, this energetic comedy of manners convinces—it's a sparkling Cinderella story for the Jazz Age.

Acknowledged as one of the great filmmakers of the 1920s, Vidor was on a historic roll by the time he came to helm *The Patsy*. Each of his four previous films—*The Crowd* (1928), *Bardelys the Magnificent* (1926), *La Bohème* (1926), and *The Big Parade* (1925)—was somehow significant. *The Crowd*, for example, garnered Vidor an Academy Award nomination as Best Director, while *The Big Parade* is accepted as one of the two highest grossing films of the silent era. *The Patsy*, also a success, was followed by the even more popular *Show People* (1928), another star vehicle for actress Marion Davies and today her best remembered work. Remarkably, these six classic films were followed by Vidor's first sound movie, *Hallelujah!* (1929), a musical drama featuring an all black cast for which the director received another of his five Oscar nominations.

Vidor came to make *The Patsy* at the insistence of newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst. The famous media mogul was head of Cosmopolitan Pictures, a small production company whose films were

then distributed by the larger Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Hearst used his influence with MGM head Louis B. Mayer to enlist Vidor, then under contract to the studio, to direct a picture starring Davies, his mistress. Hearst, who also oversaw the actress's career, envisioned Davies as a great dramatic star and had insisted she play serious roles in a series of costume dramas and historical epics. However, some of these films prior to *The Patsy* had fizzled at the box office. The media mogul was in search of a sure-fire hit.

Vidor may have impressed Hearst and Davies when he helped Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle (then working as "William B. Goodrich") with direction on the Davies film *The Red Mill* (1926). Hearst had also admired *The Big Parade*, a film Davies later remarked was her favorite. Undoubtedly, Hearst envisioned Davies in a dramatic role like the celebrated one played by Renée Adorée in Vidor's World War I blockbuster.

The Patsy was the first of three Davies comedies directed by Vidor, followed by *Show People* and 1930's *Not So Dumb*, a talkie. Nothing Vidor had done before prepared filmgoers for his light touch, and little Davies had performed thus far suggested her considerable skill at frothy comedy. Offscreen, Davies was known for her playfulness and mugging, entertaining friends at Hearst Castle house parties with imitations of fellow actors. Years later in an interview, Vidor recalled, "I didn't want to do one of the films as she had been doing...[at] the Hearst ranch I noticed that Marion Davies was a darn good comedienne."

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Director King Vidor with Marion Davies, mimicking Pola Negri

Vidor's prior efforts were mostly socially conscious dramas. Some, like *The Crowd*, had even been described as gloomy. With his gift for rhythm and gesture, however, Vidor was able to draw out Davies's natural talent as a lighthearted comedienne. Years later Orson Welles, who burlesqued the actress in *Citizen Kane*, admitted, "She would have been a star even if Hearst had never happened."

The 30-year-old actress's screwball energy dominates *The Patsy*, though the film's charm derives as well from its situational humor and ensemble cast. Here, the Cinderella motif is applied to the story of an upper-middle-class family with aspirations as they push one daughter forward at the expense of the other. Film veterans Marie Dressler and Dell Henderson, who play the parents, had both been away from screen acting for a decade before returning prior to *The Patsy*. In the Vidor film, each display the broad gesture and mastery of timing learned, in part, while working for Mack Sennett in the 1910s. The older sister, played by Jane Winton, known as the "green-eyed goddess of Hollywood," is the perfect foil to Davies. Bay Area natives Orville Caldwell (born in 1896 in Oakland, he was elected deputy mayor of Los Angeles in 1940) and Lawrence Gray (born in San Francisco in 1898, he worked for the *San Francisco Chronicle* before entering films) play the two romantic interests with admirable sincerity and benign caddishness, respectively.

The Patsy was a success for MGM, and an artistic triumph for Davies. The film turned a healthy profit and earned accolades. Vidor, perhaps acknowledging the distribution agreement that practically ensured favorable coverage in Hearst newspapers, quipped that it "even got some good reviews outside of the Hearst press." The *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, reflecting the widespread praise the film received, termed the Davies-Vidor combination "especially auspicious." *Variety* called it "a dandy laugh picture." Even more

flattering, the Hearst rival *New York World* described it as a "fresh," "ingenious," and "unusual" film comedy.

In an interview published in the *New York Times* just before the film's release, Davies described it as one of the most pleasant experiences of her career. The actress went on to note, "I believe *The Patsy* is the best comedy I have ever had. And largely because of King Vidor. Mr. Vidor inspires the players who are associated with him. Not only has he a fine imagination and a philosophic turn of mind but he consistently refuses to take himself too seriously."

Davies added, "A good motion picture, according to Mr. Vidor, should not be an imitation of the stage, which is inevitably an interpretation of life. It should be, on the contrary, a copy of life, and the director a sort of reporter who transcribes on celluloid ... Vidor's philosophy is to observe, to remember what he has seen and then reproduce it with a true human touch ... We were natural and we contributed ideas which would best bring out our naturalness."

The Patsy is perfectly attuned to its times, yet it is timeless. Naturalness, pep, good-natured humor, and well-timed sight gags fill the film. There are also numerous witty title cards, so many that the critic for the *Oakland Tribune* said the title writer had "run riot." In a sense, *The Patsy* is the "talkiest" silent picture Vidor or Davies ever made, possessing in abundance what its title character set out to acquire, *personality*.

—Thomas Gladysz

It's a sparkling Cinderella story for the Jazz Age.



Marion Davies