

# Wide Angle

EXPLORING THE BIGGER PICTURE



PRIMAL SCREEN

## ENFANTS TERRIBLES

The early decades of cinema were littered with films about hilarious, unrespectable women, and at last they are being rediscovered

By Bryony Dixon

Every generation of moviegoers is surprised by films about girls behaving badly. The 1920s had their independent-spirited flappers – the title of the Colleen Moore film *Why Be Good?* (1929) tells its own story. The 30s kicked off with pre-Code naughtiness from, for example, a whip-brandishing Clara Bow in *Call Her Savage* (1932). The 40s had its femmes fatales, the 50s delinquent teenagers, and so on. We have *Bridesmaids* (2011) and *Bad Moms* (2016). But how far back in film history can we trace these women film protagonists who don't conform to society's rules for them?

The answer is, pretty much *all* the way back. I remember being surprised, programming early British comedy back in the 1990s, to find among the male comedians several films featuring girls behaving in ways quite contrary to what I imagined was acceptable then. There were enough to make a programme, 'Bad Girls of British Silent Comedy', which showed characters far from the expected sweet, demure and buttoned-up ladies as early as 1897, snogging the boss (*Master, Mistress, Maid*), showing their ankles (*As Seen Through a Telescope*, 1900), blowing things up (*Mary Jane's Mishap*, 1903) and making nasty faces at people (*Daisy Doodad's Dial*, 1914). That's when they weren't dressing in trousers and causing havoc in the high street (*Milling the Militants*, 1913) or leaving their husbands

to look after the babies while they went out to play golf (*Wife the Weaker Vessel*, 1915).

As more early comedy was uncovered in the 2000s and presented at festivals and conferences, it became clear that this was a common theme, with a particularly glorious outpouring in the 1900s and 1910s across all the countries producing film. Two programmes screened at the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, in 2017 and 2019, aimed to bring these all together – to examine their common traits, but also for the sheer joy it. Under the title 'Nasty Women' – after Donald Trump's snipe at Hillary Clinton, which has become a rallying cry for feminists – the programme curated by Maggie Hennefeld (a researcher into slapstick) and Laura Horak (who writes about cross-dressing in film) introduced us to a rogues' gallery of anarchic comediennes. Of these, I think everyone has a fondness for the hilarious Léontine ('Betty' in the US and UK), Twenty-five episodes, made between 1910 and 1912, find her in a series of situations: on holiday, at work, borne aloft by balloons, minding the house, etc. These shorts were widely circulated by the world's largest film company Pathé, and yet we have no idea who the actress is – this was on the cusp of a major change in the film business, when popular performers were just beginning to be credited under their own names. The phenomenal rise of Chaplin in 1914 marked an irreversible shift.





◀ We know the names of many female comedians now: in Britain, the wonderful Florence Turner, who ran her own production company, and Alma Taylor and Chrissie White, who starred as Tilly and Sally in a series of one-reelers; in France, Sarah Duhamel played Rosalie and the recently identified Little Chrysia played the charmingly batty Cunégonde (aka Arabella). Italy had 'Lea', Germany the Porten sisters, America Mabel Normand, among many others. The anarchy, disobedience, eccentricity and fierce independence are surprising and delightful in these very funny films, naughty rather than nasty. Are they funny because they are so at odds with the

absurd constraints society placed on women, or do they indicate that women were beginning to break free of those constraints? It is surely no coincidence that the campaign for female suffrage was ramping up at this time. One film from the programme, *The Night Rider* (1920), introduced the audience to the magnificent Texas Guinan, who plays a single-

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minded cowgirl who proves that you really can get a man with a gun – eat your heart out Doris Day!

These women deserve to be better known but, as Maggie Hennefeld puts it, "How can we expect people to remember films they can't even watch?" Hennefeld and Horak are curating a DVD – tentatively titled *Cinema's First Nasty Women* – due from Kino Lorber next year. Meanwhile, the BFI Player ([player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)) offers some films by our British comediennes, and some French titles are available online – EYE Filmmuseum ([www.eyefilm.nl](http://www.eyefilm.nl)) has a good selection.

Below we profile eight films featuring some of the worst-behaved women in silent film.



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### 1. The Flappers and the Nuts

(UK 1913, pictured on previous page)

Constance Somers-Clarke and Edith Jackson were credited in the trade papers, though not on screen. They play two young girls at large in the countryside, where their adventures include unladylike smoking and an encounter with an angry bull. Interesting to see the use of the term 'flapper', usually associated with the 1920s.

### 2. Tilly and the Fire Engines

(UK 1911)

Directed by comedy specialist Lewin Fitzhamon for the Hepworth Manufacturing Company, this (sadly incomplete) episode of the Tilly series sees the wilfully naughty duo of Chrissie White and Alma Taylor steal a fire engine and soak their pursuers with the hose. The film ends with a close-up of the two – an 'emblematic shot' – a common type of filmic 'curtain call' at the time.

### 3. Léontine s'envole

(France 1911)

The special effects are pretty remarkable in this episode. Léontine – 'Betty' in English-speaking countries – grabs a bunch of helium balloons and takes off. Soon the whole town is in hot pursuit of the airborne youngster.

### 4. The Night Rider

(US 1920)

"I never met a man yet fit for a husband," says the fabulous Texas Guinan, playing an outspoken cowgirl in *The Night Rider* (1920) for Bull's Eye Productions/Reelcraft. Finding she has need of a man to protect her ranch, she goes right out and gets a husband at gunpoint. Guinan became her own producer the year after this film was made.



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### 5. Cunégonde femme du monde

(France 1912)

Recently identified by curator Elif Kaynaçki, 'Little Chryisia' was the English stagename of the actor behind the popular comic character Cunégonde ('Arabella' in England). Here she plays a maidservant who dresses up in her mistress's clothes and poses as a lady in the park, with unexpected consequences.

### 6. Rosalie et Léontine vont au théâtre

(France 1911)

Directed by Romeo Bosetti for Pathé Frères, this combines Léontine with another of the company's most popular comics, Rosalie, a brash, vulgar girl played by café-concert performer Sarah Duhamel. Here, the pair overreact wonderfully at the theatre.

### 7. Daisy Doodad's Dial

(UK 1914)

Florence Turner was an actress from the age of three before becoming 'the Vitagraph Girl' in the 1900s. Having made many films in New York, she set up a company in England to produce comedies. *Daisy Doodad's Dial* has her terrifying the local population by practising for a face-making competition.

### 8. Léontine, enfant terrible

(France 1911)

Evicted from the house, Léontine causes havoc in the streets among local traders, passing horses and innocent bystanders – it all ends up in the river. It is almost unbelievable that a performer of such kinetic energy has not left a sufficient mark on history to supply us with her name. Keep scouring those newly digitised documents people! 📺



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