



SILENT CINEMA

The Signal Tower

The Signal Tower

Director: Clarence Brown

©/Production Company:

Universal Pictures Corporation

Production Company: Jewel Productions

Presented by: Carl Laemmle

Assistant Director: Charles Dorian

2nd Assistant: Robert Wyler *

Scenario: James O. Spearing

Original Story: Wadsworth Camp

Photography: Ben Reynolds

Set Decorator: Kay Knudsen *

Cast:

Virginia Valli (*Sally Tolliver*)

Rockliffe Fellowes (*Dave Tolliver*)

Frankie Darro (*Sonny Tolliver*)

Wallace Beery (*Joe Standish*)

James O. Barrows (*old Bill*)

J. Farrell Macdonald (*Pete, the engineer*)

Dot Farley (*Gertie*)

Clarence Brown (*switchman*) *

Charles Dorian (*photograph of Gertie's fiancé*) *

Kitney (*the dog*) *

USA 1924

84 mins

* Uncredited

With live piano accompaniment by Stephen Horne

Restoration credits

Produced with the support of Universal Pictures

Restoration: Robert Byrne, Patrick Stanbury

Restoration Consultant: Kevin Brownlow

Image Restoration Services: Maria Fuentes

4K Film Scanning: Colorlab

Title Artwork: Sarah Southin

Grading and 35mm Production: Haghefilm Digitaal

35mm Colour Tinting: Jan Ledeký

Special recognition to David W. Packard and the

Packard Humanities Institute Collection at the

UCLA Film & TV Archive Santa Clarita CA

Restoration Produced by: Patrick Stanbury,

Robert Byrne

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk

SIGHT AND SOUND

Introduced by film historian Kevin Brownlow

On a remote stretch of American railroad, a hard-working signal operator and his family are terrorised by a snarling villain. While his pretty young wife defends her virtue against the intruder's threats, our hero engages in a thrilling race to the rescue to save a runaway train. It could easily be the plot of one of D.W. Griffith's early short melodramas, but this is Clarence Brown's *The Signal Tower*, a fully fledged feature film from 1924, adapted from a short story by Wadsworth Camp.

At the 2019 San Francisco Silent Film Festival, a triumphant screening of the new restoration of *The Signal Tower* – a collaboration between Kevin Brownlow's Photoplay Productions and the festival itself – confirmed the enduring if undersung brilliance of Brown. According to his biographer Gwenda Young, this is the first of Brown's more personal films, something evident in its emotional tenderness but also in the appearance of some of his favourite themes: hard-working folk and magnificent trains nestled among grand rural landscapes. While the film builds to a classically thrilling finish, which was enhanced on this occasion by the expert and well-paced accompaniment of the pianist Stephen Horne and the percussionist Frank Bockius, it was the more intimate scenes that marked this out as a special silent. Brown accumulates small, often domestic details to convey the tensions in relationships: the way the cad eyes up his prey when he clocks her laddered stockings and scuffed heels, the misunderstandings between husband and wife that lead to danger, the irrepressible enthusiasm of the child whose interference will prove decisive. And, neatly, in the simply illustrated intertitles, the signal of the title raises to alert the audience to the growing peril.

Brown is long overdue a critical reappraisal, for his silent-era achievements such as *The Goose Woman* (1925), *Smouldering Fires* (1925) and *Flesh and the Devil* (1927) alone, not to mention a string of first-rate talkies featuring Joan Crawford and Greta Garbo, or the highly beloved *National Velvet* (1944), which starred a young Elizabeth Taylor. One reason for his relative lack of present-day acclaim is that he was often eclipsed by his stars. That's a fate *The Signal Tower* neatly avoids since among its cast only Wallace Beery, the Mack Sennett alumnus who became a love-to-hate villain, remains a well-known name outside silent circles.

This was a prestige release from Universal, though, classified as a 'Super-Jewel' production and it is strongly cast, with the signalman and his wife, Dave and Sally Taylor, ably performed by 1920s stars Rockliffe Fellowes and Virginia Valli. A six-year-old Frankie Darro plays their boy, Sonny – he would go on to a successful career as an adult actor, and later a stuntman, though he is unrecognisable in one of his most famous roles, as Robby the Robot in *Forbidden Planet* (1956). And comic star Dot Farley has a significant role too, as Sally's misguidedly flirtatious Cousin Gertie.

Beery plays the dastardly Joe Standish, the interloper who arrives at the signal tower deep in the redwood forests of northern California to share duties with Dave and causes havoc in the happy home. He is clearly a shifty type, with slicked hair and shiny shoes (reportedly, Beery was pretty vile on set too, a cantankerous presence visibly contemptuous of his peers). Dazzled by his

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Silent Cinema: Disney's Silent Shorts + intro

Sun 6 Aug 15:30

Relaxed Screening:

Fantasia + intro and discussion

Mon 31 Jul 18:00

Missing Believed Wiped Special: Kaleidoscope

at 35: The Long Lost Show Part One

Sat 5 Aug 12:00

Missing Believed Wiped Special: Kaleidoscope

at 35: The Long Lost Show Part Two

Sat 5 Aug 15:00

Seniors' Free Talk: Angwal Embrace

+ intro and Q&A

Mon 7 Aug 11:00

Seniors' Free Matinee: Heat and Dust + intro and

Q&A with Adrian Garvey, Film Historian

Mon 7 Aug 14:00

Experimenta: Metal Machine Movies

Wed 16 Aug 18:10

Relaxed Screening: Gregory's Girl

+ intro and discussion

Mon 21 Aug 18:20

Projecting the Archive: Face the Music (aka The

Black Glove) + intro by Josephine Botting, BFI

Curator

Tue 22 Aug 18:10

Art in the Making: Grove Music + discussion

Tue 22 Aug 18:20

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop. We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

glamour, though, poor Gertie makes a play for Joe's affections, leading to some uncomfortably queasy moments as she hamfistedly attempts to seduce a man who is clearly a sexual predator. Joe, however, is determined to break up the Taylors' marriage. Fellowes – who made his debut in Raoul Walsh's superb crime drama *Regeneration* (1915) – is a likeable hero, but the film is primarily a showcase for Valli, especially in one unforgettable close-up. Her character could have been nothing more than a sketched-in type, but as a wary wife trying to protect her family from an initially ambiguous danger, Valli carries the emotional weight of the film, especially the first half. Valli is best known now, perhaps, for her role in Hitchcock's *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), but she was one of Universal's leading stars in the 1920s, and there's a hint here of how Brown would later coax distinguished performances from Garbo, Crawford et al. Director and star would remain friends for decades afterward. Brown started out as an engineer, and his love for the mechanics of the railroad holds the picture together; he also appears on screen, briefly, as a switchman.

The film premiered in London, not the US, but received positive reviews in the American press. Pointedly, the *Variety* critic wrote: 'The author has made romance out of the somewhat sombre lives of what, in England, is somewhat snobbishly called "the working class". An English producer would be almost shocked if asked to find romance in the life of a traction engine driver. He can only find beauty or heroism in the higher ranks of life.'

This new 4K tinted restoration brings that romance rushing back to the screen. Since no 35mm print of *The Signal Tower* is known to survive, the restorers relied on a Universal Show-at-Home 16mm copy and a preservation duplicate from the Packard Humanities Institute. The first print was bequeathed to Brownlow by Eric Sparks, a private collector in Sussex, whose twin passions were silent cinema and trains – and who could not be persuaded to part with it in his lifetime. Sparks considered it the best silent railroad picture in his collection, and now the world can see why.

Pamela Hutchinson, *Sight and Sound*, July 2019

Kevin Brownlow is a British film historian, filmmaker, author, and film editor and documentary-maker. Having become interested in silent film at an early age his fascination grew into a career spent documenting and restoring film. Brownlow has rescued many silent films and their history, most notably Abel Gance's *Napoleon*, and his initiative in interviewing many largely forgotten, elderly film pioneers in the 1960s and 1970s preserved a legacy of the silent cinema. He received an Academy Honorary Award given by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences on 13 November 2010, the first occasion on which an Academy Honorary Award was given to a film preservationist.