Talking Tees Valley Activity Pack

Local Actresses

Tees Valley Museums

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Tees Valley Museums

Welcome to another edition of the Talking Tees Valley Activity Pack

Each month we will use objects from one of our museums in the Tees Valley to take a closer look at the lives and stories from people in our area.

In this newsletter we are going to look at some of the early film stars who were born in the Tees Valley. Many early film stars have come from the Tees Valley so in this edition we are looking at local women who rose to stardom.

Women haven't always been allowed to act. In Shakespeare's day women were banned from the stage! When women could finally start acting in theatres they were seen as nothing more than 'fallen women' working in an unrespectable world.

By the turn of the 1900s though, many women were becoming incredibly famous, wealthy and respected for their acting talents and flourished well into the silent film era.

Ivy Close

In 1908 the Daily Mirror launched the first ever beauty contest in the UK. The winner was Ivy Close, a local Stockton girl famed for her beauty.

Following her win, she appeared live at the Empire Theatre in Stockton for a week, giving her a love for acting.

She later began her own film company called ‘Ivy Close Predictions’, and in 1914 starred in her first full length feature film, ‘The Lure of London’.

When the ‘talking’ movies became popular she found it hard to find work as her Stockton accent didn’t work well for American audiences.

Ivy died in a nursing home in Goring, Oxfordshire in 1968 having starred in fifteen silent movies and played a part in the early years of Hollywood film making.

Maude Darling

Maude Watson was born in Darlington in 1881 and always wanted to be an actress.

By nineteen years old Maude was appearing in a career defining role as Princess Aroura in Bristol, using her stage name Maude Darling.

Later she performed in her hometown of Darlington in the ‘Belle of New York’ and ‘Fifi’, both highly successful plays.

Darlington Hippodrome was opened in 1907 by Signor Rino Pepi. Pepi was a big fan of Maude’s and the two were said to be lovers.

According to her family she toured America acting in the theatres there. She died in 1927 aged 46. Oddly enough Pepi died five days after her.

Mary Lawson

Mary Lawson was the daughter of a North Eastern Railwayman born in Darlington in 1910. At 5 years old she would sing to the soldiers stationed at Feethams and was known for her signature kiss curls.

As she got older, she had regular bookings in Darlington for her singing and dancing and toured the UK appearing in plays where she made a big name for herself.

She went on to appear in 14 films acting with stars like Vivien Leigh. Mary met and fell in love with Fred Perry, the biggest tennis star of the day but the intense publicity killed their romance and she later married Francis WLC Beaumont, a famous film producer in 1937.

However, they didn't get long together because in 1941, Mary and Francis were staying with friends in Liverpool. It was the 8th night of air raids and Mary and Francis didn't manage to make it into an air raid shelter in time and were killed when a bomb hit the house. Mary Lawson was 30 years old, in her prime and at the height of her fame.

Living like an Actress

Being an actress could lead to a good wage and endorsements from magazines advertising the latest trends. It was during the early 1900s that the paparazzi became a powerful force that followed around the stars of the day taking pictures. What an actress wore was big news, so it was essential that she looked her best. Here we have some examples of some of the things an actress would be wearing in the 1920s.

Silent Film

Moving pictures were developed in the late 1880s. But it wasn't until the early 1900s that the technology existed to create longer films with storylines. One of the earliest films made was a "A trip to the moon" in 1902. It was a 14-minute long science fiction story.

Moving pictures quickly became the most popular form of entertainment for most people and in 1913, the Tees Valley's first cinema opened in Stockton, called the Globe. Cinemas usually had a live band to provide the backing music to the films. For dialogue, story cards were used in between scenes which told you what the characters were saying and set up the scenes.

Silent films were replaced by talking movies in the late 1920s, when the technology was developed to record the actor's voices.

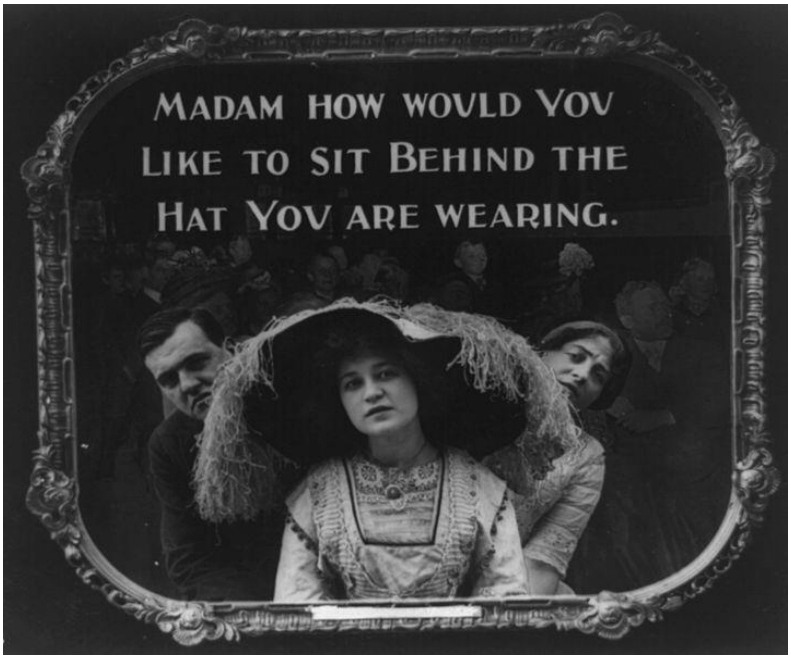
A still picture of Ivy Close in the silent film 'La Roue', 1923.

A Trip to the Cinema

Imagine what it must have been like to go to the cinema and see a silent film…

The cinema is a large dark space with rows and rows of red velvet seats all facing a large screen. You take your seat in the dark, excited and a little scared of what you are about to see. Will the story be good? Will it be scary? What if you don't like the actors or characters? There's no smell of popcorn in this cinema. For a treat you could get a small ice cream cup to enjoy whilst watching the movie.

The air is thick with cigarette smoke, the chatter of exited people makes its way to you through the auditorium. From the couples at the back who have a new way of being alone, to the children bursting with excitement at the front. The projector comes to life and the small band at the front take up their instruments. Pictures move across the screen, greeted by the occasional laughter or jib from the audience around you.



It's a dramatic ending, you feel all sorts of emotions. Love, happiness, a twinge of sadness…

What is your favourite film and how does it make you feel?

What is your silent film actress name?

If you were an actress in the 1920s what would your name be? Use your birth month and the first letter of your name to find out!

January - Ivy
February – Mary
March – Maude
April – Lily
May – Greta
June – Billie
July – Vivian
August – Doris
September – Marylin
October – Ruby
November – Rosie
December – Vesta

A – Pickford
B – Close
C – Lawson
D – Holiday
E – Monroe
F – Leigh
G – Darling
H – Elsie
I – Ray
J – Garbo
K – Fields
L - Day

M – Crawford
N – Davis
O – Loren
P - Gaynor
Q – Clifford
R – Henderson
S – Bellamy
T – Nesbit
U - Gray
V – Chaplin
W - Taylor
X – Hepburn
Y – Hayworth
Z - Kelly

The early Edwardian era produced a new craze for showcasing beauties. High quality postcards became a popular way of collecting pictures of your favourite actresses. They also became treasured mementos from trips to the theatres or cinemas.

Ivy Close, Maude Darling and Mary Lawson featured on many of these postcards and they were highly collectible. We have included a replica postcard from the era for you to write out, give to friends and family or simply keep. Maybe you could start a collection of your own?

Please share your feedback with us at teesvalleymuseums@stockton.gov.uk

Images in this newsletter courtesy Preston Park Museum and Grounds.