

# BEGGARS OF LIFE

8<sup>th</sup> February 2020

USA 1928

Directed by William A. Wellman

With Wallace Beery, Louise Brooks, Richard Arlen

Considered a Paramount 'special' and the studio's most important dramatic production of the season, *Beggars of Life* was meant to provoke. It was loosely based on a bestselling book of the same name by Jim Tully, a celebrated, rough-and-tumble, two-fisted 'tramp writer of Hobohemia'. In the book, the author gives a grim account of the nearly seven years he spent wandering America as a 'road kid'. Though covered in a dusty realism, Wellman's movie tells a somewhat different story. *Beggars of Life* is a tersely filmed drama about an orphan girl (Brooks), dressed as a boy, who flees the law with the help of a young tramp (Arlen), ending up at a hobo camp ruled by 'Oklahoma Red' (Beery).

Beery gives a fine performance, but it is Brooks who dominates the screen in what is arguably her best role in her best American film. Brooks seemingly reached down inside herself – perhaps for the first time in her career – and gave an emotionally riveting performance.

*Beggars of Life* is a Wellman film through and through. In it, he did what he did in all his films: he strove to improve the story as well as the look of the film by adding realistic detail, bits of humour, interesting visuals and unusual camera angles and movements. As film historian Frank Thompson notes, the film is a testament to the director's 'exhilaration with movement. All of the characters are constantly in motion' either walking down the road or riding on trains, automobiles, or even a slow-moving bread-cart. Thompson also notes that, whenever Wellman wants to reveal something about a character, he shows us their feet.

*Beggars of Life* is a small masterpiece and, in many ways, a film ahead of its time. In the words of film historian Briony Dixon, 'it is a film to wallow in – yes, it *is* unrealistic, and it *is* sentimental, but it is so charming and beautiful, and the characters so endearing, that we are all delighted to forgive it any such minor faults'.

Thomas Gladysz, *Beggars of Life: a Companion to the 1928 Film*

Combining the talents of director, original novelist and stars who were once variously runaways or hobos in their youth, *Beggars of Life* indirectly reflected the experiences of its leading talents who were either alienated from American society in the past or in the future, as Brooks would be herself before her eventual rediscovery as a screen icon and film chronicler.

The outsider figure of the hobo was a common feature in American history well before the stock-market crash a year after the film's appearance. Naturally, a less grim version of hobo life is depicted in the film, as several contemporary reviewers noted, and there are surprising images of racial integration at odds with the outside world.

*Beggars of Life* is a notable example of late silent cinema that, despite failing to achieve that artistic form of organic unity hailed by critics such as Lindsay Anderson and Robin Wood, deserves attention for what it does achieve. Good direction, professional acting, valuable use of locations, and its compromised (though necessary) depiction of the plight of the homeless - with a sympathy totally lacking in today's brutal world - are its commanding features.

Tony Williams, *Film International*

Louise's 'becoming' a boy was erotic in itself for audiences raised on the sexual allure of the covert, and the idea of a beautiful woman playing a boy other than Peter Pan caught the fancy of film mags. *Photoplay*, for example, noted that Louise was 'a little neat and clean but otherwise a handsome and convincing boy'. But whatever its social and psychosexual implications, Louise's androgyny received a better critical reception than the film itself. More than one critic pigeon-holed *Beggars* as 'a man's picture' and judged its social realism as more uneventful than striking. But the public liked the film, and Paramount was satisfied with Wellman, its 'man's director'.

Barry Paris, *Louise Brooks* (a biography)

Louise Brooks was not one of the important stars of the silent era, making few American films, but she has emerged most triumphantly on the basis of two films that she made subsequently in Germany. She has become the object of idolatry for thousands of younger people who base their admiration on revivals of these two films. Louise Brooks fan-clubs have started up all over the world, recognising her as an actress of brilliance and a luminescent personality.

Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By...* (1968)

