



Skinner's Dress Suit

Dir. William Seiter | USA | 1926 | N/C U | b&w | English intertitles | 1h 18m + short

Performing live: Neil Brand (piano)

2pm on Saturday 22 March 2025

Screening material courtesy of Park Circus/Universal

Film comedy thrives on simpatico duos. When you watch Reginald Denny and Laura La Plante shimmying through a chaotic rendition of the Charlestonesque dance, the “Savannah Shuffle”, in *Skinner's Dress Suit* (William A. Seiter, 1926) you may well be inclined to add them to the list of the greats. Both were first-rate silent comics, who make a very dapper on-screen couple, and they deserve to be better remembered. Denny and La Plante made three films together: this charming farce about a husband-and-wife trying to keep up with the Joneses, and both *Sporting Youth* and *The Fast Worker*, made two years previously for the same director.

La Plante, born in St Louis, Missouri in 1904, and to be spotted elsewhere in this year's Festival as one of the stars of *Smouldering Fires* (Clarence Brown, 1925) was at the time Universal's most popular star, beloved for her quick wit, beauty and girl-next-door quality. She had had been in films since she was teenager, appearing in a string of comedies for Al Christie and also westerns with Hoot Gibson. Comedy was her metier, though, despite her creditable appearances in drama. She wed the director of *Skinner's Dress Suit*, William A. Seiter, in 1926, and their marriage lasted until 1934, when she married producer Irving Asher. Their son Tony Asher was a songwriter, who collaborated with Brian Wilson, writing lyrics for several tracks on *Pet Sounds*.

The biggest hit of her career was *The Cat and the Canary* (Paul Leni, 1927) (HippFest 2019), one of several starring roles in comedy features during her silent-era heyday. She managed the transition to the talkies with appearances in revue film *The King of Jazz* (John Murray Anderson, 1930) and *Show Boat* (Harry A. Pollard, 1929), though her singing was dubbed. She starred in a couple of Pre-Codes before moving to the UK, where the Warner Bros studio in Teddington was hoping to rise above the “Quota Quickie”, with bigger budget films. La Plante's career might have been revived. When Myrna Loy considered leaving the

Thin Man series, La Plante was floated as a replacement, but Loy reconsidered. La Plante's last appearance on films was in *Spring Reunion* (Robert Pirosh, 1957), and she died in 1996.



Reginald Denny was a Brit, born in Richmond, Surrey in 1891. He acted on the London stage as a child, and as a teenager ran away from boarding school to become a boxer and continue acting. It was a play that brought him to the US in 1911, and he shortly added films to his repertoire. He returned home in 1917 to join the Royal Flying Corps, and flew Sopwith Snipe fighter planes during the Great War. Although he flexed his boxing skills in the serial *The Leather Pushers* (1922), it was as a film comedian that he really found his feet, rapidly becoming Universal's favourite comic and the second highest-paid actor in Hollywood, after Charlie Chaplin. He formed a very successful working partnership with Seiter, too: "[T]he great secret was that Bill Seiter and myself would get the script, and we'd make suggestions, and argue like hell. Finally, we'd get it right. You can't be a comedian unless you think what you're doing is funny." The pair worked brilliantly together, except when they weren't working at all, and instead skiving off to play golf.

The onset of sound outed him as a foreigner, but while his Hollywood acting career drifted into character roles Denny carved out a niche as a comic Englishman, and distracted himself with what became more than a hobby – model airplanes. He founded a company, Reginald Denny Industries, in 1935 and could proudly state that he developed the first of what we know as drones, which was employed by the US military during World War II.

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Among the rest of the cast, you will spot two more English actors: Edward J Ratcliffe, an English stage veteran credited with introducing the highball cocktail to American bars, as Skinner's boss, and Yorkshireman Lionel Braham as fellow businessman Jackson. Lila Leslie, an elegant Scottish actress born in Glasgow, but a fixture in silent Hollywood, appears as Mrs Wilkins. Future gossip columnist and notorious HUAC cheerleader Hedda Hopper appears as society lady Mrs Colby, leading light of the smart set.

This film was the second adaptation of one of Henry Irving Dodge's popular Skinner stories, which first appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*. It is a sparkling situation comedy, with more than a hint of the screwballs of the 1930s, and bursting with energy. You can sense the cheery chemistry between both leads and their director. The party scene was reportedly the highlight of the shoot, with the ensemble cast getting stuck into the gawky groove, led at full-speed by Denny and La Plante. The uncredited revellers kicking their heels included the woman who would soon become Denny's wife, Isabelle Steifer, and future Oscar-winner Janet Gaynor.

Skinner's Dress Suit exemplifies silent comedy's transition from the purely physical display of the early years to the witty, character-led style that would flourish in the 1930s. And Denny and La Plante are a delight to watch.

PAMELA HUTCHINSON

Pamela is a freelance critic, curator and film historian. Her publications include BFI Film Classics on The Red Shoes and Pandora's Box, and her website SilentLondon.co.uk is dedicated to silent cinema.