



## The Shamrock Handicap

Dir. John Ford | USA | 1926 | N/C 12A | b&w, tinted & toned | English intertitles

1h 17m + short

Performing live: Mike Nolan (piano)

2:30pm on Thursday 20 March 2025

From the collection of The Museum of Modern Art

A 1926 full-page advertisement in *Motion Picture World* features a neatly dressed young John Ford, sporting a tweed jacket and tie, offering a glimpse into his career and reputation in the final year of silent cinema. At this point, Ford had yet to be honoured with four Academy Awards for Best Director, nor had he directed ten actors in Oscar-nominated performances. He was still far from the grizzled, often irritable figure he would later become. Nonetheless, Ford was already a key player at Fox, described as the “author of some of the finest and most successful films” in the studio’s history, “ranging from light comedy to intense melodrama.”

Ford had signed with Fox in 1922, and over the next three decades, would continue to make films for the studio—sometimes independently produced. The 1920s and 1930s marked a remarkably productive era, yielding several masterpieces that are still widely studied and celebrated today. Among these films are *The Iron Horse*, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *How Green Was My Valley*, and *My Darling Clementine*. Such roll-calls are often, however to the detriment of silent films made at Fox. While *The Iron Horse* (1924) remains a staple, there are numerous lesser-known titles that also deserve recognition, such as *The Shamrock Handicap* (1926), which showcase Ford's directing skill and introduce themes and techniques he would later revisit.

One often-overlooked aspect of Ford’s silent work at Fox is his effort to weave Irish characters and themes into Hollywood’s portrayal of American history. His films from this period include a remarkable number of Irish representations, unparalleled in the work of any other director of the time. We find Irish-born characters and references in films such as *The Iron Horse* (1924), *Kentucky Derby* (1925), *The Shamrock Handicap* (1926), *Hangman’s House* (1928), *Riley the Cop* (1928), and *Mother Machree* (1928)—Fox’s first “sound” film.



Why Ford chose to focus so frequently on Irish characters in the mid-1920s remains somewhat speculative, but there are at least three overlapping reasons, each relevant to responding to *The Shamrock Handicap*. First, Irish characters were already a fixture in American cinema, especially in the “melting pot” comedies and dramas of the era in which they were frequently cast alongside stereotypical Jewish characters, most famously in the *Cohens and the Kellys* (also 1926) and the series it gave rise to. Second, Ford’s own ethnic heritage and his view of the Irish in American history were deepened by a 1921 trip to Ireland with his father that gave him a personal connection to the millions of Irish immigrants and to the land they had left behind. Third, Ford, like many directors, enjoyed collaborating with a trusted ensemble of actors who would in turn shape the stories he chose to work on. In the 1920s he found in J. Farrell Macdonald, an actor who could blend comedy and pathos, using Irish stereotypes while simultaneously humanizing them. Ford would go on to cast Macdonald in twenty-five films from 1919 to 1950, with notable roles in *The Iron Horse* (1924), *Kentucky Pride* (1925), *3 Bad Men* (1926), *Riley the Cop* (1927), and *The Shamrock Handicap* (1926) in which he plays Con O’Shea, handyman and friend to impoverished aristocrat Sir Miles O’Hara.



Based on a relatively unremarkable melodrama by Irish-American writer Peter Kyne, *The Shamrock Handicap* (1926) combines stereotypes of 1920s comedy with more “artistic” visual touches. This was at a time when Fox, under the influence of the recently arrived F.W. Murnau, was embracing a more sophisticated cinematic style. The film’s cinematographer,



George Schneiderman—who had worked with Ford on *The Iron Horse*—brought visual flair to the film, alternating between realist, comedic, poetic, and even avant-garde approaches. The film's transatlantic story is bookended by scenes in Ireland, and while scenes of the Irish landscape weren't new to American cinema, Ford avoided the typical clichés. Instead, he created a visually rich pastoral setting in the opening and closing scenes, presaging later iconic moments in his films, such as the famous scene in *The Quiet Man* (1952) where John Wayne first lays eyes on Maureen O'Hara. The horse race in the film's climax is also well-executed, adding excitement to an otherwise lacklustre romantic plot. Though the performances of the leads—Leslie Fenton, a Liverpool-born actor, and Janet Gaynor, who was soon to establish herself as a major star—lack chemistry, the ensemble cast and general inventiveness of the direction elevate the film.

For contemporary audiences, however, some aspects of the film's racial and ethnic portrayals may be uncomfortable. As noted, the pairing of Irish and Jewish characters, particularly in comedic settings, was a common trope in 1920s American cinema. While audiences of the time may have found the jovial and comedic presence of Bennie Ginsberg (George Harris) unremarkable, a more disturbing stereotype emerges through the character of Virus Cakes (Ely Reynolds), Ginsberg's African-American valet. Despite having a substantial number of scenes and a more prominent role than most African-American characters in silent films, Virus Cakes is portrayed in a manner that reinforces harmful racial clichés.

Reynolds, who appears in only one other film—Ford's *Upstream* (1927)—was part of a broader tradition of African-American character actors, like Stepin Fetchit, whose career was built on playing subservient, often comically exaggerated roles. Fetchit, the first African-American movie star to achieve millionaire status, became famous for his portrayal of lazy, subservient characters, which stirred debates about racial representation in Hollywood. While it's unclear whether Ford intended to draw direct parallels between Virus Cakes and Fetchit, both characters reflect a long-standing tradition of racial caricature in American cinema. Ford's defenders often argue that his films, including those with Fetchit, were simply employing social comedy through stereotypes of all kinds, and that his minority actors were willing participants who gained visibility and opportunities. Even so, it's hard to ignore the way Virus Cakes stands apart from the other characters and disappears once his narrative function as a figure of fun is fulfilled.

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*The Shamrock Handicap* stands then as an interesting hybrid of popular comedy and artistic ambition from Fox and Ford and a demonstration of the considerable strengths along with his undoubted limitations as a major Hollywood director.

**DR TONY TRACY**

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