

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



EILEEN PERCY| Movie Star

Eileen Percy was born in Belfast on 21st August 1900

Spirited trailblazer and Ireland's only major silent movie star, who after an early education in Belfast, emigrated to America in 1909, settling in the Brooklyn district of New York. Eileen was an artist's model aged eleven and made her stage debut on Broadway aged fourteen at the Little Theatre, New York in Maurice Maeterlinck's 1914 musical fairytale *Blue Bird* 1914.

Two further years on the New York stage included a period with the legendary Ziegfeld Follies when she was just fifteen years old and an ensemble credit in Irving Berlin's revue, *Stop! Look! Listen!* at the Globe Theatre, 1915. This production also marked the beginning of a long friendship with future silent star Marion Davies. Her first screen appearance was in director Allan Dwan's melodrama *Panthea*, 1917. Her second film appearance was more significant, cast with none other than Douglas Fairbanks in his own production, the comedy western, *Wild and Woolly* 1917, and during that year was his leading lady in a further three films.

Director Douglas Gerrard's mystery drama *The Empty Cab*, 1918 marked her permanent move to a rapidly emerging Hollywood, and although she made only two films in 1918 she more than made up for it the following year making no less than nine films. The best of these were *Brass Buttons*, *Some Liar* and director William Worthington's *The Gray Horizon*, the latter starring the great Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa.

Eileen Percy was considered to be one of the silent screen's brightest stars. She was working at an average rate of five films a year, but 1923 proved particularly productive with leading roles in director Irvine Cumming's drama *East Side West Side* and Edward Le Saint's romantic comedy *Yesterday's Wife*, the pick of the bunch.

Key work from the mid twenties included *Cobra*, 1925, starring Italian heartthrob Rudolph Valentino, in sadly his penultimate film and a young Joan Crawford vehicle *Twelve Miles Out* in 1927. As the decade wore on, technology was to dictate her future. Talkies, the new craze meant that another skill was now paramount and, sadly for Eileen Percy her voice was not considered to have sufficient depth to have a realistic future in sound film. This was a problem a number of silent movie actors were to encounter to their cost. Her final action in the world of silents was a co-starring role in director Sam Wood's comedy drama *Telling The World* 1928 and a year later made her sound film debut in the musical *Dancing Feet* starring unsung queen of silent comedy Louise Fazenda.

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She continued in her now changing world, sometimes in uncredited roles, finally bowing to the inevitable after making her final screen appearance in Gregory La Cava's romantic drama *Bed of Roses*, 1933. Her relationship with Marion Davies, now more famous as the mistress of newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst, brought her into a hugely influential well of movers and shakers that included film mogul Jack Warner and the extraordinarily eccentric Howard Hughes. However even with such illustrious friends the battle with sound films came to an inevitable conclusion and at only thirty three years of age, it was an end to a brilliant career for a veteran of some seventy films. After this enforced retirement she became a syndicated society columnist for Hearst's Los Angeles Examiner and in 1936 married her second husband, composer and screen writer Harry Ruby, a union that would last until her death.

Eileen Percy died in Beverly Hills, California, USA 29th July 1973

Acknowledgement: Ulster Actors.com