

THE FIRST QUEENS OF THE SCREEN

The closeted leading man has been around since the conception of the film industry, however, writes Matthew Myers, the silent era boasted greater sexual freedoms and more out male stars than Hollywood allows today.

In the 1927 silent movie *Wings*, two WWI fighter pilots share a love triangle with a woman. The scenario could almost mirror 2001's *Pearl Harbor*, except that the acting is better and the two male leads actually share a kiss. It was a sensual moment of love, expressed during a moment of death. *Wings* won the very first Oscar and the film industry was up and running. But such on-screen freedom would not last.

This was the era of silent film. The Keystone Cops scurried past storefront nickelodeons,

cable cars rattled in the streets and the Hollywood sign was uncut timber in the surrounding Californian countryside. While this was called the Promised Land for aspiring filmmakers, it also attracted drifting misfits in search of a fast buck. Needless to say, Hollywood also became known as "Sodom by the Sea".

It was the perfect place for artistic liberties and considering these actors had travelled from the vaudeville stages of New York, it was of no surprise to see flamboyantly camp

qualities emerging in the new studios. Let's face it, Tinsel Town has ridden on the back of gay people – often literally – since its inception close to a century ago. You only had to attend a party thrown by director George Cukor to find an array of colourful characters. Costumers, set designers, make-up artists, publicists, directors and those up front and centre – the actors.

Starlets were draping their naked bodies with pearls while young actors such as Gary Cooper and Rudolph Valentino wore face powder and mascara. Yes, long before the androgyny of '70s glam rock, these silent stars were slicking back their hair and reaching for the eyebrow pencil. But were these actors gay or just caught up in the cultural dandyism that had made its way from Europe into the fashionable new medium of the silver screen?

Considering that these actors lived close to 100 years ago, there is little information available; rare interviews with fellow thespians, left over personal letters, tabloid gossip and folklore are all that is left.

Biographers such as William J Mann (*Behind The Screen*) and Vito Russo (*The Celluloid Closet*) have examined the lives of such stars and discovered lifestyles that mirror a community much like today. Unfortunately, most of these rising stars' careers nose-dived due to the advent of sound (the talkie). But for many their fall from grace was more likely the result of industry homophobia and the advent of the Hays Production Code – a censorship watchdog created in 1930 for all things immoral and gay!

So who were the first gays of Hollywood?

Nils Asther and Marion Davies on the set of *The Cardboard Lover*.





William Haines (1900–1973) ↑

Arguably the first gay star of Hollywood and the silent era, William Haines was open with his sexuality and was the number one box office star of the time. Haines' films included *Tell It To The Marines* (1926) and *Navy Blues* (1929) but his movie career was cut short due to his relationship with long-term lover Jimmie Shields. In true Hollywood style, the romance began on the movie set, where Shields played Haines' stand-in. Haines also got up to mischief and was arrested in 1933 when he was caught with a sailor in a Los Angeles YMCA. Refusing to bow to a sham marriage insisted by the studio bosses, Haines quit showbiz and took up interior design. Meanwhile, Studio magnate Louis B. Mayer recast the actor's upcoming roles with Robert Montgomery (father of Elizabeth). Haines and Shields enjoyed a 50-year relationship working as interior designers and antique dealers until Haines died of lung cancer in 1973. Sadly, not long after his death, the pining Shields took his own life. Joan Crawford described them as "the happiest married couple in Hollywood".

Rudolph Valentino (1895–1926) ↓ ↗

Born in Castellaneta, Italy, Rodolfo Alfonzo Raffaello Pierre Filibert Guglielmi di Valentina d'Antonguolla left his homeland – supposedly

due to his gay lifestyle – and travelled to Paris before heading to New York where he became a gigolo. Moving to Hollywood, he won the lead in *The Four Horsemen Of The Apocalypse* (1921) and his film career was set. Valentino didn't just become a star; he became the star. Marrying twice (to lesbians), he did time in prison for bigamy and became even more attractive to women for his notoriety. Legend has it that a gold-plated dildo was cast from his (reputably large) penis. Valentino became the first matinee idol with a legion of screaming fans – and jealous husbands. Men labelled him the "pink powder puff" and one journalist claimed he effeminised the American male, which led Valentino to challenge him to



Ramón Novarro (1899–1968) ↑

While Haines may have been the number one drawcard of the time, Novarro is the best remembered and indeed the hottest looking. Mexican by birth, he and his family were refugees from the Mexican revolution of 1916. Novarro worked as an extra and got his big break in *The Prisoner Of Zenda* (1922) but his most noted role came in the original production of *Ben Hur* (1925), where his muscled body was duly noted. He was tagged as the "new Valentino" and Valentino himself was one of Novarro's best friends. Novarro had a relationship with *Photoplay* columnist Herbert Howe. Losing popularity with the introduction of the talkie, he moved on to musicals but his career spiralled and his final roles were bit parts on television shows such as *Rawhide* and *Bonanza*. Novarro was brutally murdered in 1968 by two hustlers in his Hollywood Hills home. In a cruel twist, the weapon was said to be the gold-plated dildo given to him by Valentino. Novarro's life has been portrayed in the play *Through A Naked Lens*.

Legend has it that a gold-plated dildo was cast from Rudolph Valentino's (reputably large) penis, the same dildo purportedly used to kill Ramón Novarro in 1968.

a boxing match. Although Valentino seemed to be at pains to defend his masculinity, many believed he was bisexual at the least, though there is no real proof. He was rumoured to have had an affair with Ramón Novarro, whom he met on the set of *The Four Horsemen Of The Apocalypse*. Others believe that cinematographer Paul Ivano, whom Valentino lived with, was another lover, though Ivano denied this in interviews. Valentino died of peritonitis at age 31. His legend lives on in films, books and even Sheik condoms.

Jack Warren Kerrigan (1879–1947) ↓

His origins in Vaudeville, Kerrigan became the tough man of the silent era, in films such as *The Covered Wagon* (1923) and *Captain Blood* (1924). In fact, between 1910 and 1924 he made a staggering 322 movies (Tom Cruise has made 30). His flagging fame was attributed to his anti-war stance at the time. In reality it was due to his relationship with lover James Vincent. According to biographer William J Mann, "J Warren Kerrigan's homosexuality, no doubt as obvious to his >>





Eugene O'Brien (1880–1966) ↑

The son of a policeman, his family expected him to become a doctor but after dropping out of medical school his passion for acting landed him on the vaudeville stages of New York in the early 1900s. Known for his good looks, he was cast into silent movies alongside such drawcards as Mary Pickford and Gloria Swanson. One favourite co-star was Norma Talamadge, with whom O'Brien made 11 pictures. Talamadge was married to the studio boss Joseph Schenck, who not only gave his wife leading star status but felt more secure in casting gay men as her leads. O'Brien quit the film business once the silent era ended and retired on a small fortune accumulated from his work. He died of pneumonia in 1966 aged 85.



WAS HE OR WASN'T HE?

Gary Cooper (1901–1961) ↓

If there was one star from the silent era that hit the big-time with the advent of the talkie, it was 'Coop'. Known for his maverick cowboy roles in films such as *High Noon* (1952) and *The Virginian* (1962), Cooper began his career with small roles in silent movies such as *Wings* and *Ben Hur*. Raised on a Montana ranch, he was every bit as rough and rugged as his on-screen persona. His lovers included Carole Lombard, Grace Kelly and Marlene Dietrich. He eventually married and had a daughter. So why the question over his sexuality? In his early years Cooper was the best friend of gay actor Anderson Lawler. The two men lived, worked and played together. They were inseparable. But while the couple could easily be tagged as lovers, Cooper may have simply been one of Hollywood's first straight mates. Over the years, many have also questioned his close relationship with author and friend Ernest Hemingway. In his autobiography, British photographer Sir Cecil Beaton also claimed to have had an affair with the star. But again, there is not a lot to support this and the mystique of Cooper's sexuality remains a mystery. Whether gay or straight, one thing is clear. The man was downright gorgeous! 👍

until his own death from a heart attack. Noel Coward once said of his friend, "It must be tough to be orphaned at 71." Apart from silent movies such as *Polly With A Past* (1920) and *New Toys* (1925) he was also well known for his later roles in *The Razor's Edge* (1946) and *Titanic* (1953) opposite Barbara Stanwyck. He managed to keep his homosexual lifestyle quiet, all while still enjoying the fruits of the city and constantly making the best-dressed list. He died of heart failure in 1966.



Clifton Webb (1889–1966) ↑

Born Webb Parmalee Hollenbeck, this young man took the name Clifton from an area of New York and received his training in the theatre before moving to Broadway, London's West End and eventually Hollywood. Well known for his dandy roles, Webb's persona was not that unlike his most famous role, the male nanny Mr Belvedere. Imagine a cross between Mr Peabody and Niles Crane and you'll get the picture. Webb was incredibly attached to his mother and they always lived together. After she died, he lived in seclusion

