

Audiences more familiar with W.C. Fields through his performances in “talkies” may be surprised by just how commanding a presence he is in a silent film without the aid of his distinctive voice (described aptly by the film critic Judith Crist as “that gravelly swoosh and slide of the vocal-nasal chords”). This seems to have caused him no consternation. As Fields himself noted in an interview on the film’s release “I prefer pantomime [over dialogue]... It’s the better medium, much funnier than speech can ever be. The laughs can come quicker. In spoken comedy, you must wait for the laugh... In pantomime, the laughs can come as fast as an audience can shake them from their throats”.



This preference for pantomime may explain why Fields appears so at ease; so confident and charismatic in *Sally of the Sawdust*. He was able to concentrate solely on the physical comedy that he had spent years perfecting, while providing McGargle with a tenderness and a great humanity in the scenes with his adopted daughter, Sally (played by Carol Dempster) around whom the plot revolves.

On his journey from vaudeville king of physical comedy, to a film star famous for his distinctive vocal mannerisms, Fields career had a remarkable durability. As the magician and comedian Harry Anderson astutely observed in a 1994 biography of Fields, “I think he found the essence of the juggler and turned it into a character who could juggle the world around him without the need for pins or balls.”

Sally of the Sawdust was filmed on stages at Astoria Studios in Long Island (then the largest film studio on the East Coast of the United States), an area also under development with new houses for wealthy New Yorkers (to include Mary Pickford, Groucho Marx and later Fields himself). The suburbs of Long Island provided the film’s external locations for the fictional town of Green Meadow, Connecticut.

The director of the film, D.W. Griffith, was primarily known for epic melodrama and the comedic tone of this film was a departure for him. Undoubtedly, Fields’ performance provides one of the film’s principal attractions, acknowledged by Griffith himself in his press notes for the film; “It is his earnestness and sincerity that makes Fields great. Never have I directed a more charming person nor a harder worker. He is the drolleries and the laughter of life itself. Two minutes in his presence, and one is laughing. Yet he works as diligently and far harder than any bricklayer”. This is high praise indeed from a filmmaker with a reputation as a founding father of cinema in the silent era.

Encouraged by their collaboration with *Sally of the Sawdust*, Griffiths and Fields would reunite for another film, *That Royle Girl*, released in December of 1925, though this film is one of five silent features starring Fields which has been sadly lost in the archives.



Thank you for attending this morning’s screening and for supporting Slapstick Festival 2022!