

12/65

## Doris Day



### **BFI Southbank celebrates Hollywood's golden girl with a selection of her finest work this December**

**Doris Day** (born Doris Mary Ann Kappelhoff, 1922) is one of Hollywood's most consummate performers and forty-four years after she quit films, in 1968, she is still the top female box-office draw of all time. For seven consecutive years from 1959, Day was one of the top four box-office attractions (coming in alongside **Rock Hudson**, **Cary Grant** and **James Stewart**), as adept in drama as in the light comedies that made her name, and for four of those years she shone at the number-one spot. Yet no other major star's often first rate work has been so underrated. Throughout December **BFI Southbank** will present a dazzling season of some of her best-loved films, such as *Tea for Two* (1950) and *The Pajama Game* (1957), and most striking performances, as seen in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) and *Midnight Lace* (1960), as reminders of why her success was justified; launching on **4 December** with an introduction to her work: *Resurrection Day!*.

Doris Day aspired to be a dancer and planned to move to Hollywood after winning a dance contest, but tragedy struck when, the night before her departure, she was badly injured in a car crash that crushed her leg. As part of her recuperation Day turned to singing and it was while fronting a touring big band that she was discovered by **Jule Styne** who, along with **Sammy Cahn**, persuaded her to screen test for **Michael Curtiz**, and the rest is history.

She made her big-screen debut – receiving fourth billing – in Curtiz's *It's Magic* (aka *Romance on the High Seas*, 1948), her performance lighting up the screen and establishing her as a bright new talent. Her smooth recording of the title song sold over

a million copies, but even without that it was instantly apparent to Warner Bros that her appeal was not simply vocal. The effervescent Day's rare combination of technical precision and radiant warmth effortlessly translated into a screen persona that spelt financial success. She went on to star alongside **Kirk Douglas** for her first dramatic role in *Young Man with a Horn* (aka *Young Man of Music*, 1950) and **Gordon MacRae** in *Tea for Two* (1950) - the first of many pairings that would include *On Moonlight Bay* (1951), pitching her as the ideal 'girl-next-door'.

After the joyous and career-defining *Calamity Jane* (1953), which made the most of her 'tomboy' persona, Day made the transition to more dramatic roles, such as Laurie in the tear-jerker *Young at Heart* (1954), starring **Frank Sinatra**. This would be her last film for Warner Bros when, under the advice of her then husband, she signed up with MGM to play Ruth Etting in *Love Me or Leave Me* (1955). This was a pivotal role in her career, allowing her to play out a greater emotional range as the 1920s singer in an abusive marriage to a Chicago gangster, played by **James Cagney**. This more dramatic phase in her resume led way to the seminal rom-com titles that portrayed her as an independent woman who would stand her ground – albeit as a girl who would say no. *Pillow Talk* (1959) earned her an **Oscar** nomination and the screwball comedy *Move Over, Darling* (1963) stands as the best of her latter, 60s comedies.

However, Day's defiant independence was written off as frigidity and her sincere conviction didn't match the era's abiding cynicism or changing sexual politics. 50 years on it is clear that revisiting her, still critically neglected, work reveals Day as an unsung heroine, a woman who held out for what she believed in, and who had the tenacity to overcome tragedy, both on and off-screen.

### **Doris Day: Programme 1 to 29 December 2012**

#### **Resurrection Day!: Doris Day season introduction**

Doris Day made her name in musicals (which most cineastes despise) and compounded the felony starring in rom-coms (which they detest). No wonder she's been critically dismissed. Heralding a season devoted to restoring her reputation, *Variety* critic David Benedict casts such snobbery aside and rediscovers a gifted comedienne with rare dramatic skill. With clips from the well-loved *Calamity Jane* to the little-screened *Midnight Lace*, he shatters her 'virginal' image and celebrates the sheer finesse of one of Hollywood's most underrated actors.

**Tue 4 Dec 18:20 NFT3 Tickets £5**

#### **It's Magic aka Romance on the High Seas**

USA 1948. Dir Michael Curtiz. With Janis Paige, Jack Carson. 99min. PG

'Everything they've ever said about women like you on boats like this with men like me certainly turns out to be true!' So says Jack Carson to Doris Day in this mistaken identity rom-com written by the Epstein twins (Casablanca). Fourth-billed Day dominates the musical, originally planned for Judy Garland and then Betty Hutton who discovered she was pregnant. Composer Jule Styne heard 23-year-old singer Day at a party, persuaded Michael Curtiz to screen-test her and her perky screen debut was a runaway hit.

**Sat 1 Dec 14:00 NFT3, Tue 4 Dec 20:30 NFT3**

#### **Tea for Two**

USA 1950. Dir David Butler. With Gordon MacRae, Eve Arden. 98min. U

Unaffected, fresh-looking Doris Day unwittingly blueprinted her perennial virgin image playing wannabe musical star Nanette who, angling for a \$25,000 investment in a show, bets her uncle SZ Sakall that she can say 'no' to everything for 48 hours. Hollywood's third stab at filming 1920s Broadway musical No, No Nanette is only loosely based on the original but it's easily the best version and arguably Day's finest Warner Bros musical. An old-fashioned charmer thanks to Day, a beefed-up score and LeRoy Prinz's dance numbers.

**Sat 1 Dec 16:10 NFT3, Thu 13 Dec 20:40 NFT2**

### **Young Man with a Horn aka Young Man of Music**

USA 1950. Dir Michael Curtiz. With Kirk Douglas, Lauren Bacall. 112min. PG

Trademark torrid Kirk Douglas and Ted McCord's stark black-and-white cinematography pull this disguised biopic of trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke back from the brink of melodrama. In her first seriously dramatic role Doris Day is perfectly cast as a band singer falling for driven Douglas. But he's in thrall to the siren song of Lauren Bacall as dangerously feline Amy who is revealed – as much as was possible in 1950 – to be lesbian. Hoagy Carmichael's presence and Harry James dubbing the trumpet solos lend the picture unusual authenticity.

**Sun 9 Dec 15:40 NFT3, Wed 5 Dec 18:20 NFT2**

### **On Moonlight Bay**

USA 1951. Dir Roy Del Ruth. With Gordon MacRae, Jack Smith, Leon Ames. 95min. U

'A happy screenful of sun-kissed melody and kiss-by-moonlight romance,' yelled the poster, which didn't lie. In her first tomboy role, Warners' number-one female box-office star Doris Day was the cheeriest member of a family newly at home in small-town Indiana. Echoing MGM's *Meet Me in St Louis*, Doris deals with family (mis)fortunes including a troublesome young brother while falling for boy-next-door MacRae. Its huge success spawned the near-identical sequel *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*.

**Mon 3 Dec 20:40 NFT2, Sat 8 Dec 18:20 NFT2**

### **Calamity Jane**

USA 1953. Dir David Butler. With Howard Keel, Allyn Ann McLerie. 101min. U

Dressed head-to-toe in fringed buckskin, Doris Day is tomboy *in excelsis* as sharp-shootin' 'Calam' in this riposte to MGM's *Annie Get Your Gun*. Having trained as a dancer, Day leaps about with infectious abandon in this boisterous musical boasting a terrific score including 'The Deadwood Stage' and the Oscar-winning 'Secret Love'. It remains a touchstone lesbian and gay movie, not least for 'A Woman's Touch' in which Doris gets lessons in homemaking and goes from butch to *femme* in exactly three minutes and 47 seconds.

**Thu 6 Dec 18:30 NFT1, Sat 8 Dec 16:00 NFT1, Sat 29 Dec 20:45 NFT1**

### **Young at Heart**

USA 1954. Dir Gordon Douglas. With Frank Sinatra, Gig Young, Ethel Barrymore. 117min. U

Top-billed Day's Laurie is the wholesome, down-home type, Sinatra's Barney is a recalcitrant drifter. Opposites attract but will their differences tear them apart? Almost 50 years on, this now feels like a fascinatingly transitional picture. Day represents early 50s certainty while young punk Sinatra embodies the rebellion about to surface in *East of Eden*. Music unites them and Sinatra's 'Someone to Watch Over Me' is worth the price of admission. Sinatra used his clout, possibly unwisely, to insist on a rewritten ending.

**Sat 8 Dec 20:40 NFT2, Thu 13 Dec 18:20 NFT2**

### **Love Me or Leave Me**

USA 1955. Dir Charles Vidor. With James Cagney, Cameron Mitchell. 122min. PG

Having quit Warners, Doris Day signed to play the lead in this MGM biopic of 20s star Ruth Etting, who rose from ten-cents-a-dance girl to singing sensation. But this pain-filled picture is no fluffy backstager. Day's exquisite vocals – including a heart-stopping 'It All Depends on You' to hushed piano accompaniment – are her finest on screen, but they're matched by the startlingly calm intensity of her highly emotional performance. James Cagney holds back nothing as gangster Marty Snyder, her abusive partner. The tension between them is electrifying.

**Tue 11 Dec 20:30 NFT1, Sat 15 Dec 18:15 NFT1, Fri 28 Dec 18:00 NFT1**

### **The Man Who Knew Too Much**

USA 1956. Dir Alfred Hitchcock. With James Stewart, Brenda De Banzie. 120min. PG

Having admired Doris Day's non-singing performance in the dramatic *Storm Warning*, Hitchcock happily agreed to cast her in the remake of his 1934 thriller. Her only outing with a bona-fide A-list director is a triumph. Despite playing opposite the more experienced James Stewart, she walks away with the picture, not least because of her rare ability to express high emotion with control and clarity. The climax in which she brings mounting desperation to the usually blithe 'Que sera sera' is a superb fusion of acting and direction.

**Sun 9 Dec 20:30 NFT3, Sat 22 Dec 18:00 NFT3**

### **The Pajama Game**

USA 1957. Dir Stanley Donen. With John Raitt, Carol Haney. 101min. U

The only musical comedy about a strike over a seven-and-a-half cents wage raise, *The Pajama Game* is 'Marxism – the Musical'. Stanley Donen's exuberant movie about love among the workers at the Sleep-Tite pyjama factory took most of its original Broadway leads but added Day as Babe, leader of the Union Grievance Committee. The picture boasts an ebullient score that explodes across the screen, doing justice to Bob Fosse's gutsy choreography. Fosse almost steals the film dancing 'Steam Heat' opposite Carol Haney.

**Sat 15 Dec 20:45 NFT1, Thu 20 Dec 18:20 NFT1** \*Introduced by season curator David Benedict

### **Pillow Talk**

USA 1959. Dir Michael Gordon. With Rock Hudson, Tony Randall. 102min. Digital. PG

Accept no substitutes: the first of the three Doris Day-Rock Hudson (no-)sex comedies is easily the best and one of the most delicious rom-coms ever made. Day received her only Oscar nomination for her role as a sharply dressed interior decorator infuriated by the antics of philandering composer Hudson with whom she shares a phone-line. Split-screen bubble-bath scenes, mistaken identities, real-life closeted Hudson playing a straight man pretending to be gay, and Thelma Ritter as a permanently hungover maid only add to the fun.

**Sun 16 Dec 16:15 NFT1, Thu 20 Dec 20:45 NFT1, Thu 27 Dec 18:30 NFT1**

### **Midnight Lace**

USA 1960. Dir David Miller. With Rex Harrison, Myrna Loy, Roddy McDowall. 110min. PG

Doris Day's underrated performance, lifts this archetypal woman-in-peril suspenser into a different league. She plays Rex Harrison's glamorous American wife living in London and her eerie, minutely calibrated descent from doubt through distress to tear-stained crack-up is mesmerising. Ross Hunter's production is elegant, as is the acting of the supporting cast with British character actors papering over any cracks in the plot. After seeing Day terrorised in a lift, you may in future insist on taking the stairs.

**Tue 18 Dec 20:40 NFT1\*, Fri 21 Dec 18:10 NFT1** \*Introduced by season curator David Benedict

### **Move Over, Darling**

USA 1963. Dir Michael Gordon. With James Garner, Thelma Ritter. 103min. U

Doris Day and James Garner headline a comedy about a missing-presumed dead wife who unexpectedly reappears after five years as her husband is about to remarry. If this melee of marital mistrust rings bells, that's because it's a remake of the Cary Grant-Irene Dunne screwball comedy *My Favourite Wife*. Planned as the comeback for Marilyn Monroe who died before the picture was completed, it was re-worked and re-shot with an entirely new team and is the best of Day's final run of 60s comedies.

**Sat 22 Dec 16:15 NFT1, Thu 27 Dec 20:45 NFT1**

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**\*\*\* PICTURE DESK \*\*\***

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