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Trailblazers: Queens of TV Comedy at BFI Southbank & Hackney Empire as part of the London 2012 Festival



As an official part of the **London 2012 Festival** - the spectacular 12-week nationwide celebration running from 21 June until 9 September 2012 - **BFI Southbank** in association with **The Hackney Empire** is presenting a season celebrating those pioneering 'golden girls' of British TV comedy between **14 to 28 August**. As BFI season curator Dick Fiddy explains, "*Nowadays funny women are a fixed part of the TV landscape but there was a time when very few toughed it out in a male dominated genre. The pinnacle of success was to be given your own show and 2012 is the perfect time to acknowledge those 'golden girls' that achieved that Olympian feat*".

From **Joyce Grenfell, Beryl Reid, Diana Dors, Marti Caine, Victoria Wood to French & Saunders**, these funny women achieved the rare accolade of hosting their own shows in a male dominated era. The season is split between two venues: BFI Southbank will present three events focusing on the careers of a variety of trailblazing female TV comedy stars with archive clips, while Hackney Empire will host two nights of live stand-up from

contemporary funny women supplemented by vintage footage from the archive. Our final event of the season will look specifically at the groundbreaking all-female sketch show **Smack the Pony**, which finished some ten years' ago but still has resonance within TV comedy today.

The season kicks off with **Storytellers and Cabaret Stars** on **Tuesday 14 August** at **BFI Southbank** with a compilation of some of the finest TV appearances by arch comic storyteller and mimic, **Joyce Grenfell**. She was the first woman to get her own TV comedy series, *Joyce Grenfell Requests the Pleasure* in 1956. Although this early material no longer exists, her long TV career spanned across four decades, and material from the 1960s and 70s does survive and will be showcased in this season. She is now lovingly remembered as a delightfully witty monologist and raconteur. Her one-woman shows displayed a sophisticated cabaret-style mix of monologues, songs and comic writing in which she invented roles including a harassed nursery teacher ("George – don't do that"). The compilation will include examples from other comedic talents such as **Victoria Wood**, **Millicent Martin**, **Sheila Hancock** and **Sheila Steafel**.

Everyone's favourite *Carry On* star, **Barbara Windsor** will introduce a unique mash-up of the classic and the contemporary at the **From the Halls** event on **Thursday 16 August** at **The Hackney Empire**. There will be rare archive footage of the music hall star, **Hylda Baker**, and clips of risqué revue performer **Beryl Reid** who became a TV favourite in the 1960s and 70s creating a bevy of memorable characters, alongside material of such talents as **Hattie Jacques**, **Dora Bryan** and **Doris Hare**. These clips will be interspersed with live stand-up from some of today's top female comedy performers.

Diana Dors was Britain's most famous Blonde Bombshell of the 1950s and described herself as "the only sex symbol Britain has produced since Lady Godiva". She is celebrated in **Girls Acting Up** on **Tuesday 21 August** at **BFI Southbank** with rarely seen clips from the 1950s. Dors continued to have a prolific television career with the ITV variety show, *The Diana Dors Show* (1959-61), and as a respected comedy character actress appearing in many sitcoms (*Queenie's Castle*, *All Our Saturdays*) demonstrating her good comic timing and appeal. There will also be clips featuring **Dora Bryan**, **Emma Thompson** and **Peggy Mount**.

Some Girls Do It Standing Up on **Thursday 23 August** at **The Hackney Empire** offers another evening of live stand-up interspersed by archive clips, featuring in particular **Marti Caine**. After working many years on the club circuit in Yorkshire as a stand-up comic and cabaret singer, **Marti Caine** came to national prominence when she won the television talent show, *New Faces* in 1975 (beating Lenny Henry and Victoria Wood). She became the most successful of all the female comedians to have her own TV shows with 10 years of high-profile, top-rating television stardom. Clips from Marti's TV career will be accompanied on-screen by other stand-up stars and impressionists, including **Jo Brand**, **Victoria Wood**, **French & Saunders**, **Karen Kay** and **Gayle Tuesday**.

The season's fifth strand is a stand alone appreciation of **Smack the Pony** (**Tuesday 28 August** at **BFI Southbank**) which ran from 1999 to 2002 (there was a one-off special in 2003). It is arguably the most successful female driven sketch show. Comedy sketch shows were mostly the domain of male comedians and **Smack the Pony** was something different – a comedy sketch show made up of an entirely female central cast and written by women exploring the show's now trademark surrealist situations that often revolved around such themes as unsuccessful relationships and competitive co-workers. Featuring a top core cast of three female comedy performers, **Sally Phillips** (*I'm Alan Partridge*), **Doon Mackichan** (*The Day Today*) and **Fiona Allen** (*Goodness Gracious Me*) with regular appearances by **Sarah Alexander** (*Coupling*), they went on to have significant further careers, starring in a host of other successful shows such as **Skins**, **Miranda** and **Green Wing**. **Smack the Pony** creator-writer Victoria Pile will join us for a Q&A after the screening.

Season curator **Dick Fiddy** will be available for interview.

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Screenings and events taking place as part of the Trailblazers: Queens of TV Comedy season:

Storytellers and Cabaret Stars

Our season kicks off with the brilliant Joyce Grenfell, who had a TV career spanning four decades and whose sophisticated cabaret-style mix of monologues and songs never failed to delight audiences. Although she could be whimsically humorous seemingly at will, she also had a knack of being able to change the mood with a well chosen and devastating line, causing the listener to gasp after having been laughing instants before. A compilation of some of her finest TV appearances will be supplemented by examples from other talents in the field including Victoria Wood, Millicent Martin, Sheila Hancock and Sheila Steafel.

c90 min

Tue 14 Aug 20:30 NFT1

From the Halls

A bumper load of laughs featuring precious archive footage of funny women who at one time trod the boards, interspersed with live performances from some of today's top female comedy performers. Barbara Windsor will introduce this unique mash-up of the classic and the contemporary and among those featured on film will be Hylda Baker and Beryl Reid, (who both fronted their own TV shows) alongside such talents as Hattie Jacques, Dora Bryan and Doris Hare.

Tickets available from both the BFI Box Office and the Hackney Empire: hackneyempire.co.uk / 020 8985 2424

Thu 16 Aug 19:30 Hackney Empire

Girls Acting Up

Diana Dors - the British starlet ("Swindon's answer to Marilyn Monroe") had good comic timing which was exploited by ITV in the 1950s who gave her her own starring show in which she performed sketches with various male guest stars. Later Dors would become a respected comedy character actress in many sitcoms (*Queenie's Castle*, *All Our Saturdays*) and a regular chat show host but we will see her in an earlier guise with rarely seen footage from the 1950s. Also featured will be Dora Bryan, Peggy Mount and Emma Thompson.

c100 min

Tue 21 Aug 18:30 NFT1

Some Girls Do It Standing Up

Another evening of live stand-up supplemented by vintage clips, featuring in particular Marti Caine, who graduated from the world of working men's clubs - via the TV talent show - to become one of the most successful of all the solo women to front her own shows, enjoying eight series of stand-up and sketch shows and starring in a sitcom especially built round her talents. She will be accompanied on-screen by other stand-up stars and impressionists, including Jo Brand, Victoria Wood, French & Saunders, Karen Kay and Gayle Tuesday.

Tickets available from both the BFI Box Office and the Hackney Empire: hackneyempire.co.uk / 020 8985 2424

Thu 23 Aug 19:30 Hackney Empire

Smack the Pony

Not the first female-driven sketch show, but undoubtedly the most successful, and one that in many ways spawned an industry. The stars of the show (Doon Mackichan, Fiona Allen, Sally Phillips) went on to twinkle in a host of other shows (as did occasional guest stars Sarah Alexander and Miranda Hart), while the heavily female-oriented creative team went on to create *Green Wing* and *Campus* and en route invented a new genre of sketch show crossed with sitcom. *Smack the Pony* ran from 1999-2002 (there was also one special in January 2003), thus making this tenth anniversary of its passing a good time to look back and salute the show.

We are delighted that creator-writer Victoria Pile and cast members will be joining us for a Q&A.

Tickets £10, concs £6.75 (Members pay £1.50 less)

Tue 28 Aug 20:45 NFT1

NOTES TO EDITORS

About the BFI

The BFI is the lead body for film in the UK with the ambition to create a flourishing film environment in which innovation, opportunity and creativity can thrive by:

- Connecting audiences to the widest choice of British and World cinema
- Preserving and restoring the most significant film collection in the world for today and future generations
- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

The BFI Southbank is open to all. BFI members are entitled to a discount on all tickets. BFI Southbank Box Office tel: 020 7928 3232. Unless otherwise stated tickets are £10.0, concs £6.75 Members pay £1.50 less on any ticket. Website www.bfi.org.uk/southbank

Tickets for FREE screenings and events must be booked in advance by calling the Box Office to avoid disappointment

BFI Filmstore

The BFI Filmstore is stocked and staffed by BFI experts with over 1,200 book titles and 1,000 DVDs to choose from, including hundreds of acclaimed books and DVDs produced by the BFI.

The benugo bar & kitchen

Eat, drink and be merry in panoramic daylight. benugo's décor is contemporary, brightly lit and playful with a lounge space, bar and dining area. The place to network, hang out, unpack a film, savour the best of Modern British or sip on a cocktail.

There's more to discover about film and television through the BFI. Our world-renowned archival collections, cinemas, festivals, films, publications and learning resources are here to inspire you.

About the Cultural Olympiad and London 2012 Festival

The London 2012 Cultural Olympiad is the largest cultural celebration in the history of the modern Olympic and Paralympic Movements. Spread over four years, it is designed to give everyone in the UK a chance to be part of London 2012 and inspire creativity across all forms of culture, especially among young people.

The culmination of the Cultural is the London 2012 Festival, a spectacular 12-week nationwide celebration bringing together leading artists from across the world with the very best from the UK. It runs from Midsummers Day on 21 June until the final day of the Paralympic Games on 9 September 2012. The London 2012 Festival celebrates the huge range, quality and accessibility of the UK's world-class culture including dance, music, theatre,

the visual arts, comedy, fashion, film and digital innovation, giving the opportunity for people across the UK to celebrate the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Principal funders of the Cultural Olympiad and London 2012 Festival are Arts Council England, Legacy Trust UK and the Olympic Lottery Distributor. BP and BT are Premier Partners of the Cultural Olympiad and the London 2012 Festival.

For more details on the programme, to download the London 2012 Festival official guide and to sign up for information visit www.london2012.com/festival

About The Hackney Empire

Built in 1901 by legendary architect Frank Matcham, Hackney Empire has been providing quality entertainment for 110 years making it one of London's oldest and finest Victorian theatres. Since the turn of the last century, many global stars have graced the stage including Charlie Chaplin, Laurel & Hardy, Houdini and Louis Armstrong to name a few. Now it welcomes over 140,000 people a year to its glittering programme of musicals, family shows, contemporary and classical music, opera and off course the world-renowned pantomime. Situated in the heart of London's East End, the artists who play the Hackney Empire and its audiences reflect the diversity of the borough. Hackney Empire runs regular participatory activity for the local community and young people, including workshops; a community choir, talent competitions and much more. For more information or to get involved visit the website www.hackneyempire.co.uk
Hackney Empire, 291 Mare Street London E8 1EJ 020 8985 2424

***** PICTURE DESK *****

A selection of images for journalistic use in promoting BFI Southbank screenings can be found at www.image.net under BFI / BFI Southbank / August 2012