

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Remarkable Tale of Dorothy Mackaill

Elizabeth Godber

John Godber Theatre Company

East Riding Theatre

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Off the top of your head, who springs to mind when the phrase “Silent Screen Goddesses” is uttered? Gloria Swanson? Mary Pickford? Paulette Goddard? Clara Bow?

Dorothy Mackaill?

Cynically, when I heard about this new play by Elizabeth Godber—now showing at East Riding Theatre—I assumed that Mackaill was just a minor B movie player, whose CV had been exaggerated (a) because she came from Hull and (b) because it would make a good play.

Not for the first time, I was completely wrong.

For a brief period in the late ‘20s and early ‘30s, Hull-born Dorothy Mackaill was a major Hollywood star. That she is a largely forgotten figure now is less a statement on her talent and popularity than it is an indictment of the studio system and the censorious Hays Code. Infuriated by a plethora of movies that seemed to celebrate the seedier aspects of life (Mackaill famously played a secretary turned prostitute in the 1931 drama *Safe in Hell*), the Hays Code sought to impose inoffensive, wholesome family dramas (i.e. anodyne rubbish) by insisting on approving every script. Hence Edward G Robinson, who had gone down ‘guns-a-blazing’ in the 1931 *Little Caesar*, became a monk at the end of 1940’s *Brother Orchid*. Perhaps we could imagine a Hays Code approved version of *Goodfellas* where Ray Liotta, after a life of crime, becomes a trustee of a donkey sanctuary.

Elizabeth Godber has brought to life the unlikely story of Mackaill through impeccable research, witty dialogue and a skilful structure, relying on an ensemble of just three young actresses to tell the story. It’s an energetic, informative and thoroughly engaging tale, tightly but imaginatively directed by Jane Thornton, that played to an enthusiastic full-house at East Riding Theatre on Friday evening.

The exploitation, manipulation and disposal of young actresses by ruthless film producers is not exactly a theme buried in the past; Godber’s skill is to tell the story faithfully and allow the audience to connect with events closer to the present day without forcing the comparison. The image of the corpulent, smug studio moguls discussing the commercial advantages of a censored film industry and the potential for them to control the lives of their artists more than vividly brought to mind the likes of Weinstein and his hideous ilk.

Mackaill’s Hull background is perhaps, if anything, a little overemphasised. Whilst it’s a running gag in the play that whenever she says where she’s from, Mackaill is met with a blank stare of incomprehension, it could perhaps be used by Godber a little more sparingly to greater effect.

However, the clash of cultures between Mackaill and the US studios undoubtedly played well—and to their obvious amusement—with the home audience!

In the title role, Caitlin Townend evokes the passion, naïveté and raw ambition of Mackaill. From the dance studios of Hull to the wartime revue of *Joybells* in London, the *Ziegfeld Follies* on Broadway and finally to the film studios of Hollywood, Caitlin shows the character's growing confidence, but also her weariness with the sometimes superficial world she is trying to conquer. Her palpable outrage at being forced to 'go on a date' with an influential studio boss portends her fate at being dropped by the industry she so assiduously pursued. Whilst Mackaill's Hull roots are a principal feature of the story, Caitlin could soften the Hull accent a little as the play progresses, particularly when depicting her in old age, the 'grand dame' living out her declining years in Honolulu.

As Dorothy's mother (as well as many other roles!), Phoebe Richardson—in her first professional engagement—is excellent. The hypocrisy of the shrill mother who tried to prevent her daughter from fulfilling her ambitions, morphing into the needy woman who 'dined out' on her daughter's success, is portrayed with acid accuracy. However, for me, May Tether is the outstanding performer of the evening. She effortlessly moves from portraying the alcoholic Marion Davies (a close friend of Mackaill), to Mackaill's German first husband and then to the sleazy studio boss celebrating the onset of the Hays Code. May has a 'chameleon' quality and her characterisations are all carefully drawn with astonishing detail, are distinctive and played with perfect timing. That the programme revealed she was trained at the highly selective Trinity Laban Conservatoire came as no surprise.

Music from the era is carefully entwined with the narrative (by musical director Dylan Allcock) and all three performers demonstrate their musical theatre backgrounds with some well executed close harmonies. If anything, greater use could have been made of music to assist and explore the narrative further. A future revival might allow for that. Graham Kirk's detailed 'art deco' influenced set perfectly conjures the magical world of the silent-era movies.

In all, this is a thoughtful, sensitive and intelligent biographical play about a largely forgotten actress—a reputation buried by sexual politics and expediency. Perhaps Elizabeth Godber's work might lead to a reappraisal of this Hull-born star.

**Reviewer:** [Richard Vergette](#)