

SHOWGIRL'S LUCK

aka **Talkie Mad / Show Girl's Luck**

Year of release: 1931 • Screenplay Martin Keith; Songs Jack O'Hagan and Ormond Bulmer

The first Australian feature film to be produced, completed and exhibited with an entire sound accompaniment, *Showgirl's Luck*¹ tells the story of the making of a fictional "first Australian talkie." Initially to be titled "Talkie Mad," the film was directed by Norman Dawn, an American filmmaker who had previously made two films in Australia. The female lead, Susan Denis (aka Katharine Dawn), was the director's wife. Leading comedians [Arthur Tauchert](#) ("the Sentimental Bloke") and [Fred Bluett](#) appear in the film, along with well-known variety entertainers [Peggy Pryde](#), George Lloyd, and [Les Coney](#) (Fred Bluett's real-life nephew). The film's opening and closing scenes comprise musical-style song and dance sequences.

Still from the film.
Courtesy of *Oz Movies*



In late-February 1930, a few months prior to the start of production, [J.C. Williamson's Ltd](#) acknowledged that it had entered into a contract with Norman Dawn that allowed the director/producer "access to stage properties, copyright material, wardrobes, musical libraries, choruses and ballets, as well as the use of the firm's stages when the latter have been equipped for the purpose."² Dawn, who had returned to Australia in late-1929, likely entered into the agreement as a means of speeding up the pre-production phase in his race to complete the film before the 31 March 1930 deadline for the Commonwealth Government's "talkie" competition. Production had to wait until a Technicolour camera and film plant arrived in Australia, however. As both did not leave San Francisco until 18 February Dawn's capacity to enter his film was reliant on the shoot taking no more than three weeks.³

In the end production did not begin until May 1930. Most of the footage was shot at the Lapstone Hill Hotel in the New South Wales Blue Mountains and at the Sydney Showground, suggesting that the J.C. Williamson's offer was never taken up. Dawn and his production company Australian Talkies planned to exhibit the film at a trade screening in January 1931 prior to its public release but were forced to cancel the first and delay the due to the film's already out-of-date sound-on-disc system. Dawn was subsequently forced to transfer the sound to an optical track.



On set
Courtesy of *Oz Movies*

Showgirl's Luck's semi-fictional concept was hinted at by Adelaide's *Register News-Pictorial* as early as 31 May 1930:

Devised by Martin Keith, the scenario pictures the exploits of Dawn's company itself. Players arrive on location to make their first talkie, and the screen reveals both the comedy and the heart-break of it before the picture is in the cans. The idea sounds good. It departs from the back-stage business, yet allows specialty numbers to be dropped in as naturally as if a footlight story were being shot.⁴

¹ Please Note: Although the film's correct title is *Showgirl's Luck*, it was often identified in advertising and reviews as *Show Girl's Luck*. Unfortunately the National Library of Australia's digitised newspaper service, Trove, does not always pick up both names in a search using one or the other title. In order to locate information on this film you need to search under both titles.

² "Making Local Talkies: J.C.W. and Norman Dawn." *Labor Daily* (Sydney) 26 Feb. 1930, 7.

³ "Talkie Race for Big Prize: Australian Revue." *Evening News* (Sydney) 14 Feb. 1930, 8.

⁴ "Australia Makes a Talkie," 9.

The storyline sees Peggy Morton, the star of a tent show touring Queensland, being offered the lead in the first Australian "talkie." When fellow actress Mona Blake finds out about the opportunity she arranges for a telegram, supposedly from the production company, to be sent to her rival saying her services are no longer required. Mona also makes up a story about her seriously ill mother and cadges forty pounds off Peggy in order to travel to her mother's side. Mona instead uses the money to make her way to the Blue Mountains where the shoot is about to start, and succeeds in taking Peggy's role. Meanwhile Peggy's tour closes. By chance she travels to Blue Mountains and finds herself in the same town. Posing as a Swedish maid she secures a job in the hotel being used by as the film company and quickly discovers Mona's deception. Before Peggy has a chance to expose her former friend's deceit, Mona's husband abducts her. However, one of the film's actors, Barry, comes to the rescue and gets her to the set just as the first scene is about to be shot. Mona leaves in disgrace, and Peggy looks set for stardom and a life with Barry. A song and dance number wraps up proceedings.

PHELAN'S TALKIES,
WALLSEND.
"Where the Best Talkies Are."

Wed. and Thursday, Dec. 23 & 24:
Monster Programme. Two Big Special Attractions. Arthur Touchert, Fred Bluett, Susan Denis, Peggy Pride, and Big Cast in the First Australian Talkie, "SHOW GIRL'S LUCK" (Western Electric Recording).
Produced by Mr. Norman Dawn (Producer & "For the Term of His Natural Life").
"SHOW GIRL'S LUCK," Drama and Comedy, replete with scenes of local interest—Queensland, the Blue Mountains, the Nepean River, Sydney Harbour Bridge. Lovely little native bear, and hundreds of interesting local items. A fast-moving, red-hot story. Pretty flappers and funny comedians. Mr. Fred Bluett, well-known vaudeville artist, Mr. Arthur Touchert, whom we have seen in Wallsend in the flesh, talking, singing, dancing to fame in the first Australian Talkie. See the Beauty Ballet and a wealth of local laughs and thrills. All in "SHOW GIRL'S LUCK," a Picture you'll enjoy.

Minimal publicity in the lead-up to its Sydney premiere may well have been a factor in the film's lack of attention in terms of reviews, and perhaps box office activity. Indeed, no advertisements or reviews have been located in research undertaken to date. Most of the information gleaned from newspapers in 1931 and 1932 comes from regional areas. During its initial exhibition phase - late-1931 and early-1932, *Showgirl's Luck* was presented mostly as the feature film, with various Hollywood films and shorts as support. By March 1932, however, the interest in the film as an Australian talkie diminished somewhat and it generally appeared as one of the support programs.

Although the film managed to be released in Great Britain in mid-1933, its public and critical reception was poor and resulted in poor box-office returns. Dawn returned to America and made no further films in Australia.

Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate (NSW) 23 Dec. 1931, 14.



- 1931:** Lawson Theatre, Redfern (Sydney); 2 Dec. [world premiere]
- 55 min.; black and white; sound.
- **Dir/Prod.** Norman Dawn; **Dir of Ph.** Norman Dawn, with Jack Fletcher and Walter Sully; **Des.** James Coleman; **Chor.** Meg Pendrick; **Ast Dir.** Fred Bluett; **Snd.** C.S. Pratt and William Marshall.
- **Cast incl.** Susan Denis (Peggy Morton), Arthur Tauchert (Hap), Arthur Clarke (Barry), Fred Bluett (Hollis), Sadie Bedford (Mona), Paul Longuet (Dud), George Saunders (Uncle George), Peggy Pryde, George Lloyd, Les Coney, Des Tooley, the Loretto Brothers.
- The first Sydney season, presumably running for a week, was held at the Arcadia Theatre beginning Tuesday 8 December. Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper record that the venue was also the home of Dawn's company. Other suburban screenings included: Kogarah (Carlton Theatre; 1-2 Jan. 1932) • Liverpool (Butterfly Theatre De Luxe; 9 Jan.).

Dawn's "Show Girl's Luck" for Sydney Arcadia

GIVING the film its premiere screening at the Lawson Theatre, Redfern (N.S.W.) on Wednesday, Australian Talkies report good country bookings for Norman Dawn's local production, "A Show Girl's Luck." First city showing will be at the Sydney Arcadia commencing next Tuesday.

Everyone's (Sydney) 2 Dec. 1931, 11.

Another print was sent on a regional New South Wales tour beginning Saturday 5 December. The first of these exhibitions appears to have been held at the Dungowan Theatre, Penrith. The film later showed at such places as Newcastle (Phelan's Talkies, 23 Dec. 1931) • Nambucca (Majestic Theatre Talkies; 26-27 Jan. 1932) • Scone (Olympia Theatre; 30 Jan.) • Armidale (Capitol Theatre; 1 Feb.) • Gloucester (Star Theatre; 5-6 Feb.) • Dorrigo (Metro Theatre; 16-17 Feb.) • Lismore (Star Theatre; 19 Feb.) • Kyogle (Tivoli Gardens; 20-21 Feb.) • Port Macquarie (Empire Talkies; 24-25 Feb.) • Grafton (Garden Theatre; 4 Mar.) • Kempsey (Macleay Theatre; 8-11 Mar.) • Maclean (Hollywood Theatre; 12 Mar.) • Taree (Boomerang Theatre; 19 Mar.) • Ballina (Centennial Pictures; 23-24 Mar.) • Crookwell (Crown Picture Theatre; 28-29 Mar.) • Burrowa (Empire Theatre; 2 Apr.) • Murwillumbah (Regent Theatre; 4-5 Apr.) • Grenfell (Royal Theatre; 18 Apr.).

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. The Commonwealth Government film prize was offered in May 1929 as an inducement to prospective makers of talkies. The first grant to be made by any government in the world to a film industry, it was hoped that the £9,000 prize would provide the impetus necessary to help Australian films become the equal of any from overseas.⁵ In the end the judges felt none of the entries were good enough to be awarded either first or second place. The Austin Fay and Arthur Higgins film, *Fellers*, was given the third prize of £2,500.
2. The camera and film plant Dawn brought to Australia in early 1930 was made available to him on the proviso that all developing and printing had to be done in the USA by the Technicolor Corporation. Sydney's *Evening News* also notes that the film would be printed first in black and white, with colour added to later prints. Interestingly Alfred Frith, *Syd Beck* and *Stiffy and Mo* were all proposed as possible cast members as late as mid-February.⁶
3. Although much promoted as the country's first talkie following the discovery of the long-lost print of the film, *Showgirl's Luck's* place in Australian entertainment history has since become the subject of much controversy. See for example the two National Film and Sound Archive *Newsletter* issues from 1987. [Further Reference]
4. Publicity for the film included such notices as:

The first Australian talkie, *Showgirl's Luck*, with its fast-moving plot, beautiful scenery, lovely women and local vaudeville headliners, will be shown at Ballina to-night and to-morrow night. In the cast are many favourites including Susan Denis, Arthur Clarke, Fred Bluett, Arthur Tauchert, Peggy Pride, Sadie Bedford, Les Coney, and many others.⁷

Australia's first talking picture, *Showgirl's Luck*, was a novelty, and gives an idea of the possibility of bigger things. The scenery depicted was magnificent, and while there is room for improvement, it at least represents a beginning. Micky the Mouse cartoon and two gazettes made up a most attractive programme.⁸

The feature on Monday night will be *Transatlantic*, with Edmund Lowe... Also *Showgirl's Luck*, starring Australia's favourites. The first Australian talkie, replete with scenes of local interest. The Blue Mountains, Nepean River and many others. All woven into a fast moving, red hot story, in which pretty flappers and funny comedians rival each other for fame in the making of the first Australian talkie.⁹

AMUSEMENTS.

"SHOW GIRL'S LUCK."

Behind the scenes with the first Australian talkie. Silence! Camera! And the producer gave the word to start filming the first Australian talkie. Australia's pretty flappers and famous vaudeville comedians rivalled each other for fame and close-ups. With stardom in the near distance and salaries for the successful ones, the competition was keen and exciting. No wonder it led to all manner of complications, and a bold plot by a crooked showgirl to steal the reputation of her friend. See the Australian players in their first effort "Show-girl's Luck" at the Tivoli.

Kyogle Examiner (NSW) 19 Feb. 1932, 4.



On set
Courtesy of Oz Movies

⁵ Eric Reade. *Australian Silent Films: A Pictorial History of Silent Films from 1896 to 1929*. Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1970, 169. Reade records that the prize was £10,000. Sydney's *Evening News* indicates it was £9,000.

⁶ "Talkie Race for Big Prize: Australian Revue." *Evening News* (Sydney) 14 Feb. 1930, 8.

⁷ "Centennial Pictures, Ballina: *Showgirl's Luck*." *Northern Star* (Lismore, NSW) 23 Mar. 1932, 3.

⁸ "1/- Picture Night: Thursday's Special Offering." *Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser* (NSW) 3 Feb. 1932, 8.

⁹ "General News." *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser* (NSW) 14 Apr. 1932, 2.

5. During a public examination in the New South Wales Bankruptcy Court, George Saunders, a former Australian Talkies director and cast member of *Showgirls Luck*, admitted that he had lost £1,400 as a result of his association with Norman Dawn and the film company. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on Saunders' bankruptcy petition, noting that other directors also lost a similar amount:

Norman Dawn and his wife were brought here from the United States to produce [the] picture and then Dawn disappeared. [We] learnt that he had gone back to America. He had trouble with his wife and left us high and dry with the picture... The person who lent us the money took possession. The directors lost everything ("Bankrupt," 5).

This in part explains why the film was so poorly promoted, especially given that neither Dawn nor Australian Talkies was involved in the film's promotion or distribution, and that its release was in the hands of people likely outside the film industry. Saunders does not identify the individual who took possession of the film.

FURTHER REFERENCE

- "About the Shows." *Western Mail* (Perth) 21 Aug. 1930, 6.
 "Australia Makes a Talkie: First All-Dialogue and Music Film." *Register News-Pictorial* (Adelaide) 31 May 1930, 19.
 "Australian Talkie: Bid for Federal Prizes." *Telegraph* (Brisbane) 15 Feb. 1930, 9.
 "Australian Talkies." *Sydney Morning Herald*. 11 Oct. 1929. 13.
 "Australian 'Talkies'." *Argus* (Melbourne) 27 Feb. 1930, 11.
 "Australia's First 'Talkie' Discovered." *Newsletter* (National Film and Sound Archive) 7 (Aug. 1987), 1.
 "Bankrupt Radio Announcer." *Sydney Morning Herald* 13 Aug. 1940, 5.
 "Film World." *West Australian* (Perth) 4 March 1938, 4.
 Johnson, Bruce. "We Can't Sleep in the Movies Any More: Talkies and the Legitimization of Australian Jazz." *Screen Sound Journal* 5 (2015).
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 Pike, Andrew and Ross Cooper. *Australian Film 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, in assoc. with the Australian Film Institute, 1998, 155-156.
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 "*Showgirl's Luck*." *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb) [sighted 12/03/2018]
 "*Showgirl's Luck*." *Oz Movies*. [sighted 12/03/2018]
 "*Showgirl's Luck*." *Wikipedia*. [sighted 12/03/2018]
 "Sadie's Luck." *Canberra Times* (ACT) 6 Aug. 1987, 29.

Centennial Talkies Ballina.

TO-NIGHT AND TO-MORROW NIGHT.

DON'T MISS THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN TALKIE.

"SHOWGIRL'S LUCK,"

with a big cast of Australia's Favourites.

And **"THREE WHO LOVED,"** romantic drama, with Conrad Nagel, Betty Compson, Robt. Ames, and others.

AND SOUND NEWS. MATINEE 3.30 TO-DAY.

Saturday Next, 26th March only—"KISSES BY COMMAND," and "THE SPY."

Monday, Tuesday, 28, 29 March—"THE CITY OF SONG," and "LADIES MUST PLAY."

Northern Star (Lismore, NSW) 23 Mar. 1932, 2.

¹⁰ Includes list of known Australian sound films produced or released prior to 24 November 1931.