



Alice Howell

Lived:

May 20, 1886 - April 11, 1961

Worked as:

comediienne, film actress

Worked In:

United States

by Steve Massa

One of only a handful of silent comediennes who ventured into the “men’s terrain” of rough-house physical comedy, at her peak Alice Howell’s name was as well-known to moviegoers as any of the popular male comics of the day, and like them, her films were designed to showcase her talents and the characterization that she had made famous. In her day, her popularity could be compared with that of [Marie Dressler](#) and [Mabel Normand](#), but she is unfortunately not as well remembered. At Mack Sennett’s Keystone Film Company, Howell quickly worked her way up from crowd scenes to featured parts in shorts such as Charlie Chaplin’s *Laughing Gas* (1914), and starred in at least one, *Shot in the Excitement* (1914). In this early one-reeler Alice helps her father whitewash a fence when sweetheart Al St. John comes calling. Complications ensue with a jealous rival, and the film ends with Alice, Al, the rival, Dad, and a couple of Keystone Cops all being chased by flying cannonballs. In her earliest known comedy in which she has the starring role, Howell’s comic timing is already in place as is her capacity for taking punishment: in the course of the film she slips down stairs, gets soaked with water, is chased by cannonballs, and has a rock bounced off her head.

Hired away by Sennett’s former second-in-command, Henry “Pathe” Lehrman, when he set up the L-Ko Comedy Company, Alice was cast to support Billie Ritchie and became popular in her own one-reelers. By 1917, she was such an audience favorite that Julius and Abe Stern formed Century Comedies to showcase her talents, making her, along with Normand and Dressler, the third comediienne to have her own exclusive production unit. Producer Julius Stern justified this decision to the *Moving Picture World* in 1917: “Women have demonstrated on the stage that they can be just as funny as the comedians of musical comedy, burlesque, vaudeville, or farce. We propose to establish Miss Howell as a comedy star upon the screen and we have faith in our determination. Miss Howell has ‘made good’ as L-Ko’s leading comediienne and we are convinced that she will duplicate her past success as a star of her own series” (1135). In a rare surviving

Century Comedy title, *Hey Doctor!* (1918), Alice is a receptionist in a doctor's office that is very short on patients. To remedy the situation she walks down a street dropping banana peels on the sidewalk. As pedestrians begin slipping and falling, Alice hands out cards for the doctor. After Howell and Century parted ways in 1919, the company continued turning out comedy shorts and was renamed Stern Brothers Comedies in 1926.

The character Howell developed was a slightly addled working class girl, and she specialized in waitresses and maids. A round Kewpie-doll face, with large eyes and bee-stung lips was topped off with a mountain of frizzy hair piled high on her head producing the effect of smoke billowing from an active volcano. To complement this look of someone who had kissed an electric light socket, she wore old-fashioned plaid or checkered blouses, long print skirts, and big clodhopper shoes. The mountain of hair and a stiff-backed penguin-waddle walk became her signature trademarks.

As we learn from the *Moving Picture World* in 1919, Howell moved to the independent Emerald Company, which became part of the Reelcraft Corporation and released her best surviving film, *Distilled Love* (1920) (123). Howell plays a farm girl who is framed as the mother of a baby by an evil Oliver Hardy. Forced to leave the farm, she goes to the big city with the baby and dances in the streets for money. The climax takes place at a big society party, which Alice totally destroys in an avalanche of stunts, including riding from room to room on the train of the hostess's gown. One highlight is the gag made famous by [Mary Pickford](#). She reaches for a piece of pie, but sees a placard of "Thou Shalt Not Steal" on the wall, which stops her until she sees a second sign, "The Lord Helps Those That Help Themselves." Another occurs as she arrives in the city with the hungry baby. Howell spots a milk truck, and in a great traveling shot, she runs behind the truck, opens the back door, and produces a hose—one end of which she sticks in a milk can and the other in the baby's mouth. One of Howell's gifts was the ability to combine comedy with pathos, as when she is driven off the farm during a raging storm only to be stopped by a bolt of lightning that just happens to strike her in the rear.

Howell's last starring series was a group of 1924–25 domestic comedies for Universal Pictures featuring a married couple and their goofy butler. While still addled and exhibiting her trademark hair and walk, her character graduates here to a comfortable, middle-class status as she trades in her mismatched costume for more flattering attire. When this series ended, she appeared in one last short, *Madame Dynamite* (1926), for Fox Film Corporation. Howell always maintained that her comedy was based on her own life experiences. In 1917, she told the *New Jersey Tribune*: "The days are not so far in retrospection when I was glad to do any kind of work and I have not forgotten how it feels to stand in line waiting for a chance to do extra work. I wanted the money so badly that I offered to wear any eccentric sort of make-up or take any chances so long as there was a pay check at the end of the week. I often felt then like the down-trodden, put upon, much abused 'slavies' that I struggle to portray humorously today. Most of my scenes are broad farce, but when I get the opportunity I try to register faithfully the character of such a girl" (15).

See also: [Marie Dressler](#), [Mabel Normand](#), [Mary Pickford](#)

Bibliography

“Alice Howell.” *New Jersey Tribune* (1917): 15.

“Alice Howell in New Comedies.” *Moving Picture World* (19 May 1917): 1135.

“Alice Howell, L-KO Comedienne.” *Moving Picture World* (2 Mar. 1918): 1215.

“Alice Howell Joins Emerald.” *Moving Picture World* (7 Oct. 1919): 123.

“Alice Howell in Scrappy Comedy.” *Moving Picture World* (23 March 1918): 1687.

“Alice Howell.” *Motion Picture News Studio Directory* (21 Oct. 1916): 101.

“Century Comedies Attract Buyers.” *Moving Picture World* (2 June 1917): 1465.

Massa, Steve. “Alice Howell and Gale Henry, Queens of Eccentric Comedy.” *Griffithiana* 73/74 (2004): 95-139.

-----, “Alice Howell Filmography.” *Griffithiana* 73-74 (2004): 94-125.

Archival Paper Collections:

Slide, Anthony. *Alice Howell: An Imperfect History*. Unpublished memoir, n.d. [Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library](#).

Filmography

A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Alice Howell as Actress

Caught in a Cabaret. Prod.: Mack Sennett, dir. Charles Chaplin, Mabel Normand, sc.: Mabel Normand (Keystone Film Co. US 1914) cas.: Charles Chaplin, Mabel Normand, Alice Howell, si, b&w, 16mm, 2 reels. Archive: [Cinémathèque Québécoise](#), [Cinematca de Cuba](#), [Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna](#), [Cineteca del Friuli](#), [Danske Filminstitut](#), [Münchner Stadtmuseum](#), [Library of Congress](#), [BFI National Archive](#), [George Eastman Museum](#), [UCLA Film & Television Archive](#), [UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive](#), [Academy Film Archive](#), [Museum of Modern Art](#), [Harvard Film Archive](#), [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia](#), [Lobster Films](#).

Caught in the Rain. Prod.: Mack Sennett, dir./sc.: Charles Chaplin (Keystone Film Co. US 1914) cas.: Charles Chaplin, Alice Howell, si, b&w, 1 reel. Archive: [Cinematca de Cuba](#), [Cinematca do Museu de Arte Moderna](#), [Cineteca del Friuli](#), [Library of Congress](#), [BFI National Archive](#), [Cineteca Nazionale](#), [UCLA Film & Television Archive](#), [UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive](#),

[Deutsche Kinemathek](#), [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia](#), [Cinémathèque Québécoise](#), [Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna](#), [Lobster Films](#), [Danske Filminstitut](#).

A Coat's Tale. Dir.: Walter Wright (Keystone Film Co. US 1914) cas.: Rube Miller, Alice Howell, si, b&w, 1 reel. Archive: [Museum of Modern Art](#).

Cursed By His Beauty. Dir.: Dell Henderson (Keystone Film Co. US 1914) cas.: Charles Murray, Alice Howell, si, b&w, 1 reel. Archive: [Academy Film Archive](#), [BFI National Archive](#), [Lobster Films](#).

Hello Mabel. (Keystone Film Co. US 1914) cas: Mabel Normand, Alice Howell, si, b&w, 1 reel. Archive: [UCLA Film & Television Archive](#).

The Knockout. Prod.: Mack Sennett, dir.: Charles Avery (Keystone Film Co. US 1914) cas.: Charles Chaplin, Mack Sennett, Roscoe Arbuckle, Alice Howell, si, b& w, 2 reels. Archive: [Danske Filminstitut](#), [Library of Congress](#), [Museum of Modern Art](#), [BFI National Archive](#), [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#), [Cinematca de Cuba](#), [Harvard Film Archive](#), [Cineteca del Friuli](#), [Filmoteca Española](#), [Library and Archives Canada](#), [Cinémathèque Québécoise](#), [UCLA Film & Television Archive](#), [Lobster Films](#).

Laughing Gas. Dir.: Charles Chaplin. (Keystone Film Co. US 1914) cas.: Charles Chaplin, Alice Howell, si, b& w, 1 reel. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée \[FRB\]](#), [Cinematca de Cuba](#), [Cinematca do Museu de Arte Moderna](#), [Cineteca del Friuli](#), [Danske Filminstitut](#), [Library of Congress](#), [BFI National Archive](#), [Library and Archives Canada](#), [Cinémathèque Québécoise](#), [Cineteca Nazionale](#), [Cinematca Romana](#), [UCLA Film & Television Archive](#), [Academy Film Archive](#), [Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna](#), [Lobster Films](#).

Lover's Luck. Dir.: Roscoe Arbuckle. (Keystone Film Co. US 1914) cas.: Roscoe Arbuckle, Alice Howell, si, b&w, 1 reel, Archive: [Museum of Modern Art](#), [BFI National Archive](#), [Cinémathèque Française](#).

Shot in the Excitement. Dir.: Dell Henderson (Keystone Film Co. US 1914) cas.: Alice Howell, Al St John, si, b &w, 1 reel. Archive: [Lobster Films](#), [Library of Congress](#).

Tillie's Punctured Romance. Dir.: Mack Sennett. (Keystone Film Co. US 1914) cas.: Marie Dressler, Charles Chaplin, Mabel Normand, Alice Howell, si, b& w, 6 reels. Archive: [Bulgarska Nacionalna Filmoteka](#), [Academy Film Archive](#), [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique](#), [Cineteca del Friuli](#), [Filmoteka Narodowa](#), [Library of Congress](#), [Hungarian National Film Archive](#), [Museum of Modern Art](#), [BFI National Archive](#), [EYE Filmmuseum](#), [Cinematca Romana](#), [Cinémathèque Québécoise](#), [Filmoteca de Catalunya](#), [Harvard Film Archive](#), [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia](#), [Lobster Films](#), [UCLA Film & Television Archive](#), [Danske Filminstitut](#), [Svenska Filminstitutet](#).

Silk Hose and High Pressure. Dir.: Henry Lehrman. (L-KO Comedy Co. US 1915) cas.: Billie Ritchie, Alice Howell, si, b&w, 3 reels. Archive: [Library of Congress](#).

Sin on the Sabbath. (L-KO Comedy Co. US 1915) cas.: Billie Ritchie, Alice Howell, si, b&w, 2 reels. Archive: [Danske Filminstitut](#), [Museum of Modern Art](#).

Their Last Haul. Dir.: John G. Blystone. (L-KO Comedy Co. US 1915) cas.: Hank Mann, Alice Howell, si, b&w, 1 reel. Archive: [Library of Congress](#), [BFI National Archive](#).

Under New Management. Dir.: Henry Lehrman. (L-KO Comedy Co. US 1915) cas.: Gertrude Selby, Alice Howell, si, b&w, 2 reels. Archive: [BFI National Archive](#).

How Stars Are Made. Dir.: John G. Blystone. (L-KO Comedy Co. US 1916) cas.: Alice Howell, Raymond Griffith, si, b&w, 2 reels. Archive: [BFI National Archive](#).

Neptune's Naughty Daughter. Dir.: John G. Blystone. (Century Comedies US 1917) cas: Alice Howell, si, b&w, 2 reels. Archive: [Danske Filminstitut](#), [EYE Filmmuseum](#), [BFI National Archive](#).

Hey Doctor! Dir.: John G. Blystone. (Century Comedies US 1918) cas.: Alice Howell, Billy Armstrong, si, b&w, 2 reels, Archive: [Library of Congress](#).

In Dutch. Dir.: John G. Blystone. (Century Comedies US 1918) cas.: Alice Howell, si, b&w, 2 reels. Archive: [Library of Congress](#).

Cinderella Cinders. Dir.: Frederick J. Ireland (Reelcraft Comedies US 1920) cas.: Alice Howell, Dick Smith, si, b&w, 2 reels, Archive: [Academy Film Archive](#), [George Eastman Museum](#), [Lobster Films](#).

Distilled Love. Dir.: Dick Smith, Vin Moore (Reelcraft Comedies US 1920) cas.: Alice Howell, Dick Smith, si, b&w, 2 reels, Archive: [Library of Congress](#).

One Wet Night. Dir.: William H. Watson. (Universal US 1924) cas: Alice Howell, Neely Edwards, si, b&w, 1 reel. Archive: [George Eastman Museum](#), [Academy Film Archive](#).

That's the Spirit. Dir.: William H. Watson (Universal US 1924) cas.: Alice Howell, Billy Bletcher, si, b&w, 1 reel, Archive: [Library of Congress](#).

Under A Spell. Dir.: Richard Smith (Universal US 1925) Cas.: Alice Howell, Neely Edwards, si, b&w, 1 reel, Archive: [Academy Film Archive](#), [George Eastman Museum](#), [Library of Congress](#), [Museum of Modern Art](#), [Lobster Films](#).

Madame Dynamite. Dir.: Zion Myers, Eugene J. Forde (Fox US 1926) cas.: Alice Howell, Edie Clayton, si, b&w, 2 reels, Archive: [George Eastman Museum](#), [UCLA Film & Television Archive](#).

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Alice Howell as Actress

High Spots on Broadway, 1914; *Cupid and the Scrub Lady*, 1915; *The Curse of a Name*, 1915; *Father Was A Loafer*, 1915; *From Beanery to Billions*, 1915; *Her Ups and Downs*, 1915; *In the Claw of the Law*, 1915; *Life and Moving Pictures*, 1915; *Lizzie's Shattered Dreams*, 1915; *Room and Board – A Dollar and a Half*, 1915; *Rough But Romantic*, 1915; *Tears and Sunshine*, 1915; *Alice In Society*, 1916; *The Bankruptcy of Boggs and Schultz*, 1916; *A Busted Honeymoon*, 1916; *Dad's Dollar and Dirty Doings*, 1916; *The Doubles Troubles*, 1916; *Flirtation a la Carte*, 1916; *Her Naughty Eyes*, 1916; *The Great Smash*, 1916; *Lizzie's Lingerin' Love*, 1916; *Pirates of the Air*, 1916; *Tattle-Tale Alice*, 1916; *The Tempermental Mother-in-Law*, 1916; *Tillie's Terrible Tumbles*, 1916; *Unhand Me, Villain!*, 1916; *Automaniacs*, 1917; *Balloonatics*, 1917; *Her Barebacked Career*, 1917; *She Did Her Bit*, 1917; *Bawled Out*, 1918; *The Cabbage Queen*, 1918; *The Choo Choo Love*, 1918; *Cupid Vs. Art*, 1918; *Her Unmarried Life*, 1918; *Hoot Toot*, 1918; *Untamed Ladies*, 1918; *What's the Matter with Father?*, 1918; *The Beauty and the Boob*, 1919; *Society Stuff*, 1919; *Bargain Day*, 1920; *Convict's Happy Bride*, 1920; *Good Night Nurse*, 1920; *Her Lucky Day*, 1920; *His Wooden Leg-acy*, 1920; *Rubes and Romance*, 1920; *Squirrel Time*, 1920; *Boulevard Profiteers*, 1921; *Who Chose Your Wife?*, 1921; *Love is an Awful Thing*, 1922; *Wandering Daughters*, 1923; *Bluffing Bluffers*, 1924; *Fair and Windy*, 1924; *The Game Hunter*, 1924; *Green Tees*, 1924; *Marry When Young*, 1924; *Mind Your Doctor*, 1924; *A Nice Pickle*, 1925; *Patching Things Up*, 1924; *Rest In Pieces*, 1924; *Should Poker Players Marry?*, 1924; *Spring of 1964*, 1924; *Way Up North*, 1924; *Why Be Jealous?*, 1924; *Why Pay Rent?*, 1924; *Women's Rights*, 1924; *Black Gold Bricks*, 1925; *The Lost Chord*, 1925; *Papa's Pet*, 1925; *Sleeping Sickness*, 1925; *Tenting Out*, 1925.

C. DVD Sources:

The Alice Howell Collection. DVD (Undercrank Productions US 2019)

Slapstick Encyclopedia, Available on DVD (Image Entertainment US 2002)

Credit Report

FIAF does not credit Alice Howell in several extant films in which she appears. Braff's confirms that she was in: *Silk Hose and High Pressure* and *Under New Management*. The publication *Griffithania* confirms her appearance and gives the archive information for: *Hello Mabel* (issue 71), *Lover's Luck* (Issues 72-74), *How Stars are Made* (Issues 72-74), *Neptune's Naughty Daughter* (Issues 72-74).

Research Update

Editorial note (May 2022): Alice Howell's date of birth has now been confirmed as May 20, 1886 (not May 5, 1892, as previously stated).

Citation

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