

BILLY HAINES

b. January 2, 1900

d. December 26, 1973

ACTOR

“Joan Crawford thought we should get married. I told her, that isn’t how it works in Hollywood. They usually pair men who like men and ladies who like ladies.”

William “Billy” Haines was one of the most popular silent and talking film stars of the 1930’s. He left show business when he refused to deny his homosexuality.

Haines grew up in Staunton, Virginia. At 14, he ran away from home with his boyfriend. In 1919, he started modeling in New York City. Haines won the Samuel Goldwyn Company’s “New Faces of 1922” contest and moved to Hollywood to pursue acting. Haines landed his first significant role in the silent movie “Three Wise Fools” (1923), and starred in “Midnight Express” (1924) and “Brown of Harvard” (1926).

In 1926, while visiting New York City, Haines met his future life partner, James Shields, and convinced him to move to Hollywood. Haines transitioned his career into talking movies, including “Navy Blues” (1929) and “Way Out West” (1930). In 1930, the Quigley Poll, a survey of film exhibitors, named Haines the top box office attraction in the country.

In 1933, Haines was arrested at a YMCA for indecency with a male sailor. MGM studio head Louis B. Mayer ordered Haines to enter into a marriage of convenience. Haines refused and was fired. His name was included in the Doom Book, which blackballed him from the film industry for being morally corrupt.

In 1936, Haines and Shields were dragged from their home and beaten by members of the Ku Klux Klan. The incident was never reported to police. The couple remained together for 50 years and established a successful interior decorating and antiques business. Clients included Joan Crawford, Betsy Bloomingdale, and Ronald and Nancy Reagan.

Haines died from lung cancer at 73. Shortly thereafter, Shields committed suicide. They lay side by side in Santa Monica’s Woodlawn Memorial Cemetery.

Haines’s story was the focus of “Out of the Closet, Off the Screen: The Life of William Haines” (2001).

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