



Valeska

Suratt

Owensville, Indiana

(1882 - 1962)

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"Valeska Suratt: The Indiana vamp of
stage and screen
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Photo Courtesy: Wisconsin Historical Society

Valeska Suratt (June 28, 1882 - July 2, 1962) was an American stage and silent film actress born in Owensville, Indiana. When she was six, her family moved to Terre Haute. She dropped out of school in 1899, worked at a photographer's studio, and later moved to Indianapolis where she worked as an assistant in a millinery at a department store. Around 1900, she began appearing in vaudeville and by 1908, Valeska began a successful solo act which featured her singing and dancing while wearing glamorous costumes and gowns. Her success in vaudeville continued and she began billing herself as "Vaudeville's Greatest Star" and "The Biggest Drawing Card in New York."

During her years on the stage, Valeska was noted for the high fashion clothes she wore on stage and her name became synonymous with lavish gowns worldwide. Known as many things including the "Empress of Fashions" and the "Original Gibson Girl," she possibly was one of the models for the famous Gibson Girl sketchings. In 1915, Valeska made her film debut in *The Soul of Broadway* and reportedly wore more than 150 gowns in the film, which cost \$25,000 each. She made a total of 11 silent films during her career, all of which are now considered lost.

By 1920, Valeska's career had begun to wane as the popularity of vaudeville fell out of a favor with audiences as did the vamp image craze. After suing Cecil B. DeMille for stealing the concept for a film, Valeska left films in 1917 and by the end of the 1920s, she had disappeared. In the 1930s, she was discovered living in poverty in a cheap hotel in New York City. After novelist Fannie Hurst learned of Valeska's situation, she organized a benefit for her, raising around \$2,000. However, Valeska squandered the money gambling and never revived her career on the stage or in films.

At the age of 80, Valeska Suratt died in a nursing home in Washington, D.C. on July 2, 1962. She is interred in Highland Lawn Cemetery in Terre Haute, Indiana.

