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Arts / Entertainment Actress Lillian Gish on Lillian Gish

By REED SPARLING

Lillian Gish gave an interview with Reed Sparling at her New York City home this March. The following is the first half of Sparling's account of this interview; the second half will appear Wednesday, April 4, when Miss Gish will be in Hanover to accept the Dartmouth Film Award.)

Lillian Gish is about as close as this country has come to producing a living legend. The endearing and enduring actress, whose stage and film career has spanned the century, is today as popular with the university students to whom she lectures frequently as she is with their grandparents who remember her performances in such classic silent films as "Way Down East," "Birth of a Nation," and other pictures directed by pioneer film-maker D.W. Griffith.

Reasons for the public's unflagging devotion to Miss Gish can perhaps be attributed to three characteristics of hers. First, she is an extremely talented actress. Whether playing a dying matriarch, Ophelia, or a social outcast floating downstream on an ice floe, Miss Gish imbues each role with enormous life and credibility. As she maintains, "You mustn't get caught acting; you must be it



or nobody will believe you."

What is most amazing about her talent, however, is that she had only one acting lesson in her life: "Speak loud and clear or they"ll get another little girl."

Second, Lillian Gish has always surrounded herself with the best. A list of the notables with whom she has worked during her lengthy career reads like a Who's Who of entertainment. She took her first curtain call, at age five, on the shoulder of Walter Huston; danced on Broadway with the divine Sarah Bernhardt; outshot Burt Lancaster; and has worked with every great director from Griffith to Robert Altman.

Finally, it would be hard to find anyone numbering Lillian Gish among his enemies. She is totally unselfish, giving her undivided attention to all: an elderly autograph-seeker, a youthful interviewer, or a director demanding a retake under the sweltering African sun. Poet Marianne Moore once described her as a "true angel lent by Heaven." Former critic Brooks Atkinson summed her up best, however, when he wrote: "Economically she began at the bottom. As a civilized human being she has always been at the top."

Miss Gish lives in the same New York apartment she has inhabited for fifty years. The furniture is pale yet warm, like its owner. The walls, those not covered with photographs and paintings of family and colleagues, are lined with shelves of books.

Halfway through this interview, Miss Gish gave, perhaps, the finest description of her art: "I always see myself as a painter. I use canvas but I don't use watercolors or oils. I only have this to work with (pointing to her body), so it has to be trained to obey every thought. That's why you have to have respect for your body. Treat it well, keep it healthy, don't abuse it. You have a good life."

Actress Lillian Gish

adage?

MISS GISH: I certainly do. But he looks after all people who allow him to, who believe in him.

SPARLING: You began your career at a time when actors were considered the dregs of society.

MISS GISH: Outside of the htels signs said no dogs or actors allowed. I remember one day asking Mother why that was. She said because actors sometimes are stranded in little towns. The manager leaves and they're not paid their salaries. They have no money. They slide down rainspouts and get out of the hotel at night without paying their bills.

SPARLING: What did you learn from this experience, as well as from your immense economic hardships?

MISS GISH: Mother said we must see that we never buy anything we can't pay cash for - one of our earliest leassons. I don't remember Mother ever charging anything or borrowing money from anybody. She'd let us go hungry before she'd ask her Father for a loan. There was something in the world called pride. I wieh it would come back.

SPAULING: Part of the dedication to your autobiography reads, "To my Father who gave me insecurity." Why was this an asset? about the making of film: the running of a camera, lighting, developing, cutting, everything there was to know. We were one family at that time. Thjere were no unions. Each person was as important as the other -- the property man, the electrician, whoever. No one was ahead of anyone.

SPARLING: Do you still prefer to work than to play?

MISS GISH: Yes, if the work is interesting, I do.

SPARLING: In many of your early pictures, you portrayed the sweet, innocent girl betrayed by society. You seem to be the same sweet person in real life. Have you never done anything of which you were ashamed?

MISS GISH: Oh I suppose so. Who hasn't? I know I had my hand slapped many times. My first whipping was from my Father, I'm told. I was three years old and had the bad habit of getting out of my little rocking chair and crawling up into the chair of anyone who got up and left it. My Father tried to break me of that habit but I kept doing it. Finally he put me across his knee, took a hairbrush, and started whipping me on my little bottom. My Grandmother Gish came in and saw what he was doing. She picked me away, took the hairbrush, sat in the chair, put him across her knee, and whipped him in front of me. She said, "That will teach you to do this to a child who isn't old enough to reason." So he was raised pretty strictly, too. SPARLING: Is it true that Irving Thalberg once offered to arrange a scandal for you, in hopes of making your image more popular to the public?

MISS GISH: He said, "You're wa there on a pedestal and nobody cares us knock you off and everybody will c: I didn't know what that meant. Thalberg explained, "Mr. Mayer war arrange a scandal for you." That wa shocking. I thought this meant I w have to give a performance offscreer onscreen. I didn't know if I had that r vitality. It takes a lot of vitality to ac play a part. And I never, I think, gi performance unless I'm being paid after three days I said, "Oh, no, Irv don't think so."

SPARLING: You have never beer terested in maintaining an image. MISS GISH: How can you act out an ir all the time? You are what you are. A you live long enough they'll find what is, so don't try to fool anybody becaus impossible.

SPARLING: You have also alw eschewed publicity.

MISS GISH: I didn't believe in publi Dorothy (her sister, who died in 1968) a always wanted personal disappearan We felt we'd last longer. It was 1 trouble, too.

SPARLING: There was a stretch du the early part of your career when you films all together. MISS GISH: I had signed with UI Artists to make three films. This was before the talkies. I saw my first tal picture, called "The Swan" -- it was Molnar's play -- and it was so slow lasted forever. I thought if I'm going to my voice (and everyone said, "You'r lucky; your voice photographs"), why it in a tin can. Why not go backto whe cam from -- the theatre -- and use it u a proscenium arch. They let me out of pictures under the arrangement that made a talking picture I would make i them. I went away to the theatre and ne even saw a movie for ten years.

SPARLING: A fellow member of D. W. Griffith's company once said to you, "God looks after actors. They're his favorite children."

MISS GISH: It was a man, who, when Griffith was young, had given him a stick of greasepaint to make up with. He said that God looks after actors, that you've never heard of a train wreck or boat going down with a lot of actors.

SPARLING: Do you agree with this

MISS GISH: He allowed me the privilege of making my living from 1905 on. It made for a much happier life later on.

SPARLING: Your dedication also reads, "To D.W. Griffith who taught me it was more fun to work than to plan."

MISS GISH: That was true. When we went into films, we worked 10 to 12 hours every day, seven days a week. But we didn't want to do anything else. There was no place we could go where we had so much fund and such an interesting time as in those films. I was allowed to research and be part of every aspect of them. I knew all

MISS GISH: I think it was Mr. (Louis B.) Mayer who thought of the idea. Mr. Thalberg told me about it because he and I worked together so well.

SPARLING: What was Mr. Mayer planning?

day, a lot of money in that time, even if it was in the movies, and not in the legitimate theater."

By 1912, the Gish girls had been featured in Griffith's early social melodrama, "The Musketeers of Pig Alley," and in 1914, while still a teen-ager, Lillian was a leading lady in the epoch-making "The Birth of a Nation."

"We had to be young then," she says, "because the photography was so bad. Old hags of 18 were playing character parts because the camera made everyone look so old. When I saw the film, I told Mr. Griffith, 'Oh, look, I have a mole on my face. Mr. Bitzer (Griffith's cameraman) gave me a mole.""

She learned everything about the movies from her beloved Mr. Griffith. Of her, "he always said, 'Well, she's a woman, and she has no brains, but 35 per cent of my audience is women, so I want to have her reactions.' He made me look at all the rushes and pick the shots I liked best. I helped write the subtitles. I watched him rehearse the actors, shoot the scene, develop the film."

"Mother thought Dorothy should be the one to leave," Miss Gish remembers, "because I got along with him better. 'Don't tell me; show me,' he always used to say; but Dorothy wanted to talk about it first, and he was in too much of a hurry for that. When Dorothy did talk to Mr. Adolph Zukor, the producer, about making pictures for him, she came home and told us she had refused his offer of \$1 million for a series of comedies. We wanted to know why on Earth she had turned him down, and she said, 'All that money! It might ruin my character!' I felt like telling her, 'Give the money to Mother. It won't ruin her character!""

TYPICALLY, HOWEVER, when Miss Gish did go off on her own, she made sure that she struck a deal in which, besides making money, she had approval of the pictures she was to make and the people with whom she was to make them. Miss Gish made one other memorable film with Seastrom, "The Wind," before she left MGM in the early 1930s and returned to work on the stage. She returned to films in the 1940s, when she laughingly told friends that now she was playing "old ladies." In 1955, she made an unforgettably gallant, indomitable "old lady" in "Night of the Hunter," the only film Charles Laughton directed. She has remained active on stage and screen ever since, completing her 100th film here in 1977 with director Robert Altman's "The Wedding."

"WHEN I FIRST started making movies, we would shoot them in one or two days, and that was that. But we always rehearsed them carefully first. That's why Mr. Griffith took only people who were experienced in the theater or bailet or music. He wanted them to have the discipline of that training. Today, it takes months and millions of dollars to make a film, and they rarely rehearse anything. We never rehearsed with Altman; he doesn't work that way." I asked her, finally, if she could tell. from her long experience, how and why some actresses endured as movie stars. Was it, after all, because they played well to the camera? "It's got to be more than that," she said. "There's something more basic. It's research and study and rehearsal and preparation. Why, my pride is constantly hurt when I see some screen acting today. I watched a bit of a new version of 'The Scarlet Letter' they're showing on television, and I swear that every one of those people could just as well have been walking down 5th Avenue today. When we made movies, Mr. Griffith would say, 'Don't just study your character. Study the whole world around you.' That's the thing they don't remember to do today." It was time then for her to get ready for the picture-taking and for her appearance onstage at the Opera House, an appearance that was to be greeted with a standing ovation. First, however, she wanted to fuss with her makeup a bit. She stood at the mirror in the little dressing room and took out a few pins so that her hair fell down. She turned to ask a question, and in that moment, with her braids now flowing down to her waist, she looked exactly as if she was ready to go before the cameras again, the lovely heroine of the silent screen who had somehow defied the years and survived with all her innocence and strength intact. It was another moment that will not be forgotten.

IN 1920, WHILE Griffith was away filming, he entrusted her with the direction of a romantic comedy she and Dorothy had written, "Remodeling a Husband."

"I always felt that Dorothy had such a wit and a great gift for comedy. She used to say such clever things," Miss Gish recalls, "and it was this quality I wanted to capture, so I found a little magazine story I thought was right for her. It was about a girl who tells her husband that men really admired her looks, and to prove this, she walks down the street and sticks out her tongue at every man she meets to make sure they'll look at her. Years later, they used the same device in that movie with Fred Astaire and Judy Garland, 'Easter Parade.' So that's where that came from. The movie was actually a success. We made it for \$58,000 and it grossed \$700,000.

"But I was too frightened to do it again. I was so young to be directing all those experienced actors, and in those days, you had to know everything about the movies, including the carpentry, to direct a film. Well, I didn't even know what feet or inches were, so I was always getting the dimensions for the scenery wrong."

She made many films for Griffith — "Broken Blossoms." "Way Down East," "Intolerance," and "Orphans of the Storm," among others but after "Orphans" was completed, Griffith gently told her it was time to leave the nest and earn the salary she could then demand.

"We always liked to work with the best people," she says. "That's something I learned from Mr. Griffith, and I tell it to

Actresses had to be young then, because the photography was so bad. 'Old hags of 18 were playing character parts because the camera made everyone look so old.'

young people today: 'Go with the people, not with the money, and you'll be happy in your work.'"

When she went to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, making a salary of \$1,000 a week, "I couldn't sleep at night because I was making all that money and not working regularly, so I went to Irving Thalberg, who ran the studio-oh, I adored him- and told him I had a couple of stories in my trunk that I wanted to make. These included 'The Scarlet Letter.' But they told me I couldn't do it because the women's clubs and churches would object. I said, 'Why should they object? It's an American classic; they teach it in the schools.' So I wrote to women's clubs and churches all over the country and said I wanted to make the movie, and I got enough good response to convince the MGM people that we could make the movie.

"It was my film from beginning to end. Lars Hansen was the leading man; Victor Seastrom was the director. I'm still very proud of it."