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LILLIAN GISH

Kevin Brownlow

If you read in a Victorian novel that an actress who began her career in the early 1800s was still going strong in 1884, you would dismiss it as absurd. But transfer the century to our own, and the dates correspond to the career of Lillian Gish. She made her first appearance on the stage in 1901 at the age of five—as Baby Lillian—acted in her first film in 1912, and recently finished a picture that will be released this year. Lillian Gish is no ordinary actress; by common consent, she is one of the greatest of this century.

You can safely say that about stage players, for their performances survive only in the memory. But Lillian Gish's performances exist in films that have been subjected to scrutiny again and again. The verdict is always the same: Lillian Gish is astonishing.

Meeting her is an exhilarating experience, for her enthusiasm is undimmed. She has the ability to convey her memories as though relating them for the first time. To see that face—the most celebrated of the entire silent era, and so little changed—and to hear references to "Mr. Griffith" and "Mary Pickford" is to know you are at the heart of film history.

She was discovered, if that is the right word, by D.W. Griffith. She credits him with giving her the finest education in the craft of film that anyone could receive. He created much of that craft himself, making up the rules as he went along. She calls him "the Father of Film." And the pictures they made together read like a roll call of the classics of the cinema: *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance* (1916), *Hearts of the World* (1918), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *Way Down East* (1920), *Orphans of the Storm* (1921).

The films she made immediately after she left Griffith, when she had her choice of director, story, and cast, include more classics, such as *La Bohème* (1926), *The Scarlet Letter* (1926), and *The Wind* (1928). In a later chapter of her career, she played in *Duel in the Sun* (1946), *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), *Orders to Kill* (1958), and *A Wedding* (1978).

"We used to laugh about films in the early days," she says. "We used to call them flickers. Mr. Griffith said, 'Don't you ever let me hear you use that word again. The film and its power are predicted in the Bible. There's to be a universal language making all men understand each other. We are taking the first baby steps in a power that could bring about the millennium. Remember *that* when you stand in front of the camera.'"

It was this ideal, this integrity, that made compromise so difficult for both of them. The seriousness with which Lillian Gish took her work was undermined at MGM in 1927 when it was suggested that a scandal might improve her performance at the box office. "You are way up there on a pedestal and nobody cares," said the producers. "If you were knocked off the pedestal, everyone *would* care."

Lillian Gish realized she would be expected to give a performance offscreen as well as on. "I'm sorry," she said, "I just don't have that much vitality." Shortly afterward, she returned to her first love, the theater, and the cinema lost her for the better part of a decade.

What the film producers failed to comprehend was how much value for the money she gave them, for she was part of an older tradition. Griffith had imbued his players with the discipline and dedication of the nineteenth-century theater, and Lillian Gish carried these qualities to unprecedented lengths.

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Culver Pictures

La Bohème*: Gish's death scene with John Gilbert; director King Vidor and producer Irving Thalberg on the set.*

When she worked with the young King Vidor on *La Bohème*, she astonished him with her dedication. He was not accustomed to actresses who prepared themselves so thoroughly for their parts. She felt that research was part of the job. As Mimi, she had to die of tuberculosis, so she asked a priest to take her to a hospital to talk to those who were really dying of the disease.

She arrived on the set with sunken eyes and hollow cheeks, and Vidor asked what she had done to herself. She replied that she had stopped drinking liquids for three days to give her lips the necessary dryness. When he shot the death scene, he decided to call "cut" only when he saw her gasp after holding her breath to simulate death. But nothing happened. She did not take a breath.

"I began to be convinced that she *was* dying," said Vidor. "I began to see the headlines in my mind: 'Actress Plays Scene So Well She Actually Dies.' I was afraid to cut the camera for a few moments. Finally, I did and I waited. Still no movement from Lillian. John Gilbert bent over and whispered her name. Her eyes slowly opened. At last she took a deep breath, and I knew everything was all right. She had somehow managed to find a way to get along without breathing . . . visible breathing, anyway. We were all astounded and there was no one on the set whose eyes were dry."

Small wonder that Vidor said, "The movies have never known a more dedicated artist than Lillian Gish."

The qualities for which Lillian Gish is famous were exemplified in D.W. Griffith's production of *Way Down East*. The picture was based on an old theatrical melodrama so lurid that when she read the play, she could hardly keep from laughing. It tells of Anna Moore, a country girl who visits the city and is seduced by a wealthy playboy by means of a mock marriage. Abandoned and destitute, she gives birth to a baby that dies soon afterward. She wanders the countryside and finds a haven at a farm. But when her secret is discovered, she is turned out of the house. Staggering through a snowstorm, she collapses on the ice as it starts to break up, and is carried toward certain death over the falls. The farmer's son, who loves her, races to the rescue, leaping from floe to floe and grasping her a split second before disaster.

Griffith transformed this material into superb entertainment, and by her presence Lillian Gish gave the story a conviction and a poignancy no other actress could have provided. "We filmed the baptism of Anna's child at night," she wrote in her autobiography, recently reissued, "in a corner of the studio, with the baby's real father looking on. Anna is alone; the doctor has given up hope for her child. She resolves to baptize the infant herself. The baby was asleep, and, as we didn't want to wake him, I barely whispered the words, 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost . . . ' as I touched the tiny temples.

"There was only the sound of the turning camera. Then I heard a thud. The baby's father had slumped to the floor in a faint. D.W. Griffith was crying. He waved his hand in front of his face to signify that he couldn't talk. When he regained control of himself, he took me in his arms and said simply, 'Thank you.'"

The film was made in and around Griffith's Mamaroneck studio, on a peninsula jutting out into Long Island Sound. The winter was so severe that the Sound reportedly froze over. For one scene, shot during a blizzard, three men lay on the ground, gripping the legs of the tripod while Billy Bitzer ground the camera and Lillian Gish staggered into the teeth of the storm. "My face was caked with a crust of snow," she said, "and icicles like little spikes formed on my eyelashes, making it difficult to keep my eyes open. Above the howling storm Mr. Griffith shouted, 'Billy, move in! Get that face.'"

On top of this, she had to shoot the ice-floe scenes. One of her ideas for this sequence was to allow her hand and hair to trail in the water as she lay on the floe. "I was always having bright ideas and suffering for them," she wrote. "After a while, my hair froze, and I felt as if my hand were in a flame. To this day, it aches if I am out in the cold for very long."

Motion picture history is compounded of generous helpings of legend, and some historians have wondered if Lillian Gish has exaggerated her feat. I have wondered that

myself: How can you survive such an ordeal without pneumonia? But an article by cameraman Lee Smith in the December 1921 issue of *American Cinematographer*, a technical journal that has never resorted to press agentry, described how the ice-floe sequence was shot:

> We had doubles for both Miss Gish and Mr. Richard Barthelmess, but never used them. . . . Miss Gish was the gamest little woman in the world. It was really pathetic to see the forlorn little creature huddled on a block of ice and the men pushing it off into the stream, but she never complained nor seemed to fear. But the cold was bitter and Miss Gish was bareheaded and without a heavy outer coat, so that it was necessary at intervals to bring her in and get her warm. Sometimes when the ice wouldn't behave she was almost helpless from cold, but she immediately reacted and never seemed to suffer any great distress.

Lillian Gish came into pictures by accident. In 1912, she and her sister, Dorothy, visited the Biograph Studios in New York because they heard that their friend Gladys Smith was working there. (Gladys Smith had changed her name to Mary Pickford.) In the lobby, the sisters met a hawk-faced young man who asked them if they could act. "I thought his name was Mr. Biograph. He seemed to be the owner of the place. Dorothy said, 'Sir, we are of the legitimate theater.'"

"'Well,' he said, 'I don't mean reading lines. I mean, can you act?' We didn't know what he meant. He said, 'Come upstairs.' We went up there where all the actors were waiting and he rehearsed a story about two girls who are trapped by burglars, and the burglars are shooting at them. We watched the other actors to see what they were doing and we were smart enough to take our cues from them. Finally, at the climax, the man took a .22 revolver out of his pocket and started shooting at the ceiling and chasing us around the studio. We thought we were in a madhouse."

The young director was D.W. Griffith, and the film became *An Unseen Enemy*, the first of many one- and two-reelers to feature Lillian Gish. Thus her career began before the advent of the feature film. It was Griffith who helped to pioneer the feature film in the United States—and it was his epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) that ensured its survival. "I saw the rushes," she said. "Even at that early age, I was terribly interested in film, how it was made, what happened to it. I was in with the developing and printing of the film, the cutting of it, so I'd seen 'The Clansman,' as it was then called. The others hadn't, and I was there that night the rest of the cast saw it for the first time. I remember Henry B. Walthall, who played the Little Colonel: He just sat there, stunned by the effect of it. He and his sisters were from the South. Eventually they said, 'It's unlike anything we've ever seen or ever imagined.'"

When Griffith visited England during the First World War, ostensibly to arrange for the premiere of his 1916 epic, *Intolerance*, he began to prepare for a huge propaganda film to support the Allied cause. He brought over Lillian and Dorothy Gish, traveling in the company of their mother, to play the leads. The journey across the Atlantic was dangerous enough, with constant peril from U-boats, and their stay at the Savoy Hotel in London was enlivened by German bombing raids. But Griffith decided to take them to France, and there they saw the devastation of war at first hand.

"In one of the villages on the way up front from Senlis," said Lillian Gish, "we saw a house that had been destroyed: bits and pieces of furniture and an old coffeepot on its side. What pictures it brought up, because everyone there had been killed. As we drove up in this car to places where they wouldn't send trained nurses—they were valuable, actresses were a dime a dozen—we saw the astonished look on the faces of all the soldiers. They couldn't believe that these people in civilian clothes—we were dressed as we were in the film—would be up there. And we were within range of the long-distance guns."

She arrived on the set with sunken eyes and hollow cheeks; she had stopped drinking liquids for three days to give her lips the necessary dryness.

Way Down East: *She refused a double for this harrowing sequence.*

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In the film, *Hearts of the World* (1918), she gives a heartrending performance as a shell-shocked girl who wanders the battlefield, in search of her lover, carrying her wedding dress. The film established her uncanny ability to portray terror and hysteria, and it established, too, the warmth and poignancy she could bring to love scenes.

But *Hearts of the World* paled by comparison with the next major production of the partnership. *Broken Blossoms* (1919) had none of the usual Griffith trademarks—no cast of thousands, no epic sets. It was based on a story by Thomas Burke about the love of a Chinese man for a twelve-year-old girl. At first, Lillian Gish fought against playing the role. She offered to work with a child of the right age, but felt she couldn't possibly play the part herself. Griffith insisted that only she could handle the emotional scenes.

How right he was. Lillian Gish played the child (changed to a fifteen-year-old) with conviction. She invested the role with a quality so powerful and disturbing that a journalist—watching the filming of the scene where the girl hides in a closet as her father smashes the door with an ax—was overwhelmed:

> She pressed her body closer to the wall—hugged it, threw her arms high above her head, dug her fingers into the plaster. A trickle of dust fell from beneath her nails. She screamed, a high-pitched, terrifying sound, a cry of fear and anguish. Then she turned and faced the camera.
>
> It was the real thing. Lillian Gish was there, not ten feet from the camera, but her mind was somewhere else—somewhere in a dark closet. Tears were streaming from her eyes. Her face twitched and worked in fear. . . . I have always considered myself hard-boiled, but I sat there with my eyes popping out.

Broken Blossoms: *Gish played this scene so convincingly that a visitor to the set was horrified;* The Night of the Hunter: *older—and tougher.*

Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills

It is hard for most filmgoers these days to see silent films. But in London last year, we staged a tribute to Lillian Gish as part of the "Thames Silents" film program. "Thames Silents" is an outgrowth of the "Hollywood" television series that David Gill and I produced a few years ago for Thames Television.

David Gill and composer Carl Davis were determined to present a silent film in a West End theater with a live orchestra, just as it would have been shown in the twenties. In November 1980, they presented Abel Gance's *Napoleon*, and its success led to "Thames Silents" becoming an annual event. In 1981 they showed King Vidor's *The Crowd* and in 1982 Clarence Brown's *Flesh and the Devil*, with Garbo and Gilbert, and later that year Vidor's *Show People*, with Marion Davies—all with new scores by Carl Davis. (Each film is being prepared for television. MGM/UA will distribute the MGM productions on video.)

Last year's event was highly appropriate, for no one has championed the cause of silent film with orchestral accompaniment more energetically than Lillian Gish. We were very anxious that she should make a personal appearance at the event, but, aware of her hectic schedule, we were doubtful whether she would have the energy to travel to London. We underestimated her. Above all, Lillian Gish is a trouper. She said she would come, and come she did.

There was a ripple of anticipation at the airport when her plane arrived. An off-duty immigration officer asked who we were waiting for, and when he heard the name, he produced a camera from his shoulder bag and joined us by the railings. Our spirits soared when we caught our first glimpse of that exquisite face. Miss Gish may technically be an old woman, but she is still astonishingly beautiful.

We broke the news to her and her manager, James Frasher, that a newspaper strike had wiped out our publicity, and that now everything depended on her. "We'll do a lot of radio," she said, "that'll help."

Given one day in which to rest, she then

plunged into a schedule that exhausted everyone but her. When she arrived for a lecture at the National Film Theatre, she was mobbed. Cameramen, professional and amateur, crowded round, and it was all James Frasher could do to get her to the reception room. The theater was packed and she delighted the audience with her enthusiastic recall and her humor.

"Is there any part you wished you'd played?" asked a member of the audience.

"A vamp," she replied. "Oh, I'd love to have played a vamp. Seventy-five percent of your work is done for you. When you play those innocent little virgins, that's when you have to work hard. They're all right for five minutes, but after that you have to work to hold the interest. I always called them 'ga-ga babies.'"

During the next few days, she embarked on a nonstop series of interviews for radio, television, and the newspapers, which gradually returned from the strike. She was interviewed by Carol Thatcher, the prime minister's daughter, for the *Daily Telegraph* and by John Gielgud, an old friend, who talked with her about the theater for the *Guardian*. Ticket sales showed a marked improvement.

The films, *Broken Blossoms* and *The Wind*, were shown in a West End theater called the Dominion, built in 1929. Chaplin premiered *City Lights* there. The twenties decor is still intact, and, more important, there's still a pit for the orchestra.

I was very pessimistic about the size of the audience; I recalled seeing *The Wind* many years ago at the National Film Theatre with seven people. But our tribute averaged more than a thousand people at each of the four performances. As anyone who has tried to program silent films will agree, that is an astonishing turnout.

It was also gratifying to see Lillian Gish's name in huge letters on a marquee again, and to see the crowds gathering before each show with autograph books. The first night, *Broken Blossoms* was attended by some of the most famous names in the English theater, not only John Gielgud, but also Emlyn Williams, who played Richard Barthelmess's part in the remake of *Broken Blossoms*. Silent star Bessie Love came to see her old friend; they had both been in *Intolerance*. They posed for pictures with Dame Anna Neagle, whose husband Herbert Wilcox directed Dorothy Gish in the silent era.

Lillian Gish introduced the film and supplied some of the background. She also explained the importance of the music. Carl Davis had arranged the original Louis Gottschalk score of 1919 (the Gish character's theme, "White Blossom," was composed by D.W. Griffith himself). The audience watched the beautiful tinted print with rapt attention. The occasion was unmarred by those titters that so often wreck showings of silent films. One could feel the emotion, and the applause afterward was tremendous. "I have been going to the cinema for fifty years," said one man, "but this was my greatest evening."

> "When you play virgins, you have to work hard. They're all right for five minutes; after that you have to work to hold the interest."

I hope he was there the following evening, for it was even more impressive. In her introduction, Lillian Gish left no doubt that *The Wind* was physically the most uncomfortable picture she had ever made —even worse than *Way Down East*. "I can stand cold," she explained, "but not heat." The exteriors were photographed in the Mojave Desert, near Bakersfield, where it was seldom under 120 degrees. "I remember having to fix my makeup and I went to the car and I left part of the skin of my hand on the door handle. It was like picking up a red-hot poker. To create the windstorm, they used eight airplane engines blowing sand, smoke, and sawdust at me."

MGM/UA allowed us to provide a new score for *The Wind* (which will also replace the 1928 Movietone recording in the television version). Carl Davis and arrangers Colin and David Matthews created a storm sequence of earsplitting volume. As one critic said, it was as though they had brought the hurricane into the theater. The effect of the film and the music pulverized the audience. Lillian Gish said it was the most exciting presentation of *The Wind* she had seen in years. Some people compared the experience to seeing *Napoleon*, and several found it even more powerful. The critic of the *Daily Telegraph* compared Gish to Sarah Bernhardt and that of the *Guardian* thought the director of *The Wind*, Victor Seastrom, was now on a level with D.W. Griffith.

Lillian Gish received a standing ovation, and days later people were still talking of her astonishing performance in the film. "It was the film event of the year," said George Perry of the *Sunday Times*. "Carl Davis's music was incredible. It felt as though the theater was collapsing. It made Sensurround seem a crude gimmick. Lillian Gish's performance was absolutely wonderful."

The Wind: a physically demanding role, with stunning results.

We said farewell to Miss Gish at her hotel while she was busy packing. Her hair was down, and I have seldom seen her look so beautiful. All of us connected with the event were exhausted, but Lillian Gish was as full of vitality as ever. "When I get back to New York," she joked, "I shall go to bed and I won't get up until 1984. When you think of me, think of me horizontal."

When we think of her, we will think of her striding onto the stage of the Dominion to receive the acclamation of an audience that, thanks to her, has rediscovered its faith in the cinema.

Kevin Brownlow is a filmmaker and film historian. His books include *The Parade's Gone By* and *"Napoleon": Abel Gance's Silent Classic*.