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'Death' of Lillian Gish

By King Vidor

(What was it like to direct Lillian Gish? King Vidor, contacted at his California ranch this week, remembers.)

"Lillian Gish was the type of star who worked very closely with the chief cinematographer. In fact, it was she who brought H. Sartov into the studio as part of her contract. In the D.W. Griffith school, she learned the tremendous value of the exquisitely photographed close-up and she would sit patiently under the lights for a full hour or so while Sartov jockeyed the lamps to a hundred positions.

"Most lighting is done with stand-ins and stars are called upon to sit in the lights only for brief checking periods just prior to the making of the scene. Not so with Lillian. If she felt that the cinematographer might do a better job of lighting her delicate features, she would dispense with the stand-in and assume the job herself.

"Miss Gish was an artist who spared herself in no way. She threw herself wholeheartedly into everything she did, even

dying. She wanted to know well in advance when we would film her death scene in 'La Boheme' (1925). She wanted to get into the mood and stay in it. This caused me some alarm. Perhaps as a precautionary measure, I decided I had better schedule it on the last day of shooting. She asked for three days' notice. John Gilbert, her co-star, and I watched Lillian grow paler and paler, thinner and thinner.

"When she arrived on the set that fateful day, we saw her sunken eyes, her hollow cheeks, and we noticed that her lips had curled outward and were parched with dryness. What on earth had she done to herself? I ventured to ask her about her lips and she said in syllables hardly audible that she had succeeded in removing all saliva from her mouth by not drinking any liquids for three days, and by keeping cotton pads between her teeth and gums even in her sleep.

"A pall began to settle over the entire company. People moved about the stage on tiptoe and spoke only in whispers. Finally the scene came in which Rudolph carries the exhausted Mimi to her little bed and her Bohemian friends gather around while she dies.

"I let the camera con-

tinue on her lifeless form and the tragic faces around her and decided to call 'cut' only when Miss Gish would be forced to inhale after holding her breath to simulate death. But the familiar movement of the chest didn't come. She neither inhaled nor exhaled. I began to fear she had played her part too well, and I could see that the other members of the cast and crew had the same fears as I. Too stunned to speak the one word that would halt the movement of the camera, I wondered how to bridge this fantastic moment back to the coldness of reality. The thought flashed through my mind, 'What if she is dead? What will the headlines say?' After what seemed many, many minutes, I waved my hand before the camera as a signal to stop. Still there was no movement from Lillian.

"John Gilbert bent close, and softly whispered her name. Her eyes slowly opened. She permitted herself her first deep breath since the scene had started: for the past days she had trained herself, somehow or other, to get along without visible breathing. She had to wet her lips before she could speak. By this time there was no one on the set whose eyes were dry