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Cover

John Ford directing "Mogambo"

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ORIGIN OF THE STAR SYSTEM

*Out of Man's Need for Myths Came the
Stars in the Movie Firmament*

By GERALD D. McDONALD

1910 WAS THE YEAR of Halley's Comet, but not everyone in this country witnessed its wonderful passage. On the nights when it was visible, thousands were seated in the dark halls of a Gem, a Rialto, or a Dreamland, involved in a celestial event of another kind. They were watching the moving figures of actors projected on a screen and discovering a galaxy of new stars. In the year of the comet, and the year that followed, the star system made its appearance in the American motion picture—by public demand. Movie fans, not any individual producer, were responsible. They insisted on knowing the names of the players they liked, and producers quickly learned to profit from the public's devotion—however inconstant—to "name players."

From 1905, when the first nickelodeons opened, until 1910, when there were almost 10,000 movie theatres in the U.S. the names of the actors were unknown—for several reasons. The early "manufacturing companies" were intent on publicizing

their own names in the hope that they would be identified in the public mind with a certain type of film, and thus create a demand for a particular company's product. As late as 1909 preferences were expressed, in film exchanges as well as at ticket booths, for the classics and comedies of Vitagraph; the well-told, well-acted stories of Biograph; the outdoor settings of Selig; the theatrical distinction of Pathé importations.

Implausible as it may now seem, the early film actors did not want their names publicized. Most of them came from the stage and expected to return to it, and they feared Broadway producers would not hire them or would not pay them well if it became known they had "posed for the pictures."

The fear was reasonable, for Klaw & Erlanger had actually blacklisted film actors. Other producers—even Daniel Frohman who became the great architect of motion picture prestige—had been actively hostile to the upstart "lickers." The theatre season of 1909-1910 was one of the

worst in years and the motion picture was blamed. Dramatic literature had been pilfered; legitimate playhouses had been converted to movie theatres; repertory theatres had attracted fewer customers; and cheap melodrama and vaudeville had lost the "10, 20, 30" cent audience.

Well established actors also held movies and actors who appeared in them in contempt, and actors working before the camera told friends they were on tour, or vacationing. Thereby they could enjoy the very real advantages of movie work: a fairly good salary, steady work, and even a chance to live at home (though some companies had already followed the sun to Florida and California). They did not have to learn long parts, meet the more exacting standards of the stage, endure the monotony of long runs, nor bother about their voices. They could even lose them, which accounted for Pearl White's film debut in January, 1910. Too many shouts and screams in the melodramas she had been playing made a casualty of her voice.

Part of the public was also contemptuous of the motion picture actor, and its feeling was often coupled with moral outrage. In 1909 films as an influence for evil was a question of grave concern to the courts, the press, and the pulpit. Case histories were compiled to show how movies had ruined lives and turned youngsters toward crime. It was in the heat of such controversy that the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures was organized to bring sanity and reason to the solution of the

problem extremists had made acute.

Behind the scenes, with the public scarcely aware of its bitterness, another conflict raged: a war for control of the screen. Ten companies were licensed to use the patents which protected the inventions on which America's film-making was based and they and trust-busting Independents fought with all the stratagems of pirate, smuggler and thug. Actors were drawn into this game of making or breaking the power of a company, and in the resulting publicity the star system gathered new force.

Before 1910 the primitive technology of the movies tended to prevent the emergence of stars. Film stock companies consisted of a small group of actors augmented by office girls, studio workmen and passers-by. Some of the actors, of course, were incompetent, unattractive, and void of professional integrity. Even good actors did not understand that they should moderate their movements before the camera, and move closer to it if they were to be clearly seen. They cupped their ears to listen, held hand over brow to look. They used too much make-up, too much facial expression, too many violent gestures. They disregarded the facts of rational behavior when they were supposed to be concealed or within the hearing of another character. In the standard wedding scene, bride and groom faced the camera and the minister stood behind them mugging for the camera's notice. Bad scenes were almost never re-shot. If a "Keep Off the Grass" sign turned up in a film of medieval England, it stayed there.

Vitagraph considered it news when it re-shot 125 feet of film because an actor had no calling card in his pocket when the moment came to present it. Even advertising was introduced into a few films in 1908.

These crudities were not overlooked and the film enthusiasts of the time agitated against them. One of the most effective of these gadfllys was Frank E. Woods, the film critic of the "Dramatic Mirror," who has never received the recognition in motion picture history he deserves.

In the Biograph and Vitagraph films of 1909 a new American technique of film acting was evolving from the stylized pantomime of French movies, then considered the most advanced, and also different from the operatic style in the Italian pictures of several years later, when Italian films led the world. (Though European films featured star performers, including "the divine" Sarah Bernhardt, only one—Max Linder—became really popular here.)

Simultaneous with the improvement in acting were advances in photography. Flickers and jumps were largely overcome, and the shadow images on theatre screens began to flow smooth and sharp. Film story-telling also acquired clarity and force.

These improvements increased the public's interest in particular actors and actresses and hundreds of letters were sent to producing companies inquiring who the actor was who jumped from the roof, who was the actress who played the Indian maid, who was "The Vitagraph Girl," "The Biograph Girl," "The Kalem Kid."

And so, in 1910, film actors began



America's sweetheart had business sense to get screen credit.

Only one company resisted this development and it was the most progressive one of its time. Biograph had introduced studio lighting, the comedy chase, cross-cutting, and had produced the best American films of 1909. When D. W. Griffith was asked if Mary Pickford knew how many letters about her had come to the studio, he replied that he had never told her because "I don't want her asking for a raise in salary."

But money was not the only reason. Biograph believed the play's the thing, and that an able director and an excellent acting company were more important than individual actors. Biograph even fired its most valuable player, "The Biograph Girl," when she asked Essanay if she and her husband could work for it as a team. When American fans asked about a favorite actor they



Stars helped Laemmle to muscle in

were told that Biograph players "renounce their names when they join the company," or "have their names locked in a big safe and only get them back when they leave."

A curious situation was created for Biograph when the well-known Mabel Normand came to work there after being with Vitagraph, and the even better-known Mary Pickford returned to Biograph after her publicity build-up by IMP and Majestic. Each of these actresses made a good showing in the first film popularity contest ever held, despite not having received a line of Biograph publicity. They were the only Biograph players to get any votes.

It was not until April, 1913, after Biograph had lost many actors who later became stars, that it began to

give screen credit and issue lobby posters naming its "stars." Biograph's superiority had been due to the ability of its director, D. W. Griffith, and it never recovered when he left the company and took Blanche Sweet, Mac Marsh and Lillian Gish with him.

A few well known stage players, though not the great stars, had appeared on the screen before 1910. Henry E. Dixey played *David Garrick* in 1908, and Miss Cecil Spooner had attempted the dual roles of *The Prince and the Pauper* the following year. When they advertised these celebrities the film companies made it clear that it was by special arrangement and not a departure from their policy of complete anonymity for film actors.

In the summer of 1909 Carl Laemmle became an independent producer and began to fight the Trust. He was determined to take advantage of the public's enthusiasm for screen personalities, and signed the most popular figure in films, "The Biograph Girl," as his leading lady.

The little blonde with a sunny smile, who looked like Harrison Fisher's conception of the ideal American girl, was the talented Florence Lawrence. As a child she had been billed as "Baby Flo, the Child Wonder," and was a veteran of tent shows and stock. She reported to the Edison studio in January, 1907, and stepped into *Daniel Boone, or Pioneer Days in America* without pausing to remove her high-heeled slippers.

She next worked at Vitagraph, and played a wide variety of roles, and was the American screen's first Juliet.

She then went to Biograph, and received more personal acclaim in the summer of 1909 than had ever been given a film player. As "The Biograph Girl" she became the "great silent celebrity."

Carl Laemmle neatly solved the problem of publicizing Florence Lawrence. Her name was quite unknown and Laemmle was not the man to advertise a rival company by continuing to call her "The Biograph Girl." His company was known by the initials IMP (Independent Motion Pictures) and he solved his problem by publishing Miss Lawrence's famous face in "Moving Picture World" above the caption "She's an Imp."

Laemmle, who later built a grandstand at Universal City so the public could feast its eyes on movie stars, stopped at nothing in his early promotion campaigns. When newspapers published a story that Miss Lawrence had been killed in St. Louis, Laemmle packed Miss Lawrence and her leading man (King Baggott) off to that city to prove it wasn't true. He also accused the Trust of starting the rumor. His publicity campaign was so well planned the astute suspected Laemmle started the rumor himself. More people met Miss Lawrence's train than had turned out for President Taft a few weeks before.

It is remarkable that in this first public encounter of a motion picture queen with her subjects, everyone seemed to know what such occasions called for. With sure instinct the crowd surrounded her, tried to see her, to speak to her, to obtain a memento. They ripped the buttons from her coat and made off with her

hat. Miss Lawrence fainted. There followed personal appearances at picture houses, the first ever arranged for a star, with Miss Lawrence and King Baggott demonstrating how motion pictures were made.

Immediately thereafter Laemmle billed her as "America's most popular moving picture actress." Letters poured in, the timeless type of letters in which the earthbound fan approaches his favorite star. "Dear Florence," one admirer wrote, "I am taking great pleasure in writing you. I would like to know if a girl of 16 without experience can pose. I never had any experience at all but I have a great deal of talent for it. I can roll my eyes every which way. My one great wish was to pose with you. Why I simply dreamed about you . . . You made me cry, laugh and you made me see things different. Florence I would like you to answer this foolish letter. How you will laugh (ha ha ha ha ha). Please answer me because I will be waiting patiently for an answer. . ."

When Florence Lawrence went to Lubin after a year with IMP she was



Florence Lawrence lacked business sense

joined by Arthur Johnson, who had played with her at Biograph. Tall, dark, and handsome, he had been a very special heart-throb since his appearance in *The Adventures of Dolly* (1908), the first picture Griffith directed. It was not until Johnson joined Reliance in the fall of 1910 that he received his first billing under his own name.

Lacmille knew how to pick winners and he replaced Florence Lawrence by taking a second gold-mine from Biograph. She was the leading player in *Willful Peggy*, which had been voted the best picture of 1910, and people everywhere wanted to know the identity of that "pretty, warmhearted, impulsive girl." The name was Gladys Smith—later Mary Pickford.

Florence Lawrence, Arthur Johnson and Mary Pickford were all Griffith-trained alumni of Biograph, though Miss Lawrence's association with that company began through a fluke. Griffith had observed the work of Florence Turner ("The Vitagraph Girl"), had admired her acting, and had been especially impressed by her ability to ride a horse. He sent his scouts to Brooklyn to get her for his company. Miss Turner had left for the day, and Griffith's emissaries gave his message to Florence Lawrence.

Florence Turner was the first film actress to become a member of a permanent stock company, when the group known as the Vitagraph Players was formed in October, 1907. She was dark and magnetic, and had expressive eyes and a determined chin. Some of her contemporaries were impressed by an "intellectual element"



Florence Turner in A DISCARDED FAVORITE

in her work, but most people were fascinated by the inexhaustible range of her mimicry. She had played everything, she once said, except a baby and a policeman. Though she was lovely as classic heroines, she preferred the roles of boys and old women, and was amusing and quite unrecognizable in her make-up for slapstick. In one picture she acted alone, without benefit of subtitles, and in another, years later, she imitated the popular stars of the day—from Richard Barthelmess to Mae Murray.

Florence Turner's name was first seen on the screen in May, 1910, and immediately a demand for personal appearances came from all over the New York area. Crowds were turned away from these "Vitagraph Nights." She was a good entertainer and knew how to hold an audience, and was one of the few movie stars whose ap-

pearance in person was never a disappointment. Even the comic John Bunny, the first film star to earn a thousand dollars a week, let people down when he seemed fatter and funnier in films than in person.

A song called "The Vitagraph Girl" was current in 1910 and it was used, with illustrated slides in color, whenever Florence Turner appeared. When the tenor sang

I'm in love with the Vitagraph girl,
The sweet little Vitagraph girl,
Each moment a picture of romance
or hate.

Her tragedy's bully, her love simply
great.

the audience would break into applause and demand an encore. One line of the song declared "Proposals she's had by the thousand or more." In her interviews Miss Turner said the proposals numbered three thousand.



Costello wouldn't carpenter

During this year of her triumph Maurice Costello was her leading man. He had been a popular Brooklyn stock actor in the fall of 1909 when, with an engagement seven weeks in the offing, he found himself stone broke, and offered his services to Vitagraph. He was astonished to find that Florence Turner, the leading lady, worked on costumes whenever she was not acting, and that he was expected to help as a carpenter in odd moments. Offered a long-term contract, he won a revolution when he said: "I am an actor and I will act—I will not build sets and paint scenery."

When Costello first appeared before the camera he improvised words suitable to the action, then paused for Miss Turner's response. She stared at him in astonishment and gave him to understand motion picture actors were not supposed to read lines. Costello insisted on dialogue, and his audiences were pleased to find they could often read his lips.

Costello was not guided in his acting by Delsarte but by the man in the street. Other actors approached a relatively natural style, but Costello seemed really relaxed. He was one of the first actors to use music to stir his emotions, and Wallace Reid, who was with Vitagraph in 1911, played his violin so Costello tears might fall. One of Costello's greatest successes was *A Tale of Two Cities*, probably the best film of 1911. Florence Turner had the feminine lead in it. In the final part of that picture (it was in three reels, each separately released), the young Norma Talmadge's performance started

her on the road to fame.

Costello accepted the nickname "Dimples" without protest, but made his studio work to publicize his full name. When Laemmle tried to get him as leading man for Florence Lawrence, he demanded, and got, screen credit, a series of personal appearances, and widespread display of his portrait. A theatre was named in his honor. Later he was given all of his own films to direct.

Handsome, attractive to women, and the screen's first great lover, he was also the winner of the first film popularity contest. In spite of the fact that he was known to be married, and to have two small daughters (Helene and Dolores) on the Vitagraph payroll, he was the ideal matinee idol of the films, and possibly the first film actor to comply with mail and telephone requests for his photograph. In 1912 he played in a comedy, *The Picture Idol*, in which a motion picture actor is beset by an infatuated girl—and played it with authority.

Costello was also the first film actor whose career was damaged by unfavorable publicity about his personal life, and by 1916 his popularity had sharply declined. He attempted comebacks throughout the next twenty years. In 1920, when he played the villain in a Corinne Griffith picture, he was an almost forgotten figure, so short is the public's memory. His best role in later years was given him by Norma Talmadge, when she generously asked him to play the father of Armand in her production of *Camille*. He had been her first leading man and had stood by her

when Vitagraph decided she could never learn to act.

Florence Lawrence and Florence Turner were also in Hollywood in the twenties and thirties hoping for more than bit parts and extra work. At the peak of her career Miss Lawrence had organized her own company, as Helen Gardner had done. She had no sooner rallied from its financial disaster than she was injured in a studio fire scene and forced to give up acting. Miss Turner organized her own producing company in England in 1913. She was a great success, but her company couldn't survive the difficulties of War I, and when she returned to America she was unable to reclaim the position she had once held. In 1936 Florence Lawrence and Florence Turner were on the same studio lot as extras in *One Rainy Afternoon*. The producer of that picture was Mary Pickford, who had worked as an unknown when they were the country's best loved stars. A year later Miss Lawrence committed suicide. Miss Turner died in the motion picture actors' home in 1946. Maurice Costello died in the same home a few years later.

In 1910 "Moving Picture World" suggested that a cast of characters, similar to those printed in theatre playbills, be flashed upon the screen at the beginning of each picture, and by the end of 1911 this was sometimes done. The name of the leading player had appeared in a title frame as early as 1910, but it was not a common practice. Inserting a close-up shot of the leading player after the film's title, occurred in 1911, and

introducing a leading actor by name in a subtitle when he first appeared in the course of the film's action, probably began in 1912.

It is difficult to trace the evolution of screen credit for actors, and no one has been so rash as to try it until now. But one other actor was "the first" to receive it, according to statements that go back many years.

Max Aaronson became famous as Broncho Billy. As G. M. Anderson he had been on the stage, and first worked in motion pictures in 1902 at fifty cents an hour. In the following year he appeared in *The Great Train Robbery*, in which, as he later recalled, he played "everything but the camera"—a bandit, a train passenger, a fireman, and the tenderfoot in the dance hall scene, the spot in this historic film where he is most easily recognized. He was to have been in other scenes, but was injured when thrown from a horse. It was only after many falls and the practice of many years that the movies' first great cowboy was reasonably sure of his seat in a saddle.

Anderson played with Edison, Vitagraph and Selig before he organized the Essanay Company with George K. Spoor in 1907. In the following year he began his annual trips to the West, where he could make cowboy pictures without telephone poles and apple orchards in the background. From then until his retirement in 1915 he wrote, directed and acted in 375 Western shorts. In 1916, not long before Essanay went bankrupt, he sold his interest in that company to Spoor. He was one of the vanguard that opened the way for the



Broncho Billy left Essanay in time

stars and is still living comfortably in Los Angeles.

When it was clear that the "nickel show fiends" could only be satisfied by the star system, the producing companies competed with each other for the most popular players. Actors switched from company to company, and their salaries mounted. Two new Independents — American and Reliance — took from Biograph and Essanay such desirable talents as J. Warren Kerrigan, Henry B. Walthall, Arthur Johnson, James Kirkwood and Marion Leonard. Lubin acquired Ethel Clayton from Essanay. When Kalem introduced the lovely Alice Joyce and the valiant Ruth Roland, they snatched Carlyle Blackwell from Vitagraph to be Miss Joyce's leading man. Mary Fuller left Vitagraph to become the most important of the Edison players. Vitagraph took Edith

Storey, one of the most remarkable actresses of the silent screen, from the Melies Company, and introduced Earle Williams, whose career was to be the subject of the first book ever published about a motion picture actor. The Selig Company acquired Kathlyn Williams, and promoted Hobar Bosworth, an early pioneer who wrote in his journal after his first experience in films: "All Saturday and yesterday I acted as leading man before a kinoscope, a strange but not unpleasant experience, and I am looking forward to seeing myself act when the films are given here. I was paid \$125." Tom Mix began with Selig the career that made him the legendary figure which grew, as folklore does, even after he had died.

It was the fan magazines that gave film actors their greatest publicity—except, of course, for films themselves.

The first one, "Motion Picture Story," appeared in February, 1911. Although it included a "Gallery of Photoplayers," its first issues were devoted almost entirely to short narratives based on the plots of current films. The magazine was deluged with inquiries about the actors—their age, marital status, color of eyes and hair, home addresses. The editor ruled such inquiries out of order, but he did try to crush rumors—often spread in those days—that screen children were midgets and that actors absent from the screen were dead.

Two contests to determine the best film plays had been conducted before: "Motion Picture Story" asked its readers to choose which of the film stories it had published were the best. The response was significant but set-

ted nothing, for most of the votes were for actors and not for the stories. The magazine did not repeat its naive mistake, and from then on fan magazines ran contests after contests to determine actor popularity.

The actors who rode the crest of the wave in 1910 and 1911 were not called stars, for that word was not yet used in connection with film. They were still called "picture players," and still worked in organizations modelled after the theatrical stock company, with leading ladies and leading men.

By the end of 1911 a constellation had been formed that dominated the public's gaze. New names appeared—Anita Stewart, Clara Kimball Young, Charlie Chaplin. Then the best acting talent of the stage capitulated and entered the movies. But even after that the original "picture players" continued to hold, or increase, their popularity.

The star system was well established by World War I. Salaries rose beyond credibility, production became wholly geared to the star vehicle, and the box office power of the great favorites supported the pictures of lesser stars. The industry discovered the shattering facts that Charlie Chaplin could work only for one company at a time, and that Mary Pickford was a unique phenomenon. As producers paid out more and more of their earnings to their actors, and exhibitors grieved on those off-nights when they played films that had none of the public's favorites, there were many in the movie business who wished the star had never been born.

SOUND TRACK NARRATION

*Its Use Is Not Always a Resort of
the Lazy and Incompetent*

By GOTTFRIED REINHARDT

NARRATION ON THE sound track has become so common in the last ten years that audiences now accept it, and film-makers now use it, at practically any point in any kind of picture.

Nevertheless, its use has been much debated, especially by lovers of pure cinema. But I think it can be demonstrated that, even when shockingly used, narration on the sound track never seems *unnatural*. And if this be so, we must acknowledge that sound track narration is as inherent a part of a film as any of the other cinematic means.

Sound track narration has an amazingly versatility, and hence is especially susceptible to abuse. Writers can, and do, use it as a crutch, as do producers and directors.

But there are some stories which cannot be told without it, and I have often studied clumsinesses and obscurities in silent films, and in films of the early years of sound, that sound track narration would have obviated.

One of the most important facts about sound track narration is that it unequivocally fixes the audience's point of view. And, as everyone knows, good dramaturgy requires that the audience must identify with a character very early if the play or

film is to be effective. Sound track narration makes doubly certain that the audience knows who it is rooting for.

There are some scripts, no matter what their art or artifice, in which identification cannot be assured without extra assistance—of a kind sound track narration alone can supply.

Some say sound track narration is a form of dictation of what the audience shall think or feel. This is naive. If you place the camera in one place rather than another, you thereby dictate what the audience will experience. You dictate when you cast Greer Garson instead of Bette Davis for a particular part. All art is dictation. It is the appropriateness of a particular artistic means to achieve an artistic end that matters.

I would like to emphasize this: sound track narration has one virtue the other cinematic means do not, i.e., the psychological affect produced by a human voice speaking in tones that suggest objectivity and intimacy. The audience unconsciously feels it is being confided in, is being let in on something. What other device—except the soliloquy—can do this? How much more natural sound track narration seems to men and women today than the soliloquy.

When I was producing *The Red*