Lillian Gish Relents, Enjoys Comedic Role


NEW YORK — Lillian Gish’s fame is rooted in drama and tragedy, but, for her 104th film, the legendary actress has chosen a comedy. In “Sweet Liberty,” Alan Alda’s genial spoof of movie making, she portrays, all too briefly, the hero’s cantankerous but beguiling mother, who has slept in her living room for 11 years “because the devil is in the bedroom.” The hero (Alda), asked how long his mother has been crazy, replies, “All my life.”

Gish said she was at first reluctant to portray such a quirky character but agreed to do so during a talk with Alda because he is such “a beautiful, charming man.” Your face, she said, mirrors your soul.

“Sweet Liberty,” which Alda also wrote and directed, centers on a professor who is plunged into a summer of madness when a film company comes to his campus to make a movie of his book about the American Revolution. The comedy, co-starring Michelle Pfeiffer, Michael Caine and Lise Hilboldt, opens in Chicago Friday.

Gish, who is 86, said her uneasiness over making a comedy faded quickly because of Alda’s “thoughtful, gracious direction.” “My scenes were all amusing, and I had great fun playing the off-center woman,” she remarked.

“The film was easier to make than most because it was shot in beautiful summer weather and nearby, around Sag Harbor, Long Island.”

“Making the movie reminded me of D.W. Griffith back in 1912,” she recalled. “There was no place we could go that was as happy as when we were shooting, and this film was just like that.”

Prior to “Sweet Liberty,” Gish’s most recent movie was a 1978 black comedy, Robert Altman’s “Wedding,” in which she played a spirited matriarch. In an interview in her elegant, book-lined apartment off Sutton Place, the actress said she saw few new movies because of their pervasive violence and sex, adding, “The love scenes I did years ago were sensitive and romantic, but in today’s lovemaking, couples are trying to swallow each other’s tonsils.”
Turning pensive, Gish said softly, ``Honey, mankind can now destroy itself.'' She said her chief concerns, besides nuclear annihilation, are

``trillion-dollar budget deficits`` and the preservation of films. Since she can do little about nuclear dangers and budget deficits, she concentrates on rescuing films by such preeminent directors as Griffith, who, she said,

``gave films their form and grammar.``

The petite actress, with her fragile, porcelain beauty and spiritual vibrance, was the ultimate Victorian heroine in such Griffith classics as

``The Birth of a Nation`` (1915), ``Broken Blossoms`` (1919), ``Way Down East`` (1920) and ``Orphans of the Storm`` (1922). When the director released her from her contract in 1922 after a nine-year collaboration, explaining he could no longer afford her, Gish went to MGM, where, over five years, she starred in such successes as ``The White Sister,`` ``The Scarlet Letter`` and ``The Wind.``

``I left Hollywood in 1929,`` she said, ``because Louis B. Mayer wanted to `take me off my pedestal and arrange a scandal` for me.`` Since then, she has appeared in scores of plays and 16 films.

For career achievement, the actress has won a special Academy Award and tributes from the American Film Institute and the Kennedy Center. Other countries, she said, have given her even more awards. Asked to total them, she waved toward a cluster of plaques and replied, ``I`m terrible with numbers, but they`re all around here.``

In recent weeks, Gish has worked to raise funds for film preservation at the George Eastman House in Rochester, N.Y., and helped the Lincoln Center Film Society pay tribute to Elizabeth Taylor. In coming weeks, she will be honored at a reception given by the Smithsonian Institution and toasted by the Museum of the City of New York at a luncheon at the Hotel Pierre. She will also travel to Vancouver, Canada, to attend Expo 86 and a film festival at which Jeanne Moreau will screen her new film about Gish`s life and career.

In a chat the other day, conducted between sips of lemonade, Gish was wearing a long velour gown--blue, like her eyes--and an opal pendant. Her long, frost-blonde hair--tied in a crownlike bun--is now white, and her skin is still very white, with only a trace of makeup. When not working on a movie or play, she said proudly, ``I never go to beauticians or hairdressers.``

Her apartment is outfitted with 18th Century French-style furniture, mostly gold and green. Some 30 small photographs and daguerreotypes of relatives adorn a small, brocade-covered table in the living room. Lining the back hall are large photos of relatives, friends and idols such as Eleonora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt, before whom Gish danced at the age of 6.
There are several photographs of a longtime friend, Helen Hayes, Miss Hayes` husband, Charles MacArthur, and their son James, who is Gish`s godson. Above the living room fireplace hangs a portrait of Gish that appeared on the jacket of ``The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me,`` a 1969 memoir she wrote with Ann Pinchot. Gish has lived in the Sutton Place area since 1929.

The actress has worked 81 of her 86 years. When she was 5, her father deserted the family, and she, her mother and later her younger sister Dorothy became actresses in road companies. They were often hungry and sometimes had to live in filthy, leaking hovels. She had only five months of formal education, at the age of 11.

Gish never married despite many proposals. ``A good wife,`` she explained, ``has a 24-hour-a-day job, while acting has required me to work up to 12 or 14 hours a day. I didn`t ruin any dear man`s life, and I`m grateful for that.``

Silent-screen Gem Lillian Gish Was Never One To Put On An Act

September 18, 1986|By Bob Lundegaard, Minneapolis Star and Tribune.

MINNEAPOLIS — The First Lady of the Silent Screen entered the banquet room and 900 people rose to their feet.

Lillian Gish looked astonished.

``How can I thank you?`` she said, as the applause subsided. ``If you could feel my heart beating, you`d know how I feel. God bless you.``

Lillian Gish has been receiving ovations like that for seven decades. It`s a triumph of her acting skill that she makes you think she`s experiencing it for the first time. Either that or--what`s equally likely--she`s modest enough to be genuinely surprised by the acclaim.

Gish was in Minneapolis for Cinecon 22, the annual meeting of film buffs from across the country who this year paid tribute to her late sister, Dorothy. The sisters costarred in some of the most memorable films of the silent era, including ``Orphans of the Storm,`` an exciting melodrama set during the French Revolution that was made in 1921.

It was hard to believe that the star of a film that was made 65 years ago was still around to talk about it. Even more amazing is that she`s still working. She is now in rehearsals in Maine for her 106th film, ``The Whales of August,`` in which she costars with another Hollywood legend, Bette Davis. They play widowed sisters in the comedy/drama, which will be directed by Lindsay Anderson.
Gish and Davis have never acted together. In fact, Gish recalled, they’ve only met once or twice. ``When you’re working, you haven’t time to go and see all the other actors and actresses.``

And Gish has always been busy in a career that is as old as this century. Her exact age is a mystery, but it’s somewhere around 90, and she started acting when she was 5.

``I didn’t have the privilege of growing up and going to the theater or the movies and thinking, ‘That’s what I’d like to do,’`` she said in an interview. ``I was just put there out of necessity. Mother was too proud to ask her family for money, and this job paid $10 a week.``

Dorothy, then 4, quickly followed suit on the stage and for a time the sisters were with different barnstorming troupes, while their actress mother was in still another show in a different town (her husband had abandoned the family shortly after the children were born). ``The next year, Mother got a job with the two of us in a show called `Her First False Step.’ I was thrown in a den of lions by the villain.

``We traveled with Teddy and Jennie--two lions--and the second year Jennie had a baby, and we played with the baby all the time. We just loved it.``

She was always protective of her baby sister. When D.W. Griffith, who directed their greatest triumphs together, showed them a script with roles for two women, Lillian always let Dorothy choose which part she wanted to play.

Why? ``Because Dorothy was nervous. She perspired. I never perspired. I always think, ‘Well, I’ll go and do the best I can.’ The attitude still persists almost 20 years after Dorothy’s death. ‘She’s the talented one in the family,’`` Lillian said.

The fact that her generosity might have cost her the juicier of the two roles seems never to have occurred to her. She seems to have absolutely no ego. And no bitterness when she tells about how she was discarded by Hollywood.

``Louis B. Mayer came to me once and said, ‘You know, you’re sitting way up there on a pedestal, and nobody cares. Let me knock you off and everybody will care. Let me arrange a scandal for you.’``

``You see, I wasn’t promiscuous. I was what they called ‘unattainable.’ I said, ‘Will you give me three days to think about it, Mr. Mayer?’ I’ve forgotten where Mother and Dorothy were, but I wanted to talk to them about it. Then I thought, that means I have to give a performance on-screen and off-screen. I haven’t got that much vitality.

``So I said no, and he said, ‘You know I can ruin you.’ And he did. He sent word out that if any (exhibitor) took a picture I was in, they’d never get another one of his pictures.``
The loss was Hollywood`s, not hers. She returned to the stage, playing Ophelia to John Gielgud`s Hamlet and starring in plays by O`Casey and Chekhov in America and Europe. Eventually she returned to films, most memorably in Charles Laughton`s ``The Night of the Hunter.``

Last year she played Alan Alda`s mother in ``Sweet Liberty.`` ``I had refused the role five times,`` she said, ``and Alan Alda wanted to know if he could come up and see me. Well . . . I looked at him and I thought, Why, I`d work for him for nothing. Did you ever see a face like that? It`s beautiful. And what`s inside is even better.``

Dorothy married, but Lillian never did.

But was she ever in love? ``Never with an actor, because I thought they didn`t know any more than I did. You see, I hadn`t gone to school, so when I went out with people, I wanted to go out with people who knew a lot. Writers particularly. I was a good listener. Henry Mencken from Baltimore was a friend of mine.``

But were you in love? ``I don`t suppose in today`s idea of love I ever was,`` she answered cryptically. ``I just loved my mother and my sister.``

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**Lillian Gish Can Still Draw A Crowd**

October 23, 1986|By Bob Lundegaard, Minneapolis Star and Tribune.

MINNEAPOLIS — The First Lady of the Silent Screen entered the banquet room and 900 people rose to their feet.

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106th film, "The Whales of August," in which she costars with another Hollywood legend, Bette Davis. They play widowed sisters in the comedy/drama, which will be directed by Lindsay Anderson.

Gish and Davis have never acted together. In fact, Gish recalled, they've only met once or twice. "When you're working, you haven't time to go and see all the other actors and actresses. That happens with actors. They're busy and you're busy."

And Gish has always been busy in a career that is as old as this century. Her exact age is a mystery, but it's somewhere around 90, and she started acting when she was five.

"I didn't have the privilege of growing up and going to the theater or the movies and thinking, 'That's what I'd like to do,'" she said in an interview. "I was just put there out of necessity. Mother was too proud to ask her family for money, and this job paid $10 a week."

Dorothy, then 4, quickly followed suit on the stage and for a time the sisters were with different barnstorming troupes, while their actress mother was in still another show in a different town (her husband had abandoned the family shortly after the children were born). "The next year, Mother got a job with the two of us in a show called 'Her First False Step.' I was thrown in a den of lions by the villain.

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Why? "Because Dorothy was nervous. She perspired. I never perspired. I always think, 'Well, I'll go and do the best I can.' The attitude still persists almost 20 years after Dorothy's death. "She's the talented one in the family," Lillian said, "And I'm here to prove it. She had a sense of humor, and I was about as funny as a baby's open grave."

The fact that her generosity might have cost her the juicier of the two roles seems never to have occurred to her. She seems to have absolutely no ego. And no bitterness when she tells about how she was discarded by Hollywood.

"Louis B. Mayer came to me once and said, 'You know, you're sitting way up there on a pedestal, and nobody cares. Let me knock you off and everybody will care. Let me arrange a scandal for you.'"

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Golden With Age

`The Whales Of August` Is A Screen Survivors` Showcase

February 08, 1987 | By Clarke Taylor.

Bette Davis and Lillian Gish were holding each other tightly as they stood on the edge of a treacherous Maine cliff, two frail figures at the mercy of the wintry, Atlantic wind, waiting once more for the movie cameras to roll. `Do you want to rest, or do it again?`` called director Lindsay Anderson, before taking a second shot.

`No, let`s get it over with,`` Davis called back.

`All the things we have done have prepared us well for this, haven`t they?`` Davis asked Gish.

`Oh, yes, we`ve been well prepared,`` Gish said softly, nodding her head in agreement, and adding. `There were no stunt men, and we worked quickly.` `Yes, that`s the way it was in the early days of motion pictures,`` said Davis, before the second and final `take`` of the shot.
``You look at these women, and you see the whole history of motion pictures,`` said Anderson`s 24-year-old assistant, Marc Sigsworth, who was in awe of the pioneering film actresses.

The history of motion pictures was on many minds in the little community of Casco Bay, Me., during the recent shooting of ``The Whales of August.`` In addition to Gish, whose career stretches from D.W. Griffith`s silents to this, her 105th film, and Davis, the film features veteran actors Ann Sothern and Vincent Price. The $3-million film, which is due to be released by Alive Films some time this year, wrapped after eight weeks` shooting on this rugged island location, a rough 45 minutes by boat from Portland, Me.

``It`s been a film buff`s dream,`` said Harry Carey Jr., the fifth and youngest member of the small cast, himself a 40-year veteran of films, including 57 Westerns. Carey`s father was a pioneering film actor and star of numerous films by John Ford, a native of Portland.

``The first day I worked, I walked into the room, and there was Bette Davis, Lillian Gish, Ann Sothern and Vincent Price, and for a cowboy actor that`s quite a jolt,`` said Carey, enthusiastically.

``This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity because of the combination of extraordinary elements that have come together here,`` said Sigsworth, who, like Anderson, is British. ``The history, personalities, and techniques of these actors are very different, and they also represent virtually every film genre: silents, melodrama, Westerns, musicals, comedy and horror films.``

The low-budget film, by first-time scriptwriter David Berry, from his own play, is set on a Maine island during a two-day period in 1954. It focuses on Gish`s character and the difficult, demanding blind sister for whom she cares, played by Davis. Sothern plays a good-natured, but lonely lifelong friend and island neighbor of the two sisters, and Price plays a ruthless, Russian emigre in search of home.

The conflict revolves around the characters` confrontations with timeless questions of old age and how to carry on. Anderson, director of such socially conscious films as ``This Sporting Life`` and ``If . . .,`` said the title refers to the whales that once visited the Maine coast. Their disappearance, due to modern development, is a symbol of change.

A new generation of actors has also been cast in ``Whales.`` Mary Steenburgen, Margaret Ladd and Tisha Sterling appear in a flashback scene as the Gish, Davis, Sothern characters, respectively. Sterling is the daughter of Sothern and actor Robert Sterling.

``It`s a story of survival, and we are all survivors, by God, all of us,`` said Sothern, adding, ``we have all been at it for a long time.

The extraordinary and long careers of all five actors were literally on display here with regularly scheduled on-island screenings of their films:

Gish`s ``The Wind,`` Davis` ``All About Eve,`` Sothern`s ``Lady, Be Good,``
Price’s `The Raven` and Carey’s `Wagon Master`.

But most of the attention was focused on the three actresses. `Lillian and Bette are the royal queens of the cinema, and I guess I’m the royal princess,`` said Sothern, pointing out that, at 67, she is the youngest of the three women.

Members of the young film crew often spent their free evenings playing poker with the gregarious Sothern, who brought her own chips. Or, on the set, during breaks and camera setups, they could be found lounging in the sun browsing through a picture book about Davis, `Bette Davis: A Celebration,``

or through Gish’s autobiography, `The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me.`

Often, when the actresses were on the set and free for a few moments, members of the crew could be heard reminiscing with Davis about her Warner Bros. days, or seated reverently at Gish’s feet listening to her reminiscences of Griffith, Charles Chaplin, or other film history. `You know, as a child I played with Sarah Bernhardt,`` she said, out of the blue, during one spontaneous session. `Of course, I couldn’t understand, because I couldn’t speak French . . .``

`Who do you think is the best actor in the English-speaking world?`` she asked a rapt, silent young audience on another occasion. `Why, that’s easy,`` she answered for them. `Sir John Gielgud.``

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`A lot of us on the crew have stuck this out because of the great respect we all have for these three women,`` said production coordinator Janice Reynolds, referring to the remote, no-frills location. `There have been difficulties, but (the actresses) haven’t been all that demanding and certainly not as demanding as some of the younger actors we’ve all worked with who have reached so-called stardom early and are already used to all the comforts and perks that come with it.

`These women are sitting here in their houses, with a companion, or sometimes alone, and every once in a while they call to ask us to bring something to them, usually something like decaffeinated coffee,`` said Reynolds.

The warm relationship that developed over eight weeks between the actresses and the crew was evidenced one day after Sothern’s last shots in the movie, when she made a spontaneous speech:
``I`ve done a lot of movies, but never with a more solicitous, dedicated crew than you guys. I`ve had a wonderful time, and I`ll never forget you,`` she said.

``And we`ll never forget you!`` responded Gish.

Said Sothern privately, on a more serious note, after she left the set:

``How do we know that this is not going to be the last hurrah for all of us?``

It was in 1981 when the film`s co-producer, Mike Kaplan, first saw Berry`s play at the Trinity Square Repertory Theater in Providence, R.I. He said he immediately saw it as a vehicle for Gish, whom he first met 18 years ago while working as a publicist on MGM`s ``The Comedians,`` and possibly for Davis as well. Kaplan recounted the usual struggle to find interest and funding for the specialized film, which he was determined to make without the obligatory ``sure-fire box-office`` star. He said Gish committed to the film soon after he took her to see an Off-Broadway production of the play, and that Anderson agreed to direct shortly thereafter. He said Davis declined the first time she was offered the role, but had agreed by the time he made his last rounds to the major Hollywood studios, including MGM, Paramount, 20th Century Fox and Warner Bros.

Kaplan also said that Sothern was considered for her role early on and that John Gielgud was the actor first considered for the role now played by Price.

``All the studio people said they liked the film, but,`` recalled Kaplan, who said he got all the ``classic reasons`` for rejections, such as the fact that ``people don`t want to see a movie about old people,`` or the fact that there was no ``Jane Fonda role,`` as in ``On Golden Pond,`` to add a youthful point of view. But the project finally came together last spring with the formation of Alive Films (a result of the split-up of Island Alive Films). Kaplan is president of marketing for Alive and is co-producing this, his first film, with Alive`s co-chairman Carolyn Pfeiffer.

Gish, Davis and Sothern all credited Kaplan for keeping the film project going, and Alive Films for taking what Davis referred to as ``a tremendous box-office gamble.`` They all expressed hope, but also great skepticism, that in today`s movie market, the film would be a success.

``I didn`t do it because it was a gamble, I don`t want to gamble anymore, I want to make money,`` Davis said candidly, adding ``and frankly, I think there are enough movies with old people--sometimes I think there are too many--thank you very much. I did it because it was a good script and a good part. I don`t know why I changed my mind, I just did,`` she said. She also thought ``it would be nice`` to make a theatrical film after an eight-year absence, during which she endured a stroke, a mastectomy and a major hip operation.

Gish declined to talk about the film in any detail. ``I haven`t seen it, it isn`t finished, I don`t know what it`s like, and I won`t know until I do see it,`` said Gish, noting that she does not see daily rushes of her films, because ``I think I`d look terrible and would be discouraged.`` She said
she committed to the role because she liked the idea of the film and because she couldn’t say no to "a fine, dear face" like Kaplan’s. "I never thought at all about the character."

Gish had returned to her island quarters after a 12-hour, nearly non-stop day on the set, changed into a full-length, green velvet lounging gown and was rushing a visitor over to a picture window overlooking Casco Bay to catch the sunset.

``Now, if you want an interview, just ask me questions," said Gish, as if following an obligatory routine of her 81-year-long career, but with her mind and her voice still clear as crystal.

``I started working so young (at age 5) that I don't know how to play," she said, when asked how she coped with the strenuous schedule demanded of a leading role.

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Throughout the day, shooting a cramped kitchen scene with Sothern, Gish demonstrated that there was more to her work. She moved slowly, and found difficulty remembering and hearing her lines, and she seemed passive, almost indifferent as she sat silently awaiting the call to "action." But when the cameras rolled she seemed to switch on, too, speaking her lines in the right mood, and looking into the right light at just the right time, as though she knew exactly what to do--meticulously, professionally and effortlessly. At one moment, Sothern was overheard whispering to Gish, "It's an honor to act with you, darling."

``She is completely unique," said Anderson. "These are not just Hollywood stars," he said of the three actresses, "they are artists."

Sothern, who has not made a feature film since 1976, when she suffered a severe back injury in a stage mishap, was the opposite of Gish on the set. Feisty, and appearing to move in a whirlwind, despite the fact that she actually moved very slowly and only with the aid of a cane, Sothern demonstrated her experience as an actor on stage and in 75 films, as well as a production executive on her long-running (nearly 200 episodes) TV series.

``It's a damned good thing we know what we're doing," she growled, at the reminder of "too little rehearsal time."
"I know about production. I know how to cut a film," she said, acknowledging that she and Anderson "have had it on a couple of times.

"But it all comes down to respect. There have been no big ego clashes here," she said.

Everyone on location would not have said the same about Davis. "She is difficult," said one after another of those who worked closely with her, from the unit photographer, to British production designer Jocelyn Hebert, to Anderson. They also all called her "totally professional."

Toward the end of a difficult day's shooting, during which she gave what Anderson called "a brave and serious performance" as the old, silver-haired blind woman, Davis agreed to put a reporter to her test. Earlier, she had put the entire company to the test, by declining to shoot a scene that had been planned and carefully set up for the day, because the wig she was to wear in a closeup shot did not suit her. She worked out a compromise shooting schedule with the crew, however, resulting in little waste of time or money. Said Kaplan: "She knows what we have to get done, maybe more than anybody does." Having changed from her dowdy costume into chic gray slacks and silk blouse, and draped in a full-length mink coat, Davis seemed strong and indomitable as ever as she sat alone with the reporter in a rustic room off the set and proceeded to take control of an interview. Chain-smoking, she brushed aside attempts to discuss the challenge of her latest role--"it's not so tough, although I guess photographing me without my eyes is totally different"--and she also coolly cut off an attempt to discuss the history represented by the five actors on the location.

"You can't talk about Miss Gish and me together," she snapped. "It's all totally different. She's 81 years an actress, starting in the silents. It's fun that we're working together, but there is nothing similar in our backgrounds . . . Well," she added, on second thought, "she did start in the theater, which I never knew until I read her book here, and her mother was a tremendous help to her, just as mine was to me. But we are totally, totally different actresses. At the risk of jeopardizing any rapport that had emerged, she was asked for her thoughts about being considered "difficult."

"Well, if they hire me, and don't know I can be difficult, it's too bad," she said, quickly adding, "but it's not a question of being difficult. Sometimes, there is a very important issue at stake.

"Lately, if I feel that I am going to get into a big hassle on a film, I am apt to say to myself, 'Forget it.' You get lazy. Then, I give myself a talking to and say, 'No, you must say something, you owe it to the film.'

"Today, for instance, my wig was not right. I thought to myself, 'I am the one who is going to be seen up there (on screen),' and that gave me great insecurity. I agreed to do a big, wide shot of the scene, because they had it all set up. And I thought, now, I suppose I should let them go on and do the rest of it. And then I thought, no, it would not be right, I wouldn't be secure and I wouldn't play it as well. I thought, I've done the rest of the scene, and now we'll pick this up tomorrow."
``It all boils down to professionalism, which also means accepting a responsibility for the film,`` she said, adding, ``we`re much more professional, we older people who have been in this business for a long time.``

Outside in the encroaching cold of another sunset, Gish and Sothern, white from the cold and shivering, were preparing to shoot Sothern`s final scene. The crew was rushing to get the final moments of the day`s light, but Gish, apparently noting that the camera angle was not set correctly on her face, stopped everyone short by uncharacteristically speaking up.

``I`m looking up, not down, or else my eyes will look half closed,`` she said, suggesting with a slight nod the correct angle. ``Look through the camera,`` she said to a skeptical but attentive and now dutiful camera crew. And with the adjustment made, she looked out at the Atlantic Ocean whitecaps as though she really could spot a whale. And the scene was quickly completed. ``Nobody needs to tell her how to do it,`` whispered one young member of the crew to another. ``She invented it.``

**Lillian Gish Returning To Screen At 90**

August 06, 1987|By Donald La Badie, Scripps Howard News Service.

``In December, I will have been working 82 years without stopping,`` said Lillian Gish, one of the greatest actresses in silent films.

Gish, 90, also has been a major stage and television star, and she has returned, occasionally, to the movies.

It has long been the opinion of Mike Kaplan that Gish deserved a new picture worthy of her talents. In 1967 Kaplan, then a young publicist for MGM, fell under Gish`s spell when she was starring with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor in ``The Comedians.`` He made it his mission to find the ideal Gish vehicle.

Twenty years later, Kaplan has produced his first picture, ``The Whales of August,`` a Chekhovian drama that unites Miss Gish with another screen legend, Bette Davis. In the adaptation of David Berry`s play, they are cast as elderly widowed sisters living on a Maine island.

According to present plans, the picture will be released nationally in December to put it directly on the line for Academy Award nominations. It is expected to have its U.S. premiere at the New York Film Festival this fall. The movie was received with considerable enthusiasm earlier this summer at the Cannes International Film Festival.
It is remarkable on a number of counts. Not the least of those is the fact that it marks the first appearance together of two actresses whose careers span the history of American movies.

One of Gish`s earliest films was D.W. Griffith`s ```Birth of a Nation``` (1914). In 1934 Bette Davis reached cinematic prominence portraying a Cockney waitress in ```Of Human Bondage``` . Two other veterans, Vincent Price and Ann Sothern, co-star in ```The Whales of August``` .

```I think this picture is unique in that you have a group of phenomenal actors who are all over 70,``` Kaplan said. Gish will be 91 on Oct. 14; Davis is 79; Sothern is 78; and Price is 76.

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**Aging Stars, Silly Script Can`t Sustain `Whales`**

November 13, 1987|By Dave Kehr.

There are times when a desire to pay tribute can shade off into an unconscious exploitation, when an urge to evoke a legend can slide off into a sad attempt to capitalize upon it.

Such is the case with Lindsay Anderson`s ```The Whales of August``` , a modest independent production designed to serve as a late-career showcase for two of the finest actresses of the movies, Lillian Gish and Bette Davis. The impulse is admirable, but the enterprise flounders on an unfortunate fact: At 91 and 79 respectively, the actresses are no longer able to do their best work, and it is no tribute to professionals as consummate as Gish and Davis to ask them to settle for anything less.

The material, in any case, isn`t worthy of them. Adapted by David Berry from his own play, the script strives for a Chekhovian refinement and subtlety, but descends instead toward the trivial and the cute. Gish and Davis are elderly sisters passing another summer, as they have done for the last 60 years, on an island in Maine.

Libby (Davis) is a flinty spinster rendered sightless in her old age, given to suspicion and cynicism; Sarah (Gish) is a glowing widow, devoting the last of her strength and patience to caring for her younger sibling. The action revolves around the question of installing a picture window in the family house-a window that will afford a view of the sea, and possibly, Sarah hopes, one more sighting of the whales frolicking off the coastline they glimpsed as girls.

The text offers little more than two broadly defined, dramatically convenient characters and, in the whales, an obtrusive symbol of youthful hopes reborn in old age.
A few other characters are carted on and off: Vincent Price as a fallen Russian aristocrat, reduced to living on his charm; Ann Sothern as a gossipy girlhood friend; Harry Carey Jr. as the bumbling handyman who may or may not install the picture window; Frank Grimes as a predatory real-estate salesman. Director Anderson, known for such angry social dramas as `If . . .`, and

``This Sporting Life,`` seems unable to find a personal connection with the material. He hasn`t filmed it so much as he`s mounted it, obviously devoting much of his effort to finding a pitch and rhythm-in the event, painfully slow- that can accommodate the infirmities of his stars.

The scenes often seem patched together from miles of different takes, as if Anderson had been forced to construct the performances in the cutting room. And yet, there might have been a magnificent movie here, had it been made a few years back. The pairing of Gish and Davis offers an almost mystical union of one of the greatest performers of silent films with one of the grand masters of the talkies-theirs is not simply a contrast in character, as parodied by the script`s sweet-sour division, but a contrast in being as well. Gish will forever carry the silent film`s aura of unreality, of dreamlike grace and distance; she doesn`t perform for the camera as much as she opens herself to it, a kind of modeling rather than acting that invites the spectator to enter her soul.

It is Davis` genius, on the other hand, to bring everything to the surface, to transform personality into physical sensation through her mastery of technique-the voice and the hands, working together to create flurries of feeling, complex and palpable rhythms of emotion. (Davis still has the use of her hands, and perhaps the most beautiful moment in ``The Whales of August`` occurs as she reaches tentatively for a hairbrush.)

There are two worlds here, and it would have been wonderful to see them, for a moment, pass into the same orbit. Unfortunately, that moment has passed. `THE WHALES OF AUGUST``

(STAR)(STAR)

Directed by Lindsay Anderson; written by David Berry; photographed by Mike Fash; production designed by Jocelyn Herbert; edited by Nicolas Gaster;

music by Alan Price; produced by Carolyn Pfeiffer and Mike Kaplan. An Alive Films release; opens Nov. 13 at the Biograph Theatre. Running time: 1:30. Not rated by the MPAA, but contains no objectionable material.
THE CAST
Libby Strong..............Bette Davis
Sarah Webber..............Lillian Gish
Mr. Maranov...............Vincent Price
Tisha Doughty..............Ann Sothern
Joshua Brackett..........Harry Carey Jr.

Flick Of Week: Gish, 91, Compelling In `Whales`
November 13, 1987|By Gene Siskel.

Our Flick of the Week is ``The Whales of August,`` not because it`s a particularly good film but because it contains one extraordinary performance. Lillian Gish, 91, is sweet, strong and compelling in her role as the nicer of two old sisters who feud and fuss during presumably their last days together at a Maine island cottage that has been in their family for 60 years. Bette Davis is less impressive as the other sister, who is blind and quite bitter. The fault is not Davis`; she is undone by a script that makes her out to be miserable while wearing a ridiculously long fall of hair.

That the two women need each other is sorely tested because Gish is such an ethereal delight while Davis is more of a beast.

Neighbors Ann Sothern and Vincent Price drop by to no particular effect. Older moviegoers will be tempted to see this film. If they do, they will be rewarded by Gish, whose career goes back to `Birth of a Nation,`` spanning the history of film.

``The Whales of August`` is playing only at the Biograph Theatre. The film is not rated, but is suitable for general audiences. (STAR)(STAR) 1/2
FLICKS PICKS GUIDE

New this week

- CROSS MY HEART (Water Tower and outlying). Here’s a movie that survives simply on the good will generated by its stars, comic actor Martin Short and actress Annette O’Toole. The story is about the hazards of modern dating—specifically, the foolishness of pretending to be that which you are not. Short tries to be cool; O’Toole tries to be prim. Of course, they learn that honesty is the best policy. There’s nothing substantial about the story, but Short and O’Toole are so likable that going to this movie is like going on an enjoyable double date. R. (STAR)(STAR)(STAR)

- HELLO AGAIN (Water Tower and outlying). Shelley Long stars in a pathetic comedy about a klutzy woman who dies and is brought to Earth a year later by her sorceress sister (Judith Ivey). Neither the slapstick involving Long’s cloddishness nor the surprise elements involving her return to Earth and her visit to her newly married husband (Corbin Bernsen) work at all. The film is a complete bustout in the comedy department. PG. (STAR) 1/2

- THE RUNNING MAN (Chestnut Station, Dearborn and outlying). Arnold Schwarzenegger stars in a futuristic, violent game show adventure in which the contestants literally fight for their lives. The core of the film is merely a glossy version TV’s “World Wrestling Foundation,” with Schwarzenegger becoming a contestant on the show because of the host’s desire to boost ratings. In a series of bouts, Arnold destroys an assortment of mundane supervillains, including Jim Brown looking awful as a guy with white spray paint in his hair and a flame thrower in his hands. Smarmy game show host Richard Dawson is effective as the host of this killer game, but the story unfolds routinely. And aren’t you getting tired of seeing Arnold breaking someone’s bones in a new movie about every six months? R. (STAR)(STAR) 1/2

- THE WHALES OF AUGUST (Biograph). This week’s Flick of the Week. See above. Not rated. (STAR)(STAR) 1/2

MORE FLICKS

Comments on other films playing locally that have been reviewed in The Tribune and synopses of films not yet reviewed:

(Note: there were no new other films).
Pbs Reopens `Masters` With A Charming Gish

July 11, 1988|By Clifford Terry, TV/radio critic.

``American Masters,`` one of the most enjoyable series on PBS, kicks off its third season with ``Lillian Gish: The Actor`s Life for Me,`` a breezily charming hour that will air at 9 p.m. Monday on WTTW-Ch. 11.

Produced and directed by Terry Sanders and narrated by Eva Marie Saint, the production skips through the career of ``the First Lady of the Silent Screen,`` starting with her stage début when, at age 5, she appeared with a traveling road company in Rising Sun, Ohio.

Gish, who has made about 100 films and acted in innumerable plays, talks about her mother`s assuming the role of sole provider because of a chronically unemployed husband who eventually deserted his family, and how she and her younger sister, Dorothy, along with Mary Pickford, started their Hollywood careers as extras for director D.W. Griffith.

The new medium fascinated her, she says, because ``you could see how bad you were. You couldn`t have any vanity.``

She ended up starring as the heroine in some of the director`s best-known works, including ``The Birth of a Nation`` (1915), ``Broken Blossoms`` (1919), ``Orphans of the Storm`` (1922) and ``Way Down East`` (1920), filmed in the midst of real storms on a frozen river. (She refused a double.)

Displaying a remarkably fecund mind and still-sharp memory, the 91-year-old actress talks about how Griffith, under pressure from the studio, drastically cut his epic ``Intolerance`` -in which she had a relatively small role as a young woman rocking the cradle of humanity-and, in doing so, ``ruined it.``

She also recalls that he had no business sense whatsoever and that his greatest strength was his booming, operatic baritone. (``Even the animals did what they were told.``)

Gish acted in more than 40 films for Griffith and in the mid-`20s moved on to MGM under Louis B. Mayer and boy-wonder Irving Thalberg (``He looked like the office boy``), starring in such productions as ``La Boheme,`` ``The Scarlet Letter`` and, what may be her best, ``The Wind,`` in which she played a newlywed raped by a cattleman, whom she, in turn, kills.

But Mayer, she recalls, decided that she needed a shot of publicity, similar to that occasioned by the alleged Garbo/John Gilbert affair, and proposed that to change her image, Gish become involved in a concocted
``scandal.``

When she declined, Mayer threatened to ``ruin`` her, so she went back to the stage in vehicles ranging from ``Uncle Vanya`` to ``Life with Father.``

``I just loved to play vamps,`` she reveals, but often was assigned to portray virtuous Victorians or what she characterizes as ``those little virgins. After five minutes you got so sick of them. And to make them interesting was hard work.``

She adds that when she was offered the part of Ophelia opposite John Gielgud`s Hamlet, she thought, ``Oh, no, not another ga-ga baby.`` But then she discovered, much to her delight, that the director wanted her to play a

``lewd`` Ophelia.

After World War II there were more films: ``Duel in the Sun,`` ``Portrait of Jennie,`` Charles Laughton`s exemplary ``The Night of the Hunter,`` ``The Unforgiven`` and last year`s ``The Whales of August.``

Toward the end of the hour Gish, who never married, remarks, ``I never fell in love with (actors) in my life because . . . (they) didn`t know any more than I did. I was a kind of snob. I wanted to be with writers and people who knew and could teach me. I was with (H.L.) Mencken a lot.``

As for her craft: ``You must speak from the diaphragm to the lips in case something goes wrong with the throat.`` And: ``I tried never to get caught acting.``

Subsequent works in the ``American Masters`` series will include profiles of Duke Ellington (July 18 and 25), Aretha Franklin (Aug. 22) and Diego Rivera (Aug. 29), as well as a reprise of the wonderful, Academy Award-winning

``The Ten-Year Lunch: The Wit and Legend of the Algonquin Round Table``

(Aug. 15).

**First great movie star Gish: A woman of taste, talent, tenacity**


The subtitle of Charles Affron's new biography, "Lillian Gish: Her Legend, Her Life" (Scribner, 445 pages, $35), signals Affron's awareness that the legend and life were not always identical. Not that there was a lot of scandal in Gish`s life. She was almost as ladylike off-screen as she was when she and producer-director D.W. Griffith in effect invented movies.
Gish, born in 1893, lived for 99 years. A working actress for all but the first few and last few years of her life, she never married, never had children, saw life early on as a choice between career and marriage, and chose career. Her mother and her sister Dorothy, deserted early in life by an alcoholic father, were all the family she needed. She came close, however, to marrying a Manhattan blueblood, Charles Duell, who conned her out of no small amount of money.

A few years later, Gish began a nearly decade-long romance with critic George Jean Nathan.

Affron puts first things first, by recognizing and documenting Gish as America's first great movie star. She and Mary Pickford were the silent era's queens of film -- Pickford with her plucky heroines in ringlets, Gish with her more serious approach, staking film's claim to artistic respectability.

Pickford, then known by her real name, Gladys Smith, introduced Lillian and Dorothy to Griffith in 1912.

Gish's breakthrough role came in "The Birth of a Nation" (1915), the racist but technically trailblazing blockbuster. Thereafter, she recycled vulnerability, heartbreak and endurance in melodramatic roles transfigured by an artistry of which the ingredients, she later was to say, were taste, talent and tenacity.

Affron avoids the mistake many writers make in assuming silent film to have been primitive. He's good at describing the process of improvisation during which the performance took shape before the camera, with the actress responding to Griffith's off-camera prompts and urgings. Eventually, Griffith stopped directing Gish, realizing her grasp of the process.

It can be argued that silent film culminated in "The Wind" (1928), which Gish made with Victor Sjostrom for MGM after leaving Griffith.

Turning to the stage, Gish starred in a successful "Uncle Vanya," played Ophelia to John Gielgud's Hamlet, and played the forbearing mother in a protracted tour of "Life With Father."

She returned to movies, most notably as the steadfast grandmother of two orphans threatened by Robert Mitchum's psychopathic killer in "Night of the Hunter" (1955). She also embraced television during its early days of live drama.

Though most of Gish's story is known, we've never had it told with such balance and completeness.
Lillian Gish

The Face That Launched A Thousand Films
March 14, 1993| By Dave Kehr, Movie critic.

When Lillian Gish died Feb. 28 in her New York apartment, seven months short of her 100th birthday, the movies lost their last and most vital link to their beginnings-an actress who was present when the medium first began to evolve into an art form, and who continued to defend her art, as a performer, author and lecturer, until her final days.

Her first film, a one-reeler made for D.W. Griffith called "An Unseen Enemy," was shot in 1912; her last, Lindsay Anderson's "The Whales of August," was released in 1987.

In terms of the intensely compressed time line of the movies, it was as if someone who had participated in the construction of the cathedral at Chartres had lived to see Philip Johnson's post-modernist office towers, or if Geoffrey Chaucer were around to autograph paperbacks in Brentano's window.

Miss Gish-it seems natural to call her that, just as she always referred to her mentor as "Mr. Griffith"-made relatively few feature films despite the prodigious length of her career, and fewer still of those films are likely to be known to the casual filmgoer.

"The Birth of a Nation," Griffith's watershed epic of 1915, will probably sound familiar, if only because of the anger its ancient, sad racism continues to provoke; perhaps some will remember the climactic sequence from "Way Down East," in which Gish, unconscious and adrift on an ice floe, is propelled toward a torrential waterfall as a rescue party struggles to save her, all without the aid of special effects or doubles.

But even a glance at the photos on these pages is enough to suggest the nature and strength of Gish's appeal. Hers was a face made to be photographed, with a high, smooth forehead, impeccable cheekbones and a small, straight mouth-all of which served as a frame to her huge, and hugely expressive, eyes.

Incappable of hiding anything, these eyes were bay windows to a soul, so clear and steady that they establish an immediate bond with whomever or whatever they brush. There is innocence and vulnerability in her gaze-Griffith made her the last of the Victorian child-women, in the line initiated by Lewis Carroll-but also willfulness and resolve. This is a woman who could be as pretty as a picture and as stubborn as a stoat.

Some of the obituaries that followed Gish's death credited her with the invention of modern screen acting ("If Griffith was the father of the movies, Gish was the mother," enthused one West Coast critic), which is a sentimental exaggeration.
As Roberta E. Pearson has documented in her scholarly study of acting in early films, "Eloquent Gestures" (California), Griffith's transformation of performance style, from the histrionic exaggeration of stage melodrama to the intimate verisimilitude of the movies, had largely been completed by the time Lillian and her sister Dorothy arrived at the Biograph Studios in 1912.

But Gish seemed to grasp the implications of Griffith's discoveries more completely than any of his other actresses.

If Mary Pickford went on to become a more popular star during the period, her performances have dated in a way Gish's pared down, almost passive work has not.

She does not address the audience, but allows the camera to approach and observe her; the relationship she establishes with the spectator is at once surreptitious and intimate, open and unacknowledged. Pickford presents; Gish is seen.

This understanding is built into the basis of "Broken Blossoms," the 1919 feature that was the summit of Griffith and Gish's collaboration. Set in a bleak, Dickensian London, it is the story of a 15-year-old waif, Lucy, who is regularly beaten by her father, an alcoholic boxer (Donald Crisp). After one violent episode, she is taken in and protected by Cheng Huan, a young Chinese merchant (Richard Barthelmess), who dresses her in silk robes and jade jewelry, and watches her as she sleeps.

It is a platonic love, which means for Griffith a perfect one; he includes a disturbing scene in which thoughts of rape cross Cheng Huan's mind (conveyed by an excruciatingly tight close-up) but subside to leave him calm and purified. Cheng is the perfect spectator, even the perfect director, costuming his actress and arranging her lighting and decor. If he has eyes only for Lucy, she has eyes only for the clothing and objects—notably, a baby doll—that he gives her.

Lucy is remote, insubstantial, impossibly delicate—a misty, unreal presence perfectly suited to this new misty, unreal medium. "Broken Blossoms"—the film is available on video, accompanied by a new recording of its original symphonic score—ends with the death of all of its major characters, as if Griffith had decided this world didn't deserve them, that the movies were already too physical for Gish's fragile nature.