

Gish name gone from BGSU film theater

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BG Independent News

The Gish name will be removed from the theater in Bowling Green State University's student union.

The Board of Trustees today (Friday, May 3) acted on the recommendation of President Rodney Rogers. In making the recommendation Rogers was concurring with the findings of [a report by a task force set up to studying the name of the film theater](#), which had until this fall, been located in Hanna Hall.

The Black Student Union challenged the name of the theater because Lillian Gish had a starring role in D.W. Griffith's 1915 film "The Birth of a Nation." That silent film, set in the time of the Civil War and Reconstruction, depicts African Americans in demeaning and dehumanizing ways and celebrates the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Based on the novel, "The Clansman," the film played a role in the Klan's revival and spread to the north. It was a blockbuster at the time.

The Black Student Union's campaign to have the name changed, which included two town hall meetings on the issue, was sparked by the showing of the film "13th," a documentary film that explores the interrelationship of slavery, the regime of Jim Crow restrictions on blacks, racism, and the prison-industrial complex.



Kyle Thompson, vice president of the Black Student Union, talks with President Rodney Rogers

"The stereotypes of African Americans in 'The Birth of a Nation' are offensive, and the film presents a white supremacist vision," the task force determined.

In advocating for removing the name, [the task force cited](#) Lillian Gish's central role in "Birth of a Nation."

Taken together the displays at the theater, the task force said, "contribute to an intimidating, even hostile, educational environment." It continued: "The display, with its oversize images and text, are prominent in a well-used space and evoke the film and its racist legacy."

Kyron Smith, president of the Black Student Union, said he was pleased with the trustees' action. "It shows the direction the university is going." He added he's looking forward to coming back next semester to see how the change plays out.

He said he would have liked more attention paid in Rogers' presentation to the board to the Black Student Union's action. It's important to recognize the role of black students in making the change, and he hopes that in the future the BSU's initiative is remembered. "One of the reasons is it shows how students can make a change on campus."

Rogers said in an interview after the meeting that it was important that students called attention to the issue. "When students who are here raised the question, asking us to reflect on whether this is an appropriate action it shows and demonstrates what a great learning community we have."

The Gish Film Theater was established in 1976 when an auditorium in Hanna Hall was renovated as a theater to support the university's fledgling film studies program.

The move was instigated by English Professor Ralph Wolfe. After hearing a talk by Lillian Gish about the legacy of silent film, he conceived of the idea of bringing her to campus and naming the new venue for her.

It was at Lillian Gish's insistence that the theater also honored her sister, Dorothy, also an actress from the silent era.

Gish came to campus and received an honorary degree. The native of Springfield, Ohio returned to BGSU three more times, including once with Eva Marie Saint, who performed with her on TV and stage in "A Trip to Bountiful." That was Saint's first time back to campus since her graduation in 1946.

Wolfe remained the curator of the theater until shortly before it was moved from Hanna Hall, to make room for the Maurer Center, the new home for the College of Business. The existing film theater and lecture hall in the Bowen-Thompson Student Union was then renamed for the Gishes, and some of the signage was put on display. The original venue, however, had more extensive displays of photos and memorabilia, though none referencing "Birth of a Nation."

Wolfe opposed that move and has opposed the removal of the Gish name.

He minimized her role, and said she had no connection to the film's racism. "Birth of the Nation" was just one small part, he said, of a long career that spanned from 1912 to 1987, when she starred with Bette Davis in "The Whales of August." She died in 1993, eight months short of her 100th birthday.

Rogers agreed that Lillian Gish was an important figure, and that the Gish Film Theater was a key element in developing Film Studies on campus. This shouldn't take away from her legacy. Still her involvement with the racist film and unrelenting advocacy of D.W. Griffith made removing the name the right action to take.

Rogers noted Gish herself said in an interview during a visit to BGSU : "I feel strongly that actors and actresses today need to take responsibility for what they say and do in film, even if they are only acting. They don't have to do the script."

The task force acknowledged her storied career: "Her work is expansive and her technical achievement great; in no way is our intent to minimize her accomplishments or contributions to film culture and history. However, as an educational institution, BGSU has a primary responsibility to its students and an overriding obligation to create an inclusive learning environment."

The report proposed a display in the lobby of the theater or inside the venue that addresses the legacy of the Gish sisters as well as the history of theater, including why it was renamed, and a discussion of the place "The Birth of Nation" holds in developing American attitudes toward race.

Rogers said "remembering how we got to the point... is an important teaching moment."

The scholarship given in her name, the honorary degree bestowed on her in 1976, and the archives of Gish material will remain.