Lillian Gish and her art are finding a home at BGSU

Can anything be written about a legend?

Lillian Gish, famous the world over for her work in silent films, stage productions and sound motion pictures, has probably been asked more questions by more reporters than any other actor or actress in America. And with good reason, because no other actor or actress alive today has appeared in as many productions, in every decade of this century, as Lillian Gish.

Despite her fame and abundant talent, this wisp of a woman with the strong, rich voice is disarmingly humble. The actress seems delighted to be honored by Bowling Green, the university only 20 miles from the site of her professional debut in Risingsun. An Ohio native, Miss Gish has been officially recognized several times by the university. She, in turn, has unofficially adopted Bowling Green as her favorite university - endowing a scholarship fund,
presenting her lecture series, visiting campus four times since 1976 and delighting the University community with her spunky comments and vivid recollections of a long-ago era. The occasion of her most recent visit was the October dedication of an impressive collection of photographs in the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Film Theater in Hanna Hall. Commemorating the enduring career of the pioneer cinema star, the collection was originally displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, for the 1980 Lillian Gish Retrospective.

Elegantly dressed in a black velvet suit and a lacy white blouse, Miss Gish relaxes in a loveseat in the University Guest House before the evening ceremony in Hanna Hall begins. Her manager, James Frasher checks last minute details as special invited guest Eva Marie Saint arrives, back from a tour of the campus, which she had not seen for 36 years. Miss Gish sits back, preparing to begin the interview, then looks down in chagrin.

"Oh, dear, I'm about to lose a button," she announces, her voice carrying across the room as though she were giving an important line in one of her films. "Does anyone sew?"

Actress Saint comes to the rescue, offering to sew the dangling button in place.

"Oh, my dear, they told me you were wearing black velvet, too," Miss Gish worries as she takes off her jacket.

Saint, dressed in a soft brown suit, laughs, "Lillian, we'd look like the Bobbsey Twins if we both wore black velvet tonight."

"Yes, well, I suppose you're right. That would have been all right, though," Miss Gish smiles.

Her celebrated lack of vanity is apparent and a bit touching in her wish to dress like her friend.

The two actresses, who first worked together in The Trip to Bountiful in 1953, are obviously fond of each other. Miss Saint quickly sews on the button and helps Miss Gish back into her jacket.

"Oh, that's so good of you, my dear." She is sincere, open and charming.

It is becoming obvious why one never reads or hears disparaging stories of the actress, well known for her admirable ability to easily make and keep friends. While Gish is busy, her manager recalls the day in 1969 when he was hired to manage Gish.

"My father said, 'Be careful, that woman will change your life.' And she has. She's made me realize the beauty of life. I'm younger today than when I started working for her. That's her great gift. That's why she tunes in to young people. College kids respond to her," Frasher says.
"She has great vitality and generosity. Coming to Bowling Green is truly exciting to her. She loves seeing the people, the trees, the town, the University. She has a very special feeling about Bowling Green - the people here have been so good to her, and she wants to return the good wishes. She doesn't visit any other university as often, or show as much interest."

Gish returns. She is an impressive woman at 5'7" and carries herself with dignity. Always attractive, her delicate features radiate an inner joy, retaining the beauty of the young actress who played opposite such leading men as Lionel Barrymore, Richard Barthelmess, John Gielgud, Gregory Peck, Burt Lancaster and others.
"Oh, tell them how happy and proud they've made me," she instructs when asked how she felt about the University's acquisition of the photo collection.
"Of all theaters, if I could have my choice, it would be this one."

Her pride in the theater is obvious, mainly because it also honors her sister Dorothy and her mother, Mary McConnell Gish, as well as Lillian. She is devoted to their memories.

"I like people from Ohio," Gish declares. "Of course, since I was born here, I may be prejudiced, but I do think they have the best manners and are more considerate of the other fellow than most people are. I got my start just down the road here, in Risingsun, so I really feel like I've come home when I come here."

She doesn't have much to say about modern films, but her disappointment in the current products of the media so beloved to her is evident.

"Film is the universal language. It can do great things. We have advanced, technically, in films enormously, but intellectually and spiritually, we have gone in the opposite direction." She pauses, then continues.

"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. Look at the crime in our country. A little boy of nine holds up a bank. Where did he learn that? I'm not saying, but I have an idea."

"Film is the most powerful thing that has been invented in this century," she continues.
"Many of the actors are still concerned about messages, but the business end has taken over. There have always been fights between the artists and the businessmen. Not many people have both talents."

She has a bit of advice for University students hoping to make a career in the performing arts.

"Use your body as an artist uses his canvas. Learn to use it to speak. Study dancing. Take care of it."

She has obviously taken excellent care of her body and is in wonderful health. Beneath her apparent delicacy is a strong woman with strong convictions. Although she must have expressed the same thoughts hundreds of times, she is animated and enthusiastic when discussing her goals and interests.

"Live equally in your body, mind and spirit," Miss Gish advises.
"You must feel your faith inside, and live it outside. I know there's a higher power watching out for me."

She has been a member of St. Bartholomew's Church in New York for many years and attends whenever she is there. As for her traveling lifestyle, she says, "Mother used to tell us that even if we couldn't find our own church, any church was better than no church at all!" Her deep Christian convictions have helped her lead a fruitful and joyful life, she adds. Her father's family was German Lutheran and her mother's, Episcopalian. Miss Gish recently wrote an article for "Guideposts," a Christian magazine with a large national circulation, and is now working on a book about the history of religion in film.

Because her father deserted the family when Lillian was a toddler, she learned to take care of herself at an earlier age than most youngsters.

"I learned to work as if everything depended on me, and to pray as if everything depended on God," she says. "Theater people are wonderful, though," she adds.
"They watched out for my sister and me when we were little girls. No one ever dared to swear in front of us unless he wanted a beating. The men would put their coats down on
railroad benches for us to sleep on. We always had someone looking out for us as we moved from town to town."

Her life is still as busy and interesting as it was in those early days. People and projects fill her days. She never married, but men have been in love with Lillian Gish since she first appeared on screen as a teenager in 1912.

"I have loved many men, but have never been in love with any of them," she says. "I never had the time."

With more than 100 movies, 50 stage productions, two books and numerous articles and other projects behind her, she didn't have much extra time. She has worked hard and tirelessly over the years. "It was D.W. Griffith (the pioneer director) who taught me that working is more fun than playing," she says of her mentor.

Always fiercely faithful to her friends, Miss Gish didn't forget the man who gave her her start, even when the rest of the world did. Her career blossomed after the 1915 classic, Birth of a Nation. Griffith, however, eventually drifted into poverty- his brilliance dulled by alcohol and broken dreams. Although there were many stories that she and Griffith were in love, she recalls him fondly as just a dear friend and teacher. The actress regards the veteran director as a true genius of silent films. When he married a much younger and rather helpless woman, Miss Gish took both the ailing Griffith and his bride under her wing and helped care for them until Griffith died. The "talkies" were his downfall.

Miss Gish first resisted the new sound motion pictures and went back to stage work. She still prefers silent film, believing it to have great power and impact on audiences. Finally, though, she began acting in sound films and was a great success.

Lillian Gish seems to have led a charmed life. From the day her film Birth of a Nation was released in 1915, she has been a star. Her pictures have made millions of dollars. She is renowned as a superior stage actress. She made her 103rd movie, A Wedding, in 1978 with
Robert Altman and is planning still more films. An Academy Award - the Oscar - was presented to Miss Gish in 1971. In addition to all this, she has traveled throughout the United States, Europe, Russia and Australia, narrating her presentation on the history of film at nearly 400 universities. That she manages to include visits to Bowling Green into her hectic schedule is a tribute to the University which has dedicated and renovated a theater in honor of the Gishes.

Ralph Wolfe, a University English professor, first suggested naming the theater in honor of Miss Gish, to commemorate her first performance in Wood County at the age of five. Then-University President Hollis Moore was in favor of the idea, so Wolfe contacted Miss Gish's agent, Frasher, and she accepted, on the condition that the theater be named not only for her but also for her sister. Thus the "Dorothy and Lillian Gish Film Theater" was dedicated on June 11, 1976. The next day Moore presented Miss Gish an honorary Doctor of Performing Arts degree during spring commencement exercises.

Since that first visit, Miss Gish has shown true interest in the University, especially the Film Studies Program. When Wolfe established a scholarship for the annual film, studies award, Gish endowed it. She returned to Bowling Green in the fall of 1976 for the theater's opening and again in 1979 to accept the Popular Culture Association Achievement Award and speak at a campus film retrospective at the theater.

The first phase of the theater renovation project included the construction of a marquee, an improved movie projection area and a lobby for featuring the Gish photographs. The improvements were made possible through private funding. Alumni Howard Beplat, James R. Good and Ronald Cohen of New York City, and Wolfe, who lives in nearby North Baltimore, donated the funds to obtain the photographic collection from the Museum of Modern Art. Wolfe had been invited to the 1980 retrospective and contacted the curators about the possibility of adding the Gish photos to the University theater. Through the joint efforts of Moore, Wolfe, the alumni office and the Museum of Art, Bowling Green now owns the collection, which includes stills from some of the Gish's most famous films.

Lillian in "Way Down East"

The second and final phase of the theater renovation will also be dependent on private funding. Improvements planned include the installation of new theater seats. Gish is delighted with the entire project. "It would make Mother and Dorothy so proud," she says.

She poses for a quick photograph. "Don't shoot up at me, dear. I'll play up to you," she
insists pleasantly. After the photograph, the trio - Gish, Saint and Frasher - hurry out the door of the Guest House off to Hanna Hall. "Oh, look," Miss Gish points, delighted at several small squirrels tumbling through the grass on campus. She has the curiosity and "joie de vivre" of a young girl, and it's infectious.

Inside, the Gish Film Theater is packed with nearly 200 invited guests. Visibly touched by the honors shown the Gishes, the actress tells the audience that she knows her mother and sister are present, too. "We three thank you," she says. Special guest Miss Saint, a 1946 alumna, is also recognized as the University awards her an honorary doctorate. Miss Gish helps President Paul Olscamp present the award to Miss Saint. Following the ceremony, Miss Gish, despite her hectic day, patiently greets guests and signs autographs. Alumni, faculty and friends mingle, enjoying the photo collection, tasting refreshments, waiting to meet the honored actress.

After a lifetime of hard work, Lillian Gish certainly deserves to retire and relax. However, she has no intention of slowing down.

In December Miss Gish was the recipient of a prestigious Kennedy Center Achievement Award, and during her stay in Washington, D.C., she was the guest of President and Mrs. Ronald Reagan.

The actress is not content to rest on her honors and accomplishments. Her future plans include writing another book, working on television specials and possibly another film. She also continues to travel with her lecture program. The future looks promising. Her legend continues to grow. With all these plans ahead will Miss Gish have time to visit Bowling Green again? "Oh, yes, if I'm invited and am free, sure," she smiles. "I enjoy it here very much."