Lillian Gish: The Silent Past

By Hal Hinson
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LILLIAN GISH made her debut in Rising Sun, Ohio, and took her first curtain call on the shoulders of her leading man, Walter Huston. The play was a melodrama, "In Convict's Stripes," and during its finale, a cannon blast frightened her so badly that she ran under the stage and hid in a box. She was 5 years old. It was 1901.

Last year she completed work on her latest film, "Hambone and Hillie," with Timothy Bottoms and Candy Clark, to be released in May. In between, she has appeared in more than 100 movies, more than 50 plays and numerous television productions. She has published two books and is at work on two more. In 1971, she received a special Academy Award for her work in film, and on Thursday, in Los Angeles, the trustees of the American Film Institute honored her with their Life Achievement Award.

The AFI has scheduled a major retrospective of her films in Washington, beginning Friday.

In her greatest characterizations, she gave tangible form to the intangible. She was to the spirit what Garbo was to sex, and she gave the passions of soul the palpable intensity of physical desire. Although she is one of the most physically expressive actresses on film, she always appears not quite solid on the screen; her presence is wispy and ethereal, as if her frail body were composed not of flesh but of pure emotion. As her friend George Jean Nathan once wrote, "She is always present, she always dominates the scene, yet one feels somehow that she is ever just out of sight around the corner, one never feels that one is seeing her entirely."

Today, the fragile, porcelain features of the young girl who baptized her dying infant in "Way Down East"--the chaste, rosebud mouth, delicate nose, and imploring, soulful eyes--are just as striking in the older woman. It is the face of perhaps the greatest tragic actress this country has produced, the American Duse; and, it seems, almost beyond the reach of age.

Her voice, with its faintly girlish warble, is spry and vinegary. It is the voice of experience, but there is more to it than that. It is the voice of the past, and, like her screen image, it seems to belong to an age of Victorian values, of Puritan discipline and self-denial. There is history in it, the history of the American century, and also a poignant irony in the fact that she has spoken so often in praise of an art form in which her voice was never heard. Lillian Gish has dedicated her life to the memory of a lost art, but unlike Norma Desmond, the abject martyr to nostalgia in "Sunset Boulevard," Gish hasn't turned her past into a moldy shrine. Instead, she has labored tirelessly to ensure that the great silent films and film artists are not forgotten.

Lillian Gish has always lived to work. Acting has been her passion, and, along with her mother and sister, Dorothy, who died in 1968, her greatest love.
In the beginning, she and Dorothy had to work. Abandoned by her husband, their mother, Mary Robinson Gish, began to work as an ingenue for the Proctor Stock Co. in New York for $15 a week. Soon after, her two young daughters began touring the country in small road companies. It wasn't easy, but they needed the money. "You got rid of your youth as quickly as you could," Gish remembers. "The Gerry Society wouldn't let you play on the stage until you were 14. The only thing we were ever allowed to lie about was our age—we always said we were older than we really were."

Later, their youth would pay off. One of the sisters' closest friends on the road was Gladys Smith, "who was like a little mother to us." At a nickelodeon in St. Louis, the girls watched a short film called "Lena and the Geese," and playing the lead was their friend Gladys. "When we told mother who we had seen, she said, 'The Smiths must be having a difficult time of it if they allow Gladys to appear in the movies,' " she recalls. "Things would have to be very hard in those days for an actress to sink that far."

In the course of things, during a trip to New York, they followed her trail to a brownstone on 14th Street in Manhattan that housed the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. When they passed through the doorway they had no way of knowing that their lives would never be the same again. "We asked for Gladys Smith, but they had never heard of her," Gish recounts. "By then she had become Mary Pickford." As the old friends, reunited, sat together on a bench in the vestibule, a tall, slender man with a hawklike profile walked down the stairs. It was D.W. Griffith.

This accidental meeting was to be the beginning of a long personal relationship and an artistic collaboration that would result in 45 films, among them some of the most exhilarating works in movie history. But Gish's introduction to Griffith--her introduction to filmmaking--was a baptism by fire; and had the $5 she received at the end of the day not been so enticing, her first day as a movie actress might have been her last.

"When Mr. Griffith asked us if we could act, Dorothy straightened up and said, 'We are of the legitimate theater,' " she remembers. "He said, 'I don't mean reading lines, can you act?' He suggested that we come upstairs with some of the company members--Henry Walthall, Elmer Booth and Lionel Barrymore--to see what we could do. We began rehearsing 'The Unseen Enemy' and, at the end of the session, Mr. Griffith took a little pearl-handled, .22-caliber revolver out of his coat pocket and began chasing us around the room, firing at the ceiling. We thought we were in a crazy house. We told mother, 'We'll never come back here again. He's mad.' But mother said, 'Well, if there's a Barrymore up there, it can't be all bad.'"

Gish says that, in the beginning, she had no ambition to act in the movies, and no conception of their potential importance. "We only did it for the money," she says. "We weren't children and we weren't grown up, so we couldn't work in the theater. In films, the photography was so bad that they needed young faces. They made the youngsters look older."

As an actress, Gish says she is self-taught. "I had curiosity--I was born with it--and I wanted to know everything about acting. I wanted to know why, when the camera was running, I felt like I was over-acting, but when I looked at myself on the screen, I wasn't doing anything. I was obsessed with learning how my face worked. Sometimes I would put a mirror on the side of the camera so that during a close-up I could see what I was doing with my face. That way I found out what was effective and what wasn't. We had to teach
ourselves. We watched ourselves up there and that taught us what to do. The only acting lesson we ever had was 'Speak loud and clear, or they'll get another little girl.'"

Lillian Gish worked with D.W. Griffith from 1912 until the completion of "Orphans of the Storm" in 1922. During that time she had become a popular and expensive star--too expensive for Griffith, who was plagued with financial difficulties. "He took me aside and said, 'You should go out on your own. Your name is as big as mine and you ought to capitalize on it while you can.' "

But closing the door on potentially lucrative business deals was to be a pattern throughout her life, and, eventually, led her to abandon Hollywood at the height of her talent and popularity. In 1925, after making "The White Sister"--which featured Ronald Colman in his first starring role--and "Romola" with director Henry King and Inspiration Pictures, Gish signed a contract with MGM for six films over two years for $800,000, making her the highest paid actress in the movies. Included in the deal was the right to be involved in the production of her films in a manner that was unprecedented for an actress in her day.

"Irving Thalberg, bless his heart, let me make 'La Boheme,' 'The Scarlet Letter,' and 'The Wind,' " Gish says. "They were mine. I found them. I worked with the writers on the scripts. I chose the directors. And I always tried to get the best directors and the best actors and the best actressess. The better they were, the better the film." But after the completion of "The Wind," as Thalberg and Gish were discussing plans for an adaption of "Anna Karenina," Louis B. Mayer called her to his office: "Mr. Mayer wanted to arrange a scandal for me," she recalls.

Mayer thought that a touch of scandal would increase Gish's appeal at the box-office, but she remembered Griffith's warning that even a hint of scandal would ruin your career and refused to cooperate. "I told him I couldn't do it because it meant that I would have to give a performance on-stage and off-stage, and I didn't have that much vitality," Gish recalls. "He said, 'You know I can ruin you?' And I said, 'Yes, Mr. Mayer, I know you can, but I'll go back to where I came from.' " Garbo went on to make "Anna Karenina," retitled "Love," and, as Louise Brooks wrote, "stigmatized at the age of 31 as a grasping, silly, sexless antique, the great Lillian Gish left Hollywood forever."

Not exactly. In 1927, she agreed to make three films for United Artists at $50,000 a film and 50 percent of the profits. Her first project, and her first sound film, was "One Romantic Night," an adaptation of Molnar's "The Swan," a less than auspicious sound debut. After shooting was completed, she asked to be released from her contract, and the studio grudgingly complied. She has made almost 20 films since she left MGM, among them "Duel in the Sun," "The Night of the Hunter," "Portrait of Jennie," and "A Wedding," but never attained the excellence she achieved during her years as a silent actress. The truth is that Gish has never believed that it was a good idea to make sound movies in the first place.

"I'm dedicated to silent film and music, that's what I want to bring back," she says. " . . . Film, like the printing machine, is in its infancy. As an art, it's still crawling around on the floor. I think we need silent films to recapture the world market. And we need great stories--like 'Gandhi.' That was a film which could have been silent . . ."
Beginning in the early 1970s, Gish began an international tour to spread the gospel of silent movies with a program of selections from her films that she called "Lillian Gish and the Movies: The Art of Film 1900-1928." Another project is an attempt to get the states to fund the production of a series of films for television about the history of each state. "So far, I have received encouragement from 40 of the 50 governors."

In addition to "Hambone and Hillie," Gish made two other films this year: "Hobson's Choice," a CBS television movie with Richard Thomas, and a film on her life with Jeanne Moreau for French television. A faint note of disdain can be heard when she talks about most films. Her last major role was in Robert Altman's "The Wedding," and she says this: "I like Mr. Altman and I like his talent, but I think he went wrong with 'Popeye.' It was a silly story. And there was no reason to go to Malta to make it. He could have made it on the back lot in Hollywood and saved a lot of money."

She still travels--"I've been to every country except China"--and is trying to finish her books. "One is on religion because I have done so many films on the different religions and they have always helped me. And the other is for children. Dorothy's and my childhood was unlike any childhood of today and I think that children from five to 10 would find it interesting."

She says it is hard to pick a favorite film, but that she is perhaps proudest of "The Wind." Last year, at the British Film Festival, Kevin Brownlaw, who was responsible for the restoration of "Napoleon," presented a program of two of Gish's films, "The Wind" and "Broken Blossoms." Gish says that the program may tour this country. "'The Wind' touches your whole being," she says. "It's an experience. I even forgot I was in it. You understand why Mr. Griffith had to have trained nurses in the ladies rooms for 'Broken Blossoms' and 'Way Down East' because so many people fainted or suffered from hysterics. You just don't get stories like that in the movies anymore."

Besides Griffith, Gish says that the only film artist who added a new dimension to the medium was Walt Disney. And, she says that whenever she feels her head swelling with pride, she remembers something a friend told her many years ago. "If anybody in film ever gets a little conceited, just tell them they're not as popular as Mickey Mouse."

"You can't have any vanity in films," she says, laughing brightly. "In the theater, yes. People come backstage and tell you how great you are, and you can't see that you're terrible. You think you are great. But in film, there's no hope for you. You cannot deceive yourself. As Brooks Atkinson once said of me, 'She has no vanity.'"

He also said of Lillian and Dorothy Gish: "They are as much a part of American folklore as Jack Dempsey, Jimmy Durante and Harry S Truman. Having been consistently modern for half a century they give their country continuity."