



While watching the recent release of "Tarzan, Lord of the Louisiana Jungle" by the Bohls, I was reminded of Lois Weber's contribution, along with Fred Miller's, to Scott Sidney's scenario in their adaptation of "Tarzan of the Apes" for the 1918 photoplay.

I had been thinking about Lois Weber as my next contribution and with Turner Classic Movies recent showing of one of her best works "The Blot", the idea was cemented.

While over-looked and rarely mentioned in surveys of early cinema, she was one of the great pioneers, not only of film but of social issues as well. A complicated woman who acted in, directed, wrote, doctored and produced films. She also ran afoul of censors and at one time she was the highest paid film maker working on the Universal lot.

Born in 1879 in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, she grew up in a family that served in a religious organization similar to the Salvation Army. Her early years were spent preaching and singing on street corners. During these years she learned to play the piano, which led her to become a concert pianist, until losing a key during a performance. This so unnerved her that she never played in public again.

Soon after she became convinced that the theatre needed a missionary, and taking the advice of an uncle who said "the best way to reach them was to become one of them", she became an actor. She met with some success and soon met and married fellow actor Wendell Smalley. One thing led to another. She got a job with American Gaumont Chronophones in 1908. With another important woman film maker, Alice Guy Blaché, who fortunately for Lois had a lot to say about the running of the company, Ms. Weber was soon taking on more and more responsibilities and learning more and more about the film business.

In 1911, she moved with her husband to the Rex Motion Picture Company which was absorbed by Universal, which was headed by Carl Laemmle. He was another decision maker who was comfortable with women in roles of responsibility. Lois Weber flourished at Universal, enjoying Laemmle's confidence and was even elected to the post of Mayor of Universal City.

In 1913, she and her husband worked together on a taut little thriller called "Suspense". The plot involves a woman being threatened by a man breaking into her house while she is on the phone with her husband. In addition to the tight editing this film showed the actions of the three simultaneously using a split screen technique.

While it wasn't the first time this idea was used on the screen, the way Weber and Smalley used it underlined its effectiveness for future film makers.



Margaret Edwards

In 1914, Lois Weber produced, directed, starred in and fought for her first major feature film, "Hypocrites". This film tells the story of a congregation and its hypocrisy which is exposed by truth. What got her into hot water was choosing to use "naked" truth to expose them, thus creating probably the first full frontal nude image in a major motion picture. You can imagine the stir that this film created. It was banned in Ohio and the Mayor of Boston called for her to paint clothes on the offending frames. "Truth" was played by Margaret Edwards whom I believe won some sort of contest for her naked feminine pulchritude.

Four years later, Weber would be involved with another famous nude film pioneer Annette Kellerman. She was asked by Fox to direct "Queen of the Seas" which contained scenes reminiscent of Maureen O'Sullivan's and Josephine McKim's contribution to 1934's "Tarzan and His Mate".

It was about this time that she was brought in to adapt "Tarzan of the Apes" for First National. I could find little information about her work on this film beyond her listing in the credits and the standard references. In fact it isn't even mentioned in the one biography I found on her. It has become sort of a quest now, and if anyone knows anything, please send it along.

In 1921, she made what is considered her best film "The Blot" using techniques that would hint at the neo realist film movement that emerged at the end of WWI in Italy. The film contrasts the poverty of a struggling family with their wealthy neighbors and the iniquity of teachers' pay measured against their value.

In 1925, she was brought back to Universal to make some sense out of the confusing mess created by Rupert Julian and Edward Segwick on "The Phantom of the Opera". The production was so fraught with problems that Julian and Chaney did not speak to one another, communicating through the cameraman. After a disastrous preview Segwick was brought into rework the film. Segwick, known for directing westerns, added comic relief and a "stagecoach" chase to the film. After that too previewed badly, Maurice Pivar and Lois Weber were brought in to rescue the picture, which they did and I think along with Chaney's performance and Gaston Leroux's corker of a story are responsible for its legendary status.

Previous to this in 1922, she divorced Smalley. In 1925, she formed another personal and professional relationship when she married Harry Gantz, an early aviator who had flown in the Mexican Expedition against Pancho Villa.

She continued to make and "fix" films until 1934 with her last film "White Heat" (no, not that "White Heat"). She died from a bleeding ulcer in 1939, broke and pretty much forgotten by the industry that she had helped to create.

She did write an autobiography which unfortunately was stolen. It does give me hope though that someday we will find out more of the story concerning her work on "Tarzan of the Apes". And more about this fascinating woman who made significant contributions to cinema and used her talents as a film maker to speak out on important social issues.

Ted McKosky Jr.
tmckosky@radford.edu