

3

THE UNIVERSAL WOMEN

In his legendary biography of the founder of Universal Pictures, John Drinkwater wrote, "Laemmle also startled the trade by giving women commissions to direct his pictures. Lois Weber, the most famous of them, Ida May Park, and Cleo Madison, were among the pioneers of his revolutionary suffrage."¹

Of all the studios in the 'teens, Carl Laemmle's Universal could boast the largest number of women directors on its payroll. Most other producers employed one, or at most two, women directors, Universal at one time had nine women directors at work on its lot.

Why so many women directors at work at Universal? I doubt the reason was Carl Laemmle's concern for women's rights. What seems the most sensible explanation is that the company had embarked on too heavy a shooting and release schedule. Having committed itself to a certain number of films a year, Universal found that it had an insufficient number of directors under contract. Rather than hire additional directors from outside at a heavy expense, it was far simpler to find new directors in the ranks of the studio's contract actors, screenwriters, and editors—and who dominated such ranks? Women.

Among the Universal actresses who became directors, one of the busiest was Cleo Madison. Born and educated in Bloomington, Illinois, Miss Madison had an extensive career on the stage and in vaudeville before joining Universal. She began directing late in 1915, first two-reel dramatic shorts and then features.

Cleo Madison directed and starred in two five-reel features for Universal. The first, *A Soul Enslaved*, was released on January 24, 1916.



Uncle Carl Laemmle—the mentor to many of the silent screen's women directors.

According to *The Moving Picture World* (January 15, 1916), "This five reel production goes deeply into the more vital problems of human relationship, picturing the manner in which two people who have transgressed finally find happiness in each other's love." In the second, *Her Bitter Cup*, released on April 17, 1916, Cleo Madison, according to *The Moving Picture World* (April 22, 1916), portrayed Rethna, "a girl raised in a sordid slum district. She nurses the sick and even steals for them. Later the elder son of the factory owner fancies her and fits her up in an apartment. The contrasts of life are pleasing here, but the relations of the girl with Harry Burke are not made clear. In fact, at this point a

number of mixed motives and obscurities creep into the story. The crucifixion of the girl's body at the close seems revolting. The story is quite strong in some respects, but certain features seem to lack proper significance."

According to *The Moving Picture Weekly* (April 15, 1916), Cleo Madison's role in *Her Bitter Cup* was "one of the most exacting she has ever played and taxes her great powers as an emotional actress." *Her Bitter Cup* also contained scenes shot during a freak snow storm in Los Angeles, and coincidentally the first snow ever to fall on Universal City.

Cleo Madison directed and starred in a host of two-reelers during 1916; some—*The Guilty One*, *The Girl in Lower 9*, etc.—were codirected with William V. Mong.

According to *Photoplay*, Miss Madison was a firm believer in the rights of women. "With the lovely but militant Cleo at their head, the suffragettes could capture the vote for their sex and smash down the opposition as easily as shooting fish in a bucket. Cleo Madison is a womanly woman,—if she were otherwise she couldn't play sympathetic emotional roles as she does,—and yet she is so smart and businesslike that she makes most of the male population of Universal City look like debutantes when it comes right down to brass tacks and affairs."²

Cleo Madison's time as a director was all too short, as were her years as a star. By the Twenties, she was playing minor roles in minor films. In later years, she recalled for one of her fans, "I went into 'White collar' work about 1931 and am retired now. Just growing old. I am sending you several of my remnants of old pictures. Keep what you like and dispose of the rest as I have no need of them. The Silent Films! Those were the happy days." Cleo Madison died, alone and forgotten, in Burbank, California, on March 11, 1964.

Another Universal actress turned director was Ruth Stonehouse, who had been a popular leading lady with Essanay before joining the Carl Laemmle forces in 1916. She was born in Elkhart, Indiana, on October 24, 1894, and had been a professional dancer before entering the movies.

Ruth Stonehouse does not appear to have started directing until the spring of 1917. One of her first directorial assignments was a two-reel Victor comedy titled *Dorothy Dares*. According to a Universal publicist, Miss Stonehouse was never happier than when she was playing child roles and "experiencing the feelings of a little girl again." Such was Universal's excuse for her directing and starring in a series of Mary Ann



Ruth Stonehouse.

Kelly stores. She was certainly petite. As a contemporary writer commented, "It seems incredible that this delicate, dainty little creature could be so masterful as to dominate a band of fiery photoplayers."³

Like Cleo Madison, Ruth Stonehouse's years as a star were over by 1920. She continued to play character roles well into the sound era, and died in Los Angeles on May 12, 1941.

Lule Warrenton joined Universal as an actress, specializing in "mother" roles, in 1913. A buxom, middle-aged woman, Mrs. Warrenton had been on the stage all her life. In 1916, Universal decided, at the suggestion of one of its leading male directors, Otis Turner, that she should direct a series of children's shorts, featuring child actresses Clara Horton and the Black Ernestine Jones; the first of such films was titled *The Calling of Lindy*. As was customary at Universal, Mrs. Warrenton had her own company, which consisted of Allan Watt as her assistant director, and Nora Dempsey, Irma Sorter, and Benjamin Suslow as supporting players.

Early in 1917, Lule Warrenton left Universal to form her own company, the Frieder Film Corporation, with studios at Lankershim,

FIVE RIPPLING ROARING REELS OF LAUGHTER!

A Bubbling, Sparkling, altogether Unique Rendition of
Kate Douglas Wiggin's Celebrated Masterpiece, "The Birds' Christmas Carol,"

"A BIT O' HEAVEN"

IN FIVE PARTS

THE CAST:

CAROL BIRD	MARY LOUISE
Uncle Jack	Harold Skinner
Mrs. Bird	Ella Gilbert
Mr. Bird	Donald Watson
Elfrida, the nurse	Madeline Easton
Brother Donald	Carl Miller
Mrs. Ruggles	Mary Talbot
And nine raggedy Ruggleses.	



Carol Bird, the angelic child of wealthy parents is an invalid whose contact with the big world is confined to her father, mother, her nurse Elfrida, her much beloved Uncle Jack now sojourning in distant lands, and nine raggedy members of the Ruggles family who live in the house in the rear. An occasional letter from Uncle Jack with a trinket from the tropics and the surreptitious visits of one or more of the Ruggles' brood constitute Carol's only diversions. She is more spiritual than earthly—gentle natured, cheerful and universally beloved.

As the Christmas season approaches, Carol busies herself with thoughts of those around her, and one day conceives the wonderful idea of inviting the nine youthful Ruggleses to the Christmas feast, notwithstanding the shudders of father Bird at the awful thought of "watching those children eat." To heighten the joyful anticipations which this resolve brings, arrives a letter from Uncle Jack who begs them to stretch the nest a trifle to let him in for the holidays.

Christmas morning is the scene of much activity in the Ruggles' household. Good Mrs. Ruggles greatly laments the absence of her spouse who will not be there to see their "children enterin' Christy" in the big Bird home. She borrows a pair of stockings for "Peary," frames the precious invitation, makes Sarah Maude, the eldest, give them all "such a washin' an' combin' an' dressin' as they never had before," makes a dress for tiny Larry out of her precious old



Original publicity for A Bit O' Heaven (1917).

California. *The Moving Picture World* of February 17, 1917 explained the reason behind her new company: "The big idea 'Mother' Warrenton has had ever since she quit directing pictures for Universal is to produce photoplays with children as actors for the most part, she plans to present the comedies and the tragedies and the dramas of childlife, just as they appear to the child mind. She has studied the proposition deeply, and believes that by writing her own scenarios and directing her own scenes, and supervising the entire production, she can produce photoplays that will be intensely interesting to both old and young, and entirely suitable for children."

The Frieder Corporation's first feature, written and directed by Mrs. Warrenton, was *A Bit O' Heaven*, adapted from the popular children's novel, *The Bird's Christmas Carol* by Kate Douglas Wiggin. It featured "the incomparable child prodigy" Mary Louise, with Harold Skinner, Ella Gilbert and "Nine Raggedy Ruggleses." It was extremely well

received. *Exhibitor's Trade Review* (June 23, 1917) described it as "an unusually high-class production filled with charming originality. . . . While the theme is simple and devoid of complexities of plot, it has all the appealing charm of youthful pathos." *Motion Picture News* (July 7, 1917) announced that "a feast awaits the picturegoing public, man, woman, and child in this production."

However, the Frieder Film Corporation's first success was also its last. Two further features—*The Littlest Fugitive* and *Hop O' My Thumb*—were announced, but there is no indication that they were ever released, and the company disappeared from view. In September of 1917, Lule Warrenton was back with Universal—as an actress.

Lule Warrenton continued to act until 1922, when she decided it was time for a rest. For a middle-aged woman, she had had a strenuous career in the film industry, not only as an actress and director, but also as founder of the Hollywood Girls' Club. She retired to her avocado ranch near Carlsbad, and died there on May 14, 1932. Her son, Gilbert, became a successful cameraman.

Grace Cunard and Francis Ford (brother of director John) were a popular starring team in Universal serials of the 'teens; their most famous being *The Broken Coin*, released during 1915. Aside from starring in these serials, Grace Cunard also wrote them and occasionally directed episodes. She also directed a number of shorts, sometimes in collaboration with Francis Ford, including *Lady Raffles Returns*, a feminist detective drama, *Born of the People*, and *The Terrors of War*. In 1914, she directed a burlesque of the civil war, titled *Sheridan's Pride*, released on March 4, and featuring Ernie Shields as General Sheridan. Grace Cunard was still remembered with affection by serial enthusiasts when she died, at the age of seventy-three, on January 19, 1967.

In the summer of 1914, Ruper Julian and his wife, Elsie Jane Wilson, a New Zealander by birth, joined the Universal Rex Company as actors, working under director Joseph de Grasse. Julian was eventually to become an important Universal director—his best known film was undoubtedly Lon Chaney's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925)—after a period during the First World War when he was constantly required to impersonate the German Kaiser in films such as *The Kaiser—The Beast of Berlin*, which he also directed.

Elsie Jane Wilson turned to directing in 1917 with a series of pictures, featuring child actress, Zoe Rae. The films were, apparently,



Grace Cunard

not too inspiring. Of *My Little Boy*, released December 17, 1917, *The New York Dramatic Mirror* (December 15, 1917) wrote, "should recommend itself to audiences comprised for the most part of women and children. What parts of it that aren't dull are insipid." "A cheap feature at best," was *Variety's* (November 23, 1917) opinion of *The Silent Lady*, released December 10, 1917.

Mrs. Julian preferred to leave the directing to her husband, and soon departed the film scene. She died in Los Angeles on January 16, 1965.



Jeanie MacPherson.

After an early career in newspaper and publicity work, Ruth Ann Baldwin joined Universal as a writer; one of her first major assignments being the 1915 Herbert Rawlinson-Anna Little serial, *The Black Box*. In 1916, she assisted Lynn Reynolds with the direction of *End of the Rainbow*, featuring Myrtle Gonzalez. In the same year, she became a full-fledged director with her own company of players. One of her first films was *Retribution*, released on August 7, 1916, and featuring Cleo Madison. Announcing her appointment as a director, *Photoplay* (October, 1916) noted that "she has long been regarded as one of the most capable of Universal's staff."

Jeanie MacPherson is well remembered for her work as a scenarist for Cecil B. DeMille, for whom her first assignment was the 1915 *Blanche*

Sweet vehicle, *The Captive*. However, before joining DeMille, Miss MacPherson had been a director at Universal. Indeed, it was indirectly as a result of such directorial work that she came to join DeMille.

Miss MacPherson made her screen debut with the Biograph Company as an actress; from Biograph she went to the Edison Company, and from Edison to Universal, first as an actress, and then as a scenario writer. One of the first scripts she wrote, Miss MacPherson remembered in a 1916 interview as being *The Tarantula*, directed by Edwin August.⁴ (Despite Miss MacPherson's describing *The Tarantula* as "the most popular and profitable film the company has produced," I can find no record of this title in any of the trade papers of the period.)

No sooner was the film completed than August left Universal. Unfortunately, the negative was accidentally destroyed, and, with the original director no longer at hand, Universal asked Jeanie MacPherson to reshoot it. Universal was, apparently, pleased with the result, and appointed Miss MacPherson both leading lady and director of one of the organization's producing companies, Powers.

Overwork led to nervous prostration; while recovering, Miss MacPherson met DeMille, who persuaded her to quit Universal. After devoting the rest of her life to the producer, Jeanie MacPherson died, in Hollywood, on August 26, 1946.

One of the most prominent Universal women directors of the later 'teens was Ida May Park; she even contributed a chapter on film directing to a 1920 volume on *Careers for Women*⁵ Born in Los Angeles, Ida May Park went on the stage at the age of fifteen. It was in the theatre that she met her husband, fellow actor Joseph De Grasse.

When De Grasse joined Pathe as an actor, in 1909, his wife also entered films, not as an actress, but as a scenario writer. The couple joined Universal, in New York, during 1915, coming out to California in the spring of 1916. At Universal City, Mr. and Mrs. De Grasse worked together as a directing team, making as many as twelve features in eleven months.

In May, 1917, Ida May Park was given the opportunity to work as a solo director, handling one of Universal's biggest dramatic stars, Dorothy Phillips. Miss Park directed Dorothy Phillips in two major productions, *Fires of Rebellion*, released on July 2, 1917, and *The Grand Passion*, released on a States-Rights basis in January of 1918. The latter production also featured an actor destined for major stardom in the Twenties, Lon Chaney. *Fires of Rebellion* depicted "the sordid side of life as seen inside factory walls." Commented *Exhibitor's Trade Review* (July

7, 1917), "credit must be awarded Miss Park for the capable direction of the play."

Ida May Park talked at length on directing in a 1918 interview, published in *Photoplay* magazine:

It was because directing seemed so utterly unsuited to a woman that I refused the first company offered me. I don't know why I looked at it in that way, either. A woman can bring to this work splendid enthusiasm and imagination; a natural love of detail and an intuitive knowledge of character. All of these are supposed to be feminine traits, and yet they are all necessary to the successful director. Of course, in order to put on a picture, a woman must have broadness of viewpoint, a sense of humor, and firmness of character—there are times when every director must be something of a martinet—but these characteristics are necessary to balance the others.

It has been said that a woman worries over, loves, and works for, her convictions exactly as though they were her children. Consequently, her greatest danger is in taking them and herself too seriously.

Directing is a recreation to me, and I want my people to do good work because of their regard for me and not because I browbeat them into it. . . . I believe in choosing distinct types and then seeing that the actor puts his own personality into his parts, instead of making every part in a picture reflect my personality.⁶

Ida May Park disappeared from the directing scene in 1920, for reasons unknown. Her husband continued to direct through the Twenties, and Ida May Park is credited as the writer of his 1926 production, *The Hidden Way*. She died, in California, on June 13, 1954.

1. John Drinkwater, *The Life and Adventures of Carl Laemmle* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1931).

2. William M. Henry, "Cleo, the Craftswoman," *Photoplay* (January, 1916).

3. "The Directing Microbe," *Moving Picture Stories* (April 13, 1917).

4. Alice Martin, "From 'Wop' Parts to Bossing the Boss," *Photoplay* (October, 1916).

5. Ida May Park, "The Motion Picture Director," in *Careers for Women*, edited by Catherin Filene. (Boston: Houghton: Mifflin, 1920).

6. Frances Denton, "Lights! Ready! Quiet! Camera! Shoot!," *Photoplay* (February, 1918).