

The Leadville native who became the most powerful woman in Hollywood

By Drew Björkstén

Editor's note: Drew Björkstén is a graduate student and researcher in Columbia University's film and media studies program. She is working as a fellow for Columbia's Women Film Pioneers Project and is writing a series of stories on important women in Hollywood during the silent film era.

All eyes were on the brightly lit stage when, from the darkness, a voice rang out: "Mother, I'm dying!" These were the last words June Mathis, the "world-famous motion picture scenarist," would ever utter. Mathis had been attending the play "The Squall" with her grandmother at Playhouse Theater in Manhattan when, in the middle of the third act, she began spontaneously screaming and sobbing. Scores of audience members leapt from their seats, and the actors froze on stage. Mathis threw her arms around her 81-year-old grandmother as a sudden heart attack struck her dead.

It was July 26, 1927. The following morning, Mathis' death was prominently featured in *The New York Times*, and in papers across the country. Motion picture fans were shocked that the most successful executive in Hollywood had died, and at only 40 years old. Ironically, as a screenwriter and production executive who worked behind the scenes rather than in the limelight, Mathis' dramatic death was also her greatest moment of fame. 97 years later – to the day – we can look back at the life of this great film pioneer, who hailed from Leadville, and ascribe her the acclaim and recognition she deserves.

By the mid-1920s Mathis had reached the zenith of motion picture success, but her humble beginnings were closer to home: June Bah Hughes was born on Jan. 30, 1887 in Leadville. She was an only child, and after her father's death she assumed her stepfather's last name, Mathis. In a profile on Mathis from 1927, *The Salt Lake Tribune* connected her far-reaching success to her high-altitude upbringing: "Born on a High Mountain Top June Mathis Has Ever Lived on the High Peak of Success." It's clear that from the start June Mathis was a star: as *The Salt Lake Tribune* put it, "the 'high voltage' power of Leadville marked her from the first as a child of ability." It didn't hurt that her mother was also an actress. After display-



Contributed photo June Mathis smiles for a photo.

ing an early interest in performing – at the tender age of three – Mathis began her career as a child stage actor in vaudeville, doing dances

and imitations while still in "pigtails and pinafores." Despite a tendency to fall ill, she was very talented and quickly garnered praise; one local paper even referred to nine-year-old Mathis as the "best child elocutionist in the country."

After a childhood in Leadville, Mathis moved, along with her mother and stepfather, to Salt Lake City, where she performed everywhere she could. *The Salt Lake Daily Herald* later declared that there was not a "ward or amusement hall in Salt Lake in which she has not played." Mathis quickly became well known within the city and maintained her popularity there

long after she had moved away. Years later, when she returned to Salt Lake with touring plays, the theaters were packed, and the "dainty, natural and convincing little woman" received thunderous applause.

It was in Salt Lake City that June Mathis tasted fame, but, not satisfied with local recognition, she began looking for a bigger stage. In 1900, Mathis, a "slight, black-haired girl of thirteen," left Salt Lake for San Francisco, where she began a successful career as a professional stage actress. Her first professional performance was at the newly-opened Fischer's Theatre, where she debuted an uproarious vaudeville

sketch; once again, June Mathis was a hit.

Soon after, the young actress was transferred to Chicago, where she began performing vaudeville at the Chicago Opera House. It was there that she befriended actress and comedienne May Volkes. Within a year, the ambitious Mathis had replaced Volkes as the leading role in the play "Whose Baby Are You?" Not only was this Mathis' first chance to perform on the "legitimate" stage – as opposed to vaudeville – but it also kicked off the theatrical touring phase of her career. After a run in Chicago, "Whose Baby Are

Continued on page 11

76TH ANNUAL BOOM DAYS 2024







**BOOM DAYS PARADE
MINING COMPETITIONS
BOOM DAYS PACK BURRO RACE
AUTO SHOW • VENDORS & MORE!**

AUG. 2-4

SCAN HERE FOR THE 2024 SCHEDULE OF EVENTS
LEADVILLE BOOM DAYS COMMITTEE, P.O. BOX 596, LEADVILLE, CO 80461
CO-SPONSORED BY THE LEADVILLE ELKS LODGE #236

LEADVILLEBOOMDAYS.COM



Mathis won the hearts of audiences across the country

Continued from page 10

You?” went on the road, performing in theaters from Mississippi to California. As the play toured from state to state, Mathis won the hearts of audiences across the country. Before long she was traveling nonstop, performing in plays like “The Fascinating Widow” alongside the renowned female impersonator and comedian Julian Eltringe.

As dusk fell through the tall pines over the Park Opera House in Grand Junction, “Brewster’s Millions,” a “refreshing, original, delightful comedy” was being staged in the theater for an audience “packed from the orchestra pit to the top-most row of the gallery.” 5,000 sets of eyes locked on the slight, dark-haired actress who was starring as Brewster’s faithful love interest, Peggy. Traveling for work had finally afforded June Mathis the opportunity to return to her home state of

Colorado. Now she was back, and with a bang.

The night before, Mathis had performed before an admiring audience at Leadville’s Elks Opera House (now known as the Tabor Opera House). According to *The Herald Democrat*, the “large and enthusiastic crowd ... went wild with delight over the wonderful spectacular effect[s]” and was very impressed by Mathis’ performance. (The notice for the play was the first of 22 times June Mathis has previously graced *The Herald Democrat’s* pages, from 1908 to 1926.) There was even a luncheon held in her honor. The next night, excitement ran high before her Grand Junction performance; every seat had been sold out days in advance. Once again, the high expectations of the theatergoers were met: they were thrilled by the plucky young actress’ performance, and had no idea that, onstage, Mathis was feeling very ill.

As a child plagued with ill-

ness, Mathis hadn’t let poor health tamper her ambitions. At a tender age she already had the grit and resolve of a professional. It was this same resolve that propelled Mathis onto the Park House Opera stage that night, and onto the Elks stage the night before, although she had been ill for several days. She reportedly gave a magnificent performance, but after the first act ended, “one of the coming actresses of the American stage” couldn’t go back on. As her understudy waited in the wings, the 21-year-old was rushed out of the opera house and into a Pullman railroad car. At midnight, Dec. 11, 1908, Mathis arrived at the hospital in Salt Lake City, where she spent her recovery. As soon as she was well, though, she was back on the stage.

Mathis spent another six years on the road – for a grand total of thirteen years – performing, as she



Contributed photo

Stage actress June Mathis poses for a photo circa 1908.

Continued on page 12

**Tree Risk Assessments • Tree Health Consultations
Hazardous Tree Removal • Forest Management Plans**

Through Consultation, Risk Assessment and education we can take steps to keep our trees healthy and safe. As one of only 800 Board Certified Master Arborists in the world, you can be assured the guidance and workmanship my company provides is a result not only of years of experience but a broad knowledge of complex ecosystems.

I invite you to explore all the services I provide to determine which one is right for you, or contact me directly with any questions you may have.

Luke Hiotis • Leadville
603-340-4534 • luke@hemlockconsultingco.com
www.hemlockconsultingco.com

ASCA AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CONSULTING ARBORISTS

Leadville City Council will be holding a work session to discuss a potential city sales tax for the 2024 ballot or later.

July 30 at 6 p.m. at Leadville City Hall
COMMUNITY MEMBERS ARE INVITED TO ATTEND

**NOW HIRING
Broker Associates
Join a winning team!
Voted Best Real Estate Office
in Leadville and Twin Lakes**

Do you have a strong work ethic and great customer service skills, but no previous Real Estate experience? We’re willing to train the right candidate to be a licensed broker associate!

- amazing salary potential
- highest producing Real Estate office in Lake County

Start an exciting new career today!
To submit a letter of interest and resume email leadvillehomes@gmail.com

REGISTER NOW

BOOM DAYS PARADE

**SAT., AUG. 3
10 A.M.
CAPITOL HILL**

For information or to sign up please contact:
Rhonda (719) 486-1005

DREDGING UP LEADVILLE’S PAST 2024

Mathis discovered screenwriting while on tour in 1914

Continued from page 11

later recalled, “at every water tank from Maine to California and from the Gulf to the Canadian Rockies.” Understandably, it began to wear on her. Then, on a theatrical tour in California in 1914, Mathis discovered screenwriting. While she initially held reservations about moving pictures, a common skepticism among theatrical performers, Mathis soon became deeply intrigued. Reminiscing on her theatrical years, she wrote in a piece for The Motion Picture Director in 1927, “Stage life began to pall on me, and literary ambitions took hold of me ... soon I was devoting all my efforts to writing, having forgotten my former aspirations for the stage.” She was on her way to becoming the “world’s most famous writer of movie manuscript[s].”

After bidding her theatrical life adieu, Mathis moved to New York to study screenwriting, bringing her now twice-widowed mother with

her. She started freelance writing and was soon working as an assistant at the B. A. Rolfe Company, one of the studios in the Metro organization. Her lifelong devotion to screenwriting had begun: As she later put it, those in the industry, herself included, “live pictures, eat pictures and dream pictures ... [we] become veritable slaves to the celluloid.” This gritty, hard work ethos and unshakable commitment remained a constant throughout Mathis’ scorchingly successful career.

It was in New York that Mathis got her first break as a screenwriter. She entered a film scenario writing competition and, while she didn’t win, her work received favorable attention. In 1915, only one year after quitting stage acting, Mathis’ first screenplay to go into production was released, entitled “The House of Tears.” Just two years later Photoplay magazine called her “one of the most successful of picture play writers,” and by 1918 she was the head of

Metro Studios’ screenwriting department and a pioneer of the nascent artform, particularly for her work developing continuity scripts. In fact, according to early screenwriter and critic Lewis Jacobs, Mathis “can be credited with the make-up of continuity as we know it today.” By 1919, when Metro moved to Los Angeles, they brought Mathis along as head of the scenario department.

Mathis became the company’s first female executive and eventually the highest paid executive in Hollywood; she was known as a “superwoman” and a “genius.” Over the course of her 11-year career (1916-1927), Mathis wrote 114 feature films that went into production and worked for Metro, Famous Players-Lasky, Goldwyn and First National.

Despite her rapid success in the industry, it wasn’t

until 1920 that Mathis got her biggest break, as screenwriter and producer for “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” based on the novel by Vicente Blasco Ibáñez. Despite its reputation in the industry of being unadaptable, Mathis championed the film and persuaded Metro to make it. They took her advice, and it paid off: “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” became the first million-dollar production in cinema history – the most expensive film in the studio’s history at that point – and the sixth best-selling silent film of all time. More importantly to our readers, the film provided another opportunity for June Mathis to grace this newspaper’s pages, in a 1921 publicity piece for the film.

Two smartly dressed dancers trot across a stage, framed by onlookers and

the purple haze of cigarette smoke. A sullen, handsome face appears, knocks the male dancer out of the way, pulls the female dancer close, and leads her around the floor in a sensual embrace ... This “star-making tango scene” from “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” announced the arrival of the world’s first “Latin Lover” superstar, the dark-eyed Italian heartthrob Rudolph Valentino. And who was behind his discovery, his image, his talent? None other than June Mathis.

Though Mathis had only seen Valentino in a small part in the film “Eyes of Youth,” she insisted on casting the little-known Italian as the crucial lead role in her adaptation of “The Four Horsemen.” It paid off big:

Continued on page 13

It's important to join the right click!

Like us on Facebook. 

The Leadville Herald Democrat.
www.facebook.com/HeraldDemocrat

News. Information. Photos. Breaking Stories.

YOUR WATER WELL PROFESSIONALS

Golden Eagle Drilling

Quality Mountain Water Wells Since 1958
 Residential to Large Commercial
 Mountain drilling is challenging.
 Take advantage of our 60+ years of experience.

Our experience gives us the advantage to develop all the water available, which is vital in areas of low producing wells.

CALL FOR QUOTES & INFORMATION Colo. License #388
970-668-3564
www.goldeneagledrilling.com





Leadville & Twin Lakes

Real Estate

AGENT FOCUS

your local specialists


Scan code or email:
swagner@orourkemediagroup.com

ASPEN LEAF REALTY

we're the same. just with a better logo.

On the market right now in Leadville & Twin Lakes

Scan the code, visit us online, or stop by our downtown location at West 7th & Harrison Ave.



www.LeadvilleHomes.com
 719.486.1930

CENTENNIAL REAL ESTATE

Owner Amy Tait, Voted Best REALTOR® in Leadville & Twin Lakes 2019, 2020, 2022, 2023

Buy • Sell • Property Management




486-1409 • 1020 Poplar
leadvillecorealestate.com

YOUR EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURE AWAITS.



ESCAPE TO LUXURY. EXPERIENCE THE EXCEPTIONAL.

INDEPENDENCE REALTY & PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

Independence Realty & Property Management
 970.688.4342 | Andrew@RentLeadville.com
www.RentLeadville.com






Scan the code for a tour & call today to schedule a showing!

CHRIS TURNER REALTY
 Chris Turner GRI, e-Pro
 Leadville, CO (719) 293-0082
chrisinleadville@gmail.com

Contact Stephanie today for your Real Estate advertising needs!




LAKE COUNTY REAL ESTATE EXPERT



STEWART VOUTOUR
 Broker Associate
 Slifer Smith & Frampton

Scan to contact Stewart



Mathis cast Rudolph Valentino in ‘The Four Horsemen’

Continued from page 12



Courtesy photo

June Mathis looks up from her work.

she had found a superstar – renowned for his swagger, acting finesse and “almost perfect physique” – and launched the “craze for R[u]dolph Valentino,” as Motion Picture Magazine put it in 1923. “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” was a major success, and it kicked off a period in which Valentino starred in three more scripts Mathis penned. The Hollywood executive didn’t just discover and write for Valentino, though – she also coached and directed him, and ultimately became his longtime friend and mentor. Mathis even posted bail for Valentino after he was arrested for bigamy in 1922. Four years later, when Valentino died suddenly and was in need of a burial place, Mathis offered her own family’s crypt in the Hollywood cemetery, where, a year later, she was interred in the vault next to his.

By the mid-1920s, June Mathis had hit her stride. In 1923, Photoplay acknowledged her as “the most powerful woman in the motion picture industry.” “She fairly lives and breathes motion pictures,” reported the New York Morning Telegraph in 1924, “and if ever a woman had her hand on the pulse of the film industry, it is this indefatigable worker, who not only knows what she wants, but knows how to get it.” That same year *The Herald Democrat* listed her as one of the highest paid women

in the world, and in 1926 Mathis was voted the third most influential woman in the history of motion pictures. Despite these lofty titles, just as Mathis was hitting the peak of her career, she was fired.

In 1922, at the height of her success, June Mathis left Metro to become the editorial director at Goldwyn, which had recently bought the rights for “Ben-Hur.” Wanting to create an epic motion picture, Mathis set about adapting and producing it. In her usual fashion, she went full-steam ahead, spending two years writing the script, scouting locations, selecting the director, hiring the crew, and even overseeing the signing schedules. She chose to shoot the film in Italy, which proved to cause major problems, as there were numerous strikes, delays and labor slowdowns. What’s worse, the director she had chosen, Charles Brabin, was

incompetent and uninterested in collaborating with her. The film also had financial problems, going four times over budget and ending up as the most expensive film of the silent era. To top it all off, according to legend, seven extras, wearing Roman armor costumes, drowned while shooting a battle scene on the open sea. Ultimately, Mathis was held responsible for “Ben-Hur’s” fiasco; she was fired from Goldwyn.

Despite this setback, Mathis kept working, initially as editorial director for First National – where she pivoted to make several successful, light-hearted films – and later as a freelancer, to “gain more freedom in her scenario writing.” It was writing that was first and foremost in her heart, and it is from her writing that, almost 100 years on, we can best draw conclusions about her sensibility and character. Many of Mathis’ scripts, such as “The Four

Horsemen of the Apocalypse” and “Ben-Hur,” demonstrate the persistent emphasis on religious tolerance, mysticism and mythological iconography in her work, as well as a focus on racial and spiritual diversity.

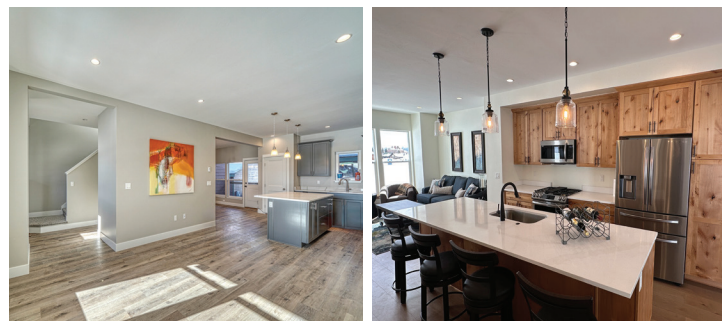
Among her friends and colleagues, Mathis was known most for her brilliant intellect and her ever-present, radiant smile. Despite a high-stress job, she maintained an upbeat personality and acted as a compassionate champion of many rising actors and filmmakers.

From small town Leadville to the height of the Hollywood stars, June Mathis serves as an example of an ambitious, pioneering woman who shaped the growing film industry, yet who’s largely remained in anonymity. It’s time she is commemorated, especially in Leadville. Even back in

1924, *The Herald Democrat* wrote, “Of the many things for which Leadville deserves to be famous is it is the birthplace of June Mathis.” Unfortunately, Mathis died just three years later, and never received the credit she was due in her lifetime. It’s something we can give her in death, however. As Hollywood Vagabond publisher Billy Joy wrote after she passed away, “June Mathis brought fame, honor and progress to the motion picture and in justice to our own consciences we cannot permit time to dim her memory nor the sacrilege of forgetfulness to mar her legacy of attainment. June Matthis ... honor to her name!”

This article was published in partnership with the Women Film Pioneers Project at Columbia University Libraries.

FOR SALE



Newly constructed townhomes for sale from \$699,900
Great location near hiking, biking, skiing and other mountain activities
Close to town with incredible views
Limited seller financing available




Scan the code, email us or visit us online to schedule your showing today! **Scan Me**




Mark Heyde
REALTOR | eXp Realty
719-470-2230

www.BuyYourMountainHome.com







TUESDAY JULY 23
5-7PM @ FREIGHT

LAKE COUNTY MULTI- USE BUILDING FEASIBILITY STUDY UPDATE

5-6pm: Meet & Greet with OLC

6-7pm: Progress Report, Survey Results, & Market Analysis Findings
Food & Interpretation will be available!

5-6pm: Encuentro con OLC

6-7pm: Informe de progreso, resultados de la encuesta y hallazgos del análisis de mercado
¡Habrà comida e interpretaci3n disponible!

