Mary Pickford, Filmmaker

Profile by Hugh Munro Neely

Mary Pickford was born Gladys Smith on April 8, 1892 in Toronto, Canada. Her mother Charlotte was Irish Catholic. Her father John Charles Smith was, by reputation, a staunch Methodist with a weakness for alcohol. Within five years of Gladys' birth the Smith family counted three children: Gladys, her little sister Lottie, and baby brother Jack. In 1898 when Gladys was nearly six, her father died from an accidental blow to the head, leaving his family without savings or income.

Mother Charlotte took in boarders and sewing work. It was a boarder who suggested Charlotte might earn a little money by putting her children on stage. Despite her misgivings about the moral character of "theater people," within weeks Gladys, Lottie and even their mother were involved in a production at the Princess Theater, just a few blocks from their Toronto flat, that paid the family, by one account, $8 a week.

Little Gladys loved it! From early on it was clear that she would be the star of the family. The playbill for one show promised: "Baby Gladys is a Wonder." Over the next nine years Gladys appeared in vaudeville sketches, melodramas, and road show productions that traveled through the northeastern United States.

The developing woman was frugal, hardworking, and kind to all who met her. Other adjectives that applied were bright, willful, and ambitious.

Elsie Janis, another child star three years older, recalled meeting "Baby Gladys," at Shea's Theatre in Toronto. "She was a very grown-up baby," Janis later wrote. "She would gaze wide-eyed at my array of dresses, hanging on the dressing room wall, a different one for each performance, and two performances a day. 'Mother,' she would say plaintively, 'do you suppose I will ever have pretty dresses like those?'"

By the age of 15, she was mature enough to travel on her own, and she was setting her own goals. Gladys decided that she should work for one of New York's most famous producers, David Belasco. It seemed like a thousand to one shot for a teenage road show performer to break into Broadway, but she did it. It was Belasco who insisted she find a new name. In the summer of 1907 she cabled her mother in Canada "GLADYS SMITH NOW MARY PICKFORD - ENGAGED BY DAVID BELASCO TO APPEAR ON BROADWAY THIS FALL."

Mary Pickford appeared in the long run of only one Belasco play, *The Warrens of Virginia,* before she discovered the movies. "Flickers," they were called in those days. The typical film was a single reel, eight to twelve minutes long. Often the

script, called a “scenario,” was a simply idea in someone’s head, or an outline of shots on paper. Scenes were improvised with minimal dialogue (which of course the audience would never hear). “Intertitles,” just long enough to explain what could not be revealed by mime, were written after the film was edited. These films were shown in storefront “Nickelodeon” theatres, which would run a program of five or more “flickers” in rotation for an admission charge, as the name implied, of a nickel. It was rudimentary fun, but in 1909 this infant medium of “flickers” was changing in leaps and bounds. Some directors, a man named D.W. Griffith at the forefront, were attempting to adapt classic literature to this twelve-minute pantomime; in his first year as director Griffith produced a one-reel version of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

In April, 1909 Mary Pickford walked up to the Brooklyn brownstone in which the American Biograph Company had set up their studio and asked for a job.

D. W. Griffith arranged an immediate screen test for her, applied her makeup personally, and gave her a small part in a scene for a film that was shot the same afternoon. At the end of the day he invited her to dinner, and when she declined he asked, “Will you come back tomorrow? Our pay for everybody is five dollars a day. We pay only by the day.”

“Mr. Griffith, I’m a Belasco actress and an artist. I must have ten,” said Mary. According to her account of this meeting, Griffith laughed and agreed.

What happened next was a whirlwind tutelage that quickly developed into a genuine, if often volatile, collaboration. Griffith worked quickly. A film shot in June was released in July, and before the year was out, forty-two films were released in which Mary had a role: more than one a week. Within months Mary had convinced Griffith to use her younger siblings as well. But it was Mary who got all the attention, all the raises, all the important roles, and *none* of the fame. Biograph actors were never identified by name. Director D.W. Griffith was the star.

In January, 1910 Griffith moved most of his troupe to California to avoid the New York winter. Mary went with them, playing everything from Gibson goddesses to Indian maidens. She also wrote a few scenarios, since Griffith occasionally purchased them for twenty-five dollars apiece.

Mary worked for Griffith for a year and a half. During this time she fell in love with Owen Moore, another Biograph actor. They were married, secretly, in January of 1911. Pickford was eighteen; Moore twenty-three. The secret was kept even from Mary’s mother, who was shocked and dismayed when she found out, months later.

After she had appeared in eighty Biograph shorts, Pickford left the company for Carl Laemmle’s IMP company. Laemmle had previously snatched another

anonymous Biograph actress from Griffith, Florence Lawrence, and publicized her name to great effect. Now they offered the same inducement to Pickford: more money and name recognition. Creatively, however, the collaboration was an unhappy one. Thirty-four (now I suppose that should be "thirty-five") films later, Pickford broke her contract. After an abortive attempt to make one-reelers with her husband as director at the Majestic Company, she ended up back on Griffith's doorstep.

In rejoining Griffith, Pickford accepted the fact that talented collaborators and a happy work environment were more important than being on your own. Griffith, on the other hand, accepted the fact that Mary was no longer anonymous. The public now knew her name, and her films were very popular. The next year produced some of the greatest results of the Biograph days.

Mary excelled at parts that moved from adolescence to dawning romance. She was every man's perfect first love. Marriage or sex might be a part of the story, though often this was implied as coming only after the denouement.

In December 1912 David Belasco offered Mary a chance to return to the theatre to play the part of the little blind girl in *A Good Little Devil*. Mary jumped at the role, but decided it should be accompanied by an increase in salary. Belasco agreed.

Toward the end of the successful run a man by the name of Adolph Zukor offered to make a film of *A Good Little Devil* using the original cast. It would be a feature film, a classy project with a famous director, Edwin S. Porter. Far from fearing actor recognition, as had Biograph, Zukor welcomed it. The slogan of his newly formed company was "Famous Players in Famous Plays."

Over the next four years, from 1913 to 1916, Mary Pickford made twenty-one feature films for Zukor and his Famous Players Film Company. Zukor's company, in turn, became part of Paramount Pictures. By early 1916 she was making $2000 a week plus a $10,000 bonus each time she finished a picture. At a time when the average annual family income was under $2000, Mary Pickford was making $150,000 a year.

Mary Pickford had become a phenomenon the like of which the world had never seen. She would not be the last. Charlie Chaplin, a comparatively new kid on the block, would eclipse her, just slightly. But by 1916, twenty-four year old Mary Pickford was generally acknowledged to be the most famous and popular woman, not just in America, but in the *world*. How did this happen?

American movies had become an international business. Domestically, hundred-seat nickelodeons were being replaced by legitimate theaters of up to one and two thousand seats, now referred to as "movie palaces." Internationally, it was easy to export films. Change the language of a few dozen intertitles, and Pickford

pictures could be sent to France, Sweden, the Austro-Hungarian empire and even farther afield to Russia or South America. Distributors made still more money with block booking schemes. “You want the new Mary Pickford film? I’m sorry, her films are not available individually, you must buy the entire Paramount slate for the month of March. Thank you for your business.”

There was something about this beautiful, spunky girl that people loved. There was an honesty to her performances that was striking. She sensed from the beginning that, compared to the stage, acting for the camera required smaller, more subtle reaction and gesture, and she rarely forced a performance or chewed the scenery. Then there was the fact that she was quite simply drop-dead gorgeous. Fans published poems that went into raptures over her hair: those long tube-like locks that dangled around her incredibly beautiful face. “Little Mary,” who hardly seemed to have aged from 1909 to 1916, usually played poor girls, upstarts who expected and demanded fair treatment, girls of common birth who might marry wealth or family, but who would always be true to their roots. In her features, she rarely played a woman of royalty or an upper crust snoot. She was friendly and open and straightforward. People thought of her as their friend.

Zukor observed Mary on the set. He saw her confer with the scenarist, look over the shoulder of the cameraman, plan a scene with the director, give advice to other actors and fuss with her wardrobe. She seemed to have absorbed every aspect of the craft of making movies. He privately concluded that, had she gone into manufacturing, she might have become president of United States Steel.

Midway through 1916 Mary signed a new contract with Zukor that made her, in effect, his partner. Mary and her mother Charlotte conducted tough negotiations. Together, they functioned as a sort of “good cop/bad cop” team. Henceforth her pictures would be produced by the Pickford Film Corporation and released under a new company: Artcraft Pictures (under the Paramount corporate umbrella). Over the two-year span of the contract Mary stood to make, at minimum, one million dollars.

Mary was searching for a consistent production team: talented people whom she liked, who liked working with her. One of the first persons to fill the bill was a woman, Frances Marion, who wrote the scenarios for *The Poor Little Rich Girl* and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (both 1917). Frances would then go on to write seventeen films for Mary, one of which she directed. The two became the closest of friends.

For *The Poor Little Rich Girl* Pickford and Marion contrived a gimmick that would define Mary’s future. She had played adults, and she had portrayed playful young girls who blossomed into young women ready for love in the final reel. But in *The Poor Little Rich Girl,* twenty-four year-old Mary Pickford played a twelve year-old child for the duration of the film. Adult actors who appeared with her were cast for their height, and camera angles and a few tricks of perspective were used to

maintain the illusion that Mary was child-sized. Enlivened by a variety of humorous bits improvised by Mary and Frances on the set, *The Poor Little Rich Girl* became a huge hit.

It was so successful, in fact, that before the year was out, Mary had repeated the stunt in not one, but two more hit films: *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm,* and *A Little Princess.* Though she spends most of the film as a child, Rebecca finishes her story as a grown woman. But in *A Little Princess* Mary once again played a child from first to last frame. The illusion was refined through extensive use of oversized sets and props. These successes cemented the public image of "Little Mary," the perpetual child. It was an image she would briefly revel in, producing some of her best work, and yet ultimately it was an image that would constrain her.

Rebecca marks the debut of another of Pickford's hand picked team. Not infrequently, Mary had battled with her directors. Now she wanted a friend. She picked frequent co-star, Marshall "Mickey" Neilan. In addition his acting, Neilan was an experienced director who had just directed two films featuring Mary's brother, Jack. The Pickford/Neilan partnership would prove to contain just the right amount of spice.

"Mickey would dream up running gags long in advance," Mary said, "and then at the psychological moment blast them at me." Lucita Squire, a script girl, recalled "the banter, the mimicry, and the happy fellowship that went on behind the scenes." She noticed that Mary always learned lines and spoke them, even though they wouldn't be heard.

On screen the collaboration between Frances Marion, Mickey Neilan and Mary Pickford is a delight that effectively mirrors the good spirits that pervaded the set. *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* became a classic.

The following year Pickford found the third collaborator who would contribute to much of her screen heritage, cinematographer Charles Rosher. She had built a professional family that would work together, not always without conflict, but always with spirit and good humor.

Big changes were coming to her private life, as well! Her marriage to actor Owen Moore had been a disaster from its secret start. In a sense it was still a secret. Interviews and articles about Mary never mentioned Owen. Most of her public had no idea that Mary Pickford was also Mrs. Owen Moore. Now to this secret there was added a much more sensational one. Mary had fallen in love. Mrs. Moore, a Catholic, was madly in love with another married man: Douglas Fairbanks.

Fairbanks had begun as a stage actor who specialized in stunts, macho heroics, and self-deprecating humor. Douglas had a wife, Beth, and a young son,

Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. Charlotte and Mary feared that if the romance became public, Mary would be crucified in the press as a home-wrecker. Despite these concerns, plans for their respective divorces slowly went forward.

Mary, Douglas and Charlie Chaplin (Doug's best friend) participated in a series of personal appearances to sell Liberty Bonds to support American forces in World War I. At a New York appearance on Wall Street, 50,000 people reportedly turned out to see the movie stars. In an era before public address systems, before radio was widely available, it was impossible for the actors to be heard by everyone present. No matter. The crowd thronged to see the stars.

In January 1919 Pickford was the powerhouse who, together with Doug, Charlie and D. W. Griffith, created an organization that was designed to serve the filmmakers rather than the studio heads. They formed their own distribution company, United Artists. "The lunatics have taken charge of the asylum," quipped one worried mogul.

In fan magazines and newspaper ads, and in the movies themselves, these United Artists humbly submitted their work to the judgment of that audience. During their first years of UA, Mary's films were successful. Her first for UA was *Pollyanna* (1920), a delightful, if self-consciously commercial film that drew its appeal in buckets directly from the *Poor Little Rich Girl* well.

On March 28, 1920, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford were wed. The marriage would last fifteen years, but only the first eight years would be truly happy.

Moviemaking was changing. Productions were getting bigger and more expensive. They took longer to make, also. Five Pickford features were released in 1918, four in 1919, only two in 1920. *Little Lord Fauntleroy* was the third and last Pickford to be released in 1921, and after that Mary settled into making only one film a year. Her control over the finished product was now virtually complete. *Little Lord Fauntleroy* was ostensibly co-directed by Al Green and Mary's talented, but alcoholic brother Jack. But cinematographer Charles Rosher recalled it differently to Kevin Brownlow: "She did a lot of her own directing," he said. "The director would often just direct the crowd. At the end of the scene, whoever was directing, she would always ask me for my opinion."

Rosher's assistance was especially important on *Fauntleroy*, because Mary played two parts, the little boy and his mother. This was the second time Mary had played a "dual role" on screen. The first back in 1918 had been *Stella Maris*, and many considered that film to contain some of the best dramatic work she ever did. *Fauntleroy* was especially designed to be a crowd pleaser. The original novel, written in 1886, described an American boy who inherits an English title and vast estate. Tricks of perspective, as well as oversized props and sets were again used, with the added difficulty of having to create the illusion of both Mary

as child *and* a considerably taller adult Mary as mother. The image of the boy Fauntleroy, with long thick Mary Pickford-style curls, comes from the original illustrations for the book. It was a perfect role for Pickford, and Mary who had begun to tire of playing children, took delight in the intentional tweaks to her persona represented by the Little Lord's desire to have his hair cut, and his mother's insistence "Cedric, I cannot bear to have you grow up."

Fauntleroy became Mary's second highest grossing feature to that time.

After *Fauntleroy* Mary did a stunning remake of her 1914 hit *Tess of the Storm Country* (1922). The year after that she imported German director Ernst Lubitch, and gave him his first chance to direct an American film, *Rosita* (1923). Working her way through adult roles, she tried her hand at the Elizabethan epic *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall* (1924). But fan mail revealed that her public preferred the girl-child roles, and she returned to that mold with *Little Annie Rooney* in 1925.

Little Annie Rooney is classic Pickford in the best sense of the word. Mary plays a scruffy teenager whose eventual maturation is hastened by the loss of her beloved father. Most of the first part of the story is a long series of tenement gags, and the film's one fault is that the ethnic stereotypes presented, while good-humored, don't hold up very well in an era of politically correct sociology.

Sparrows (1926) is a unique film in Pickford's catalog; an unusual and beguiling film by any measure. In theme it mixes elements of Charles Dickens and Edgar Allan Poe. The plot revolves around Mary as "Molly," a teenager who lives on a "baby farm," where impoverished parents send their children to work for food and board. The dramatic center of the film is an extended escape sequence, in which the children are threatened by a cadaverous Mr. Grimes and his vicious over-sized dog on the one hand, and swamp-dwelling alligators on the other. Biographer Eileen Whitfield says *Sparrows* is "horrifically good - a bad dream that wakens to a happy ending; a fairy tale told with brilliant style; a comedy; a Grand Guignol; (and) an expressionist thriller (all rolled into one)."

In early 1927 Mary joined other film professionals as one of the founding members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Later in October of that year, she released what would prove her last silent film. *My Best Girl* is a delightful romantic comedy. Mary sought to break with the image that *The Poor Little Rich Girl* had set, and here she succeeds magnificently. She plays "Maggie Johnson," a modern woman, her long curls tightly rolled up and hidden from view. Another successful woman writer, Hope Loring, provided the simple shop-girl-meets-boss'-son-in-disguise romance. Loring had recently scripted William Wellman's *Wings*, and she thought the young male lead of that movie might be just the thing opposite Mary in *My Best Girl*. Hope engineered a "cute meet" for the pair, leading Charles "Buddy" Rogers to the front door of Mary's studio bungalow, without telling him whose door it was. Rogers was smitten at first sight. So was Mary.

There is no question that Douglas Fairbanks was the love of her life. Doug and Mary knew how to have fun together and they genuinely loved their better selves. For a long time the marriage worked well. But there were lingering problems. Doug's genial good cheer could be obscured by long black moods, severe depression. There were rumors of brief affairs. Meanwhile, Mary was weakened slowly over the years by the same affliction that haunted all the members of the Pickford clan: alcohol.

In March, 1928 Charlotte Hennessey Smith Pickford died. Mary was inconsolable. She screamed, she cried, she hit people. Three months later Pickford walked into a hair salon and cut off her curls. Before the end of the year, another death was widely predicted, the art of pantomime. Silent film, an art form forty-five years in development, was doomed. No film starring Mary Pickford was released in 1928, the first such gap since Mary had entered the movies.

In early 1929 Mary appeared in her first talkie, *Coquette*. A popular play the previous season on Broadway, *Coquette* was the tale of the downfall of a rich family, done in by jealousy, class snobbery, sex and murder. It was an intentional departure from the typical Pickford heroine. Mary's version was significantly sanitized to suit the tastes of the newly minted "Production Code," administered by the Hays office, which sought to control the content of American movies. Nonetheless, her performance was honored with the Academy Award in the first year that the award was given to an actress for a talking picture.

Mary's second "talkie" was also released in 1929. *The Taming of the Shrew* is a wonderful, eminently watchable film. The *New York Times* put the film on its ten best list for the year. William Cameron Menzies, Fairbanks' art director, lent his hand to the sets and for the first and last time Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks appeared in starring roles in the same film, which was a co-production of both Pickford's and Fairbanks' companies. Like Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, they were made for the roles. Although their marriage was falling apart as shooting progressed, there is enough in *Shrew* to permit the viewer to understand something of both the attraction and the problems these two vibrant souls found in each other. The expensive production made money, but not the kind of money that was expected from the meeting of two of the biggest stars of the last two decades.

Mary Pickford completed two more films after *Shrew*, and neither was a success. After that, her heart fell out of it. She told her close friend Lillian Gish in 1931 that she would like to burn her old films, but she never did. Her last film, *Secrets* (1933), with Leslie Howard, is a fascinating and frequently compelling tale. It suffers principally from a difficult speech made late in the film by Mary's character, forgiving her husband for an unforgivable string of infidelities. It is impossible not to see this for what it is: a desperate and public attempt to call

back Douglas Fairbanks and tell him that all is forgiven. It was too late; Mary and Doug had split forever.

Mary Pickford was forty-one years old when she stopped acting in film. She was rich and famous, an owner of a major movie studio. But she was practically alone. Her marriage was headed for divorce, her mother had died, her younger brother Jack had died. She had her sister, who would die unexpectedly from a heart attack in 1936, and her niece, Gwynne, to whom Mary tried, with little success, to be a second mother.

But this was not the end. Though she would never again achieve the stunning success of the first decades of her career, Mary continued to reign as the godmother of Hollywood. She stayed active on the board of United Artists, and produced films, such as *One Rainy Afternoon* (1936) and *Sleep, My Love* (1948). She appeared on radio and wrote her autobiography, *Sunshine and Shadow* (1954). At Pickfair she remained, as she had been with Douglas Fairbanks, the most renowned hostess of Hollywood.

On June 24, 1937, Mary Pickford and Charles "Buddy" Rogers married at the home of Hope Loring, the writer who had introduced them ten years earlier. Mary's new husband was twelve years her junior, but he had pursued her relentlessly for some time. Their partnership proved an enduring one, lasting more than 40 years until her death.

"Buddy," as everyone called him, was a gentle and stunningly handsome leading man, who began his film career in 1926, and shot to fame the following year with leads in *Wings* and *My Best Girl.* He was a musician who had his own band, *The California Cavaliers*, and by 1937 he had settled into playing leads in modestly budgeted comedies and musicals. Buddy was easy-going and cheerful to all who knew him.

In 1943 Mary and Buddy adopted two children, Ronald and Roxanne. In time, Mary spent more and more time at home. For some while there still was talk of a return to the screen. She tested for the role of "Vinnie" in *Life With Father* (1947), and a few years later Billy Wilder approached her for the role of "Norma Desmond" in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Though she was fascinated by the script, Wilder and Pickford did not see eye-to-eye on the story. Rare among Hollywood stars, Pickford retained the copyright of many of her early features, and virtually all of her films beginning with the formation of United Artists. In 1945 she began to donate copies of her many productions to the Library of Congress, and later to the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. After her death, many of her papers and still photographs were given to the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. While the preservation of her film legacy still requires major effort, much work has been done to preserve and restore her films. Significantly, due to her personal ownership and foresight, a

larger percentage of Mary Pickford's films have been saved than those of most other silent film stars.

In 1956 Mary ended her work as producer when she sold her shares in United Artists. She and Chaplin were then fifty-fifty owners of the Corporation, and they were the last of the original founders to leave the company. Instead of film work, Mary now turned her attention to charity.

In Paris in 1965, the Cinémathèque Française produced a lengthy retrospective, which included screenings of more than fifty Mary Pickford films. Mary traveled to France for the event, which pleased her tremendously. In spite of this, however, she gradually began to lock herself away like a recluse, spending days at a time in her bedroom at Pickfair. Ill health, and a weakness for alcohol contributed to this seclusion. It had been the bane of practically all of the Smith/Pickford family.

Fewer and few people were admitted into her world. Close friends and family who continued to visit included Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. (who looked upon Mary as a second mother), Lillian Gish, Frances Marion, as well as Colleen Moore, Adela Rogers St. Johns, Lottie's daughter Gwynne and her family as well as adopted daughter Roxanne.

At the suggestion of her lawyer and accountant, the Mary Pickford Foundation (originally the Mary Pickford Charitable Trust) was established in 1956, in order to create an enduring charitable organization that could address Mary's concerns on a continuing basis. Finally, in 1976, Mary was given an Honorary second "Oscar" by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The presentation was filmed in advance at Pickfair, and inserted into the live broadcast. It would be Mary's last public appearance. She died on May 29, 1979 aged 87.

Mary Pickford was an actress and a producer of talent and vision. If, at her death, she was primarily remembered as a woman who played sweet little girls like Pollyanna, then even a casual investigation of her legacy proves this to be a woefully inadequate assessment. As an actress, her work defined film acting. As a producer, she set standards for quality that placed her films among the best of the era. As a woman of the film industry she helped shape that industry through precedent-setting contracts and by founding the Academy as well as through the formation of charitable institutions such as the Motion Picture and Television Fund. In many ways she truly was, as author Eileen Whitfield called her in her 1997 biography: "The Woman Who Made Hollywood."