



CHASING
THE

PARADE

by Kevin Brownlow

IF YOU WORK in the film industry, you meet American producers—and the chances are high that you'll get an invitation to Hollywood: "If you're ever on the West Coast, you must stay with us in Beverly Hills. We can put you up any time." These invitations are seldom serious; they are presented more as an information service than as an act of friendship. The producer wants you to know that (a) he lives in Beverly Hills, and (b) has a house large enough to accommodate both you and his family.

I received one of these invitations quite early in my career, and it sounded most convincing: "Why, it would be no trouble. We have one of the biggest houses in Beverly Hills. Belonged to an old movie director. We have our own projection suite with control buttons on the armchairs. You'd love it. We can run pictures all night." I got as far as New York before the sad truth crackled down the long-distance wire. "Well, listen, Kevin. I'll tell you the problem. My wife's mother is staying with us . . . why don't you call me next week?"

Hollywood had been my objective since my first interest in silent pictures. I had tried several ways of getting there. I wrote a treatment for a television spectacular about the Golden Days of Hollywood. It got as far as the costing stage, but the TV company procrastinated and David Wolper's excellent *Hollywood—The Golden Years* rendered it obsolete.

The idea of a book about the silent era had occurred to me years before, but I could find no publisher willing to finance it. The idea of a grant from an American Foundation was suggested—but I was told that only American citizens were eligible. So I sank my meagre savings into the project, and got as far as New York. Oscar Lewenstein and Woodfall Films generously provided me with the fare on to California; and all I had to do was to arrange for accommodation.

While waiting for the producer to free himself from his mother-in-law, I tracked down the personalities of the silent era who lived in New York. Most of them were hospitable and helpful, but they were all surprised that someone in his twenties should be so fascinated by their past. "But silent pictures look pretty silly today, don't they?" they would say. The first part of the interview was generally spent restoring their confidence in their work, explaining that silent films were *not* jerky, flickery

and technically incompetent, despite what they may have seen on television. It amazed and saddened me to find that the popular misconceptions had spread even to those who worked in silent pictures. I used to carry a strip of 35 mm. film shot in 1915 and a strip shot in 1963; comparing these under the light provided positive proof of the superb quality of orthochromatic film.

One personality often led straight to another—sometimes by accident. A vivid interview with Enid Markey about her days with Thomas H. Ince took place at the Algonquin hotel; Miss Markey suddenly spotted a friend and called out "Nancy!" And I was introduced to Nancy Carroll who, the following day, gave me a dramatic demonstration of the difference between silent and talking-picture acting.

But there was no freemasonry among silent picture people on the East Coast, and I had many failures. Constance Bennett broke every appointment and left charming notes on whimsically illustrated memo pads. The mat outside the door of her apartment—the sort that usually says Welcome—said Go Away. I expected everyone to have a tinge of *Sunset Boulevard*, so I wasn't perturbed by eccentricity. One actress, however, a blonde beauty of the early Twenties who once headed her own production company, refused point blank to co-operate. "I have never given an interview in my life," she said over the telephone. "People would pay a lot of money for an interview right now." I tried to convince her how important it was to meet her and tape-record her reminiscences. She seemed horrified. "No, definitely not!" she said, adding by way of explanation: "I don't look at all like my pictures. You see, I'm 5 ft. 3, but I look a lot taller on the stage because I have the presence. I look twenty and feel twenty. I still go out with men but I regard myself as 37. I am a very beautiful woman and I don't want to be dated. I would hate it if you wrote the dates in your book. You would wreck me. Just to make your book go well you would wreck me."

But most of the silent stars I talked to had no such peculiarities. Lillian Gish, as fragile and as beautiful as though seen through gauze, talked with sensitivity—and common sense—about her days with Griffith. "Dedicated? I suppose I was—I knew the financial burden he was carrying. The others didn't. But it was a dedicated life then. You had no social life. You had to have lunch or dinner, but it was always spent talking over work—talking over stories or cutting or titles. I don't see how any human being worked the way he did. Never less than eighteen hours a day, seven days a week. They say he saw other people's pictures. He never had the time. If you insisted, he'd borrow a print of *The Last Laugh* and run it at the studio, but that was very rare. He didn't have time to see pictures; he was too busy making them."

Lillian Gish's sister, Dorothy, looked older, but had lost none of her intelligence or wit. I anticipated, perhaps, a pale shadow of Lillian, but Dorothy's humour and energy gave her a strong personality of her own. She also had a charming talent for self-deprecation: "If someone tells me I can't do something, I generally take it on," she said. "I remember what Robert Sherwood said about me in *The Bright Shawl*: 'After seeing Dorothy Gish play La Clavel, I'm sure we'll be seeing Jackie Coogan as Macbeth.'"

Transcribing these and other tapes emphasised the importance of a journey to Hollywood, and I placed another long distance call to my producer friend. But his strained voice indicated that his problems, far from diminishing, had increased. My mental picture of his sprawling mansion dissolved through to an overcrowded beach hut. I didn't bother him any more. A fellow collector, director David Bradley, came to my rescue—offering not only accommodation in Hollywood itself, but a car to solve the major problem of transport.

Hollywood exists, but it is more a generic term than an actual place. When a film man talks about 'Hollywood' he refers to Culver City, Burbank, Glendale and all the other film producing areas of Los Angeles.

I didn't find Los Angeles 'disillusioning', as have so many people: my imaginary picture was based on photographic evidence and was therefore reasonably accurate. Some of it looks like an endless North Circular Road, and there is a general feeling of impermanence, as though a mass of squatters had descended on the city, nailed their names to rapidly constructed shacks, and refused to leave. Brush fires, earth tremors, floods: within my stay, Los Angeles was subjected to them all. The scale of the place—houses, studios—was rather smaller than I had anticipated, although the streets go on interminably. The tree-covered residential backwaters are both relaxing and, to a European, very attractive; single-storey wooden bungalows, with beautifully kept gardens set in quiet streets . . . here was where I discovered most of the retired stars and technicians.

The Street of the Stars is a pavement literally studded with stars; upon each brass star is a symbol—a camera or a microphone—and a name. I found myself skirting such hallowed names as Lillian Gish and Lon Chaney, but I got a vicarious thrill from stamping on those of certain producers. Why they were represented on the Street of the Stars, I can't think—Chaplin isn't. But in Hollywood, the manufacturers of grade-zero quickies co-exist with the Viders, Fords and Wylers. Like manufacturers in a factory town, your goods may be cheap and shoddy, but if they're serviceable they sell—and you thus contribute to the general welfare of the

Kevin Brownlow's book on Hollywood before sound, The Parade's Gone By, is reviewed in this issue by Rodney Ackland. In this article, Kevin Brownlow writes about his experiences while looking for Hollywood's silent past. The photographs were taken by Mr. Brownlow in California earlier this year.

town. Whenever I deprecated the work of these men I was sternly rapped on the knuckles: "There is still something honourable about them. Their work provides employment, doesn't it? It gets a release, doesn't it?" The theme of providing employment was frequently used when justifying the ubiquity of television. The great cameraman Hal Rosson told me he would never work in TV, but he recognised that it had saved the town from extinction.

At Fox studios, Western Avenue, production was at that time geared almost exclusively to TV films. The big stages had once been used by J. Gordon Edwards and Raoul Walsh; when Fox took up Movietone, they lined the walls with mattresses—ordinary mattresses—as sound-proofing. They are still there.

Twelve O'Clock High, the TV series inspired by the Henry King picture, was in production, and it was enlightening to see Hollywood's idea of wartime



MINTA DUFFEE ARBUCKLE, WIDOW OF COMEDIAN ROSCOE ('FATTY') ARBUCKLE.

Britain. Once, Hollywood produced the best English pictures in the world (*David Copperfield*, *Treasure Island*); but accuracy requires good art direction and first-class technical men, and television can spare neither the time nor the money. The result was Archbury Street, somewhere in England. There was an English car, some English posters . . . The Archbury Cinema announced *The Mark of Zorro* with Tyrone Power and Linda Darnell. But the sidewalks were too high to be called pavements and a police box was placed in a position of honour beneath an arch, as though it was something precious to our culture. And there was a very odd, very large green box on a stand, looking like an Emmett fire alarm. "What's that?" I asked our official police escort. "Why, that's an original English mailbox."

A director with a German accent was shooting a scene with a great deal of camera movement: "Let's get married! None of your Nos!" "Have you got leave?" "I took leave. I'm going out into the wide civilian world." "What about your self-respect?" "Don't you understand, honey? I've had enough. I can't take it. I'm washed up. I'm through with the Air Force!"

"Cut! Perfekt! Print!" called the director.

The technicians were middle-aged and old men, very friendly; some were asleep on their stomachs. A notice pinned to the door was addressed To All Employees: "It's all right to start the day with tea. A coffee break's okay at 10.00. A drop of Scotch mid-morning. Some Coke before lunch. Beer with the meal. Coffee in the afternoon. BUT THIS SIP, SIP, SIP ALL DAY HAS GOT TO STOP!"

Apart from the studios and the Street of the Stars, there is little to suggest a film-producing centre. An eye accustomed to American movies will react nostalgically to the familiar bungalows, lamp-posts, streetcar rails and telegraph poles. Otherwise the only memories are evoked by the Keystone Dry Cleaners, near what was once Mack Sennett's headquarters, the Old Time Movie Theatre on North Fairfax . . . and the reminiscences of the older generation.

The friendliness of Californians is a cheering contrast to the often open hostility of the East. However, it can be carried to extremes, and in restaurants it frequently is. Here, waitresses are called hostesses, and you are handed a slip like a preview form: Service satisfactory? Could be improved? Only fair? And the hostess greets you with chilling effusiveness: "Hello. My name is Tilly and I'm your waitress for this evening. Is there anything you'd like before you order?"

I visited Pickfair, the name given by the press to the home of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, and Greenacres, Harold Lloyd's mansion. These are the last great homes in the possession of their original owners. Pickfair had reduced its grounds, but the place was still highly impressive. Nevertheless, I was disappointed to find so little reference to motion pictures; apart from a still of Mary Pickford and her husband Buddy Rogers in *My Best Girl*, there was no indication whatever of Mary Pickford's career.

Greenacres is vast; one day it will be presented to the people of Beverly Hills. Harold Lloyd showed me his Christmas tree, which had taken ten days to erect. Bamboo poles supported the branches, which were laden with presents and decorations, some covered with costume jewellery, others with tiny figures wearing Harold Lloyd glasses. They had been sent by admirers from all over the world. Underneath the tree was a model village; the whole thing was illuminated with photofloods.



HAROLD LLOYD WITH CHRISTMAS TREE.

Lloyd led me into another room, packed with speakers, amplifiers and turntables. In an ante-room, approached through a sliding panel, were shelves stacked with record albums; Lloyd added a new release as it was issued. He demonstrated his sound system, and the fidelity surpassed anything I have heard before or since. "It takes three people to carry in each of those bass speakers," he said. "I might come into this room at 10.30 after a tiring day—and I'll listen to music and be sorry to go to bed at 2 a.m." His passion was Beethoven, and his library catalogue had many closely typed pages under that one entry. Besides his enthusiasm for hi-fi, Lloyd was an expert photographer, and showed me some of the stereo work which had brought him national awards.

Underneath the lawn was a long corridor, lined with signed photographs: from John Barrymore, 'one of your most ardent fans'; a sombre picture of Chaplin with just a signature; a picture of Capra, 'to Harold, who started most of us gag men'; and a message from Cecil B. De Mille: 'I hope that the public will never find my spectacles as funny as they find yours.' And, at the end of the corridor, a movie theatre. "Shall we have some lunch and see some pictures?" asked Lloyd. I had to take a deep breath and say no: in half an hour I had an appointment with Francis X. Bushman.

I could have postponed the interview with Bushman, but experience had taught me that this was fatal. A postponed interview too often becomes a forgotten interview. (In fact, Bushman died eighteen months later.) At this time, he was running with his wife an antique and curio shop called Remember When? I was astonished to see the winged helmet he wore as Messala in *Ben-Hur* (1926) lying on the table just inside the door. It was, unhappily, not for sale. I picked it up covetously and discovered that it had been made from a German pickelhaube—the spiked helmet of the First World War.

"That's right," said Bushman. "The armour and all the metal stuff for *Ben-Hur* was made by Hermann J. Kaufmann, in Berlin. They did an excellent job, because it was heavy stuff and when I was out in the Italian sun, I'm telling you I *roasted*." Bushman recalled the ludicrous and tragic events

that led to the *Ben-Hur* company being brought home from location in Italy. His career was given a lift by *Ben-Hur*; shortly afterwards he was blacklisted by Louis B. Mayer. "What I went through in my career! No one would believe me. But sixty-eight years in show business, and a lot of things happen. Dead yesterday and unborn tomorrow, that's me."

The following night, I was told, there was a meeting at the Masquers Club at which several silent stars would be present. It was a difficult situation: the club was full of members, any one of whom could have been an old movie star. There was Alan Mowbray—"How is Hampstead Heath? The last time I saw it was under canvas, in 1918..."—Vivian Duncan, one of the famous Duncan sisters, and many old theatre and vaudeville players. But I couldn't spot Laura La Plante or Viola Dana, who were supposed to be there. Eventually, I was trapped by a lady who, far from being a once-great actress, was currently marketing a new kind of lamp. She supplied an interminable commercial.

Taking refuge in a corner, I found myself sitting next to Francis McDonald, supporting actor in hundreds of silent pictures. He was a tough man to talk to, very different from the smooth Frenchman he so often portrayed. He wouldn't let me record his conversation; he said his agent wouldn't allow it. He also said that he was leaving in a moment—but stayed for more than an hour while I struggled to write down everything he said.

"I worked with Bill Wellman on *Legion of the Condemned*. Wellman found an army man, Lieutenant Robby Robinson, who resigned his rank and helped on all the air pictures. He flew the D8s and Nieuports from the back. We sat out front playing the pilots, but he said, 'If you touch the stick, you bastards, I'll kill you.' So he sat back there with a club out of sight. The cameras were bolted on the planes and



IRVIN WILLAT, DIRECTOR FROM THE DAYS OF THOMAS INCE, IN FRONT OF THE STUDIO BUILT FOR HIM IN THE TWENTIES. THE STUDIO IS NOW A PRIVATE HOUSE.

we went up and did our stuff. Three boys were killed on that film. Two Nieuports spun in... they took 'em up too cold. Those engines have to be revved. Wellman, of course, had spun in during the war and had a plate in his head to prove it."

In the lobby were pictures of past presidents of the Masquers Club, and sitting on a couch nearby was an intriguing looking woman in her sixties. I was convinced that *she* had been in silent pictures, so I began a conversation with a mention of Fred Niblo, whose picture was just above her head.

"Oh, yes—he was married to..." She couldn't remember.

"Enid Bennett."

"Oh, yes—but you don't remember..."

"No, but I'm very interested in this period. Particularly in directors."

"Well, my husband was a director."

"Really? What is his name?"

"Oh, you wouldn't have heard of him. Joseph Henabery."

"Joseph Henabery!" I sat down heavily on the arm of a chair. "I've not only heard of him, I have prints of some of his pictures."

We arranged to drive out to the Henaberys' Tarzana home at the weekend. California was having its worst flooding for ten years: torrents of water poured down the side streets, and

cars sent up bow waves. We were late, but Joseph Henabery was warm and welcoming. He was a fervent admirer of D. W. Griffith, whom he closely resembled. He had an amazing recall of events which had taken place fifty years before, and he talked solidly and grippingly for four hours, while Mrs. Henabery fed us coffee, beer and toasted cheese sandwiches. I began to think that California's old advertising claims of 'a paradise on earth' had some foundation...

At David Bradley's house, I was living in a day-dream, staring at the Los Angeles Wilshire district spread below me, and able to pick up a telephone and contact anyone I wanted. There was only one difference between the dream and reality—the Los Angeles telephone directory listed practically no celebrities, past or present.

I was determined to meet Buster Keaton. The problem was how to get his unlisted number. I managed to find the name of his agent, and called his office. He'd left, but the switchboard



FRANCES MARION, SILENT SCENARIST WHO WROTE "STELLA DALLAS", "THE SCARLET LETTER", "THE WIND".

girl gave me his home number. I called his home—and he hadn't arrived. I explained to his wife why I was anxious to meet Keaton: she seemed to understand, but hinted at a problem. I gave her my number and was about to launch into some more propaganda when she said, "Oh, I hear his car. Don't go away." I heard the sound effects of the front door opening and the wife's voice. There was a very long pause. Eventually, I heard footsteps. The receiver was picked up; another long pause. Evidently, the agent wasn't finding the decision easy. Finally, I heard what sounded like a sigh of resignation. "I'll give you the number," said a man's voice. "But don't tell him who gave it to you." He rattled off the number and replaced the receiver.

Was Keaton hard to get along with—or was the agent merely being melodramatic? I dialled the number nervously. A deep gravelly voice answered. Imagining that Keaton spoke with a hardly audible whisper, I didn't realise at first who I was speaking to. By the time I had explained what I wanted, I found myself speaking to Mrs. Keaton. To my surprise, she fixed an appoint-

UNIVERSAL STUDIOS, 1969: HORSES ON CALL FOR A WESTERN.



ment at once—and even took the trouble to give details of the quickest route to the Keaton home.

The house in the San Fernando Valley was called The Keatons; it was pleasant enough, but scarcely comparable with his former residence. Mrs. Keaton opened the door and before I could enter, the gap was filled by a colossal St. Bernard. Grinning, Mrs. Keaton tried to keep the door open, drag the dog in and shake hands all at once. From the next room, thundering hoofs and gunshots came from a television set. "Buster!" called Mrs. Keaton. The noise stopped abruptly. "The studio put Buster on standby today," she told me. "If I'd had some place to call you, I'd have cancelled the visit. But they aren't shooting after all." I congratulated myself on my foresight in not leaving a number.

Buster Keaton emerged from the next room, in his shirtsleeves. He looked a lot younger than the current photographs I'd seen—and he laughed. That was the last thing I expected from the deadpan comedian. But several times during the interview, a suddenly remembered funny incident would be accompanied by an infectious, spontaneous laugh of genuine amusement.



DIRECTOR CLARENCE BROWN.

Keaton talked about his silent pictures, about his mentor, Roscoe Arbuckle, and he described with especial enthusiasm the mechanics of gags. "The difference between a pratfall and a One-oh-Eight? The 108 was invented by Ben Turpin. In other words, however he fell—a walkover frontwards, a layout, a spreadeagle flat—that was his 108. So anytime a director says 'Hey, you come through here, Ben—take a fall.' He says, 'Which you want? Hundred and eight, fifty-two or one of the small ones like seven?' 'No, do a hundred and eight.' He'd do a regular straight pratfall. It would have no number. Anytime anyone took a wild fall, he always called it a 108."

At that moment Mrs. Keaton came into the room.

"Mademoiselle!" exclaimed Keaton, pleased to see her.

"You didn't feed the girls," said Mrs. Keaton, referring to the chickens.

"Yeah, I did it just a minute ago," said Keaton. "I was about forty-five



ENID BENNETT, STAR OF "ROBIN HOOD", WITH HER HUSBAND SIDNEY FRANKLIN.

minutes late and they were all standing at the gate, stamping their feet at me." And Keaton did an imitation of a seething chicken, tapping his foot and scowling.

Contacting Keaton had suggested difficulties; the Screen Directors' Guild presented them. "We're sorry, no addresses," they said. "We will pass your enquiry to our members, but I'm afraid we can't do more." Fortunately, David Bradley was a member, and he pulled the right strings. The first director I located was Sidney Franklin. His was a name which had always fascinated me. With his brother Chester, Franklin had started with Griffith in 1914, moved to Fox in 1917 and made a series of children's pictures which, when seen today, seem remarkably imaginative and exceptionally funny. I had found several of these, together with some of the Norma Talmadge pictures which Sidney Franklin had made on his own. And, of course, I had seen his more famous films of the Thirties, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* and *The Good Earth*.

When I called him, a deep, rather English voice answered the 'phone. I asked if he would be free for an interview. "I'm not very keen to do this . . . so many times what is written is inaccurate. I never give interviews or anything like that . . ." I emphasised the importance I placed upon accuracy, and told him that I had been collecting Sidney Franklin pictures since the age of fourteen. His attitude began to change: reluctantly he arranged a date. This reluctance was still noticeable as we began the interview. He was a slightly built, grey-haired man with the moustache he had worn since his Triangle days; for some reason, this made him look English. He also wore a dark blue jacket and white trousers, which made

him resemble a cricket blue. Franklin's early fascination for England, reflected in many of his films, took a beating when he came to work in London, and he confessed that some of his romantic illusions had been sadly dispelled.

At first, he talked with his eyebrows raised, as though full of disdain, but he would unexpectedly break into a wide, mischievous grin. He would begin a tantalising story, then stop and say, confidently, "That's for my book." I would try another question. A short pause and he would provide an answer. But just as it became interesting he would break off: "Now, tell me about yourself." I gradually eroded his resistance by describing his films to him. "I didn't know I was that darn good," he grinned. The atmosphere gradually became warmer and the reminiscences livelier.

"On *Intolerance* there were a thousand idiots on top of the walls of Babylon throwing down burning oil and big rocks made of plaster of Paris. Well, if one of them hit you, it could kill you. They were dropping so many things that no one could get the extras up to the walls. I was in charge of a group of 500, and Christy Cabanne had another group of 500. And since I was out in front, I made a speech. You know, a big rousing speech—'Come on boys, don't be afraid to approach the walls—follow me!' I charged toward the walls, thinking and hoping they'd all follow me. It took a lot of courage. 'Follow me!'—and I'd no sooner got the words out of my mouth than a rock came hurtling from fifty feet up and struck my shield. The shield knocked me cold and my 500 extras went the other way. My mother came across to the studio and said, 'Is my son in there?' 'Yes,' they told her. 'His brains are all over the lot.'"

Towards the end of the morning, Sidney Franklin called his wife. And down the Georgian staircase came a remarkably beautiful woman with a very familiar face—Enid Bennett, star of *Robin Hood*. The widow of Fred Niblo (he made *Ben-Hur*), she had recently married Sidney Franklin.

However elusive, however reluctant to talk, these great names of Hollywood displayed astonishing friendliness and cooperation once the barriers were overcome. And they all proved remarkable people. Some were in their seventies, some well over eighty, yet none were senile—none were even old, in the usual sense. For old age generally causes people to retire from life. This was true of no one I met. They were nearly all active, either in the film industry, or in writing or painting. And the sense of exhilaration they communicated made me realise why the Twenties was such an astonishing era—when they were young and making pictures.