

Lady Helen's Escapade

By Daniel Eagan

Excerpted by permission of the author from America's Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide to the Landmark Movies in the National Film Registry, Bloomsbury Academic, 2009

Released in April 1909, this modest comedy is the first of four films in the Registry directed by D.W. Griffith. Often credited with inventing many of the elements of film grammar (claims that he repeated in a famous trade paper advertisement in 1913), Griffith is usually cited as the first important director in movies. The reality is more complicated, but there is no question that Griffith changed the medium in a way that few others did.

Born on a farm in Kentucky in 1875, David Wark Griffith was one of seven children. His father Jacob was a doctor, soldier, prospector, farmer, gambler, and politician who was emotionally distant from his children. He died when David was ten. The debt-ridden family moved to Louisville, where David clerked in a department store and started acting. He was touring by 1896, and moved to New York City when he was twenty-four. Many years of deprivation followed, including stints of physical labor. In 1906, he married Linda Arvidson in San Francisco.

Aware of his limitations as an actor, Griffith tried writing plays and poetry. He broke into movies at Biograph, the nickname for the American Mutoscope and Biograph company, headquartered on East 14th Street in Manhattan. It was run at the time by Edwin S. Porter ("The Great Train Robbery," 1903). Griffith acted, sold some scenarios that were filmed, then hinted that he would like to direct. For his first film as director, "The Adventures of Dollie" (1908), he screened other movies for tips on technique, went to Broadway to cast actors outside the Biograph staff, shot on locations in three different states, and combined two separate rivers into one adventure sequence. In other words, he approached the job purposefully, treating the production above all as a serious endeavor. Soon he was the chief Biograph director, turning out a one-reel film every week.

The hard work and scuffling Griffith endured earlier helped when success finally arrived. He could draw on his own life experiences, on acting friendships built over the years, and on his knowledge of stage technique and repertoire when it came time to direct. Between 1909 and 1912 he would make hundreds of films, ransacking plays, books, poems, and songs for material. He was

BIOGRAPH FILMS
Released April 19th, 1909
"LADY HELEN'S ESCAPADE"
LENGTH, 705 FEET
"A TROUBLESOME SATCHEL"
LENGTH, 717 FEET
Released April 22nd, 1909
"THE DRIVE FOR A LIFE"
A TERRILLING STORY OF A WOMAN'S ESCAPE
LENGTH, 940 FEET
AMERICAN MUTOSCOPE AND BIOGRAPH COMPANY
11 E. 14th STREET, NEW YORK CITY

An advertisement that appeared in an April 1909 edition of Variety. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

paid by the foot, getting a small royalty — it had reached 10 percent by the time he left — on every one of his films Biograph sold to exhibitors. To make money, he had to shoot as much as possible.

Griffith paid attention to the mechanical aspects of moviemaking. He formed a creative collaboration with G.W. Bitzer, the most accomplished cinematographer in the country. Together they learned how to use close-ups, fades, cross-cutting, parallel editing. Griffith broke scenes into different camera set-ups, different angles, enabling the use of reaction shots. He developed a stock company of actors and filmmakers, helping to establish the careers of Mary Pickford, Dorothy and Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, Blanche Sweet, Donald Crisp, Raoul Walsh, Christy Cabanne, Mack Sennett, and many others.

Florence Lawrence, on the other hand, was already a successful film performer when she was hired by Biograph. Born Florence Bridgwood in 1886 in Hamilton, Ontario, the daughter of actress Lotta Lawrence. Florence was on stage herself by the age of three. She acted in her mother's touring company until 1907, when they were hired by Edison. Lawrence's film debut was "Daniel Boone" that year. In 1908 she switched to Vitagraph, which at the time produced the most popular films in the country. There she appeared in "Richard III" with Florence Turner, another stage veteran. Turner was forming an immense following, but remained anonymous to her fans because producers refused to identify the actors in their films. Turner was simply "The Vitagraph Girl."

Perhaps at the suggestion of Biograph actor Harry Salter, Griffith saw Lawrence in Vitagraph's "The Despatch Bearer" (1907), and lured her away to his stu-

dio in September 1908. (Lawrence later married Salter.) The actress brought a freshness and youthful vitality to Biograph product, whether appearing in adaptations of classics or in knockabout comedies. Her personality was so strong that she quickly developed an enthusiastic audience. She received fan mail addressed to “The Biograph Girl.”

Although studio records are unreliable, some sources credit the actress with 38 movies in 1908, and 65 in 1909. “Lady Helen’s Escapade” is typical of Biograph’s output at the time. The film has three sets, props and costumes recycled from other films, and a dozen or so performers at a time, ruling out close-ups. The actors compensate by gesticulating vigorously, striving to stand out from their makeup and costumes.

Lawrence, who is in almost every frame, doesn’t have to try so hard. Even when playing petulant or bored, as she does here, she projects a warmth and friendliness that is entirely winning. Unlike that of many of her contemporaries, her looks translate well to the present. But more important, she has in common with most great movie stars the ability to communicate directly with viewers, to bring them in on the joke, to include them in the action. (A few years later, writers would credit her, and specifically “Lady Helen’s Escapade,” with introducing the concept of costume design to movies.)

Although “Lady Helen’s Escapade” has aspects of the assembly line, with its perfunctory staging and threadbare sets, it provides a window into a world of almost alien class and economic systems. Lawrence plays Helen, a woman wealthy enough to have at least three servants waiting on her, yet she is bored with life. Food, clothing, shopping mean nothing to her, but a chance notice in a newspaper spurs her into sudden action. She takes a job as a waitress in a boarding house, where she swoons over a tall, handsome violinist who accompanies a singer after a meal. To get to this point, she has to put up with relentless come-ons from dandies with slicked-back hair who have no compunction about forcing themselves on the hired help.

In tone and temperament, Lawrence is not far removed from the madcap heiress Carole Lombard played in “My Man Godfrey” (1936). She doesn’t get mad at the men who try to paw her; she is indifferent to them, smarter than their best tricks, single-minded in her goal. Film curator Eileen Bowser unearthed one review of “Lady Helen’s Escapade” that cited Lawrence’s “very great personal attraction” and “very fine dramatic ability.” Along with John R. Cumpson, the actress was in the midst of a comedy series based on the characters “Mr. and Mrs. Jones.” She was so popular that in 1910, Carl Laemmle hired her for his new IMP studio.

In a masterstroke of publicity, Laemmle planted a story that Lawrence was killed by a streetcar in St. Louis, then took out ads denouncing the “lie” perpetrated by IMP enemies. In the ads Laemmle identified Lawrence by name as “The Imp Girl” and the former “Biograph Girl.” According to Bowser, this was not the first time a film actress had been identified. While Lawrence went to St. Louis to “prove she was not dead,” Florence Turner was introducing a song called “The Vitagraph Girl” in Brooklyn movie theaters and being profiled in the “New York Dramatic Mirror.” No matter who came first, the star system was put into irrevocable motion.

Biograph would not identify its performers until 1913. By that time Griffith had established himself as the most important director working in the United States. He was arguably the first who tried to evoke feelings, nostalgia, and memories in his movies: the first to establish emotional tones and moods. Other filmmakers were intent only on building a reality for what they were adapting — a play, a song lyric, a newspaper headline. They were trying to capture the window, the door, the harbor, the train, the baby, the battleship. Griffith went beyond that, using a field or forest to mean “rural,” a homestead for “nostalgia” He would pan across a valley, a shot that did nothing to advance the story, but everything to create an atmosphere. He was among the first to suggest that film could be more than a photographic record, that it could be the equivalent to another medium, an art form in itself, rather than animation or duplication of something else.

According to biographer Kelly R. Brown, Lawrence was seriously injured performing a stunt in 1914. Eight years later she attempted a comeback, but her time had passed. In a gesture of charity at the start of the sound era, she was hired by MGM to appear as an occasional extra (ironically, MGM hired Florence Turner as well). Suffering from a bone marrow disease, Lawrence committed suicide in 1938. Many of her Biograph titles survive, fortunately including “Lady Helen’s Escapade.”

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Daniel Eagan has worked for Warner Bros., MGM, and other studios as a researcher and story analyst. He edited HBO’s Guide to Movies on Videocassette and Cable TV (Harper Collins) and MGM: When the Lion Roars (Turner Publishing), to which he also contributed articles. His work has appeared in Smithsonian, The Nation, The Hollywood Reporter, and other outlets.