

film

Who's That Girl?

Northwest Film Center remembers one of Hollywood's earliest leading lesbians

by Gary Morris

During Hollywood's Golden Age, press agents worked overtime selling Tinseltown to the world as Hetero Heaven. Magazines happily cooperated, flooding fans with saccharine tales of marital bliss among the stars, along with the occasional regret-tinged story of divorce or mystified account of a certain bachelor, male or female, who just couldn't seem to find the right spouse.

Of course, sophisticates could read between the lines, and even the fan mags couldn't disguise every gay relationship. (Photo spreads portrayed occasional lovers Cary Grant and Randolph Scott as "zany bachelors" dawdling by the pool and cooking dinner as they roomed together between marriages.) But a few stars preferred to distance themselves from the elaborate lies and fantasies that fed the publicity machine. Among the latter was Janet Gaynor, who usually diverted questions about her romantic life to discussions of her work. She had good reason to be discreet.

But first, some history. Gaynor (1906-1977) made her first major feature, the melodrama *The Johnstown Flood*, at age 20. Studio execs immediately saw her star power and put her in higher-profile films at Fox Studios. Standing a mere 5 feet tall, Gaynor was the quintessential American gamine—beautiful, beguiling and, in her own quiet way, a commanding personality. She was also seriously

talented, winning the first Best Actress Oscar in 1928 for *Sunrise* and *Seventh Heaven*. She was nominated again a decade later for the pre-Judy Garland version of *A Star Is Born*. A year later she retired from films, returning only once in 1957 for a guest spot in the Pat Boone vehicle *Bernardine*.

Gaynor was never less than good, but she's best remembered for three silents—*Sunrise*, *Seventh Heaven* and *Street Angel*—and the sound film *A Star Is Born*. In *Sunrise*, frequently cited as a masterpiece of poetic style, she plays "The Wife," a beleaguered farm woman whose husband (George O'Brien) is lured by a temptress from "The City" into a potentially lethal affair. Gay director F. W. Murnau not surprisingly expends much camera time on the hunky O'Brien, but Gaynor more than holds her own, particularly in the grim sequences where hubby tries to kill her.

Gaynor made 10 films with rumored closet case Charles Farrell, and the two became top box office draws, generating millions for Fox. The best of the films are *Seventh Heaven* and *Street Angel*. *Heaven* is the quintessential romance, with Gaynor stunningly real as Diane, a street waif and prostitute in love with a sewage worker, Chico, who dreams of moving up in the world—to sweeping the streets. In this gorgeously shot drama, even poverty, war and death can't keep the lovers apart. *Angel* has a similar look and feel, with Gaynor registering powerfully as a girl forced

into prostitution to save her ailing mother and then falling in love with an artist who doesn't suspect her dubious past.

Gaynor usually played an enchanting naïf in these ultra-romantic films, but in real life she was apparently much more worldly. An early advocate for better parts and more money, she did the unthinkable in going on strike against Fox. One of her 1930s co-stars, gay actor Richard Cromwell, called her "terrifyingly tough." Gaynor was also a gifted painter who lived in Brazil during the 1950s and '60s. She married three times—each

husband, according to numerous sources, gay. Her second husband was MGM's legendary fashion designer, Gilbert Adrian, and the two had a son. (Rumor had it that during labor, doctors told Adrian his wife might lose the baby, to which he replied, "Oh no, I'll have to go through that again!") According to C. David Heymann's authoritative biography *Liz*, Adrian had a long affair with Elizabeth Taylor's father, Francis, while married to Gaynor.

Not that Gaynor minded. William Mann's meticulously researched book *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood 1910-1969* reveals she was a lifelong lesbian, seriously involved with at least two other stars, Margaret Livingston and, most significantly, Mary Martin, mother of actor Larry Hagman, who played J.R. Ewing on



Janet Gaynor played the plucky daughter of an ornery skipper in 1932's *Tess of the Storm Country*.

Dallas. Actor Robert Cummings once quipped: "Janet Gaynor's husband was Adrian, the MGM fashion designer. But her wife was Mary Martin."

Gaynor's work, as she would have wished, was her legacy, and it remains a strong one even today. If she was forced, like so many actors of her time, to live a closeted life, she at least did it as much on her own terms as she could in those difficult times. **JO**

The Northwest Film Center presents JANET GAYNOR: A CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION through Dec. 28. For a complete schedule visit www.nwfilm.org.

GARY MORRIS edits and publishes Bright Lights Film Journal, located online at www.brightlightsfilm.com.



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