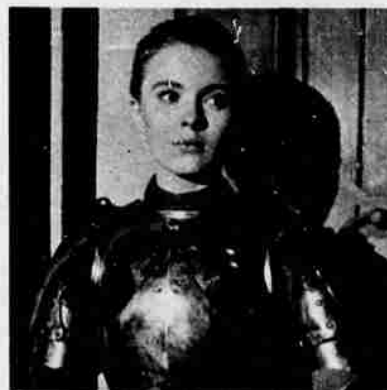


Seberg:

REAL-LIFE CINDERELLA

Hollywood combed two continents before selecting a 17-year-old Iowa girl to play Saint Joan, the theater's most exacting role.



BY PEER J. OPPENHEIMER

EVERY ACTRESS—whether she's a teen-age amateur in Iowa or an international star in Paris—has her dreams, and generally they're about portraying the most dynamic woman in history or drama, Joan of Arc.

That amateur in Iowa, however, is usually content if she wins a high-school speech contest by reciting excerpts from Maxwell Anderson's "Joan of Lorraine." What more can an inexperienced schoolgirl expect? Certainly not greater triumphs in a role portrayed by Katharine Cornell, Sybil Thorndike, Geraldine Farrar, Julie Harris, and Ingrid Bergman, to name a few.

So the young girl settles back to a quiet, small-town life with its regular run of dates and duties, and after high school enters the State University of Iowa. Oh, she hears about the big Hollywood search for a new young Saint Joan. It even sets off dreams again. But she pushes them back in her mind.

"It's just a Hollywood publicity stunt," she says. "They'll end up casting a box-office star or at least somebody with Broadway training."

Out in Hollywood, a lot of the wise guys agree with the inexperienced kid from the corn country. It's true that producer-director Otto Preminger's search for a fresh Saint Joan is a publicity stunt worth far more than the \$150,000 it costs.

But wise guys and small-town girl are wrong about one thing. Preminger is serious about the end result of his contest; like playwright George Bernard

Shaw, whose "Saint Joan" he is bringing to the screen, Preminger believes the make-believe Maid of Orleans should be about as young and unknown as Joan herself was.

And among the millions of entries in his talent hunt is one describing that teen-age Iowa girl. It has been submitted by a friend and neighbor who doesn't realize the tremendous odds or understand that sometimes Hollywood doesn't mean what it says.

His efforts result in a telegram delivered to college freshman Jean Seberg, whose father, a pharmacist in Marshalltown, Iowa, is still talking about his daughter's recitation honors.

The telegram says, "You are one of 2,000 semi-finalists in the search for an actress to play Shaw's Saint Joan. Please report to Chicago for an audition before Otto Preminger."

Miss Seberg is stunned. But not family friend and neighbor J. W. Fisher, the Marshalltown manufacturer who secretly entered her in the contest. Nor her mother, nor the other three Seberg children.

It's a good thing Jean has this loyal backing. Only 17, she is as terrified at appearing before the hard-bitten director as Saint Joan was in facing the Inquisition. Preminger has a reputation for being stern, unrelenting, dictatorial.

But Fisher and the Seberg family play their supporting roles well, and Jean finds herself on-stage in Chicago giving a reading. Later, for 50 finalists, there is a Hollywood or London screen test.

Jean has played her role well. She becomes Preminger's "fresh" Saint Joan!

Call it luck, coincidence, or the triumph of talent, this is the Cinderella story of an actress whose first screen appearance will be a major event of the coming film season.

Filming of "Saint Joan" has been completed, yet nervousness and awe still are very much a part of Jean Seberg. She'd be ignorant of the depths of her role if they weren't.

Preminger's production, however, moved forward smoothly; Miss Seberg sensed Preminger's confidence in her natural ability and showed it before the camera.

But how does she feel off the set, thinking about her big debut? "I'm embarrassed by all the attention," she says quietly. "I only hope I won't disappoint all the people who expect so much of me."

Back in Marshalltown, Mr. Seberg shakes his head. "Ask me about all this in a couple of years. I'm still too bewildered to give you an answer now."

And Mrs. Seberg? All she says is, "Whatever Jean wants to do is all right with me. I just want her to be happy."

There's anxiety in Mrs. Seberg's voice if not in her words. She knows Jean has reached a tremendous pinnacle overnight. A fall from such heights could shatter a teen-age girl.

But in Hollywood the wise guys are certain Jean has a firm footing at the top. Mrs. Seberg hopes they are right this time.



Jean revisits admiring friends in Marshalltown, Ia.



The Seberg family joins Jean in a press conference.



One home-town girl asks another for her autograph.