

Hollywood's One Woman Director

Dorothy Arzner Has Never Acted, But From Typist in a Movie Office She Has Worked Her Way Up Through Positions of Film Cutter and Editor To the Front Rank of Picturedom, Bossing the Making of Photoplays

"NOW, kiss!"
Then 15 seconds later by the stop watch:
"Break!"

And another Hollywood ga-ga girl has been brought one kiss closer to stardom, thanks to Hollywood's girl-with-brains and only woman director, Dorothy Arzner.

For movie kissing isn't the impetuous pastime it appears to be. In fact, it's an exact science. In the words of the song that is considerably older than cinema kissing technique: "Every little movement has a meaning all its own"—and also a time limit.

A perfect kiss never lasts longer than 15 seconds—at least not in the movies, according to Director Dorothy Arzner. And only the most heavily scented moments can stand a kiss of that length. Not because movie wooers who can't get into that length of time all the emotion any scene requires are not efficient enough at the business to have their efforts immortalized in celluloid, but because even the loveliest heroines and nicest heroes look ridiculous if this matter of osculation is overdone.

But do not get the idea that timing kisses is a movie director's principal occupation.

"A director's job really isn't nearly as easy as many persons seem to think it," Miss Arzner says. "In many ways the success or failure of a picture lies in the director's hands. When a theater audience sees a picture it thinks only of what the characters are doing and not of the guiding hand behind that action."

"FOR example, in a love scene, few people stop to consider the technical action behind it," Miss Arzner explains. "When the man kisses the girl, that act is all that registers. Yet if the kiss were a little too long or too short it might ruin the entire scene."

"Kisses must be of various durations, depending upon circumstances. I would say that the average screen kiss should last from five to seven seconds, although there are many times when a two-second kiss is more effective. That is a thing the director must decide for his players. He must visualize the effect that kiss will have upon an audience and time it exactly right. A seven-second kiss in a spot that calls for one of 15 seconds would be just as bad as overdoing it."

"Another very important factor which must be decided by the director is the amount of highly emotional acting, commonly known as 'sob stuff,' a film requires. That is one of the most difficult questions to decide because people vary so greatly in their like or dislike for this type of acting."

"Women as a rule like considerable emotion in a picture," she continues. "If they shed a few tears while they are in the theater, the film is a success. Men, on the other hand, prefer comedy. Consequently we must have enough sob scenes to satisfy the women, but not enough to overcome the humorous side of the film which appeals to the men."

DOROTHY ARZNER'S views on movie matters are interesting because she is the only woman in Hollywood who is in position to express them, as it were, through a director's megaphone. And for nearly eight years she has been associated with the business of producing pictures. So, although she has never acted, she knows the cinema art—and business—from every angle.

Two years ago she achieved her greatest ambition by becoming a director. Only one other woman, Lois Weber, who has since retired, ever wielded a movie megaphone.

Miss Arzner is considered one of Hollywood's most interesting notables. She is credited with having more brains than many of the so-called big men of the industry. And she easily holds her own in competition with the horde of male directors. Yet her entry into the movie business was purely accidental.

"If anyone had told me I was going into the picture business a year before I did I would have promptly told him

he was crazy," Miss Arzner says, although much of her early life was spent around theatrical people.

Her father was a prominent San Francisco cafe owner before the 1906 earthquake. After his business was wiped out by that disaster he came to Los Angeles to start over again and opened a cafe in connection with one of the leading theaters in the city, which became popular.

About that time Dorothy was enrolled in the Westlake School for Girls, located on what was then the outskirts of the city. She completed her grammar and high school courses there.

She was in the midst of her second year at the University of Southern California when the United States entered the World War. Along with several other girls, she left school and joined the Red Cross Ambulance Corps. However, she saw no overseas service. Her detail was assigned to transporting sick soldiers and sailors between San Pedro and San Diego.



Ex-editor Arzner . . . no actress, she sees a movie lot with the eyes of an expert technician. . . . Left, "listen-in" during the filming of a talkie.



The only woman director on the job. . . . "I have not found that men object to taking orders from a woman," she says. . . . "I don't believe there is such a thing as sex in thought . . . and thought is the prime factor in making a picture."

In the director's chair. . . . Dorothy decided it was a comfortable seat . . . right on top of the world.

VERY shortly after she was mustered out of the ambulance service Miss Arzner had her first taste of life within a film studio, although she still had no desire to pursue a cinema career. In college she had studied sociology and medicine with the idea of following the medical branch of sociology work.

"A girl friend of mine literally shoved me into picture work," declares the director. "She thought I was well suited for it, so she made an appointment for me with Cecil B. DeMille. Then she drove me over to the Paramount studio and dumped me out in front of the main office. There was nothing left to do but go in, although I still had no idea what I wanted to do."

When the more or less abashed young girl entered his office DeMille inquired, "What can I do for you?"

"I want a job," Dorothy replied.

"Let me see your profile," said DeMille. "Oh, I don't want to be an actress," she hastened to assure him.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

"I don't know." That closed the short interview. For the next week Miss Arzner spent her entire time prowling around the studio, learning what she could about the art of making pictures. It was during that week that she became ambitious to be a director. She saw DeMille walking around the lot and decided that he was the "big shot" with a comfortable seat right on top of the world. So she went back to his office and told him she wanted to go to work.

"Do you know yet what you want to do?" he inquired. "Yes. I want to start at the bottom," she replied.

"What do you consider the bottom?" was his next question.

"Typing scripts," she replied.

DeMille promised her the first opening in the studio's typing department and about a week later she was called to start



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work. Then followed jobs as a script girl and finally as a cutter.

"My first picture as a cutter was Rudolph Valentino's 'Blood and Sand,' she says. 'I was given a pretty free hand on the picture and the studio officials liked my work well enough that they gave me a permanent job as a cutter. But I wasn't satisfied. I wanted to become a film editor, so I quit and went to work as an editor for Universal.'

"I WAS always quitting my job at Paramount to go somewhere else and always came back again," Miss Arzner says. "I soon learned that there is a lot of truth in the old proverb, 'a prophet in his own country is without honor.' Nobody would recognize my ability to do bigger things in my own studio. I had to take the bigger job at another studio and then come back to Paramount."

"Finally I decided I wanted to be a scenario writer. So I quit my job again, rented an office and set myself up as one—but there were no scenarios to write. I was just about ready to give up when I got a job adapting six western stories for an independent producer."

"Just as I was getting nicely established as a scenario writer, Jim Cruze asked me if I would come back to Paramount and cut 'Old Ironsides' for him. After I finished cutting his biggest success, 'The Covered Wagon,' I told him that if he ever wanted me to edit another picture for him I would. When I finished on 'Old Ironsides' I decided it was time for me to achieve my great ambition and become a director, so I tried to quit my job again."

But this time Paramount would not let her and when she clung to her determination to be a director, the Paramount executives decided to give her a chance.

Her first picture was "Fashions for Women," in which Esther Ralston was starred.

"I shall never forget it," Miss Arzner declares. "I never had called 'camera' before in my life. Most assistant directors have the opportunity to direct small scenes, but I never had had that training. Outwardly I guess I was perfectly calm. But inside I was in a turmoil. On the very first day we shot a cabaret scene with about 500 extras in it. Nobody said anything, but I know everyone on the set sensed a certain tenseness for about two weeks."

"I have not found, however, that men object to taking orders from a woman. In fact I don't believe they consider it in that light at all. I have never thought I was working for anyone but myself and I believe most people are in that same frame of mind."

"Then, too, I don't believe there is such a thing as sex in thought, and thought is the prime factor in making a picture. I had thoughts to transfer to the screen and the people working with me accepted those thoughts at their face value without any consideration of sex whatever."

"ONE often hears remarks about good direction, but in reality it is the actors who are good," Miss Arzner contends. "You can only bring out of people what they have in them. If they don't possess a certain quality, nobody can bring it out. That is why some directors are better than others. They know better just how to bring out the qualities in their players. It is impossible to make a character appear noble on the screen unless he has a noble streak in him somewhere, even though it may not be developed."

"Nothing is sure fire in pictures," Director Arzner has found. "We can guess at what type of material will make successful pictures, but we never know until we find out how many people are paying their money to see the film."

"I have never yet attempted to make the type of picture which we term great. My idea is that the public goes to a theater to be entertained, and if we don't entertain them we aren't giving them their money's worth, no matter how great the production might be. If a film is wholly entertaining, people will overlook its minor defects."