

Mabel's Blunder

By Brent E. Walker

Mabel Normand was the first major female comedy star in American motion pictures. She was also one of the first female directors in Hollywood, and one of the original principals in Mack Sennett's pioneering Keystone Comedies. "Mabel's Blunder" (1914), made two years after the formation of the Keystone Film Company, captures Normand's talents both in front of and behind the camera.

Born in Staten Island, New York in 1892, a teenage Normand modeled for "Gibson Girl" creator Charles Dana Gibson before entering motion pictures with Vitagraph in 1910. In the summer of 1911, she moved over to the Biograph company, where D.W. Griffith was making his mark as a pioneering film director. Griffith had already turned actresses such as Florence Lawrence and Mary Pickford into major dramatic stars. Normand, however, was not assigned to the dramas made by Griffith. Instead, she went to work in Biograph's comedy unit, directed by an actor-turned-director named Mack Sennett. Normand's first major film "The Diving Girl" (1911) brought her notice with nickelodeon audiences. Mabel quickly differentiated herself from the other Biograph actresses of the period by her willingness to engage in slapstick antics and take pratfalls in the name of comedy. She also began a personal romantic relationship with Mack Sennett that would have its ups and downs, and would eventually inspire a Broadway musical titled "Mack and Mabel."

Sennett left Biograph in 1912 to start the Keystone Film Company, with Mabel Normand as one of his initial triumvirate of stars. Mabel's first release, "The Water Nymph" (1912), was also one-half of the company's first public offering. Clad in a bathing suit, the film returned Normand to the seaside a year after "The Diving Girl," and its success gave the new Keystone Comedies a tremendous beginning with audiences. Keystone was the very first movie studio concerned with making comedies only, and Sennett's skill as a talent scout soon led him to sign such comedians as Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle and Charlie Chaplin, both of whom did notable work when paired with Normand. In fact, Chaplin's first sequence featuring his famous tramp character was lensed for a film in which he was supporting Normand-- "Mabel's Strange Predicament" (1914).

As Keystone became more successful, and more comedy units were added, Mack Sennett--who had originally directed every Keystone comedy--began



A 1914 portrait of Mabel Normand looking uncharacteristically somber. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection.

to assign directorial control to each of his stars on their comedies, including Normand. Mabel directed a number of her own films through the early months of 1914. However, Sennett eventually took back the directorial reins from her--reportedly due less to any lack of ability on her part as to the reported unwillingness of some male co-stars to take orders from a woman.

In the middle of 1914, Sennett began production on his ground-breaking feature film, "Tillie's Punctured Romance," starring Broadway headline Marie Dressler. Sennett cast Chaplin and Normand in the two main supporting roles. Tillie took several months to complete, and during that period, Chaplin and Normand continued to crank out their individual short comedies in between Tillie's production schedule. On July 25, 1914, Sennett departed the studio for New York City to secure a distribution deal for his upcoming feature film. He would not return to Los Angeles until over a month later. Sennett had been directing Mabel's recent short films, but in his absence, he again gave Mabel the authority to direct herself.

One of those Normand-directed comedies was

"Mabel's Blunder," which began shooting on Thursday, August 13, and concluded five days later on Tuesday, August 18, 1914. Trade papers verify Normand's status as director of her films in August, though not specifically mentioning Mabel's Blunder by title. The August 29, 1914, Motography reported: "During the absence of (...) Mack Sennett, (...), Roscoe Arbuckle and Mabel Normand have been directing the Keystone players." On September 19, 1914, The Moving Picture World stated, "Mabel is busy directing her own company and is putting on some real good comedy."

Mabel's Blunder features Normand as a stenographer secretly carrying on a romance with her boss's son--played by Keystone regular Harry McCoy. She becomes jealous when she sees McCoy taking up with an attractive woman (Peggy Page), and disguises herself as a chauffeur to spy on them as they rendezvous at a restaurant. At the same time, Normand's younger brother disguises himself as his sister, and finds himself the subject of amorous attentions from her boss (Charles Bennett). In the end, Mabel discovers that her perceived love rival is actually McCoy's visiting sister, and everything is sorted out for the better.

Besides trading on the comedy staples of mistaken identities and misunderstood intentions, Mabel's Blunder also features a double-dose of another standard of farce: gender-impersonation, with Mabel disguising herself as a man, and the unidentified young actor playing Normand's brother donning drag to impersonate his sibling. Normand had been impersonating males for comic result ever since her Biograph days. An early Keystone, "Mabel's Stratagem" (1912), had also featured Normand as an office worker who is fired when her boss's wife feels her husband is being too affectionate to his stenographer, and insists that he hire a man for the job instead. Mabel later dons male drag and gets the job--only to find herself now becoming an object of flirtation from the wife.

Notable in the cast in the role of Harry McCoy's carousing pal is Charles Parrott, who joined Keystone as an actor earlier that same year of 1914. Within two years, Parrott left acting to become a comedy director--a duty that led to a position as the director general of the Hal Roach Studios in the early

1920s. In 1924, Parrott returned to the screen as a lead comedian for Roach--initially under the name "Jimmy Jump," but shortly afterward as "Charley Chase." Under that screen name, he would become one of the most popular two-reel comedy stars of the 1920s and 1930s, often employing female impersonation, misunderstandings, and office politics--all subjects of this film--in his comedies.

The finale of "Mabel's Blunder" takes place at a distinctive outdoor restaurant which--with its vine-covered trellises and historic location--was designed as a throwback to "Old California." It is the La Ramada Restaurant, established in an old adobe at Glendale's Casa Verdugo--once part of the vast rancho of 1784 Spanish land grantee Jose Maria Verdugo. Sagaciously cashing in on the interest in Spanish colonial California which followed the popularity of Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 novel "Ramona," railroad baron Henry Huntington turned the old abode into a restaurant to create a tourist destination at the northern terminus of his Pacific Electric Railway's Glendale line. That was the same "red car" route (originating in downtown Los Angeles) that passed right in front of the Keystone studio at 1712 Alessandro Street in Edendale. So it is likely that some of the Keystone film crew took the PE train from the studio up to the shooting location on the days when Mabel Normand directed herself and her cast at La Ramada.

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

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