When the movie business adopted some of the ways of other big industries in 1920s America, women—who had been essential to the industry's early development—were systematically squeezed out of key behind-the-camera roles. Yet, as female producers and directors virtually disappeared for decades, a number of female film editors remained and rose to the top of their profession, sometimes wielding great power and influence. Their example inspired a later generation of women to enter the profession at mid-century, several of whom were critical to revolutionizing filmmaking in the 1960s and 1970s with contributions to such classics as *Bonnie and Clyde, Jaws* and *Raging Bull*. Focusing on nine of these women and presenting shorter glimpses of nine others, this book tells their captivating personal stories and examines their professional achievements.

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Front cover: Anne Bauchens, first female film editor both to be nominated for and to win an Academy Award (Paramount Pictures); background © 2016 iStock

McFarland

MEUEL Women Film Editors

WOMEN FILM EDITORS

Unseen Artists of American Cinema

DAVID MEUEL

4

"Bobbie Says..."

Barbara McLean's Four Decades as Darryl Zanuck's "Right-Hand Woman"

In the summer of 1933, 30-year-old Darryl F. Zanuck was still far from being the Hollywood legend people remember today. An ambitious writer-producer at Warner Brothers during the late 1920s and early 1930s, he and company president Harry Warner had recently parted ways after a loud, bitter argument over business at the fabled film-biz haunt the Brown Derby Restaurant in Los Angeles. Now—along with producer Joseph Schenck and some investment dollars from Schenck's brother Nicholas and others—he was trying to start a new film company from scratch.

The name of the company was Twentieth Century, and, as assistant Sam Engel—who had suggested it to Zanuck—noted with a smile, this name would be good for another 67 years. But the more pressing issue for Zanuck and Schenck at the time was whether the fledgling company formed during the worst year of the Great Depression had only short-term viability. Without a stable of contract stars or directors, a network of theaters to show films, extensive in-house production facilities, and other resources the major studios had, they knew they were a David pitted against four Goliaths. A couple of poorly made films or market miscalculations could mean that—instead of 67 years—their Twentieth Century might only be good for another six or seven months.

The new company's first production was a rough-and-tumble drama set on the lower East Side of Manhattan in the early 1900s called *The Bowery*. Directed by the talented Raoul Walsh, starring reliable stars Wallace Beery and George Raft, and focusing on a rivalry between two long-time

male friends (a favorite Zanuck storyline), the film appeared to have all the ingredients of a hit. During post-production, however, there was a strike and, along with other employees, the film's newly hired assistant editor walked off the job. When the strike was over, bad feelings remained and people at the studio didn't want to bring several of the strikers—including this assistant editor—back. But, the film's lead editor (who considered this loss nothing less than a catastrophe for the film) personally pleaded with Zanuck to rehire the assistant—someone Zanuck hadn't yet met and knew only as "Bobby."

"Get him back," Zanuck ordered, assuming that "Bobby" was one of the men who now dominated in Hollywood's editing ranks. "Get him back."[1]

Soon afterwards, however, Zanuck learned that "Bobby" was really "Bobbie," a 29-year-old cutting room veteran named Barbara McLean (1903–1996). A skilled and insightful film editor himself, he immediately recognized her contribution to *The Bowery* (which went on to become the studio's second biggest hit that year). Calling McLean "one of the best editors in town,"[2] he quickly made her a lead editor, and soon she was handling the studio's most prestigious productions. Two years later, when Zanuck and Schenck purchased the ailing Fox Film Corporation and created 20th Century-Fox, she—along with other new hires such as screenwriter Nunnally Johnson—went with them.

And she stayed for the next 34 years.

As an editor, McLean worked on more than 60 films for such directors as Henry King, Clarence Brown, John Ford, Elia Kazan, and Joseph L. Mankiewicz and was, during her time, the most honored member of her profession. Between 1936 and 1951, for example, she received an eye-popping seven Academy Award nominations for editing (winning an Oscar for her work on 1944's bio-pic *Wilson*), a record she held or shared until 2013 when editor Michael Kahn received his eighth editing nomination for his work on Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*. And, even after her retirement, she remained one of the industry's most respected editors, receiving one of the first two Career Achievement Awards given by the American Cinema Editors (ACE) in 1988.

McLean's achievements as an editor were, however, only part of the story. In her years at 20th Century-Fox, she also became a valuable creative resource for several of the studio's directors, the head of the studio's editing department, and one of Zanuck's most trusted advisors and confidantes. She worked on 29 films, for example, with one of Zanuck's favorite directors, the very under-appreciated Henry King. In fact, as King frequently

said, if he could always have his way, he'd have McLean with him on *all* his films. As well as editing, King asked McLean to participate in shooting, occasionally going with him and his crew on location to advise on how scenes were shot and the kinds of shots she would need to tell the story most effectively. In 1949, McLean moved into a supervisory role, heading 20th Century–Fox's editing department until her retirement in 1969. During this period, she exerted the kind of influence over the studio's total output that only Margaret Booth at MGM could match. And, throughout McLean's tenure, Zanuck relied heavily on her advice on all matters from re-cutting the work of other editors to wardrobe choices, to the casting of actors. When looking at screen tests of actors vying for the lead role in King's 1936 film *Lloyd's of London*, for example, McLean went against the consensus choice of the more established Don Ameche, arguing for a then unknown 22-year-old named Tyrone Power. Ultimately, Power got the part,

One of Darryl F. Zanuck's most valued confidants at 20th Century-Fox, Barbara McLean—who received seven Academy Award nominations between 1936 and 1951—was perhaps the most honored film editor of the studio era. Much of her best work was with director Henry King, who found McLean's contributions to his films indispensable (© 20th Century–Fox).

carried the picture, and became one of the studio's most popular stars. In fact, Zanuck grew to value McLean's opinion so much that, as studio lore went, any time he would begin a sentence with the words "Bobbie says..." those listening knew that the time for further discussion on the matter had passed—that McLean had spoken.

While not as well-known as other long-time Zanuck confidantes such as King or writer/producers Nunnally Johnson and Philip Dunne, the shy, reserved, and very private McLean was nevertheless one of the most creative and powerful voices at one of Hollywood's elite studios for nearly four decades. When film scholar George F. Custen, in his 1997 biography of Zanuck, referred to her as "the centerpiece of his professional world,"[3] he wasn't exaggerating but simply reaffirming what everyone well acquainted with that world already knew.

"[Y]ou worked like mad because you loved every minute of it."

In contrast to most of her editing peers who learned their craft as adults, McLean, who was born Barbara Pollut in Palisades Park, New Jersey, began as a girl in grade school. Her father, Charles, ran a local film laboratory, and during her breaks from school she would work there, patching together release prints of films for an adjacent studio run by silent film actor and director Edward Kline Lincoln. She also studied music, an experience she later claimed helped to give her a keenly attuned sense of the natural rhythms of film editing.

When she was in her early 20s, she married a movie projectionist named J. Gordon McLean and the two moved to Hollywood. Gordon later became a cameraman. The couple never had children and divorced in the late 1940s.

Once in Hollywood, Barbara found work as a negative cutter for Grant Whytock, the film editor for the highly regarded silent film director Rex Ingram, and assisted Whytock on such exotic, sophisticated Ingram efforts as *Mare Nostrum* (1926) and *The Garden of Allah* (1927), films which would serve as excellent preparation for many complex, challenging films she would later tackle at 20th Century–Fox. Then, after a brief stint at First National Studio, she went to work for silent screen superstar Mary Pickford at United Artists on the early talkie *Coquette* (1930), for which Pickford would win a Best Actress Oscar. Delighted to work with Pickford, whom she greatly admired, McLean was also thrilled that the experience

at United Artists gave her the chance to learn about filmmaking from numerous perspectives. "My God, we did everything," she recalled. "I could get into every department.... You'd go on the scoring stage when they'd do the music, to see what [they] would be doing. You know, to know that everything was going to fit. [With] each thing you learned a little bit more."[4]

While at United Artists, McLean also worked with Samuel Goldwyn, whom she remembered and admired as "a perfectionist."[5] Then, in 1933, she got a job as an assistant editor on *The Bowery*, the first film produced by Darryl Zanuck and Joseph Schenck's brand new company Twentieth Century. And, after her brief departure during a strike and Zanuck's plea to "Get him back," this studio would be her professional home for the rest of her career.

Just as Zanuck, King, and others at 20th Century–Fox valued working with McLean, she appreciated the opportunity to work not only with them but also in the environment that many at the studio had a hand in creating. "It was like the whole family, so naturally you worked like mad because you loved every bit of it," McLean once said. "You loved them, and you wanted the picture to be great, and you didn't mind how hard you worked. And that's the faculty that Zanuck had."[6]

Recognizing what McLean could do, Zanuck quickly promoted her. She was the lead editor on Twentieth Century's fifth film, a woman's drama starring Ann Harding called *Gallant Lady* (1934). And soon afterwards, she was editing many of the studio's prestige pictures, such as the comedy *The Affairs of Cellini* (1934) with Constance Bennett and Frederic March, the historical drama *The House of Rothschild* (1934) with George Arliss, and another historical drama, *Clive of India* with Ronald Colman and Loretta Young.

During these early years, some of her most impressive work was in 1935 film version of Victor Hugo's classic novel *Les Miserables* with March and Charles Laughton.

One of the great challenges of watching 1930s film adaptations of classic novels today is, certainly by current standards, their relatively slow, plodding pace. To McLean's credit, however, this version of *Les Miserables* tells the story of this sprawling novel with great speed and economy. Throughout, too, her excellent sense of rhythm helps to underscore the points being made in the story. In one excellent montage early in the film, for example, she captures the experience of being a prisoner consigned to row day after day on a galley ship along with the repetitive, oppressive sound cadences that are central to this experience. The prisoners row to

the beat of a gong, the film's cuts and dissolves follow accordingly, and, as we in the audience watch and listen, we absorb both the horror and the haunting musicality of the situation. It's an entrancing few moments.

McLean's work here as well as throughout *Les Miserables* made a powerful impression on her peers, earning her the first of her Best Editing Academy Award nominations after only two years as a lead editor. The film was also nominated in the Best Picture category, and, while it has several other assets, including Gregg Toland's gorgeous black-and-white cinematography and fine acting performances from March and Laughton, McLean's contribution was critical to its success.

When Zanuck and Schenck bought Fox in 1935, McLean's work life only got better. Reflecting his understanding of the importance of editors in the filmmaking process, Zanuck built a new three-story editing building with all the most advanced equipment and facilities. The first floor was for screenings, where producers (rather than directors) conferred with editors and made the final decisions on films. The third floor was for film storage. And the second floor was where the editors worked—and where no one else was allowed.

For an editor, especially one with McLean's talents, this was the equivalent of heaven on earth. While directors were deeply involved in the editing phase in the early years of the film industry, and while they are usually deeply involved today, they were more hands-off during the heyday of the studios. A major reason was the assembly-line model the industry had adopted. Once directors had finished the production phase for one film, they were usually off to direct another. The editing was left for the editors, and much of the critiquing was the job of producers, such as Zanuck. Although editors didn't have the benefits of a director's continuous input, they were also spared the headaches of a director's constant meddling and, as such, had greater autonomy to make the decisions they considered best for the film. As McLean later recalled, "I've always been pretty fortunate in being able to put the picture in the first cut as I saw fit."[7] In addition, she had the clout to tell directors to reshoot scenes or to shoot additional close-ups if she believed this would help the editing and ultimately improve the final product. With this kind of model, it's no wonder that, from the 1930s to the 1960s, 20th Century–Fox offered an extremely appealing work environment not only for McLean but also for such other major editing talents as Hugh Fowler, William Reynolds, Robert Simpson, and Dorothy Spencer—all of whom McLean mentored.

Once Twentieth Century had merged with Fox, McLean also began working with a director whose career would parallel hers for the next 20

years, Henry King. A true film pioneer, King had directed his first film in 1915 and quickly developed a reputation both for his versatility and for his straightforward, unpretentious visual style. After working as an independent producer-director and then a director for Samuel Goldwyn in the 1920s, he joined Fox Studios in 1930, became one of Darryl Zanuck's most trusted directors after the merger with Twentieth Century in 1935, stayed with the studio until 1961, and died in 1982 at the venerable age of 96. In his time at 20th Century–Fox, he directed 37 films, 29 of them with McLean.

Their first notable collaboration was the 1936 historical drama *Lloyd's of London*, the film for which McLean suggested that the studio cast the 22-year-old unknown Tyrone Power in the lead. Set in England before and during the Napoleonic Wars, the film is the story of the fictional Jonathan Blake, a boyhood friend of Lord Nelson, who goes to work for the firm Lloyd's of London and eventually uses chicanery to help his old friend keep his fleet intact and win the crucial Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Again, McLean's instinct for cutting to the rhythms of the story with seemingly perfect timing is apparent. While the film's pacing never seems rushed, it also flows with great crispness: we never feel that even a second of unneeded film can be excised. Here, too, McLean shows a real talent for cutting between close-ups of key characters in crowd scenes to reinforce dramatic tensions. She does this quite well, for example, in one scene at a party when Blake realizes that the woman he has fallen for is married to a callous ne'er-do-well (played brilliantly, incidentally, by George Sanders in his first American film). In a brief succession of reaction shots, the complex relationship dynamics among the three characters are conveyed with great economy and skill. For her work on *Lloyd's of London*, McLean received another Academy Award nomination.

In addition to cutting dramas, McLean was adept at musicals, and one of her great triumphs during this period was 1938's *Alexander's Ragtime Band*. Directed by King and starring Power, Alice Faye, and Don Ameche, the film is story of a bandleader, his songwriter friend, and the woman they both love that runs from the early 1900s to the 1930s and features a veritable smorgasbord of Irving Berlin songs. Here, McLean's work is often stunning. In the film's many big-band numbers, for example, she mixes long, medium, and close shots with great aplomb not only to show the various performers at work but also to reinforce some of the story's romantic tensions. In the film, she also does an excellent job mixing actual footage of World War I with scenes shot to incorporate the film's characters into the conflict, making it difficult to distinguish between them. (This is a skill she would later perfect in 1949's *Twelve O'Clock High*.) An enormous hit, *Alexander's Ragtime Band* received six Academy Award nominations, including one for McLean.

In 1939, McLean tried her hand at a disaster film, Clarence Brown's *The Rains Came*. Set in the fictional Indian city of Ranchipur in the 1930s, the dramatic center of the story is a massive earthquake and flood that leads first to a great plague and ultimately to the people's resolve to rebuild the ravaged community. The film, which beat out *The Wizard of Oz* that year for the very first Oscar for Best Special Effects for its depiction of the earthquake and flooding, required a special effort from McLean to edit all the disaster shots together in a way that not only was credible, gripping, and terrifying, but that also kept the various human stories moving.

The result, a sequence that lasts about for three and a half minutes, is quite powerful. An initial tremor shakes up a party the major characters are attending. For a moment, this one minor quake seems to be it. Then additional quakes hit, several larger than the first. We see buildings collapse on people, the earth opening up and people falling in, and even a large dam bursting and the escaping water overwhelming the ant-like humans in its wake. In between such shots, we also see the various characters we've been following thus far in the story. A young Indian doctor and his nurse rush to the hospital and are covered by floodwater. We don't know if they will survive. An arrogant British aristocrat and his bitter servant argue pointlessly just before one of the later earthquakes crushes their house, instantly killing the two of them. Throughout the sequence, both the large-scale events and the intimate events involving the film's characters are juxtaposed with great skill. The experience is everything it should be: fast-paced, chaotic, dramatically riveting, and a clear object lesson relating to the story's more self-absorbed, self-important characters, pointing out that—in the face of nature's enormous power—we are ultimately small, fragile creatures with largely petty concerns.

In addition to winning the first Academy Award for Special Effects, *The Rains Came* was nominated for five more Oscars. One of these was for best film editing, McLean's fourth nomination in five years.

McLean's work during the 1940s was no less exceptional. She received a fifth Academy Award nomination for her work on 1943's religious film, *The Song of Bernadette*. Then, the following year, she finally won an Oscar for her work on *Wilson*, a film biography of President Woodrow Wilson, which focuses on the period from when he was president of Princeton University to his last days in office as U.S. president. Nothing less than an obsessive quest for Zanuck (who greatly admired the former president),

the film—largely because of its uninspired and rambling script—received generally poor reviews, was a major failure at the box office, and is rarely seen today. But, owing to the mysteries of Academy Award voting, it somehow managed to receive 10 Oscar nominations and win five of the golden statuettes.

Wilson presented some major editing challenges for McLean, many related to the size and scope of the project as well as to the excessive amount of film used in shooting it. (At the time, it was the most expensive American film ever made after *Gone with the Wind.*) As McLean later recalled, "I can remember *Wilson.* Holy Mother.... I'll never forget the [Democratic] convention ... when you had miles and miles of film. And all those bands. You sit down, 'Where do I start and what do I do?' You just sit down and figure it all out."[8]

It's unfortunate, however, that, if McLean were to win only one Oscar, it would be for this film. Not only had she already done superb work on numerous, more deserving films, but she would also continue to do superb work for another decade.

After *Wilson*, King and McLean teamed on an adaptation of John Hersey's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *A Bell for Adano*, the story of an Italian-American officer determined to restore a 700-year-old bell the Fascists have taken from the Sicilian town of Adano during World War II, a bell that had been tied closely to the town's identity. The film, starring John Hodiak and Gene Tierney, is mostly a solid, respectful adaptation of the book, but, in their discussion of McLean's work, Susan Ware and Stacy Lorraine Braukman write how, even in a fairly routine film, McLean's editing could still "dazzle." As they note, "[S]he took material director Henry King shot on the return of the Italian POWs to their village and put it together with such a pure sense of emotion that when she cut at exactly the right moment to King's overhead shot of the prisoners and villagers coming together in the square, the cut was more heart-stopping than conventional close-ups would have been."[9]

In 1947, McLean attempted something quite different for her at the time, a very dark film noir titled *Nightmare Alley.* Directed by Edmond Goulding, it tells the story of the rise and long, hard fall of an amoral con man that begins and ends in two seedy carnivals. Eager to expand beyond the swashbuckling action roles he was playing at the time, Tyrone Power had purchased the rights to the novel the film is based on with the intent to play the lead himself. Although the film wasn't successful on its initial release, it is widely considered one of Power's best performances and has since become a noir classic.

One of *Nightmare Alley's* great strengths is its ability to convey—in true noir fashion—life's nightmarish aspects, and McLean ably does her part to support the overall objective through editing. As the blogger "monstergirl" wrote in 2012, "In *Nightmare Alley*, Barbara McLean contributes to creating a landscape of a distorted reality alongside the darkly, clandestine, and arcane carnival atmosphere. The film is beautifully woven, as the seamless images flow into one another.... McLean's editing constructs much of the surreal and tormented movement of the film. It's what transports each scene of the film, making it every bit as if WE were inhabiting someone's nightmare."[10]

The years 1949 and 1950 represented yet another high-water mark for McLean with her work on King's powerful and grim World War II film *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949), King's pioneering psychological western *The Gunfighter* (1950), and Joseph L. Mankiewicz's masterpiece *All About Eve* (1950). Again, her editing enriches these films in various ways. In *Twelve O'Clock High*, for example, she once again shows her amazing talent for integrating actual war film footage with dramatized scenes to create a riveting air battle near the end of the film. In *The Gunfighter*, she turns the claustrophobic environment of the saloon the title character is confined to for much of the film into an asset, occasionally mixing close-ups of characters' faces with close-ups of a steadily ticking wall clock to intensify suspense and audience anxiety. And in *All About Eve*, she is pitch-perfect in editing to the rhythms of the witty lines the urbane characters constantly exchange, exhibiting the keen sense of timing of an accomplished stage actor. For her work on *Eve*, she received her seventh—and last—Academy Award nomination.

McLean would continue to edit films until 1955, but, after 1949, when she became head of 20th Century–Fox's editing department, her work focus became more supervisory in nature. One major achievement during this time, however, was her editing on the 1953 Biblical epic *The Robe.* Directed by Henry Koster, this was the very first film shot in CinemaScope, a new widescreen film process the studio had invested in—and was heavily promoting—to compete with television. Almost overnight, the wide screen would become the norm for the movies, but, as film writer Kevin Lewis has noted, "The challenges involved in determining editing cuts in the widescreen process for the first time certainly seemed to deserve a special award."[11] Yet, while the film received five Academy Award nominations with two wins (in Art Direction and Costume Design), the film's editing was passed over.

As well as taking a new direction in her career during the 1950s,

McLean also took a new direction in her personal life. Recently divorced after her marriage of more than 20 years to Gordon McLean, she began dating Robert Webb, a long-time assistant director to Henry King, after actress Susan Hayward had invited them both to dinner. They married in 1951 and became one of only a handful of Oscar-winning couples at the time. Webb had received his Oscar in the short-lived category of Best Assistant Director for his work on King's *In Old Chicago* in 1938, the last year that particular award was given. He would go on to direct about 20 films, including Elvis Presley's first feature, *Love Me Tender* (1956).

McLean also co-produced two of Webb's films, *Seven Cities of Gold* (1955) and *On the Threshold of Space* (1956). But from the mid-1950s until she retired in 1969 to look after Webb, who was then in poor health, she focused entirely on her supervisory duties.

In many respects, these were probably not McLean's happiest years at 20th Century-Fox, either. After more than 20 years of being the master of all he surveyed at the studio he effectively created, Zanuck, seeing that times were changing, stepped down as the company's studio head in 1956 and went to live in Europe and work as an independent producer. In 1962, he returned with his son Richard to run the studio but found that the adage "you can't go home again" applied even to him. In late 1970, Richard was asked to resign and then in May 1971 Zanuck himself was forced out.

By that time, of course, McLean had already left, her departure coinciding closely with Margaret Booth's retirement from MGM and within just a few years of the deaths of both Anne Bauchens and Viola Lawrence. A great era, to which these women had all made enormous contributions, had clearly come to an end.

McLean and Webb lived quietly in retirement until his death in 1990. One highlight during this time came in 1988 when she and editor Gene Milford, who had won Oscars for editing Frank Capra's *Lost Horizon* (1937) and Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954), became the first-ever recipients of the American Cinema Editors Lifetime Achievement Award.

In 1996, McLean died in Newport Beach, California, where she had lived since her retirement, of complications from Alzheimer's disease. She was 92. People who had worked with her remembered her both as a dedicated editor and truly supportive supervisor and as a person who usually kept to herself, rarely socializing even in the studio commissary.[12]

As one would expect, assessments of McLean's overall contribution to the films she worked on vary widely. In his 1996 obituary of McLean, for example, Adrian Dannatt called her "a revered editor who perhaps single-handedly established women as vital creative figures in an otherwise patriarchal industry."[13] Yet, as film historian J.E. Smyth has written, "Film critics have often said her work with Zanuck at Fox was more a 'corporate signature' than personal style."[14]

McLean certainly was "a revered editor," as Dannatt contends. But to say that she was "single-handedly" responsible for keeping women at the forefront of film editing, especially during a period when they were being squeezed out of a male-dominated industry, may be a bit much. She did play a major role in doing this from the 1930s through the 1960s, but—as Margaret Booth, Anne Bauchens, Viola Lawrence, Dorothy Spencer, Adrienne Fazan, and others might have argued—she was by no means alone.

Like Booth, McLean resisted being cast as a feminist later in her life. But, when asked once why there have been so many good women editors, she fired back with a question of her own, "Why do *you* think that the film editors who are women, who have been in it since I've been in it, are the best in the business?" she said. "Why? Because you had to be good or you wouldn't get there."[15] While not making a feminist speech, she was clearly suggesting that—in the male-dominated world of Hollywood at the time—the only way a woman could survive was to be just that much better than the men she was competing against for opportunities.

Looking at the films McLean worked on, it also seems unfair to dismiss her contribution as merely part of the 20th Century-Fox "corporate signature." In fact, because Zanuck made it a policy to shield his editors from meddling directors—and because Henry King and other directors so completely trusted her instincts, insights, judgment, and, when called for, ability to "dazzle"—she likely had far more freedom to cut films in ways that satisfied her artistic preferences than most of the editors of her era. By her own account, she always made the first cut by herself, and, although there were always modifications, the final cuts almost always remained close to her original.

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In 1977, the magazine *Film Comment* asked McLean to answer several questions about editing, and her answers were so terse that one wonders if she secretly harbored disdain for her questioners. But, her answer to one of the questions—"What is great film editing?"—is quite intriguing. "Great film editing," she said, "begins with great pictures."[16] Just as great cooking begins with the best ingredients, she seemed to be saying, the best editing begins with—and effectively depends upon—great moments on film. If they aren't there, then the film is probably doomed, no matter how much clever cutting an editor does on it.

This small revelation might help illuminate McLean's core beliefs and the editing approach that emerged from them. Unlike most editors who simply work with the raw footage a director and cinematographer give them, McLean often took a more activist role, pushing for directors to shoot additional footage if she felt more close-ups and additional perspectives could in some way help improve the storytelling. Combined with her great instinct for the rhythms of a particular story and her commitment to keep stories constantly moving, the result is a dynamic, often highly creative visual style. For example, the galley sequence in *Les Miserables* could have simply consisted of a scene showing the main character rowing with a look of despair on his face. Instead, McLean created a brief montage, combining timely cutting and the rhythmic pounding of a gong to capture the oppressive monotony of the situation aurally as well as visually. In essence, she devised a very imaginative solution to convey the experience in a richer, more multi-sensory way. Another classic McLean solution came when she worked on Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata!* in 1952. Dissatisfied with the existing footage of one scene showing peasants beating rocks to warn of danger, she took shots Kazan had made, duplicated them, reversed many of them, and put all these pieces together to transform a simple, straightforward scene into a more complex and more dramatic sequence that suggested many more people and perspectives. In doing so, she constructed a cinematic moment that was ultimately far more effective than even this ambitious director had originally envisioned.

This level of dedication also suggests a quality few people mention when discussing McLean's work: her level of emotional investment. A good editor, she once said, "uses the scissors on a film ... with affection and understanding and tolerance."[17] After seeing many of the films McLean worked on, it's difficult *not* to see this as a striking aspect about her work. She cared deeply about each story she helped to tell with strips of film, and—whether we're seeing a fast-paced musical such as *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, a downbeat film noir such as *Nightmare Alley*, or a gritty psychological western such as *The Gunfighter*—her sizable emotional investment consistently shows through. A big part of why so many films Barbara McLean worked on remain fresh and vibrant today is Barbara McLean.

Like virtually all the Hollywood film editors of her era, McLean adhered to the classical conventions developed by D.W. Griffith and others in the 1910s. She was by no means a radical stylistic innovator. But, in film after film, she clearly pushed the limits of the classical style and, in doing so, certainly proved that editors could put their artistic stamp on films.

McLean's Work on All About Eve

All About Eve may be the most celebrated film Barbara McLean ever worked on. On many peoples' short lists of American film masterpieces, it received a record 14 Academy Award nominations in early 1951, was one of the first 50 films added to the Library of Congress's National Film Registry in 1990, and, in 2007, placed number 28 on the American Film Institute's list of the best 100 U.S. films ever made.

When evaluating the film, most people have—and rightly so—focused on its brilliant, acerbic script by writer-director Joseph L. Mankiewicz and several wonderful acting performances, especially Bette Davis' tour-de-force as aging Broadway diva Margo Channing. But the film owes its enormous success to numerous other contributors as well, and one of them is Barbara McLean.

Bette Davis and Anne Baxter face off as Gary Merrill and George Sanders look on in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950). The film, which hinges on conversation and includes relatively little physical action, presented editor Barbara McLean with some daunting challenges (Photofest).

A film about the theater, *All About Eve* is far more theatrical than cinematic in nature. In some respects, we can rightfully call it "all about words." Physical action—the heart and soul of most films—is minimal here. Words are both omnipresent and omnipotent. Language reigns supreme. Even when characters aren't uttering words in scenes, we hear them in voiceovers from multiple narrators. And in place of guns or daggers, words often—and ably—serve as the weapons of choice.

Such a film presents special challenges for a film editor. Mostly, it's a very stagy experience, and the challenge is to make it seem less so.

A big part of McLean's strategy here was to vary textbook editing whenever possible to make the story more interesting visually and aurally. We first see this strategy at work in the film's opening scene, which consists almost entirely of well-dressed people sitting politely at an awards reception listening to a presenter drone on as we listen to a long expository voice-over by the character of Addison DeWitt (George Sanders). There doesn't seem to be a lot for an editor to work with here, but McLean does some very interesting things.

One—when two major characters, writer Lloyd Richards (Hugh Marlowe) and director Bill Sampson (Gary Merrill), are introduced together—is to delay an immediate (and logical) cut from Richards to Sampson. Instead, McLean allows the camera to linger on Richards for a few additional seconds, perhaps with the intent of arousing our curiosity about who this director character is. The delay is subtly jarring, but it also keeps us on our toes. Visually, we are challenged a bit.

Another wonderful touch is the use of a freeze frame near the end of the scene at the moment the award recipient Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter) is about to take her trophy in her hands. At this time freeze frames were not at all common in mainstream films, and the effect is akin to an exclamation point. We know that something significant is about to happen—a change of scene perhaps. But the change is more elaborate and elegant than we might expect. Instead of a straight dissolve or fade out from the freeze frame to another scene, the film goes from the freeze frame to a live action reaction shot of Addison continuing his voice over; back to the freeze frame; then to a live action reaction shot of another key character, Karen Richards (Celeste Holm), who now begins a voice-over narration of her own; and finally to a long (five-second) dissolve to the moment in the past when Karen first meets Eve. Taking less than a minute, this is both quite arresting and visually stimulating.

In the film's famous party scene, McLean adds more subtle touches that give big moments special impact. One of these is the way she helps

to set up Margo Channing's memorable line: "Fasten your seatbelts. It's going to be a bumpy night." Margo is in a bad mood, and other characters fear that a volcano is about to erupt. As they talk, innocuous music is played on an unseen piano. Then Karen confronts Margo, saying: "We know you. We've seen you like this before. Is it over, or is it just beginning?" At this, the piano music changes to a much more raucous, "bumpier" tune. It plays as Margo—in her most theatrical manner—finishes her martini, crosses the room, steps up one stair, turns, and delivers the line. In the way she synchronizes this music with the dialogue and the cutting of the visuals as Margo crosses the room and positions herself to deliver the line, McLean does an especially good job of maximizing its impact. If the music were synchronized differently or the timing of the editing were off, even just a bit, this line—one of the most famous in all of American cinema—might not be nearly as well-known or admired.

Throughout the film, McLean also does a wonderful job of cutting to the rhythms of one of the film's central elements: conversation. The timing of cuts is so natural—so in the moment—that we really do feel that we are in the room with these people listening to real conversations as they are actually taking place—not watching hundreds of pieces of film all assembled together well after the fact. Important in all films, the ability to make the conversations seem so real and immediate is especially important in this film that not only hinges on conversation but also celebrates it. Here, McLean achieves the illusion of complete invisibility, something that nearly all editors aspire to but that few actually pull off as well as she does.

As she often did, McLean also made ample use of close-ups and other reaction shots to flesh out scenes in *All About Eve*, giving them more texture, depth, and dramatic complexity. In this film especially—with its complicated characters and the complicated dynamics that exist between them—doing this well was of critical importance. There is a lot going on with these people; it all had to be communicated; and, to her credit, McLean got it all across with amazing clarity and insight. There is not a reaction shot or interaction between characters that seems forced or out of place in the entire film. Again, her editing was totally in synch with the film's grand plan.

While the editing in a film such as *All About Eve* is not as much of an attention-getter as the editing in some other films McLean worked on such as *Alexander's Ragtime Band* or *The Rains Came*, it was no less challenging to pull off. In fact, the challenges, when there is so little physical action in the film, were perhaps even more daunting. But, as McLean usually

did, she found ways—even with these constraints—to intrigue, amaze, and yes, to "dazzle."

The Top Hollywood Editor of Her Era?

Few editors have ever had as much power to shape the final versions of films they worked on as Barbara McLean did.

And few have ever capitalized on this opportunity as fully as she did.

McLean was fortunate early in her career to connect with Darryl Zanuck, who appreciated and valued the contribution of a good editor as much as anyone in filmdom. But, just as he could be supportive, Zanuck could also be demanding and tough. To gain his trust, McLean had to prove her value, and, to keep that trust, she had to consistently perform at the top of her game. A driven perfectionist who also put a great deal of her heart into each film she brought to fruition, this came naturally to her. And for decades at 20th Century–Fox, she thrived.

Her personal style was very different from her long-time counterpart at MGM, Margaret Booth, with whom she is often compared. While Booth could be prickly and authoritarian with subordinates and peers, McLean tended to be more nurturing and collaborative. While Booth was more attuned to studio and industry politics, McLean preferred to assume a less visible profile.

McLean, nevertheless, was no less powerful and her contribution no less substantial than Booth's. In fact, unlike Booth, who came to MGM when it was already a first-tier studio, McLean was both present at the creation of 20th Century–Fox in 1935 and instrumental in its becoming a formidable filmmaking force within just a few years. In her role, she was also key—along with Zanuck, Henry King, Nunnally Johnson, Phillip Dunne, John Ford, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Elia Kazan, and others—in creating and cultivating the studio's distinctive, highly compelling storytelling style from the late 1930s until the mid–1950s, a style that has influenced filmmakers around the world ever since.

Was Barbara McLean—as her seven Academy Award nominations and unique position in Darryl Zanuck's brain trust suggest—the top Hollywood film editor of her era?

The answer would be highly speculative and totally subjective, of course. But it could very well be *yes*.

5

Cutting to the Chase

Dorothy Spencer's Action-Packed Half-Century in Hollywood

When veteran Hollywood filmmaker Mark Robson agreed to direct Universal's ambitious 1974 disaster epic, *Earthquake*, he knew that he'd have his hands full. Hopes were running high that the film, which followed on the enormous successes of other formula disaster-centered thrillers such as Universal's *Airport* (1970) and 20th Century–Fox's *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), would be a huge hit as well. To add to the pressure, there would be stiff competition. Two other big-budget disaster films, Universal's *Airport '75* and *The Towering Inferno*—a production so expensive that Warners and 20th Century–Fox opted to co-produce it—were both in development and set to open in theaters about the same time as *Earthquake*. The scope of *Earthquake's* story was also a consideration. Instead of showing a jetliner in peril or the capsizing of a cruise ship as *Airport* and *Poseidon* had done, the intent of *Earthquake* was to convincingly depict nothing less than the destruction of the city of Los Angeles by an earthquake and flood. To complicate matters more, *Earthquake* would be the first film to use "Sensurround," a new audio process developed by sound speaker manufacturer Cerwin-Vega to replicate the sound and (to some extent) the vibrations a person feels when experiencing a real earthquake. Added to this, four cameras were needed to film most of the action sequences. This ultimately resulted in more than 200,000 feet of shot film footage, an enormous amount for a two-hour feature. Finally, there was the unique editing challenge of cutting film footage shot from cameras that were deliberately shaken to simulate the trembling of the earth during the quake. How could this be done so the editing wouldn't look awkward or the overall effect cheesy?