

# WOMEN FILM EDITORS



*Unseen Artists  
of American Cinema*

DAVID MEUEL

deal to Arzner's taut, intelligent cutting and elegant pacing. Delighted with her work here as well, Cruze worked with her on other films, including his lavish 1926 historical epic, *Old Ironsides*. In addition to its share of complicated oceangoing battle scenes, the film offered an additional challenge to Arzner: it was shot in an early widescreen process called "Magnascope." And, since it was widescreen, it required the editor to rethink many of the standard editing rules used for traditional screen dimensions. It's important to note, too, that she was doing this nearly 30 years before the widescreen processes (and editorial styles) became the norm in the mid-1950s.

After *Old Ironsides*, Arzner set her sights on becoming a director. At first discouraged by various executives, she finally received her opportunity when she threatened to leave Paramount. And, for the next 16 years, she remained the only woman director working regularly in Hollywood.

During this time, she never forgot her editing roots and often insisted on working with female editors. When she worked at Columbia, as she did on films such as *Craig's Wife* (1936) and *First Comes Courage* (1943), she asked for, and got, Viola Lawrence, whom she considered her favorite editor. And, when working on *The Bride Wore Red* (1937) at MGM, she fought hard to have the very talented Adrienne Fazan, who had thus far been relegated to short films, promoted to lead editor on a major feature.

The reasons aren't entirely clear, but after *First Comes Courage* in 1943, Arzner, only in her mid-40s, quit feature film directing. She remained busy on various projects, though, from teaching film courses at the Pasadena Playhouse to teaching filmmaking at UCLA. She also came to the aid of her old friend and the star of *The Bride Wore Red*, Joan Crawford, directing more than 50 Pepsi Cola commercials for the company when Crawford was on its board.

During her time in Hollywood, Arzner had been linked romantically to a number of women, including several actresses. For the last 40 years of her life, however, she remained in a relationship with choreographer Marion Morgan. She died in La Quinta, California, in 1979 at age 82. For more information about her, there's a book by Judith Mayne titled *Directed by Dorothy Arzner* (Indiana University Press, 1995).

### *Blanche Sewell: Wizardry Behind The Wizard*

Except to a handful of people well versed in film editing history, Blanche Sewell is all but forgotten today. This could be partially due to

her early death in 1949 at the age of 50. But, many of the more than 60 films she edited, especially during her 24 years at MGM, will likely never be forgotten. They include Best Picture Academy Award nominees such as 1930's *The Big House*; a Best Picture Oscar winner, 1932's *Grand Hotel*; 1933's *Queen Christina*, which features Greta Garbo in one of her most luminous roles; the rousing 1940 adventure/romance *Boomtown*, with the all-star cast of Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, Claudette Colbert, and Hedy Lamarr; and two Gene Kelly musicals, 1948's *The Pirate* and 1949's *Take Me Out to the Ballgame*. Among all the films she worked on, however, the



Little is known about Blanche Sewell today, but, in the 1930s and 1940s, she edited numerous MGM classics from *Queen Christina* (1933) with Greta Garbo to *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) with Judy Garland (Photofest).

one with the best chance of never fading from our collective memory is the 1939 masterpiece *The Wizard of Oz* with Judy Garland. In fact, since it became a television perennial beginning in 1956, this film—perhaps even more than the film that beat it in 1939's Best Picture Academy Award category, *Gone with the Wind*, or 1943's *Casablanca*—could be the most widely seen and appreciated film of the studio era in Hollywood. While Sewell did not have a long career, she nevertheless left her mark on many fine films.

Born in Lowe, Oklahoma, in 1898, Sewell and her family moved to Southern California, where she graduated from Inglewood High School in Inglewood, a city in southwestern Los Angeles County. Initially, she had wanted to be an actress. But, in 1921, she went to work as an assistant to Viola Lawrence on the drama *Man, Woman, Marriage*, produced by the independent company, Allen Holubar Pictures. Learning her profession quickly, she moved to MGM in 1925, where she broke in as the editor on a Marshall Neilan romance called *The Sporting Venus*, with Blanche Sweet and Ronald Colman. She quickly graduated to working with some of MGM's top directors such as Clarence Brown and Monta Bell, and she easily made the transition to sound as well as editing some of the studio's earliest sound pictures such as the romantic drama *The Single Standard* with Garbo. In the 1930s and 1940s, she was constantly in demand to work with other top directors at the studio such as Victor Fleming, Rouben Mamoulian, and Vincente Minnelli.

Watching many of films she edited, it's easy to understand why Sewell was always working. Whether she was editing a drama, comedy or musical, she had a superb sense both of getting to the essence of the action and characters and helping to make fine performances from actresses from Garbo to Judy Garland richer and more memorable. One wonderful example of her work is the famous scene in *Queen Christina*, when Garbo's queen simply walks around the room she has shared with her lover for several days, touches various objects, and says she simply wants to remember this room—every detail in it—for the rest of her life. With only a simple musical complement, the mostly wordless scene is beautifully cut to capture the intense emotion both the queen and her lover feel at that moment.

Perhaps Sewell's finest work is in *The Wizard of Oz*. Here—in addition to shaping great performances by Garland, Billie Burke, Ray Bolger, Jack Haley, Bert Lahr, Margaret Hamilton, Frank Morgan, and others through her judicious editing—she had numerous technical challenges (often involving the film's ambitious special effects) to contend with. One, for example,

that has received much attention over the years is—as Dorothy (Garland) arrives in Oz—the film’s innovative transition from black and white to full-blazing three-strip Technicolor. Even today, children seeing the film for the first time are mesmerized by this moment, and one can only imagine what it was like for viewers in 1939, who had rarely (or, in some cases, had never) set their eyes on a color film.

Pulling this off as effectively as the MGM technical staff and Sewell did was no easy feat. After abandoning a lengthy and costly “stencil printing” process, the technical team opted for a less costly variation. They painted the inside of the farmhouse sepia to conform to the black-and-white scenes in the film up until this point. As Dorothy opens the door, it is not Garland but her stand-in wearing a sepia gingham dress. The stand-in quickly backs out of the frame. Then, as soon as the camera moves through the door, Dorothy (played by Garland this time) steps back into the frame in a gingham dress that’s bright blue, and she emerges from the house’s shadow and into the bright glare of the Technicolor lighting. It’s a spectacular moment, of course, and making it succeed depended on Sewell’s excellent editing sense as much as any other element involved.

After working on a variety of MGM films during the early and mid 1940s, Sewell began to gravitate more toward musicals at the end of the decade. It’s interesting to speculate how her contributions might have affected some of the great MGM musicals of the 1950s.

Unfortunately for Sewell, and most probably film audiences everywhere, however, she died at age 50 on February 2, 1949, in Burbank, California. Little is known about her personal life other than that she was married to a Leon Borgeau and that she had a son, Barton, who died in 1953.

### *Adrienne Fazan: Magnificent with Musical*

Certainly one of Hollywood’s premiere film editors during the 1950s, Adrienne Fazan became, on April 6, 1959, only the third woman (after Anne Bauchens and Barbara McLean) to win a Best Editing Academy Award. Fazan received her Oscar for her work on Vincente Minnelli’s musical *Gigi*. In fact, beginning in the mid-1940s with her work on musicals such as George Sidney’s *Anchors Away* (1945) with Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly, Fazan—who had already proven proficient at films from short subjects to documentaries, to feature-length comedies and dramas—quickly established herself as MGM’s top editor on musicals. Among her