THE PARADE'S GONE BY... Kevin Brownlow

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Margaret Booth is one of the great motion-picture editors. Today, one of the top executives at M-G-M, she holds the all-embracing title of editor-in-chief. One of the few to survive every regime since the days of Thalberg, Miss Booth now holds immense control. Her uncanny perceptiveness, which has something of Thalberg about it, is the result of a long career and a complete devotion to this most demanding craft.

Perhaps her most celebrated achievement was the first version of *Mutiny on the Bounty* (Frank Lloyd). She also cut scores of other M-G-M films: *Mysterious Lady* (Fred Niblo) with Garbo, *The Enemy* (Niblo) with Lillian Gish, *Lady of Chance* (Robert Z. Leonard), *Telling the World* (Sam Wood), and *A Yank at Oxford* (Jack Conway).

Miss Booth is reticent about her work and modest about her achievements. She is well known for the fact that she entrusts nothing to writing. It was hard to persuade her to describe her career. Finally, just before she left London for California, after a visit in 1965, surrounded by suitcases and unpacked clothes in her hotel suite, she relented and recalled enough about her work to hint at the sort of problems she overcame and the sort of person she is.

MARGARET BOOTH: I had just come out of school, and I started as a patcher [film joiner] with the D. W. Griffith Company. While I was there, I learned to cut negative; in the old days we had to cut negative by eye. We matched the print to the negative without any edge numbers. We had to match the action. Sometimes there'd be a tiny pinpoint on the negative, and then you knew you were right. But it was very tedious work. Close-ups of Lillian Gish in *Orphans of the Storm* would go on for miles, and they'd be very similar, so we all had to help one another.

This lasted a few months, then I went to work in the laboratory at Paramount, assembling the tinted sections for release prints. That lasted two or three weeks. Finally, I went to work for Mr. Mayer at the old Mission Road studios.

Louis B. Mayer was then an independent producer, releasing through First National. At Mission Road was a remarkable director, John M. Stahl. I became his assistant. I used to stand by him while he cut, and he used to ask me to come in with him to see his dailies in the projection room. This way he taught me the dramatic values of cutting, he taught me about tempo—in fact he taught me how to edit.

In those days, one did everything, and sometimes I went on location with him as script girl. When the Mayer company merged with Metro and Goldwyn, I went to work at the Culver City studio. I was still an assistant, but I used to go back at night and cut the out-takes—the takes Stahl had discarded. After a while, he started to look at these efforts of mine, and sometimes he'd take a whole sequence that I had cut and put it in the picture. Then gradually I got around to making his first cut—and that's how I got to be an editor.

Learning how to cut was hard going because Stahl was a very hard taskmaster. He was a perfectionist; he kept doing things over and over again. He shot every sequence so it could be cut in many different ways.

Irving Thalberg was that way too. In *Romeo and Juliet* [Cukor], I had five versions of the balcony scene. One with tears, one without tears, one played with

John M. Stahl during the making of The Wanters *(1923) with Paul Bern, Amos Meyers, and Sidney Algiers at the Mayer Studios.*

close-ups only, another played with long shots only, and then one with long shots and close-ups cut in.

When Stahl left M-G-M, he asked me if I'd come with him. But I didn't want to work for just one man; I enjoyed working for everyone. . . . I feel people get tired of you, and you get tired of them by the time a picture's finished. I went on working at M-G-M, mostly with Thalberg—the greatest man who was ever in pictures. M-G-M was like home to me. I started there so young; I knew everybody there, and never wanted to work any other place.

I think we took longer to cut pictures in those days. There was more time to play with them. We were making many, many pictures—unlike today, when you have to make them fast and get them out fast. You could say, "We won't release this until we get it perfect." And you could go and reshoot things. If you needed a close-up to help the scene, you went down and shot it. You—or anyone else—could do it, and it cost nothing. Today that same close-up would cost you five thousand dollars.

When I cut silent films, I used to count to get the rhythm. If I was cutting a march of soldiers, or anything with a beat to it, and I wanted to change the angle, I would count one-two-three-four-five-six. I made a beat for myself. That's how I did it when I was cutting the film in the hand. When Moviolas came in, you could count that way too. You watched the rhythm through the glass.

We used the big screen more in those days. As we cut the picture, we would continually screen it. We would make the necessary adjustments, and then screen it again. Cut it and run it, cut it and run it. And gradually we would make our rhythm, our pattern, for the picture.

We didn't always have titles when we started editing. We would assemble the material, and run it for the title writer. He would give us a set of temporary titles to keep us going until we got the picture finalized, when we could insert the regular titles. The temporary titles were set up on a typewriter and shot down at the laboratory; sometimes the letters were quite large. Title-typing, we called it. Titles had to follow their own pace—a foot and half to a word, so that people could read them.

I think the director contributes a great deal toward editing. It's a combination. Some editors are given credit when the director has more to say than you realize. It isn't like writing a book, and writing it all yourself. You make a cut, and the director comes in and says, "I don't like that" or "Why didn't you punctuate this?" It's a combination of minds. There are very few editors who cut a picture on their own, without anyone saying anything.

Directors don't necessarily play the part of the editor down—but they *do* like to play the part of the editor. They like to edit. They like to get into the cutting room and play around with their own pictures. This is bad, I think. Everyone should be allowed to do their own work. Directors want to contribute to the editing part of it, but most of them are bad editors. They realize, however, that it teaches them about their cutting, and shows them where they've made their mistakes.

Clarence Brown was a wonderful technician; I cut a number of his pictures, and I never saw him in the cutting room. He worked in the projection theater; he used to run the picture again and again and make comments. He understood cutting. He was wonderful to work with.

Charles Brabin was a good director; he left cutting up to us. John Stahl cut his own pictures, of course, and Reginald Barker, a great outdoor director, whose films had a wonderful vitality, also worked in the cutting room. Fred Niblo, on the other hand, told you what he thought and what he wanted, but he would stay away.

Sound was very nerve-racking when it first came in. It was hard to get it synchronized. We were all new at it, and I thought it was terrifying. The first sound I had to cope with came along when I was cutting a silent picture, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* [Charles Brabin]. It was decided to add a talking sequence at the beginning and end.

But silent films could be quite frightening too. When we went on a preview for *Trail of '98* [Clarence Brown], I was still putting the titles in on the train. I was handing them to an assistant so he could hand-patch them. The train was swaying and shaking, and I could hardly read them. I was very worried in case I handed them to him upside down. When we got to the theater, I could barely bring myself to watch the picture in case a title came on the wrong way round. . . . Thalberg was worried about the picture anyway, and I thought, "If I get into trouble over this. . .!" The film ran smoothly enough, but the preview went very badly. People just didn't care for the picture. We were all very disappointed.

We previewed at the Fox-Wilshire a Selznick picture I had cut, *Our Dancing Daughters* [Harry Beaumont], with Joan Crawford. When we went in, there were five hundred people outside the theater. So we put on a second preview. It was a tense time for me, because we were running working copies—and they used to break. That same night, I had to race back to the studio to fix a reel while they started on Reel 1.

Some cutters keep a record of their pictures, and they can remember everything they've worked on. This doesn't interest me. Remember, I have never been in a cutting room since 1937. I work in the projection room. Directors and editors work on a picture, and then I come in and finish it.

There has been no advance in technique since the silent days—except for one thing. They're doing away with fades and dissolves. I like this much better than the old technique of lap dissolves, which slowed down the pace. There was a time when we made eight- to ten-foot dissolves. We taught the audience for many years to recognize a time lapse through a lap dissolve. Now they're educating them to direct cuts—a new technique brought about by a new generation of directors who can't afford dissolves or fades. And I think it's very good.