Photo: Rastar Pictures, Inc.

Margaret Booth

Interview by IRENE KAHN ATKINS

MARGARET BOOTH'S first and last statements in this interview may well epitomise her attitude about the recognition — or lack of it — that she has received for her work as a motion picture film editor. But for more than forty years she has had a great deal to say about the editing of movies and people have been listening carefully to what she has to tell them. As Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's supervising editor from the mid-Thirties until 1968, she helped determine the shape and final form of nearly every film produced by that studio. Today, as editorial supervisor for Ray Stark's Rastar Productions, she continues to guide the editing of such films as The Sunshine Boys, The Owl and the Pussycat, Fat City, Funny Lady, Robin and Marian and the current Murder by Death.

Miss Booth began working in films as a negative cutter in D. W. Griffith's laboratory in 1915. A quick reckoning determines the least that her years can be, but her appearance belies the calculation. Her ash-blonde hair is neatly coiffed. Her alert eyes twinkle behind trendy gold-rimmed glasses. Her figure is slender and, when she walks, there is a store of energy in her step.

Miss Booth was interviewed in her office at the Burbank Studios, during a break in her busy schedule of conferences, screenings, and dubbings. Before this meeting, she had been interviewed only twice in the last ten years, and after the last one — for a show business trade paper — she said that she would never again give an interview to anyone, that she had been misquoted and that the interviewer had had the rudeness to refer to her as "Booth" instead of "Miss Booth" throughout the article. She consented to give this interview only on the the condition that she would review the transcript before its publication.

While she was reading the transcript, Miss Booth suddenly said, "Doesn't this make me sound terribly egotistical? I don't like it where I keep saying, 'I, I, I.' " I assured her that she didn't sound egotistical, that I liked to preserve people's manner of speaking in a transcript, to give the gist of their personalities and to add colour to the piece. "That's colour?" she asked, in a tone of disbelief that seemed much like one she might use in rejecting a motion picture scene that she deemed superfluous or objectionable.

But the main body of the interview did not become "the face on the cutting room floor". And these are her observations.

MARGARET BOOTH: Really, I haven't anything to say.

IRENE KAHN ATKINS: *You have a wealth of experience.*

Yes, that I have. I've got a wealth of experience with a lot of different people. But I was lucky, in many ways, because I started very young and I was lucky enough to get with John Stahl. At that time he was one of the top directors in the industry. He taught me a lot. I used to just stand and hand him the film, and he put my name on the screen as editor. Those were silent pictures. When you worked in the silent days, you learned about rhythm, and you learned to cut film like poetry. I think that's one of the great accomplishments. Just to learn to cut from sound, you can become choppy.

I know you were born in Los Angeles, and that you must have been very, very young when you started working in films in 1915. Did you ever go to any silent films as a child? Were you interested in the movie business?

Yes. My mother loved acting and so she took me to every theatre performance that ever came to town and we went to every picture that was playing. My brother was an actor on the New York stage. He was brought here by D. W. Griffith. He was only here three months when he was killed in an automobile accident with Tod Browning. The studio said that when I finished school I could go to work there. I didn't know what that work meant. When I saw a film on the screen, I thought that's how it came out of the camera. I had no idea how it was put together.

I started working in the lab with D. W. Griffith. It was on Sunset Boulevard at that time, I think. But I was only there for about three

months. The lab closed and then I went to Mr. Mayer, who had a studio on Mission Road. When I was working in the lab, there were all young girls, all kids, really. I became friends with one of the girls who went with a young man named Billy Shea, who was an editor. He was one of the old-time editors. He was working for Mayer and did the first Anita Stewart picture. When the Griffith lab closed, I went to work for Billy Shea.

I had never been on that side of town. The studio was next door to the Selig Zoo. It was a cute little studio. We had two or three stages. I was only there for a short time. Billy Shea used to bring me back and forth. That's how I started with Mr. Mayer. But I didn't cut until the merger in 1924 — Metro and Goldwyn merged with Mayer. At the studio in Culver City, there were all young people there cutting.

You received screen credit for some films before the merger: Husbands and Lovers, Why Men Leave Home, *and some others.*

I got credit for all the John Stahl pictures. He gave me credit, along with Bob Kern. They just put my name in there, but I was not a cutter then. John Stahl was really the cutter.

How did you learn to cut?

By watching. Mr. Stahl was the director and he cut his own pictures. He used to take me into the projection room. He would tell me *why* he went to a close up. He said, "Always play it in the long shot unless you want to punctuate something." He told me the different techniques of cutting. And then at night I would stay until two or three in the morning and use the out takes from the picture. I was practising cutting with them, learning to do it on my own. And that's how I really learned to cut.

One day he couldn't get a sequence the way he wanted it and he said, "Did you cut this at all, with the out takes, at night?" And I said, "Yes, I did," but I was frightened to death to show it to him. He took it, and he said, "I like it. I'll take that." And he used my cut. So from then on I started to cut for him.

When you were editing a film, did you go on the set?

Oh yes. I went on the set with George Cukor, on his first picture. I went on the set with George Roy Hill; that was later. But they used to send me on the set with all the directors who had come out from the New York stage when sound came in. I went on the set with Lionel Barrymore. He wanted to become a director.

He only directed one movie, The Rogue Song. *Did he enjoy directing?*

Yes, he did. But he just wanted to see what directing was all about. The Barrymores were that way. I knew John and Ethel. They were that way. They liked to do things. I don't think Lionel ever wanted actually to make directing his career. He just loved the fact that he *could* direct, and he proved it.

Did the New York stage directors have a problem getting used to working in the early talkies?

Yes, they did, because they didn't know how to make the camera set-ups. They didn't understand the camera — how to keep people looking in the right direction, and exiting and entering in the right direction. But most of them fell right into it, and some of them were successful. Some of them weren't, though.

Did the advent of sound create problems for the editor — more, say, than the advent of the wide screen?

Yes, it did. We were all new at it, and they brought people out here from the Victrola, the RCA Company. Those men who were brought out started the sound departments at the studios.

At first I was so frightened to work with the soundtrack and picture, frightened that it wasn't going to be in sync. I knew I would have to go over to the sound department and run it before all these men who were sound technicians. I was cutting *The Bridge of San Luis Rey.* It had a sequence in it that was partly sound. That's the way we started. We made a silent picture, and then added a sound sequence.

LILY DAMITA, ERNEST TORRENCE AND DON ALVARADO IN *THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY* (1929).

Another film you cut, A Lady of Chance, *which had some talking sequences in it, was released before* The Bridge.

That's possible. But *The Bridge of San Luis Rey,* which was the first one I cut, may have been a more important picture and held for later release.

But the editors suffered through those agonies of being used to working when you could throw the film around in any way. When you got the soundtrack, you had to be careful that it was always in sync.

Did you have any kind of sync system in the very beginning?

Yes, but it was very crude. You had to have the start marks. I think they had a numbering machine, but I'm not quite sure now. But I do recall that we were always suffering because there was only one place we could run the picture, and that was over in the sound department. We were used to going into our own projection room. But then we had to go over there and run a reel, and all the people would look at it. And that annoyed us most, all these sound — electronic — people who were there to see it, and who would say, "It's one frame out of sync." And you'd just say, "O-o-h!"

You worked in the silent days before you had movieolas.

Yes. We used to just count off, this way and that way. Then, later, we had a movieola, but it was a strange kind of one. It wasn't like the one they have today. When we got the picture and sound head movieola, it made it easier and nicer.

You edited one of John Gilbert's early sound films, Redemption. *There has been a great deal of controversy about his voice and why he declined in popularity.*

Oh, his voice was rather high-pitched but it was the sound equipment that was so bad. It wasn't his voice. Unless you had a very low voice, it didn't come over. And he, of course, felt very

JOHN GILBERT, ELEANOR BOARDMAN AND CONRAD NAGEL IN *REDEMPTION* (1930).

badly and all. It was too bad. He was such a romantic figure, and such a wonderful-looking man.

It's been said, "They could have fixed his voice in the dubbing."

Well, we couldn't really. Not at that time. We couldn't put the bass in like we can today. Now, if I don't like something, or if something is a little high-pitched, I say, "Put some bass in it, and let's get that." But as far as John Gilbert was concerned, no.

From 1939 on, I have never sat down to work in a cutting room. Now I work with an editor, from the screen. When Mr. Thalberg died, in 1936, they wanted a supervising editor at the studio. So, during the time that Mr. Mayer was alive, I used to look at everything in the projection room, all the dailies from everybody's pictures at MGM. And Mr. Mayer told me that, if I didn't like anything, to tell him and he would have it re-taken, because it was easy to re-take in those days.

The cutters used to bring their first cut to me, and I would look at it and tell them my reaction, make suggestion for cuts, to make it faster or slower — how to do it.

People talk about directors' styles. Did you find that editors had different styles?

I think some editors did. But I think you have to go by the style of the director, because you're sort of locked into that. A comedy, for instance, needs fast tempo cuts. You have to do them. And so you're locked in, in many — in all — respects, with what the director does.

In the early days of sound films, did directors tend to have the same editor on each picture?

It all depended. You see, we made about forty-two pictures a year. The directors had their favourites, but sometimes they couldn't get them. For instance, I cut with Jack Conway and Sam Wood in the early days, or Sidney Franklin. But sometimes I would be busy on one picture and they would be ready to start on another one. So they would have to take another cutter. We had so many cutters at that time. They were all very fine editors and they were always there, so you could pick and choose.

It was the same with the cameramen — they were all under contract. All the editors were under contract. All the stars were under contract.

You really saw the evolution of MGM, from its beginnings until 1968.

Yes, I really did. It was like home. It was like a family. It was really a great family studio. Everybody worked together. Sometimes, on a picture, we previewed five times if it was a picture that we felt was in trouble, or was not very good. I would be the principal cutter on the picture, and they'd say, "We have to preview tomorrow night." They would give somebody else two or three reels, Blanche Sewell or Tommy Held, or another cutter. They'd say, "Let him have a sequence, and you have a sequence," and we'd all go to the preview, because we were all working on the picture. We'd go to San Bernardino in cars. I'd take the first two reels. The theatre would start the picture while the cutters who were working on the last two reels were still in Culver City. And so they would have to go practically on two wheels to get to the preview. Sometimes I don't know why we weren't all killed.

Previews were very important in those days. Did the preview reaction affect the final version of the pictures?

Yes, because we knew sometimes they would laugh in the wrong place, and if people laughed at something that we felt was dramatic, we knew we were in trouble and we would have to fix that.

It was easier to fix things in those days. You could run down to the stage, or I could go and say, "I need a close up. I can't cut that footage out unless I have a close up to replace it." We could go down and get the close up because the people were under contract and the cameraman was under contract and there were no ninety people that you had to have to do the close up like you do now.

How about the films you're working on now, for Ray Stark's company? Do you preview them?

Yes. We take them generally to Denver, and other places. But we don't take them out like we used to. You see, I think that people were not as educated to pictures then as they are today. In those days they *loved* pictures. They wanted to see them. We've taken out pictures where we had a title card that said "insert missing". They didn't care. They'd laugh, or applaud, or something. And they'd write notes on their little cards, and they were very helpful. But today, when you put out cards, you get children who say, "It's lousy. It stinks." That's the type card you get. You didn't get that in those days. People thought they were helping you, and they were.

There have been many women, including yourself, who have been outstanding film editors. But there have been so few women directors and almost no women in the other technical branches of film-making. How do you account for that fact?

I really can't say why that was. It just seemed like girls took to that at that time. But there weren't that many women editors, if you count

them. There was Barbara McLean at Fox, and Blanche Sewell and Adrienne Fazan and myself at MGM, and Viola Lawrence at Columbia. I don't think Warner Brothers ever had a lady editor.

Irving Thalberg asked you to direct.

Yes. That was when I was cutting on *Camille*. But I said, No, I couldn't, because I liked what I was doing. I enjoyed what I was doing. And I said, "I want to be the best, if I can, at that."

You've also been very reticent about taking screen credit. Is there a reason?

Well, yes. Irving Thalberg didn't take credit. The studio had all the editors under contract, and I was getting a very large salary at MGM, so it kind of balanced out. But now I'm getting older and Ray Stark gives me the screen credit.

You've had a lot of very good credits recently.

Yes. But I only work for Ray. I don't care to work all the time. If he has a picture that I like, I'll do it. I used to go back and forth to England a lot, and to Rome, and I worked with Carlo Ponti.

You worked on Ben-Hur, *the 1959 version. Did you go to Rome for the filming of it?*

Not at the beginning of the filming. They used to send the dailies back and I looked at them. Sam Zimbalist was the producer. And then there was a little bit of trouble going on, and they asked me to go over. I did, and when I came back I was only back a week when Sam Zimbalist died.

Did anyone take over as producer?

Yes, William Wyler. And I went back to Rome, and stayed through the entire production. Then we brought it back here for editing.

Did you study the original MGM Ben-Hur *before working on the newer version?*

No. I never saw it. I remember when they were doing it, but I didn't have anything to do with it at all. Lloyd Nosler was the cutter on that, with Irving Thalberg.

You did work on a famous pair of films, the original and the re-make of Mutiny on the Bounty.

I did the original *Mutiny*. I used to fly to Catalina every day with the film and run the film with the director, Frank Lloyd, and then come back and cut it.

On the first *Mutiny*, they had a unit that went to Tahiti. Frank Lloyd went there and did all the Tahitian exteriors. And every time I needed a piece from Tahiti, I just went to the bin and there it was. It was all lined up before they even started shooting here.

Then they would take the boat out from Catalina. Catalina was just the base of operations; it was never used as part of the picture. They shot whatever they needed off the boat, in the open sea.

The first preview of the first *Mutiny* was in Santa Barbara, and we had a standing ovation for it. It was wonderful.

You worked on many of the famous MGM musicals, including some of the very early ones with Lawrence Tibbett and Grace Moore.

It was really a great thrill to work with Lawrence Tibbett at that time because he was in such wonderful voice. I thought *The Rogue Song* was a very interesting picture. I think the negative was destroyed in some kind of accident in the vaults at MGM, and so they have never been able to have any prints on it. It was too bad; I thought it was a wonderful picture. And I enjoyed working on it with Lionel Barrymore.

Grace Moore did some pictures at Columbia that were very successful, but the ones she did at MGM, *A Lady's Morals* and *New Moon*, were not. I don't know why. It could have been the stories. It could have been anything.

I knew Arthur Freed quite well and liked him very much. I had a great deal to do with *Gigi*

CLARK GABLE, CHARLES LAUGHTON AND DONALD CRISP IN *MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY* (1935). STAN LAUREL, OLIVER HARDY AND LAWRENCE TIBBETT IN *THE ROGUE SONG* (1930).

when he made that, because Vincente Minnelli was away at the time.

Is there a different technique in editing a musical?

Yes. It's quite different. You have to know when to cut on the downbeats. Otherwise you get a jarring cut, and it throws things off. Of course, I feel that way about any editing. It has to be done rhythmically. If it isn't rhythmic, it doesn't come out well on the screen because you should not feel the breaks. It's like pauses and breaths that you take on the stage. It has its ups and downs and its pace.

You've worked on several of Barbra Streisand's films.

All of them except *Funny Lady*. I started on it, and got off. And then in the end I went in and helped them dub the picture. I think Barbra Streisand is wonderful. She has a great voice and is very, very good. When Ray did *Funny Girl*, I was still at MGM. And I used to go to his house at night and help him a little bit with that.

Of all the pictures you have edited, which ones are you most proud of?

Of the things I actually worked on, I think the picture I liked most of all was *Mutiny on the Bounty*, the first one. And then *Camille*. I still think *Camille* is a beautiful picture. It's a gorgeous picture to see.

I cut quite a few of Greta Garbo's pictures. I don't remember all of them, but there is *The Mysterious Lady*, and *Susan Lenox, Her Fall and Rise*. She was a wonderful girl. But she always seemed to want to be alone.

That wasn't just publicity?

No. It wasn't. On the set she would sit by herself. But she was darling. Once I saw her in Bullock's Wilshire, shopping. She had a big floppy hat on. I passed her, and then I was next to her at a counter. The next day, at the studio, she said, "Why didn't you speak to me?" And I said, "I didn't want to bother you when you were shopping." But I thought it was kind of cute that she wanted me to speak to her.

Susan Lenox *was an early Clark Gable picture.*

He was a wonderful man. I haven't seen *Gable and Lombard* and I really don't want to. I understand that in it they say he was mean. He was not mean; he was never mean.

There's another picture that I enjoyed working on, that people are talking about quite a bit.

FRANCHOT TONE AND JEAN HARLOW IN *BLONDE BOMBSHELL* (1933).

It's *Bombshell*, with Jean Harlow.* At the time that we did that we didn't think it was such a great picture, but now the buffs have taken hold of it. You know why? Because it had such a fast tempo. I don't think there was a sprocket hole in between each line of dialogue, because I loved to cut that way. And now people like that.

But I liked most of the pictures. It was fun working on all of them. I worked on the first picture that MGM made abroad, in England, *A Yank at Oxford*. I was the cutter on it, and Mr. Mayer sent my mother and me over. We had never been abroad before, and it was a lovely trip.

MGM had started the first *Ben-Hur* in Rome, but then they brought it back here. And Rex Ingram had made quite a few pictures in his studio in Cannes, and released them through MGM. But this was really the first one, with Bob Taylor and the little girl who played in *Gone with the Wind*, Vivien Leigh.

* Finally released as *Blonde Bombshell*.—Ed.

I had a funny experience on *A Yank at Oxford*. Quite a bit of it was shot outdoors. There was a race in boats on the Thames, and things like that. I had to have many loops made with Bob Taylor, about a hundred loops throughout the picture. So I got them ready, and, not thinking, I called the sound department and told someone there, "I would like the stage tomorrow to make some loops." He asked, "How long will you use it for?" I said, "The whole afternoon, from one to five-thirty." He asked how many loops I was going to make. I said, "Close to a hundred." "Why," he said, "that's impossible. Nothing has ever been done that fast. You couldn't do that. That will take several days." But I assured him that the one afternoon would be time enough.

While the operator was putting the first loop on the machine, he said, "Laurence Olivier was in here the other day making loops, and they were trying to make them to the entire scene. The scenes were two hundred feet long, and he was trying to jump at every line. Finally he ran off the stage and said, 'I'll never make another loop in my life.' "

I explained that we didn't do them that way. It would be one line, and maybe a breath. The loop might be as short as three feet. We started making the loops, and Bob Taylor was absolutely wonderful in doing this work. He would go from one to the other without missing a line. Finally they had to put film on the machines in the back, and they stopped and turned the lights on. When they did, there was a whole audience in back of us, watching. It was something they hadn't seen in London before.

We were shooting at Denham Studio. Later MGM had their own studio and I used to go there all the time. I went there to work on *The Yellow Rolls Royce*, with Tole de Grunwald. Anthony Asquith was the director. I was there for six months because of all the location shooting in Austria.

Can you tell me something about The Red Badge of Courage*?*

I thought it was very good. That was John Huston, and Gottfried Reinhardt was the producer. We had lots of trouble on the picture but it sort of became a classic.

I understand that it was originally about three times its final release-print length.

ROBERT TAYLOR IN *A YANK AT OXFORD* (1938). DIRECTOR JOHN HUSTON (IN A BIT ROLE) WITH AUDIE MURPHY IN A DELETED SCENE FROM *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE* (1951).

It was very long at first and we had to cut it down.

Would you have liked it kept a little longer?

I don't think so. I think it was better shorter. The length caused most of the conflict concerning the picture, and then everybody got into that, I think.

It wasn't a financial success when it was released.

No. You see, that's what is so funny about it, that these are the things that are kind of a mystery to you. I mentioned *Bombshell*. That was just a nothing picture. We said, "Oh, all right, fine," but it didn't make any money at all! And *The Red Badge of Courage* wasn't very successful at the box-office. Yet now all the buffs are talking about these pictures. I liked *The Red Badge of Courage* myself. I just did *Fat City* for Huston and Ray. These are the pictures the critics like. They keep saying how wonderful they are, and they die at the box-office.

You mentioned the films that you liked. Were there directors whom you really enjoyed working with?

Yes. I loved working with Sidney Franklin and Victor Fleming. Victor Fleming was one of my favourites. George Cukor was wonderful. George Roy Hill. All of these people were very nice.

Do you find there's a conflict because the director wants to edit the picture?

No, because I'm used to working with directors. I've been doing it all my life. So I don't ever feel any conflict. And I really believe in the director having his way. He has probably worked on the script and he knows what he wants and he has every right to have this. So I always feel quite close. Besides, now, working with Ray as I do, I go on the set and work with the director, so I know what he wants. By the time he finishes, I have a cut that I know will please him. And then he adds to it, or does whatever he likes. I enjoy working with people here.

How has the change in the shape of the screen affected the editor's work?

I don't think it's done anything. If you are using the longer screen, you might not use close ups as much. They're not as pretty. But I don't think it has affected us in any way. You just slide into all of these changes. It's the same as when you're in the theatre. After you've seen the big screen for five minutes, you've forgotten about the fact that it's a big screen. At first they said, "You can't have a face this big on the screen." Well, the people wanted it. They love it. So it didn't seem to matter. At first when you do something that way, you feel that it's going to hurt it. Like when we blew up *Gone with the Wind*. They blew the negative up and re-orchestrated the whole thing. And people said, "Oh, it's never going to be the same." Well, it was better, and it was more beautiful.

I asked you how you learned to cut. How does someone learn to be an editor today?

Well, it's difficult because they don't have the access that I had. They don't have the directors. I worked in a small studio with John Stahl and Reginald Barker, and I was close to Thalberg at that time. I used to see them and hear them at their work. And now, today, assistants have to work eight years before they can be editors. That's a long time. Unless you're wanting to be an editor more than anything else, it's very difficult. And you don't have the thing that you had years ago, when they made so many more pictures: the chance to watch the different directors, to realise the differences in their styles. That's a great help to students coming along.

Do you think it's helpful for someone to go to a film school or the film department of a university, not as a substitute for studio experience, but as an adjunct?

No, no, no. I think that's a waste of time. You don't know anything until you come in and

work at a studio. It's just as if I take a course in typing but I don't have a typewriter but I know the keys are there and this and that and the other thing. And then there's the pressure of a studio! We have pressure on us all the time in an editorial department. You're pressured to see the picture and get a cut made, because they're only going to be on that set for two days. And if you get it cut, then they can see whether they need added shots or not. But if you're going to school, there is no *real* pressure on you.

What does a young person do today who really wants to become an editor?

You just have to get your foot in a studio. That's all you can do. But if you get your foot in the studio, you can then become anything.

Do you feel that most people are film editors because they expect to be something else in films?

Yes. This is the stepping stone for directors, for anybody who wants to be a director. As an assistant, in an editorial department, a young person could come in for a short time and still go on to directing. He would go to all the conferences that an editor goes to, and he would learn, if he's intelligent at all, from the writers and directors who are in the projection room. There are debates going on all the time. A young person who's intelligent can go any place, become a director. You do the stepping stones, and go on. Now, he could be an assistant director — if he can get into the Guild! That's the thing. Those are the things that are stopping people from learning their craft today. It's the guilds that are stopping them. They have to have a card in order to work.

If they will sit in the outer office at whatever guild or union and wait until there's an opening, if they want it bad enough, they will be able to do it. Otherwise there's no way of telling them how to get in.

Do you think people really understood the function of the film editor?

No, no. I don't think anybody realises how much film we have, how much film we have to handle. For instance, you know the skit in *The Sunshine Boys*, the one that they do on the stage? We had 50,000 feet of film, with three cameras. And that's a lot of film to go through. You have to plough through so much film on pictures. On *Mutiny on the Bounty*, when you have wrecks on the water and things like that, that have to be done over and over again, you have to go through it all. Much of it is useless, but then you get a little piece that's wonderful. I'm sure Verna Fields, who did *Jaws*, must have ploughed through thousands of feet to get her exciting episodes.

Verna Fields is an editor who, until a short time ago, wasn't interested in any part of film-making except cutting. And yet now she has become an executive at Universal.

But I don't think she's going to be happy at that. She made Universal very happy to have her, and I think she's a great asset to them. I think they want her to direct, too. And so, fine, if she wants to. But I'm beyond that. I like what I'm doing.

Well, you really haven't talked very much about yourself.

Well, I don't think there's very much to tell.

LEFT, WALTER MATTHAU AND GEORGE BURNS IN THE SKIT FROM THE *SUNSHINE BOYS* (1976). RIGHT, MARGARET BOOTH AT WORK WITH EDITOR JOHN F. BURNETT.