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.

A lifelong student of films, DAVID MEUEL has also published more than 100 poems, numerous short stories, and hundreds of articles on subjects ranging from theater to U.S. national parks, to writing and speaking for business. He lives in Menlo Park, California.

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

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?

To assure that this disaster film would not itself become a disaster, Robson—a thoughtful, versatile craftsman with a couple of Academy Award nominations to his credit—took particular care in his choices for key behind-the-scenes assignments. And for the job of his chief film editor—the one who would assume the enormous task of whittling all this footage down and then integrating it with various visual and sound effects—he sought out a petite, soft-spoken 65-year-old woman who was then living in the country in semi-retirement.

Her name was Dorothy Spencer (1909–2002), and, while she may have struck a casual observer as an odd choice for his assignment, she was—Robson knew—the perfect choice.

Spencer's Hollywood career had begun more than 45 years earlier when she worked as an assistant editor on silent films for Frank Capra, Raoul Walsh, and others. She began to receive editing credits in 1929, and by 1974 she had edited more than 70 films both as a freelancer and as a long-time staff editor at 20th Century–Fox. Although she had worked on virtually every kind of film from urbane comedies to serious dramas, to westerns, to suspense thrillers, she had gradually found a niche for herself in action films. "For some reason, I always seem to get assigned to pictures that are very physical," she once wrote. "I don't know why. Pictures [that] had a lot of physical action—fighting and brawling and things like that.... [T]hat suited me fine, because I like working on action pictures very, very much. They're more flexible and I think you can do a lot more with them. I like dialogue pictures, too, but, still and all, you're locked down with dialogue."[1]

Action, after all, was what *Earthquake* was all about, and, for Robson, who had worked with Spencer in seven previous films, choosing this action specialist who was as adept as anyone at cutting to the chase made absolute sense.

In opting for Spencer once again, Robson was in good company. In addition to him, Capra, and Walsh, she had worked on multiple occasions for such respected directors as John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, Ernst Lubitsch, Fred Zinnemann, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Jean Negulesco, Anatole Litvak, Tay Garnett, Archie Mayo, Edward Dymtryk, and Henry Hathaway. And, along the way, she had picked up three editing Academy Award nominations for her work. These included her contributions to Ford's enormously influential *Stagecoach* (1939), Litvak's moving war drama *Decision Before Dawn* (1951), and Mankiewicz's overblown but technically impressive *Cleopatra* (1963).

Spencer did not disappoint Robson during the making of *Earthquake*,

From the 1930s until the 1970s, Dorothy Spencer (pictured here in the mid-1930s) was one of Hollywood's most respected and sought-after film editors, working on notable films ranging from John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) and *My Darling Clementine* (1946) to Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944) and picking up four Academy Award nominations for her work (Photofest).

either. Relishing the various challenges, she often came up with ingenious solutions to difficult problems such as speeding up the film's final rescue sequence while still keeping it credible. And, while the film's human story is usually clichéd, the editing and special effects (certainly for that time before computer-generated images) were quite impressive. When Oscar time rolled around in 1975, *Earthquake* received four nominations mostly in technical categories, and among those nominated was Dorothy Spencer for her editing.

Spencer came out of retirement one last time five years later to edit another disaster film, *The Concorde...Airport '79*. But, *Earthquake* was

effectively a last Hollywood hurrah in a career that bridged both the classic film era and the "New Hollywood" and was responsible for accentuating hundreds of riveting moments in all kinds of films from the tightly edited final gunfight in Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946) to the flooding of Los Angeles near the end of *Earthquake*. Unlike her later editing contemporaries such as Dede Allen, who introduced a variety of new editing techniques into her work in the 1960s and 1970s, Spencer basically remained a traditionalist, adhering to the classic rules of editing established by Griffith in the 1910s and championed by people such as Margaret Booth. But, through it all, she also remained the consummate craftsperson—an editor so many great directors turned to again and again simply because she was that good.

"[C]utting is very creative": Spencer's 50-year Run

For someone as accomplished as Spencer, it's amazing how little is known about her personal life. We know that she was born in Covington, Kentucky, in 1909 and died in Encinitas, California in 2002, for example, but sources differ on whether her actual birthday was February 2 or 3. We also know that she had an older sister, Jeanne, who edited about a dozen films in the late 1920s and who was married to a film editor named Frank Ware. It's possible (but only conjecture) that these two could have been helpful in giving the Dorothy her start in Hollywood in the 1920s.

We do know, however, that she began in the film business at a very early age, perhaps as young as 15, when she did entry-level jobs at the Consolidated-Aller Lab in 1924. After work as an uncredited assistant editor on several films for several directors, including Frank Capra and Raoul Walsh, between 1926 and 1929, she joined Fox Studios in 1929, where she received her first credits on low-budget musical and comedy efforts such as *Married in Hollywood* and *Nix on Dames* (both 1929).

During most of the 1930s, she freelanced, eventually teaming with veteran Otho Lovering to share editing credit on several films for United Artists and independent producer Walter Wanger. Many of these, such as the comedies *Stand-In* (1937), *Trade Winds* (1938), and *Eternally Yours* (1939), were with Tay Garnett, a solid journeyman director, who is probably best remembered today for his 1946 film version of the noir story, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. But, she and Lovering also worked with other directors, and by far their most important collaboration during this time was their contribution to John Ford's landmark western, *Stagecoach* (1939).

Stagecoach, which marked Ford's return to the western genre after 13 years and nearly three-dozen non-western films, is, for numerous reasons, one of the most influential Hollywood films of the 1930s. Famously called "the first adult western" because of its sharp writing, complex characterizations, and top-notch production values, it gave the then-lowly genre a level of respectability it had not had since the mid–1920s and, in the process, launched the "Golden Age" of the western that ran from the mid–1940s to the early 1960s. In addition, it served as a primer on good filmmaking for the young Orson Welles as he developed *Citizen Kane* (1941), arguably the most influential film ever made. According to numerous accounts, Welles and many of his Mercury Theater players watched *Stagecoach* some 40 times as part of their preparation for *Kane*.

Part of why *Stagecoach* captivated audiences in 1939 and remains surprisingly fresh today is the tight construction in every element from its script (by frequent Ford collaborator Dudley Nichols) to Spencer and Lovering's editing. When watching certain scenes and sequences over and over again, they seem just about perfect in their timing and rhythms—nothing is too leisurely or too rushed, nothing is extraneous, every frame matters.

The sequence that Spencer and Lovering are often praised for is the famous Apache attack on the stagecoach and ensuing chase over desert salt flats. Not only does it remain riveting more than three-quarters of a century later, but it has also fascinated film historians because it deliberately breaks the 180-degree rule—one of the cardinal precepts of traditional editing—and succeeds admirably.

The 180-degree rule is essentially a guideline for on-screen spatial relationships to help reduce possible confusion for audiences watching a scene. For example, two characters having a conversation are shot from roughly the same vantage point so that one is always looking to one side, say right, and the other is always looking to the other, say left. In an action scene such as a chase, when things are happening quickly, adherence to this rule is especially helpful in clarifying the action for viewers. There is much less disorientation and confusion.

In *Stagecoach*, Ford, Spencer, and Lovering's decision to break this rule and cut accordingly was—for a Hollywood film at the time—quite radical. The objective *was* to disorient, confuse, and heighten anxiety for viewers, and, by achieving this, the scene achieved a couple of intriguing results. First, by heightening viewer anxiety, it also heightened suspense, making the action all the more compelling. And second, by disorienting and confusing the audience, it created a closer bond between viewers and the characters in the stagecoach, who are themselves thoroughly disoriented

and confused. So, rather than compromising the cinematic experience, this deliberate breaking of the 180-degree rule actually intensified it. After *Stagecoach*, it would be done with increasing frequency in commercial films.

To make the scene even more nerve-wracking, Spencer and Lovering also mixed in frequent (and quick) crosscuts between the passengers and the attacking Apaches. And the combined effect is startling: the camera placement is deliberately disorienting to convey the confusion and anxiety of the stagecoach passengers, while the crosscutting between shots of the passengers and shots the pursuing Apaches ratchets up the scene's tempo and intensity to even higher levels. The passengers have this sense of everything spinning out of control, and we in the audience share their experience more fully than if it had been presented in a more conventional, less imaginative way.

To increase the scene's suspense even more, Spencer and Lovering also interplayed sound in some fascinating ways that wouldn't become standard practice until decades later. One is the climactic moment when—fearing capture, torture, rape for the women, and death for all the white people—one male passenger chooses to shoot a very ladylike female passenger so she will not have to suffer "that fate worse than death." We see his gun pointed at the unknowing woman who is deep in prayer. Then we see his gun fall, suggesting that he has been killed. Then, as the woman continues to pray unaware of what has happened, we hear—just as the woman hears it—the sound of a bugle. Her face lights up: the sound means of course that the cavalry has come to the rescue. She and most of the other passengers will be saved. Again, a more conventional approach would be to cut to a cavalry bugler as he sounds the charge and then cut to the woman's reaction shot. But, the sound of the bugle, Spencer and Lovering knew, would be enough, and their choice would make this moment more exciting.

Although Ford was legendary for shooting just what he wanted to use and giving his editors little to work with, Spencer credited him later in her life with giving her a great deal of editorial freedom. "With most directors, you cut it exactly the way they want it, and there's no room for editorial creativity," she wrote. "[But] Ford never told me anything and he never looked at the picture until it was finished."[2]

Seven years later, Spencer was the sole editor of another great Ford western, *My Darling Clementine* (1946), and her touch is also apparent there in numerous scenes. One highlight is the film's climactic gunfight in the iconic OK Corral. It plays like some of the best edited scenes in *Stagecoach*—nothing too leisurely or too rushed, nothing extraneous, every frame important, and all editorial choices combining to achieve a highly suspenseful result. In fact, writer Peter Flynn notes that, without significant mood music, the film actually "achieved its suspense ... in its editing, a tight, pared-down construction in which only the barest (and most pertinent) of information is conveyed."[3]

For their work on *Stagecoach*, Spencer and Lovering received an editing Academy Award nomination, a first for both. And, by 1941, Spencer was the sole editor on major films for major directors. Just a few of her credits during the 1940s include *Sundown* (1941) for Henry Hathaway, *To Be or Not To Be* (1942) and *Heaven Can Wait* (1943) both for Ernst Lubitsch, *Lifeboat* (1943) for Alfred Hitchcock, *A Royal Scandal* (1945) for Otto Preminger, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945) for Elia Kazan, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947) for Joseph L. Mankiewicz, and *The Snake Pit* (1948) for Anatole Litvak.

As these credits suggest, most of these films were made by 20th Century–Fox, where Spencer went to work as a staff editor in 1943 (and where she would remain until 1967). In addition to Ford, directors who made films for the studio during those years included Lubitsch, Preminger, Kazan, Mankiewicz, and Litvak—by any standard an impressive group. But, these directors all had an equally impressive group of in-house film editors to work with, including Barbara McLean, Robert Simpson, William Reynolds, and Hugh Fowler. And, while the editing supervisor often assigned editors to specific films, several of these directors repeatedly asked to work with Spencer.

Throughout the 1950s, Spencer continued to turn in good work on a wide variety of films. These ranged from Nunnally Johnson's thoughtful social drama, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955); to Fred Zinnemann's moving story of drug addiction, *A Hatful of Rain* (1957); to Edward Dmytryk's character-centered wartime drama, *The Young Lions* (1958).

Increasingly, however, her growing reputation for excelling in action films and large spectacles was leading her toward more of those kinds of assignments. A turning point may have been her work on Litvak's taut, stark World War II espionage thriller, *Decision Before Dawn* (1951). Her editing on that film received a great deal of praise and a second editing Academy Award nomination. After that, came assignments for more action-oriented films such as Delmer Daves' Biblical epic, *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954); Jean Negulesco's disaster epic, *The Rains of Ranchipur* (1955); and Henry Hathaway's knockabout western, *North to Alaska* (1960).

One of Spencer's greatest challenges came in 1963 when she edited Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* with Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, and Rex Harrison. Initially budgeted at $2 million, the film—constantly beset with production problems and cost overruns—eventually cost more than $31 million (before adding the marketing and promotion costs). Easily the most expensive film ever made at the time, *Cleopatra* also had the dubious distinction of being both the highest grossing film of the year and a money loser.

Mankiewicz, who was brought in to replace the film's original director, Rouben Mamoulian, when the film was already $5 million over budget, had a hair-raising experience throughout. In addition to countless problems with sets, logistics, and the weather, stars Taylor and Burton (both married to other people at the time) started an off-screen affair that brought the film much negative publicity (but eventually curious audiences). Then, Taylor became seriously ill, delaying production even longer and running costs up even higher. Add to this—Mankiewicz, unhappy with the script, was rewriting constantly throughout the entire shoot. At one point during the editing, he was fired, but he was soon rehired when the Fox's executives realized that the story was basically in his head and, like it or not, they needed him.

Working with Mankiewicz to turn what seemed like an inevitable train wreck into a respectable film was, according to film writer I.S. Mowis, "arguably the most difficult task of [Spencer's] lengthy career."[4] When the shooting was finally completed, Mankiewicz had amassed some 70,000 feet (or 13 hours of footage) that needed to be edited down. The cut that Mankiewicz first screened for 20th Century–Fox executives was six hours long. At the executives' request, Mankiewicz and Spencer cut the film down to four hours for its premiere. The executives—wanting to maximize the number of showings per day per theater—thought this was still too long. Again (and this time over Mankiewicz's objections), the film was cut to slightly more than three hours. Fortunately, the version available for the home market today closely resembles the Mankiewicz-approved version, running just over four hours.

Despite such difficult working conditions, the finished film received many more positive reviews than most jaundiced industry observers would have figured. The film industry magazine *Variety* said: "*Cleopatra* is not only a super colossal eye-filler (the unprecedented budget shows in the physical opulence throughout), but it is also a remarkably literate cinematic recreation of an historic epoch."[5] More recently, film writer Matt Thrift has noted: "*Cleopatra* remains an agreeably old-fashioned epic in the definitive sense. A camp melodrama if ever there was one, its opulent gaudiness and the unimpeachable craftsmanship of its production design now more than ever keep the eye enthralled through even the more plodding longeurs of its 243-minute running time."[6]

When the Academy Awards were announced in early 1965, *Cleopatra* received nine nominations, second only to the British import, *Tom Jones*, which had 10. Again, Spencer was singled out for her work, receiving another Best Editing nomination, but again she failed to win an Oscar.

Undeterred, Spencer continued to work regularly through the 1960s, and then more infrequently in the 1970s, before retiring for good in 1979 after working on *The Concorde: Airport '79*. Ten years later, in only the second year that the American Cinema Editors, perhaps the most prestigious society of film editing professionals, presented a Lifetime Achievement Award, she was one of the two recipients, making her one of the first four ever to receive this honor.

Late in her career, Spencer, in a rare public statement, shared some of her thoughts on what it takes to be a good film editor and, in doing so, also exhibited some of the intensity and passion that had served her so well during her half-century in Hollywood cutting rooms:

> [W]hen young cinema students ask me—as they often do—what it takes to become a film editor, I always tell them that patience is the first requirement. For example, there was a situation on [*Earthquake*] where we wanted to delete a scene, but I didn't have enough material to cover the cut. [Director] Mark Robson told me that I wouldn't have the patience to solve the problem, but I said: "It's a challenge, and I'll lick it." I just insisted that there had to be a way of doing it. There's always a way. Well, I found a way and he liked it. He just walked away shaking his head, but I thought it was fun.
>
> Besides patience, I think you have to be dedicated to become a film editor. That's always been more important to me than anything else. I guess my whole life has been made up of wanting to do the best I could. I enjoy editing, and I think that's necessary, because editing is not a watching-the-clock job. I've been on pictures where I never even knew it was lunchtime, or time to go home. You get so involved in what you're doing, in the challenge of creating—because I think cutting is very creative.[7]

Dorothy Spencer died at age 93 in 2002, just a few months before the passing of another grande dame of the cutting room, Margaret Booth.

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While Spencer certainly broke new ground as an editor in films such as *Stagecoach*, she remained largely a practitioner of classical editing technique throughout her career. This includes the 1960s and 1970s, when Dede Allen, Verna Fields, and others were shaking up mainstream editing practice and philosophy in films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Jaws*. And

this adherence to the "old school" might be a major reason why Spencer is not as well known today as Allen, Fields, or other contemporaries.

Within the classical editing tradition, however, Spencer did wonders. On one hand, she was a minimalist adept at cutting every extraneous frame to give a scene maximum dramatic impact. On the other hand, she was a master of pacing and rhythms. While action scenes moved quickly, they never moved too quickly. There was always just enough time for the audience to absorb what was happening not just visually but also emotionally. The final gunfight in Ford's *My Darling Clementine* is an excellent example of this. The sequence is bristling with energy generated largely from the dynamic cutting. It moves quickly, but it is never rushed. It runs without music to amp up the drama because, quite simply, it doesn't need it; the editing does the job.

In addition, Spencer was a pragmatic problem solver. She loved to look for more ways to add suspense and generate more action in stories and usually found them. One example she once shared was from *Earthquake* involves a scene that features actor Richard Roundtree as a daredevil motorcyclist. During one take, a stunt double for Roundtree took a spectacular fall. Luckily for the double, he wasn't hurt badly, just shaken up a bit. And luckily for the production, Spencer saved the take and, with the help of a little reshooting, was able to use it in the film, adding to the excitement of the scene.

Spencer's Work on Alfred Hitchcock's Lifeboat

Lifeboat was the second film Spencer edited for Alfred Hitchcock, and, sadly, it was also her last. After *Lifeboat*, Hitchcock, displeased by the lack of support studio head Darryl Zanuck had given the film, left 20th Century–Fox and never returned. Meanwhile, Spencer remained on staff. It would be interesting to imagine the possibilities, though, if the two had continued to work together. Like John Ford, Hitchcock, edited—to use the saying—"in his head," shooting exactly what he wanted and little more and giving editors a minimal number of choices to work with. But, just as she could tirelessly whittle away at miles of footage when editing enormous films such as *Cleopatra* and *Earthquake*, Spencer was also adept at fine tuning the very limited amounts of film she received from people such as Ford and Hitchcock. In other words, she could also start with a film that was already pretty much edited in a great director's head and then take it up a few notches. In *Lifeboat*, she did precisely that.

Although *Lifeboat* is not one of Hitchcock's best-known films, it is still a wonderful example of his work. The project began when the U.S. Maritime Commission asked Darryl Zanuck of 20th Century–Fox to make a film that dramatized the dangers of German U-boats in the North Atlantic during World War II. Zanuck then contracted with David O. Selznick for the services of Hitchcock, who was still under a long-term (and increasingly irksome) contract with the producer. The technical challenges of setting a film almost entirely in a confined space, such as a lifeboat, had long appealed to the director, who apparently had once considered setting an entire film inside a telephone booth. (After *Lifeboat*, of course, Hitchcock would experiment with this idea even more in 1948's *Rope* and 1954's *Dial M for Murder* and *Rear Window*.) And the project was a "go."

The film—based on a story by John Steinbeck and involving numerous writers including Hitchcock and his wife Alma—centers on eight survivors

Attempting to replicate the experience of being stranded in a lifeboat on the Atlantic Ocean but shot mostly on the 20th Century-Fox studio lot, Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944) presented major technical challenges for everyone involved with the production, including its editor, Dorothy Spencer. Pictured here is most of the film's cast: (from left to right) John Hodiak (back to camera), Walter Slezak, Hume Cronyn, Tallulah Bankhead, Heather Angel, Mary Anderson, Henry Hull, and Canada Lee (back to camera) (20th Century-Fox/Photofest).

of an Allied ship sunk by a U-boat and one survivor (the captain) of the U-boat, which was also sunk in the attack. All come from different walks of life and different social classes, and, of course, one is a German—the enemy. After the opening credits, which are filled with images suggesting the shipwreck, all the action takes place on the boat with the characters—among other things—working together, squabbling, learning bits and pieces of personal history about each other, grieving for a dead baby, operating on one character's gangrene-infected leg, wondering which direction they should sail, and ultimately trying to determine how to deal with the German—kill him, keep him as a prisoner, or allow him to use his skills and captain the boat.

To compensate for the confined setting, Hitchcock focused on several areas. First, he (and others who wrote various versions of the script) developed several complex, nuanced, genuinely interesting characters. Then he cast actors excellently suited for these roles. Three of the standouts are Tallulah Bankhead's Connie Porter, a self-absorbed socialite/journalist with a biting wit who learns to become more sensitive to the suffering of others; William Bendix's Gus Smith, a tough, working class man who must accept the fact that he must lose his leg; and Walter Slezak's mysterious German, Willi, who constantly lies but eventually gets some of the others to trust his thinking and eventually his leadership. Second, even though the film was shot in the studio, Hitchcock and his technical people did a fine job of giving viewers the sense of what it might actually be like to be on a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean. For people who get seasick, the endless rocking of the boat on the big screen, can—and has—produced headaches and even nausea. Also, to reinforce the film's sense of place, Hitchcock made the very conscious—and for the time daring—decision, not to use music, except during the opening credits.

These and other choices consequently led to another challenge: they put more pressure on the film's editor. There was no music to mask subpar edits. The editing of the rocking boat had to be constantly checked so that the "knocked-about" experience remained credible to audiences. And, with so much riding on the interaction between characters, every bit of blocking, every line of dialogue, and every reaction shot had to be handled just right. In many films an editor can use the tricks of the trade to hide various problems, but in *Lifeboat* Hitchcock and Spencer had no such luxury. The editing had to be perfect, or the experience would appear false.

Throughout the film, one of the impressive characteristics of the editing is how it captures the rhythms, the ebbs and flows, of being at sea for an extended period with long stretches of boredom punctuated by fleeting

moments of humor, drama, and conflict. Often, the editing mirrors this experience with lengthy shots, sometimes going for a minute or more. These are immediately followed by quick reaction shots to heighten the intended mood, be it humorous or dramatic. Then, these are followed by longer shots, underscoring that the moment has passed and we are back to the boredom.

One scene that's particularly well handled comes toward the end of the film. It's preceded by a comic bit in which one character is about to show his winning hand and the wind blows away the cards; a darkly comic bit in which it begins to rain and then, seconds later, stops; and a poignant moment when the weakening, increasingly delusional Gus finally succumbs to drinking salt water from the ocean.

After Gus sips the water, there is a long (about six seconds) fade to black and fade in on Willi, alone, rowing. As we watch Willi, we hear Gus talking alternately about his thirst and his girlfriend. (Everyone else at this point is asleep at the other end of the boat.) As he listens and gently advises, Willi seems patient and understanding, but he can also be disguising his disgust at Gus's vulnerability. After a brief interchange in which Gus shifts between delusion and lucidity, Willi—seeming quite kindly—matter-of-factly pushes him off the boat. Gus's calls for help eventually wake the others, but, by the time, they are fully awake, Gus has gone under.

Here, the editing, which has been fairly leisurely, picks up. Shots cut more quickly between Willi on the front end of the boat and the others, all grouped together against him, on the back end. As the others learn what Willi has done (not only killing Gus but also secretly hoarding water), the cutting quickens, hinting that the main conflict in the story is coming to a climax. (In the next four minutes, there are more than 30 cuts of various lengths, averaging about eight cuts per minute or seven and a half seconds between cuts.) Then—as if to suggest a release of all the built-up anger the others feel—the quick cuts stop and we see one very lengthy shot in which five of the six characters rush Willi, overwhelm him with everything from fists to a block of wood, throw him overboard, and, with the help of Gus's old shoe, finish killing him in the water. At a minute and 15 seconds, this is easily the longest single shot in the scene. It's also fairly gruesome, showing both how ugly a real killing can be and how almost anyone, even the kind nurse Alice (Mary Anderson), is capable of participating.

As a final touch, the film cuts to a close-up of Gus's shoe, the murder weapon, in the hand of Rittenhouse (Henry Hull) and then follows the shoe as he releases it and lets it fall to his feet.

 by DAVID MEUEL

From here, we slowly dissolve to the next scene. Again, it is the bow of the boat, but a little time has passed. The remaining six characters sit around each other, all spent, subdued, in a bit of shock, and trying to absorb what has just happened and how they came to do it. The cutting returns to the pace it has been for most of the story.

From the fade in until the dissolve out, this scene runs about nine and quarter minutes, consists of about 60 separate shots, and is a masterpiece of pacing and cutting. The cutting between shots begins slowly, picks up as Willi prepares to and eventually does push Gus overboard, and quickens as the other characters learn about Gus's death and Willi's hoarding of water, building to a moment of climax. Then, there's the release—the long and very disturbing single shot in which the others gang up on Willi and kill him. Finally, there's even a mini-denouement—a last, relatively brief shot showing Gus's shoe falling from Rittenhouse's hand to the deck of the boat, a subtle suggestion that the civilized people who thought they were above murder have also fallen.

Altogether, this scene is a highlight in a film that's superbly crafted throughout. And, while Hitchcock was clearly at the helm of this production, Spencer's great sense of knowing exactly where to cut for maximum effect clearly had an impact. Without her, neither this scene nor this film would have been quite the same.

A Special Stamp

Calling Spencer "a consummate studio craftsperson," writer Peter Flynn has noted that "her competence in the field, her success within the industry, and her devotion to her craft remain uncontested."[8]

Looking at films Spencer worked on 40, 60, and 80 years ago, it is totally understandable that so many great directors wanted to work with her. Even supremely confident people such as Ford, Hitchcock, Lubitsch, and Mankiewicz sought her out because—as they knew as well as anyone else—her editing choices often gave their films a special truth and vitality. And they appreciated that. While not a great innovator who changed the art of editing, she nevertheless had a special stamp that she put on each film she collaborated on. And, if it is true that films really are made or destroyed in the editing room, her impact on U.S. film history really has been immense.

6

The Revolutionary

Dede Allen Upends American Film Editing in the 1960s and 1970s

"If I have to get up and pee," Hollywood mogul Jack Warner told director Arthur Penn before seeing Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* at a private screening prior to the film's 1967 release, "I'll know it's a lousy movie."[1]

As Penn reported many years later, not only did the crusty 75-year-old studio head get up before the end of the film's first reel but he was also up several more times before the film had finished. "He didn't like it, didn't understand it, didn't get it," Penn said. "It was the beginning of a dark time, because it was clear that, if he didn't like it, it was going to get dumped.[2]

Among his many complaints with *Bonnie and Clyde*, Warner had a special disdain for the film's editing. From the very first live-motion shot, when viewers see only a young woman's painted red lips in extreme close-up, the experience seemed alien, confusing, and probably very amateurish to him. "Why begin there?" he must have been wondering. "Lips don't tell the viewer anything about where or when this is supposed to be."

Warner's displeasure was certainly understandable. For more than half a century, he (and nearly everyone else) had watched films that told the story in a very particular, and usually very literal, way, the classical Hollywood editing style. Developed by D.W. Griffith and others in the 1910s, this style called for editors to follow certain conventions when cutting films, conventions that soon became hard and fast rules the entire industry adhered to: gospel. Individual scenes, for example, should begin with establishing shots, usually long shots that identified the setting for viewers, and then progress to a mix of medium and close shots. Any change to another time or place should be signaled by a dissolve or fade.