

'Our Mansfield Girl' was a leading actress during silent film era

Martha Mansfield's films have largely been "lost in time."

(source: Mansfield News Journal, by Matt Ferraz)

September 10, 2023

Matt Ferraz wants to make sure her story doesn't suffer the same fate.

A native of Brazil, Ferraz has written a number of books. He also worked as a film critic. Ferraz has a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master's degree in biography.

He discovered Martha Mansfield while watching the 1920 silent film, "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." Mansfield starred alongside John Barrymore as Millicent Carew, Dr. Jekyll's fiancée.

"It's one of the three movies she did that exist today," Ferraz told the News Journal in a Zoom video call. "All the others were lost in time."

He started researching the actress, finding hundreds of stories on her on newspapers.com.



"She had an amazing career and strong opinions about the art of cinema," Ferraz said. "She was going to be one of the greatest, I believe. It's a great story that deserves to be told."

Unfortunately, Mansfield's life was tragically cut short at the age of 23 during an on-set movie accident.

While filming "The Warrens of Virginia," Mansfield was taking a break when her dress caught fire. The dress featured laces, causing it to burn quickly. Two members of the company ran to her and extinguished the flames by wrapping their overcoats around her.

The young actress reportedly died of shock the next day.

Questions remain about how fatal fire started

Ferraz said there has never been a good explanation of what ignited the fire. Mansfield could have done it herself while smoking a cigarette, or a careless person could have been passing by and tossed a match that hit her dress accidentally.

Ferraz is interested in writing a book about Mansfield, planning sort of a cross between a novel and a biography. He said he would not fabricate any details.

Mansfield was born July 14, 1899, in New York as Martha Erlich to an Irish mother whose family came from Ireland and achieved significant influence in the city of Mansfield.

It was here that Mansfield's mother married Maurice Erlich, a New York newspaperman. He reportedly deserted the family in 1912, leaving his wife to take care of Mansfield, then 12, and her younger sister Edith, then 7.

"She really loved Mansfield. She traveled a lot to the city," Ferraz said of the actress.

At the age of 14, she became a model for Howard Christy, a photographer who specialized in taking pictures for burgeoning magazines.

Mansfield worked as a photography model for two years while pursuing her goal of becoming a serious actress. Her theatrical debut came in 1914 with William A. Brady's big spectacle "Hop O' My Thumb" at the Manhattan Opera.



Mansfield could sing, dance and act, making an impact in Vaudeville. She became part of the Ziegfeld Follies, the most celebrated and extravagant company at the time.

Max Linder, a famous French comedian, caught one of Mansfield's acts. He was visiting America to seek a co-star in a new series of films.

A contract with Linder led Mansfield to become a movie star during the silent era.

Linder would call her "our Mansfield actress" and "our Mansfield girl." She became a celebrity in Mansfield, with many people believing she came from here.

She loved Mansfield and made frequent visits here to see her grandmother.

When it came time to change her stage name — Erlich didn't sound like a movie star's name — she chose the name Mansfield.

She never stopped working as a photography model and graced the cover of many magazines. In September 1920, the film version of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" was released. Mansfield almost lost the role to Tallulah Bankhead, a leading actress at the time.

The movie was the peak of her career, acting opposite John Barrymore, one of the biggest stars in the world. At the time of Mansfield's ascension, cinema was still a young medium, less appreciated than theater.

Mansfield was poised to become movie star

At a time when many movies were simply filmed plays, Mansfield understood the medium could go much further than that.

"She knew what she wanted to accomplish with it," Ferraz said.

"The Warrens of Virginia" was her biggest film to date, telling the story of a young girl from the South who falls in love with a Union soldier during the Civil War.

It was 1923 and she had made 10 films in the previous two years, including a couple that hadn't premiered yet.

She did not live to see the success of "The Warrens of Virginia" because she was the first person to die in a movie set accident, according to Ferraz.

Mansfield's funeral was held a week after her death in New York. More than 1,000 people attended. On Broadway, a crowd of 5,000 people, many of them theater workers, waited motionless for two hours until her coffin was brought down the street.

The young actress could have accomplished so much more had she lived. Ferraz wants to document her life, which he thinks has the potential to be a movie.

"I really think I'm the right person to tell the story," he said.

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