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BLANCHE SWEET: A CENTENNIAL RETROSPECTIVE

First Major Archival Series Includes Virtually All the Surviving Feature Films Blanche Sweet Starred In, Including Works by D. W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille

June 7-22, 1996<

To celebrate the centenary of a charming and highly original actress whose professional stage and film career spanned six decades, the Department of Film and Video of The Museum of Modern Art presents *Blanche Sweet: A Centennial Retrospective*, comprising twelve feature films and twenty-two short works.

The series, which runs from June 7 to 22, presents virtually all the surviving feature films in which Blanche Sweet starred, including Cecil B. DeMille's *The Warrens of Virginia* (1915), Frank Reicher's *The Case of Becky* (1915), John Griffith Wray's *Anna Christie* (1923), and Marshall Neilan's *The Sporting Venus* (1925). Also presented are two of Sweet's sound films, Mervyn LeRoy's *Show Girl in Hollywood* (1930) and Robert Ober and Albert Kelley's *The Woman Racket* (1930), as well as a significant sampling of her Biograph work for D. W. Griffith and his assistants. Among these is Griffith's *Judith of Bethulia* (1913), which is accompanied by rare outtakes of Sweet rehearsing on the set.

Blanche Sweet was born in Chicago on June 18, 1896. By the time she appeared in her first film at age thirteen, she had already been on the stage for nearly eleven years. Her first role came when she was eighteen months old, in a popular melodrama called *Blue Jeans*, in which she was carried on to the stage so that one of the actors could kiss her foot. Sweet's celebrity status was assured in her late teens when, in roles that demanded preternatural maturity for a young woman, she starred in several films by Griffith, including *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), *The Painted Lady* (1912), and, notably, the biblical drama *Judith of Bethulia*. In 1914 Sweet left Griffith for Cecil B. DeMille, who cast her in *The Warrens of Virginia* and *The Captive* (1915). It was the first time that DeMille, then a young director, was able to cast a bona fide movie star in one of his films.

Blanche Sweet's independent spirit, as well as her deep commitment to film projects that she personally sought out and developed, made her a valued star in the 1920s. During this period, she insisted on and enjoyed unusual freedom as a freelance performer at a variety of studios—Ince, Pathé, Goldwyn, and Metro—collaborating with sympathetic directors such as Clarence Badger, Marshall Neilan (to whom she was married from 1922 to 1929), and John Griffith Wray. Her stirring performance in Wray's film adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Anna Christie* greatly inspired Greta Garbo, who filmed the story in 1930 for her first talking picture.

Sweet herself made three feature-length talkies, in two of which she also sang: *Show Girl in Hollywood*, in which she stole the film away from its

young lead, Alice White, playing a silent film actress making an awkward transition to sound; and *The Woman Racket*. She then returned to the stage, playing on Broadway and in several touring shows.

Of her storied film career, which flourished in the two decades in which film itself came of age, Sweet later said, "The pictures we made then had more entertainment value than pictures do now. And we were *idolized*."

Blanche Sweet died in 1986.

Blanche Sweet: A Centennial Retrospective was organized by Steven Higgins, Film Collections Manager, Department of Film and Video, and J. B. Kaufman, film historian and coauthor with Russell Merritt of *Walt in Wonderland: The Silent Films of Walt Disney* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). The Department of Film and Video is grateful to The Library of Congress, George Eastman House, and the Turner Entertainment Co. for the loan of prints in this series.

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