



## Arzner, Dorothy (1900-1979)

by Jacqueline Jenkins

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Although not the first woman to direct films in Hollywood, Dorothy Arzner was the only woman director to work through the turbulent, richly productive, 1930s and 1940s--the period crucial to the development of Classical Hollywood Cinema.

Arzner had been familiar with the film industry almost her entire life. Although she was born in San Francisco, on January 3, 1900, she grew up around the filmmakers and actors who frequented her father's Hollywood restaurant. After dropping out of the University of Southern California, where she had intended to become a doctor, Arzner interviewed with William DeMille (of the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, i. e., Paramount Studios) and accepted her first film job as a script typist. She soon moved on to cutting and editing, eventually editing fifty-two pictures as chief editor for RealArt, a subsidiary of Paramount.

Arzner negotiated her directorial debut at Paramount with *Fashions for Women* in 1927. Between 1927 and 1933, she directed eleven films for Paramount; in the ten years between 1933 and when she left the Hollywood film industry in 1943, Arzner directed another six films as a freelancer with RKO, United Artists, MGM, and Columbia.

During this time, Arzner received a substantial amount of media attention as a "woman director" in the popular press; and as a woman, her work and her career were constantly scrutinized. For all this, however, Arzner remained enigmatic, even provocatively so: observers commented on the juxtaposition of her petite figure and her "mannish" dress; journalists reassured readers that this woman gave her orders on the set with a soft and "feminine" voice; and publicity photos regularly romanced her relationship with her female stars, who included such actresses as Clara Bow, Claudette Colbert, Rosalind Russell, Katherine Hepburn, and Joan Crawford.

Arzner's lesbianism seems to have been well-known within the Hollywood community, though little attention was paid to it publicly. She lived openly with her companion Marion Morgan, a choreographer and dancer, from 1930 until Morgan's death in 1971. The prominence of dance in several of Arzner's films may reflect Morgan's influence.

As with the films of all directors who worked within the creative constraints imposed by the economic and ideological demands of the early studio system, Arzner's films must be read cautiously for signs of her personal politics. Nevertheless, her films are, predominantly, films that convey the varieties of women's experiences and desires, and the tenacity of women's relationships with other women, often within the intersections of gender and social class.

Arzner's films consistently depict controversial topics: extra-marital sex and pregnancy (*Working Girls* [1931], *Christopher Strong* [1933]), cross-class relationships (*The Bride Wore Red* [1937]), prostitution and/or erotic display (*Nana* [1934], *Dance, Girl, Dance* [1940]). Some viewers have detected a playful homoeroticism in the schoolgirl comedy *The Wild Party* (1929).



A 1927 portrait of Dorothy Arzner (left) and Marion Morgan created by Arnold Genthe. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

Even those films that appear most "conventional" succeed in critiquing the actual conventions they participate in; for instance, in *Craig's Wife* (1936), the very character of Harriet Craig (Rosalind Russell) offers a compelling indictment of the institution of marriage and the social and economic dependency that described the lot of many wives.

Similarly, in an important and much-cited scene, Arzner exposes and deflates the power of the "gaze" (understood both in terms of gender--i.e., male--and social class) that underpins most classical American cinema: in *Dance, Girl, Dance*, Judy (Maureen O'Hara), a ballet dancer forced by poverty to dance in vaudeville, confronts her audience, and in a role-reversal that anticipates much later feminist criticism and feminist filmmaking, tells them exactly how she and the other dancers on the stage see them.

Arzner left Hollywood in 1943 to recover from an illness, and she never returned. Coincidentally, post-World War II Hollywood experienced a radical movement towards conservative "family values" quite incompatible with Arzner's general themes and interests, and her work seems to have fallen out of favor.

After her Hollywood career, Arzner directed training films for the Women's Army Corps, taught in the film program at UCLA (1959-1963), and was honored by the Director's Guild of America in 1975. She died on October 1, 1979.

As a woman "pioneer" in the film industry, and as a lesbian, Arzner has attracted considerable attention recently. She has been recognized for her innovations in using sound and her films, though many are still hard to find outside of archives, have seen a renewed interest both academically and popularly.

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## **About the Author**

**Jacqueline Jenkins** teaches Medieval Literature and Culture as well as Film and Gender Studies at the University of Calgary. Her research interests include vernacular book production and the reading habits of late medieval laywomen; women's spirituality and late medieval religiosity; Saints' legends and performance; medieval and contemporary Popular Culture.