

Silent Star: The Forgotten Film Career of Margarita Fischer

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Childhood fame, a clandestine marriage, national popularity, nude photos, premature retirement from the public eye, a spouse's early death--the progression of silent film star Margarita Fischer's career from 1911 to 1927 was as colorful as the plot of any of her pictures. The moviegoing public loved Fischer's work. A June 1914 *Photoplay* poll named her America's most popular actress, and American Beauty Films selected Fischer's face as one of the nation's most beautiful and recognizable to serve as its logo the same year.¹ Her final film, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927), directed by husband Harry Pollard, was one of the most expensive and highly-hyped films then made by a major studio.²

While film historians have generally directed their attention to the careers of iconic stars such as Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin, they have often not traced in detail the declining profile of other actors once equally popular. Today Fischer's stardom and body of work, like that of many other silent stars, have been largely forgotten. Sadly, her final screen appearance is the only one of her feature-length movies available on video, and she has been virtually excluded from major works of film scholarship since the mid-1920s. Her story reveals reasons why such a popular actress of the silent era should be so little known today and why she was forgotten so quickly. The causes of her career's end and her fame's eclipse lie in a complex interaction of personal, professional, and social factors.

Although she did not hail from a theatrical family, Fischer began her career early in life. She was born in Iowa to John and Kate Fischer on February 12, 1886. Three years later, her family moved to Oregon, where her father managed a hotel. In 1894, a theatrical agent cast eight-year-old Margarita Fischer in the play *The Celebrated Case*. After seeing her acclaimed work in other plays, John Fischer sold his hotel to manage his daughter's burgeoning career.³ By the turn of the century, Fischer had gained teenage fame in an eponymous touring company as "the Youngest Leading Lady on the American Stage."⁴ After her father died in 1906, she joined other theatrical companies and enjoyed years of professional success in comedies and dramas. In July 1911, at the age of twenty-five, Fischer secretly married fellow actor Harry Pollard. The two hid their marriage until the following year, possibly so as not to detract from Fischer's individual

¹ June 1914 *Photoplay* poll, Margarita Fischer Papers MS 81-4 [hereafter Fischer Papers], Department of Special Collections, Ablah Library, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS, Box 13, personal scrapbook; June 1914 *Photoplay* cover, Fischer Papers, Box 13, personal scrapbook; "Margarita Fischer: The American Beauty," 1914 (?), Fischer Papers, Box 13, personal scrapbook. Few of the clippings in Fischer's scrapbooks include dates or publication information. In following the specific path of Fischer's career, the Margarita Fischer Papers and the Harry Pollard Papers proved invaluable. These collections, held in Ablah Library's Department of Special Collections at Wichita State University, comprise personal letters, fan mail, studio contracts, newspaper clippings, magazine articles, and hundreds of still photographs from Fischer's and Pollard's films.

² "Sixteen pages of Proven Press Copy for the Universal masterpiece 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,'" 1927, Fischer Papers, Box 19.

³ Biographical Note to the Fischer Papers, available from <http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/collections/ms/81-04/81-4-A.HTML>; Internet.

⁴ Margarita Fischer Co. advertising playbill, 1903 (?), Fischer Papers, Box 13, personal ledger.

fame; she held starring roles in theatrical productions until Independent Film Co. hired her to an eleven-month contract in November 1911.⁵

After Pollard followed his wife into film the next year, Fischer's personal and professional lives intertwined. Although she signed contracts with multiple studios over the course of her career, she returned time and again to making films with her husband, who actually maintained his own production company, Pollard Picture Plays, in the late 1910s.⁶ The couple worked together as director and actress in such unusual films as the anti-abortion *The Miracle of Life* (1915) and *The Pearl of Paradise* (1916), in which Fischer appeared nude.⁷

In March 1917, after the pair had become established in film circles, American Film Co. offered Fischer and Pollard a year-long contract at \$1000 per week for the couple; five months later, the studio re-extended the offer to Fischer alone at the same rate of pay.⁸ The couple's agents apologized in a letter included with that of American Film Co., and despite the slight to her husband, Fischer accepted the contract and even renewed it the following year at terms much less favorable than those initially promised by the studio.⁹ These contract negotiations hint at Pollard's troubled personal life. Fischer's own papers exclude any hint of discord relating to her marriage, but a biographical note attached to the collection of her papers states that Pollard lost his contract with American "probably due to a combination of alcoholism and artistic differences" and that the couple separated in 1919.¹⁰ The following year, the independent young woman who had headed her own stage company as a teenager decided to retire, according to Universal Studios publicity, "in order to devote herself exclusively to being Mrs. Harry Pollard."¹¹ This progression of events suggests that Pollard might have been a liability to Fischer's career, and that her eventual devotion to the role of "Mrs. Harry Pollard" was a desperate attempt to save her marriage, even at the expense of her stardom. Despite this "retirement," she returned to the screen in the 1924 melodrama *K--The Unknown*.

Fischer's return to film was temporary; she made only two more movies after *K--The Unknown* before retiring in 1927 for the second and final time. According to a newspaper article written in 1936, two years after Pollard's death, Fischer ultimately "retired at the request of my husband ... who wanted me to be with him always, and this I could not do unless I gave up my career. ... At the beginning I missed my work terribly and it took me some time to get used to being without it."¹² The article places a positive spin on the end of "Mrs. Harry Pollard's" career--despite her wistfulness, she insists that she "never" regretted abandoning her work--but it seems that once again, she retired from filmmaking in order to provide emotional support for her

⁵ Marriage announcement, paper unknown, 1912 (?), Fischer Papers, Box 13, personal ledger; Independent Film Co. contract, November 27, 1911, Fischer Papers, Box 1, folder 26.

⁶ Pollard Picture Plays advertisement, 1917 (?), Harry Pollard Papers, MS 81-5 [hereafter Pollard Papers], Department of Special Collections, Ablah Library, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS, oversized folder.

⁷ Margarita Fischer and Harry Pollard filmographies, Fischer Papers, index folder; *The Pearl of Paradise* photographs, Fischer Papers, Box 19.

⁸ American Film Co. to Margarita Fischer and Harry Pollard, March 12, 1917, Fischer Papers, Box 1, folder 26; American Film Co. to Margarita Fischer, August 13, 1917, Fischer Papers, Box 1, folder 26.

⁹ American Film Co. contract, August 27, 1917, Fischer Papers, Box 1, folder 26; American Film Co. contract, September 4, 1918, Fischer Papers, Box 1, folder 26. The first contract proposes a second year at a salary of \$1250 per week, but the second contract offers only three months of employment at \$1000 per week. It does, however, maintain the clause that Fischer be cast only in starring roles.

¹⁰ Biographical Note to the Fischer Papers.

¹¹ "Sixteen pages," p. 7, Fischer Papers, oversized folder.

¹² "Actress of Silent Days Visits Shanghai," *Vista Press* (Vista, Calif.), December 31, 1936, Fischer Papers, oversized folder.

husband. Harry Pollard directed seven films in the five years after his wife's retirement. The 1932 flop *Fast Life*, a formulaic vehicle for waning MGM star William Haines, proved Pollard's final directorial effort.¹³

The personal influence of her husband is in itself an insufficient explanation for the end of Fischer's career and the disappearance of her fame, though. For example, the late 1910s and early 1920s saw the increasing conglomeration of independent studios and movie theaters into larger organizations. This process of conglomeration, according to film historian J. M. Klenotic, resulted in a standardization of film content and production.¹⁴ Fischer and Pollard--the innovative filmmakers of unconventional early works such as *The Miracle of Life*, *The Quest* (1915), a dramatic adventure story, and *The Devil's Assistant* (1917), a tale of morphine addiction--must have been limited indeed by the creative constraints of the studio system. Pollard's contract difficulties with American Film Co. certainly indicate the conflict between studios and artists whose dramatic tastes were too unorthodox.

As if creative differences were not enough to complicate filmmaking, studios increased their vigilance over stars to the extent of interceding in their personal lives. During Fischer's tenure with American Film Co., the United States' entry into World War I motivated the studio to change Fischer's name to "Fisher." A 1918 publicity shot shows her pulling the "C" out of a



Figure 1. Margarita Fischer becomes Margarita Fisher.

sign displaying her name and throwing it into a map of Germany (Figure 1). Fifty years later, Fischer remembered that "I had no choice" but to perform this action, as she depended on her salary to support several relatives, but that the name change and the photo "broke my dear Uncle Will's heart" and "saddened me for many years."¹⁵ Fischer implies that her salary was contingent on her obedience in image-related matters such as the Americanization of her name--a symbolic wartime gesture, as her family hailed from Switzerland. These instances of studio-inflicted trauma might have lessened the blow of Fischer's retirement from acting, especially after Pollard stopped making films as well in 1932.

Sound was another contributing factor to the decline of many silent stars' careers. In 1927, the year of Fischer's final film, *The Jazz Singer* became the first widely released film with integrated sound. "Talking pictures" were an immediate hit, and studios quickly began the process of conversion to the new art form. The final years of silent film were, ironically, the greatest years for artistic freedom

¹³ Filmography, Fischer Papers; William J. Mann, *Wisecracker: The Life and Times of William Haines, Hollywood's First Openly Gay Star* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 205-206. Mann suggests that Haines's career ended because he was unwilling to pose as a heterosexual for the sake of studio publicity. Haines's case demonstrates the power studios held over their artists.

¹⁴ J. F. Klenotic, "Class Markers in the Mass Movie Audience: A Case Study in the Cultural Geography of Moviegoing, 1926-1932," *Communication Review* 2, no. 4 (1998) 461-495.

¹⁵ Margarita Fischer to Roi Uselton, 1968 (?), Fischer Papers, Box 1, folder 22.

since the beginnings of the studio system. Studios in a state of technological flux were desperate for products to fill theaters and relaxed their control over filmmakers as a result.¹⁶ The scenic bombast of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* represents the flowering of Pollard's creativity backed by the publicity machine and the \$2 million budget of a suddenly cooperative Universal Studios.¹⁷ After this period of adjustment and innovation, though, studios were anxious to associate themselves solely with sound film and stars who could perform well in this new medium.

The careers of many of the most popular silent stars did not survive the transition to sound for a variety of reasons. John Gilbert's career foundered because of an unsuitable speaking voice; Clara Bow was intimidated by on-set sound equipment; Lillian Gish's fragile onscreen image was irrevocably linked with the silent epics of D. W. Griffith.¹⁸

Such causes were not the case with Fischer, whose long professional history and stage training endowed her with the speaking voice and flexibility to adapt to a new filmic style. A 1928 article, written before Fischer's retirement was final, describes her "beautiful English" and "easy and quiet" voice, adding that "'Talkies' should hold no fear for her."¹⁹ Her career was troubled even before the introduction of sound film, though. During her final years in Hollywood, film scholarship such as Terry Ramsaye's 1926 *A Million and One Nights* relegated her to brief mentions, describing her as "wife of Harry Pollard, director"—an indication that social change was already marginalizing Fischer's work in critical if not in popular circles.²⁰ The stardom of the 1910s was irrelevant in the filmmaking world of the 1920s.

A more significant reason for Fischer's career decline was the changing role of women in popular culture. Film fans of the 1910s had appreciated seeing trailblazing female-centered stories such as Fischer's *The Quest* or the comedic *Miss Jackie* serials set in Army and Navy circles (1916-1917). Such movies, says historian Nan Enstad, both reflected contemporary women's entry into the workplace in increasing numbers and offered escapist relief from the limitations placed upon them in this new sphere.²¹ Filmgoers of the 1920s, by contrast, were increasingly fascinated by stardom rather than by storytelling, a preoccupation based on public desire to crack the mystery of an idolized star's personal life.²² The Fischer-Pollard marriage filled this need for a time, but studio controls kept news innocuous in a desire to create an image that appealed to the public. By the end of the 1920s, the couple's publicity consisted of such revelatory headlines as "Shy Harry Pollard, Film Director, Has Never Been to a Hollywood Party."²³ This focus on ordinary life was a decade ahead of its time; audiences of the 1920s wanted glamorous offscreen

¹⁶ William K. Everson, *American Silent Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 334-336 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

¹⁷ "Sixteen pages," Fischer Papers, oversized folder; "The Pre-view Weekly Film Pictorial Section," *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, May 1, 1927, Fischer Papers, oversized folder.

¹⁸ Ken Wlaschin, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of the World's Great Movie Stars and Their Films: From 1900 to the Present Day* (New York: Salamander Books, 1979), 20, 21; *Clara Bow: Discovering the 'It' Girl*, prod. Elaina B. Archer and dir. Hugh Munro Neely, 65 min., Timeline Films, 1999, videodisc.

¹⁹ "Marguerita Fischer, Star of Movieland Here To Visit Old Scenes of Childhood [sic]," *Capital Journal* (Salem, Ore.), August 16, 1928, Fischer Papers, Box 18, folder 12.

²⁰ Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture Through 1925* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), 717.

²¹ Nan Enstad, "Dressed for Adventure: Working Women and Silent Movie Serials in the 1910s," *Feminist Studies* 21, no. 1 (1995) 67-90.

²² P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 81-82.

²³ "Shy Harry Pollard, Film Director, Has Never Been to a Hollywood Party," *St. Louis Star*, May 1, 1929, Pollard Papers, oversized folder.

personas that tallied with the roles actors played onscreen.²⁴ Margarita Fischer's wifely persona might eventually have ceased being interesting to new fans.

The interest of 1920s fans was drawn as much by the physical appearance of a star as personality or image; changing standards of beauty in the early decades of the twentieth century could have encouraged the discounting of Fischer's work after the end of her film career. Roles for actresses in the silent era fell into several major categories such as exotic "vamps," innocent "virgins," and free-spirited "flappers." All of these types were required to fit what historian Heather Addison calls a "physical culture" of idealized thinness, encouraged by the insecurity and need inherent in the growing culture of consumption.²⁵ Addison quotes a 1922 article from *Photoplay*, the magazine that crowned Fischer the "American Beauty" of 1914, that describes a "New American Beauty" of a "softened, feminized ... tiny, childish, girlish type."²⁶

Fischer did indeed begin her career playing roles of what an early contract proposal called "the sweet, sympathetic class," yet in appearance she was, as a later newspaper article noted, "a lovely brunette of a Spanish type" (Figure 2).²⁷ The unexpected contrast between her capability and her femininity, between the exoticism of her appearance and the innocence of her persona, permitted Fischer great leeway in choosing film roles, but the impossibility of typecasting such an actress conflicted with the "New American Beauty" as the decade wore on. Her final film appearance in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which she played the light-skinned slave Eliza, confused her physical image further. With the advent of the oversexed platinum blonde bombshell at the beginning of the 1930s, Fischer's physical appearance became as outdated as her silent work.



Figure 2. "A lovely brunette of a Spanish type."

As with many silent stars, the passing of the silent film era resulted in Fischer's eventual obscurity. Studios concerned with the transition to sound no longer valued their earlier silent output or the stars of those features who failed to succeed in sound films; film stock was recycled or allowed to deteriorate. By one estimate, less than ten percent of silent films survived into the 1970s.²⁸ Fischer's career output has been decimated over the course of the past seventy-five years; only two of her more than 100 films and shorts are available on video, and the

²⁴ Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 25-27, 29.

²⁵ Heather Addison, "Capitalizing Their Charms: Cinema Stars and Physical Culture in the 1920s," *Velvet Light Trap* no. 50 (2002) 15-35.

²⁶ Adela Rogers St. Johns, "New American Beauty," *Photoplay*, June 1922, 26-27; quoted in Addison.

²⁷ Walter Sanford to Margarita Fischer, October 24, 1908 (?), Fischer Papers, Box 13, personal ledger; "Actress of Silent Days."

²⁸ Everson, 14-15.

Library of Congress holds two others.²⁹ Some might still exist in private collections, but her most innovative works—including *The Pearl of Paradise*, *The Devil's Assistant*, and her dual roles in *The Girl From His Home Town* (1915) and *The Hellion* (1919)—probably do not survive and can be known only from stills. For Fischer and other silent artists whose more enticing works have not survived, the process of effacement in the public eye may be inevitable. Changing tastes in modern entertainment render the once-thrilling ice floes and escapes of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* more archaic and less enthralling to contemporary viewers with the release of every action-adventure movie.

Fischer's neglect by film historians, too, is in part due to the small amount of surviving material. Definitive monographs such as Lewis Jacobs's 1939 *The Rise of the American Film* omit her and Pollard entirely from discussions of silent film. Later works mention Fischer only in connection with the studios for which she worked; she is named in Timothy James Lyons's *The Silent Partner*, a 1974 history of the American Film Manufacturing Company, and in I. G. Edmonds's 1977 *Big U: Universal in the Silent Days*. Anthony Slide's *Early American Cinema* (1970) mentions Fischer and Pollard as American Beauty artists and notes Fischer's appearance in *Miss Jackie* serials in the 1910s, but incorrectly identifies her as "Marguerite," the sister of "Katie" Fischer—actually referring to her niece Kathie. William K. Everson's more general *American Silent Film*, published in 1978, includes a great deal of information not only about the most famous silent stars but also about less well-known ones; Fischer and Pollard are not included.³⁰

Margarita Fischer herself was philosophical about the end of her career. In a 1936 interview, she professed the belief that sound film is "so much better than the silents which seem so funny now;" more than thirty years later, reflecting back over the course of her life and career, she told film historian Roi Uselton that "God has been good to me."³¹ Certainly Fischer was not the only silent actress for whom a collision of factors resulted in career oblivion. The 1914 *Photoplay* poll that named her America's favorite actress is only one of many cases in which a now-forgotten star won popularity polls in silent-era film magazines.³²

Fischer is therefore, in a sense, a case study for the ephemerality of celebrity in general and silent film in particular. Her personal choices, the professional environment in which she worked, and the society in which she lived all contributed to bring her career to a close and to remove her works from their former position of prominence. Understanding the decline of Margarita Fischer's career fosters an understanding of the social values that led to this process. Far from being irrelevant today, this silent star's life and work have much to reveal to modern scholars.

²⁹ *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927) and the short film *How Men Propose* (1913) are the sole works available to home viewers. The Library of Congress holds prints of *Draga, the Gypsy* (1913) and *The Quest* (1915).

³⁰ See Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1939; reprint, New York: Teachers College Press, 1968); Timothy James Lyons, *The Silent Partner: The History of the American Film Manufacturing Company 1910-1921* (New York: Arno Press, 1974); I. G. Edmonds, *Big U: Universal in the Silent Days* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1977); Anthony Slide, *Early American Cinema* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1970), 83, 84; Everson.

³¹ "Actress of Silent Days"; Fischer to Uselton.

³² Everson, 5. Everson offers Bessie Barrisdale and Dorothy Dalton as examples of such once popular but "now almost forgotten" actresses.