DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH:	**LILLIAN GISH (LG)[1]**
INTERVIEWERS:	**CARL COLBY (CC); RUTH CUMMINGS (RC)**
LOCATION:	**LILLIAN GISH'S RESIDENCE**
DATE:	**1983**
TRANSCRIBER:	**JANET CROWLEY, TRANSCRIPTION COMPLETED OCTOBER 19, 2018**

CC: In terms of preserving films early on, or—?

LG: My first connection—do you want to put that thing on?

RC: It's on, if you don't mind.

LG: I had a telephone call from a woman called Iris Barry. She wanted to see me, she said, about something that had to do with films, that she thought would be interesting to me. And I went up to—she gave me an address on Madison Avenue. I went in to a tiny little office, and a woman was sitting in there in back of the desk, and I sat in the other chair. It was so small, there was practically no room for anything else. And she said, "I want to start a film library." I had never heard those two words together before in my life. I thought—because I was interested, deeply interested in film because I felt, well, I'd learned. I didn't know in the beginning. I made fun of it like everyone else; we called it the flickers. But as I grew older and as I traveled, I found out this was a power. What I've got on today, this is a gift from China. You see, we were the world market, the silent films, and incidentally, there were never such a thing as silent film. You always had music, always. Even if it was five cents and you saw a newsreel, you had a little piano, so there's no such thing as silent film. But she said the Museum or someplace was interested in it, but nobody would give her film. And she said, "Could you influence Mr. [D.W.] Griffith to give me some of his film?" She didn't ask for all of it, just some of it. "If he would give me some, I think the others would follow suit." And she'd get what she was after. So I said, "I'll try," because

[1] Also present, James (Jim) Frasher, Lillian Gish's personal manager.

it interested me, too, and I felt it would interest him. I said, "He's in Kentucky with Evelyn, his wife, but I'll write them or call them down there and see." And he wanted to know if he gave her some, if she would take care of the prints. And of course, for *The Birth of a Nation*, we only took one take. There was only one negative on that. And that wore out.

JF: Anybody want any lemon?

R/C: No thank you. [RC and CC simultaneously]

JF: I've got hot buttered Alabama pecan.

RC: Oh my.

JF: Little celeries and cakes, tea will be steeping; that's warm.

LG: Honey, put them over by them and then we won't have to pass them.

CC: So this was a totally novel idea to you.

LG: Well, it was an absolutely new idea. And he wrote me or told me, I can't remember, he said, "You know I'm paying taxes on my—they're all down here in a vault, but I pay Kentucky taxes on them." And I said, "Well, if they'll take care of them, I think it would be a good idea to send them up here, some of them, and see what happens." (Thank you.) So he did. And then the other people started giving film. So he really started it, like he started everything else in the movies. [RC and CC laugh] You know, they don't know that, at least, they don't want to know it out in California because they were, well, they were just mostly immigrants, first generation here. And there was no reason why they should see the advantage of this new thing and not go into it, the Americans, but they didn't; they didn't have enough sense. Mr. [Louis B.] Mayer, who was a Russian immigrant, and [Adolph] Zukor, and all of them that were in control of the business—not Griffith; [he] didn't have *that* much business sense. I guess you're not a poet and you're not a man like that with two talents. You just have one. He had a brother that looked after him who had less.

CC: Was he able to control the rights on those particular pictures so he was able to give—?

LG: Was he what?

CC: The rights to the pictures. Did he have the rights too?

LG: No, he sold the rights. Because when I was signed—this was ’15, when he made *The Birth*. And at ’25, Nick [Nicholas] Schenck here in New York signed me to a contract that I didn’t want. It was a lot of money and I didn’t want a lot of money, I wanted a salary to live on and a little gross percentage of my pictures in case they made money, I would’ve. [If] they lost money, they wouldn’t lose money; they wouldn’t give me that. They gave me a million dollars to make six pictures. Well, the government took—

RC: Took the whole—

LG: Took so much of it. Anyhow, that started the film part.

CC: He was happy to have a place that he could put the pictures in.

LG: He was very glad to have someone take care of his films, and, two, remove the taxes from him. Because the man had no money. He was such an honest man, he worked and gave all his money to the end of his life. And when he died, he didn’t owe 10 cents. But that—he was living on an annuity that his little manager—there was never anything written with Griffith. I was there nine years, and you never saw a script. There was never a script. Everything was rehearsed in a room out of his head. He called it—you followed what he was saying, but it was up to you to find your character and do with that character. He can’t be bothered with that. And you’d want to discuss things with him—Dorothy [Gish] particularly, she liked to talk things over. He said, “Doooooon’t tell me; show me.” [RC and CC laugh] He didn’t have time to discuss things.

CC: So was he able to see that the Museum was able to collect the movies and take good care of them?

LG: Well, he just sent the movies up here. Two or one, dear?

RC: One, please.

LG: One.

CC: Was there a revival of interest then? Well, when did that begin to happen?

LG: Well, that began—they didn’t have any.

RC: That started it. Right?

LG: They didn't have a film division.

CC: When did interest pick up again for those particular pictures?

LG: Well, when he came up. What did he come up for? I can't remember dates. I cannot remember a number.

CC: We even saw some film of Carl Brown.

LG: You give me your telephone number, it's gone. [Laughter]

RC: That's okay; that we don't need.

LG: Milk?

RC: Yes please. Thank you.

LG: Oh, you have it English fashion.

RC: This is high tea, isn't it? I see this nice spread, and I have to.

LG: I learned to drink tea in England.

CC: It's wonderful that I've been able—maybe because of the Museum and because of the AFI and places like that, I had the privilege to see *Broken Blossoms* with a tint version, too, down in Washington, which was terrific; [a] 35 millimeter color tint version of the film.

LG: Would you like the story of *Broken Blossoms*? You know, it's from *Limehouse Nights*, Thomas Burke's short story, very short. And he made it—Douglas Fairbanks sent it over. And we made it in 18 days and nights.

RC: Oh my.

LG: The nights because the man who played my father [Donald Crisp] was directing a film at Paramount in the daytime, so all his scenes were at night. And it cost $91,000 to make, complete. When it was finished—

CC: With all the costumes and the sets and everything else?

LG: Well, I had my costumes, I brought over from England when we were taken there to—by the British government.

CC: And Richard's [Barthelmess] beautiful Chinese—

LG: And can you help yourself?

CC: Yes.

RC: Absolutely.

LG: Some of these cakes are good. Jim's mother made those little ones with the nuts in them. And you want one or two sugars?

CC: No sugar, only the milk, please.

LG: Just milk.

CC: Thank you. It's one of my favorite pictures because of the—

LG: What, *Broken Blossoms*?

CC: It's just the relationship that is set up.

LG: We took it in that time, and then it sat there. And the cutter, Jimmy Smith, came to me and he said, "What's the matter with the old man? I can't get in to look at that picture." And he couldn't touch it, of course, cut it until—so, I said to Mr. Griffith, I said, "Jimmy is worried you're not cutting *The Chink and the Child*." That was the name of it.

CC: *The Chink and the Child*? [Laughing]

LG: That was the original name of it. She was 12 years old. I didn't want to play it. I said I'd help any child; I'd be with her day and night; I'd do anything if he wouldn't make me play that. [Laughter]

CC: With the tin foil in her—?

LG: And he said, "Don't be silly. How could a child play those emotional scenes?" And he said, "Get up there and get your costumes." [RC laughs] Well, I went up, and we had a Mrs. [Mae] Jones. She was really Mrs. [Erich] von Stroheim but he didn't want it known that he was married to her. They only had a four-year old child.

CC: [Laughing] I never even knew that he was—

LG: You know, he was an extra there, and would play little—those bit parts.

CC: Wasn't he an assistant director on—?

LG: No.

CC: He was never, then?

LG: Well, later on, but—

CC: Not on that picture.

LG: Dorothy and I—there were two, three of them, from Germany. And they had scars on their faces, you know.

CC: They called it a dueling scar?

LG: You know, they all walked—they were very serious. If we'd see them coming down the street, Dorothy and I'd cross over on the other side so we wouldn't have to say hello to them. They frightened us. [Laughter] And then he'd rehearsed a part in *Hearts of the World*. A big part, because anybody rehearsed any part—if the actor that Griffith might have had in mind, you'd never know who that was. He was busy playing in another picture, because there were all always many pictures being made under Griffith's supervision.

CC: The extraordinary picture for me though, must have been, in terms of the difficulty of shooting it—

LG: Yes.

CC: —must have been the orphans with the ice floes and all of that.

LG: Yes.

CC: That's very daring to have done.

LG: He didn't have a little part in that, did he? No. No, he wasn't in *Broken Blossoms*.

CC: *Broken Blossoms*, I think it's because of the—did you see the film *Barry Lyndon?*

RC: It's a Stanley Kubrick film.

CC: It's about Ireland and all, very beautifully photographed. But the feeling of that film, the pacing, the ease of it all.

LG: It's a painting.

CC: It's a painting.

LG: A series of paintings.

CC: And I often felt *Broken Blossoms* just evolved that way too, just very slow and meditative.

LG: Yes, it's a tragic poem.

RC: Very romantic. Right.

LG: And Griffith said—when I asked him why he didn't, that Jimmy was worried he couldn't get it cut, and he said, "Oh, it depresses me so. Why did I do that? If it does that to me, how can I expect to sell it?" [Laughter] Anyway, he did cut it, and there was only the beginning and end of each scene off. Not one retake. Not one added scene or not one that was removed. It had all been rehearsed. You see, when he told me I had to do it, I told Mrs. Jones not to come near me; I didn't feel well. It was late in the day and I walked home. I thought, I'll walk this off, whatever it is. Well, I didn't—it was through just a district of houses, no corner drugstore to telephone, and I crawled under [the] bushes, I could hardly get home, I was so whatever was the matter with me. And I crawled up the back stairs so Mother wouldn't see me. I never wanted to worry her. And when she found me she got the doctor and I had a 106 temperature, and I had Spanish influenza. And we had already lost six people, because they were dying so fast out there we couldn't make caskets for them. It was the end of 1918, or '19; I can't remember. Anyway.

CC: What was Iris Barry like? Was she really very devoted?

LG: Iris was a darling English woman. Mother, Dorothy and I had been in England seven months in '17, working, in England and in France. We were sent up front in the first World War, and Mother got shell shocked, you know, like this. She couldn't pick up a cup or anything, you had to hold her. And it resulted in her

loss of health, I think. Honey, take—these are good cakes, different kinds. That's lemon cake, that salt cake that I cut; I don't know if you like it or not.

RC: And which were the cookies that Jim's mother—?

LG: And those little ones with nuts are Jim's mother's; they're good.

RC: All these are great; thank you.

CC: Well, I think it's—

LG: Anyway, he took her to—*Broken Blossoms*, he took it to Zukor when he had it finished. Zukor had a contract with him for each of six or seven reel of film, $250,000. Well, it was 91 [$91,000], so that was a good profit. And Zukor said, "You might as well put your hand in my pocket and steal $250,000." And Griffith, they said, [because] I wasn't there, went white, and walked out without saying a word. And he thought—he borrowed, [and] he got $250,000, came up and put it on the desk and said, "Give me my film." And Zukor gave him the film. Well, it opened and made millions. [Laughter] It opened here, at 42nd Street and Broadway, the old George M. Cohan Theater, $3.00 a ticket.

RC: My goodness, in that time!

LG: With the balalaika orchestra. [Laughter] And the critics raved. They said this should be the bible at the right hand of anyone making a film in the future.

CC: [Laughing] Whoa, that's a good review, I'd say.

LG: So, anyway.

CC: But it's nice that it went back to the Museum—what they've been able to do in terms of—

LG: I can't hear you.

CC: What the Museum's been able to do in terms of preserving films so people can study and see all these things.

LG: Well, to me, the most important thing [is that] we are the first century to leave a living history. So I'm working with the Library of—the people in Washington...

C/R: Library of Congress. [CC and RC simultaneously]

LG: On the preservation of our newsreels. Now they've destroyed them all in California because they're, money, money, money; that's their interest. And maybe that's right, but anyway, they don't know that this, I think, is the most important invention of this century; much more important than flying.

RC: The medium of film, you mean.

LG: Yes, because it affects life, it affects history. We—Griffith, you know, thought it was predicted in the Bible. He said that there was to be a universal language. Well, this, you see—we have the world. And he made his first talking picture in '21, called *Dream Street*. It was over at Town Hall, it opened there. And he saw it, and he said, "Why, this is committing suicide. Only five percent of the world can speak English; why should I lose 95 percent of my audience?" And he took the talk away, and showed it as a silent film.

RC: This is delicious, by the way; thank you very much.

JF: Eat up, eat up, don't be shy.

RC: Once the Film Department was started, did you—?

LG: Then it began. That started the Film Department. Because they had—now how long she stayed there—you see, that was—what year was it?

RC: She was there in 30 something, wasn't it, '32?

CC: She started in about '32 and she started in on—she went to Hollywood to try to secure interest in pictures there.

LG: She did. Well, I—

CC: And the only people who helped her were—well, Mary Pickford supposedly helped a little bit, but she had it tough going though; she had it tough.

LG: I bet she did; they wouldn't be interested.

CC: No. You know, it's funny. They had a party for her. Mary Pickford had a big party for her and all, but the Museum was a little miffed because they even sent them a bill for the wood that burned in the fireplace. Can you imagine? So I guess they are money, money, money. [Laughter] They give a little service, and then they didn't care. It's true.

LG: But then, you must remember, they were not—Griffith was deeply American. His father was a colonel, Roaring Jake Griffith, in the Civil War, and they had come over here; he was a Welshman descended from the ap Griffiths [Gruffydds] kings of Wales. And since he's died, I've had several letters from people that asked me if they knew that Mr. Griffith was descended from royalty in 13th century Wales. But he had this magnificent Welsh voice; that was his power. Because anything he said: He'd tell a kitten to go to sleep; it would sleep. [Laughter] Now that's power! [Laughter] He'd be—so, in *Way Down East*, he wanted to get over the heat and laziness in the little village, and with an old man asleep above with his mouth open, and you think he's snoring; a silent film. And then he goes to the kitten, and the little kitten goes to sleep and leans against his leg. [Laughter]

CC: I remember something he wrote in a book once, that—and I think about it every week or so—he said that often times making movies you know you don't get enough exercise in the day. So he said he'd like to start a day off by everybody running across the field and back, so they could build up a little sweat, he'd say. And then he'd feel that the day was at least... [laughing]

LG: Do you want one sugar or none?

CC: No sugar, please.

LG: No sugar; that's right; you want milk.

CC: Yes, a little milk; thank you. It's nice to see how they're succeeding, too. The Film Department is going great guns now. They've even got people like Clint Eastwood interested in giving money and having his films supported, and that's pretty unusual, when you think about it. That's a success, I think.

LG: Well, honey, I would think naturally, it's better than—we *always* had museums; every country. We've got this beautiful Metropolitan, and all over the world, wherever there's religion, there's beauty, because they had paintings, they had buildings, they had everything, and marble statues. If you've been through the Vatican, you know what I mean. So that is known around the world.

CC: And also, it's a good way for people like the French and the Russians and the Italians and everyone else to be able to study our early pictures.

LG: Oh right. Have you been in Leningrad?

CC: No; have you been?

LG: [Sighing] Yes. Oh, you could stay there three months and never see it all. It's so beautiful.

RC: Oh my. We spoke with Jay Leyda who was the curator of film at the Museum.

CC: Well, he was involved in doing something. He did those books on [Sergei] Eisenstein.

RC: Well, he worked with him.

LG: Well, you know, *Intolerance* ran 10 years consecutively.

CC: What?! [Laughing]

LG: And that was what made Eisenstein. He—I think he was an attorney and he gave it up and went into films, from that one film. And [Vladimir] Lenin asked Griffith to come over to Russia and head the film and propaganda department.

CC: Wow, that's amazing.

LG: Because *Intolerance* had—

RC: Such power.

LG: Intolerance to the human race. You could turn it around and say he was a communist, so Lenin thought he must be interested in communism when you couldn't get anybody—

CC: Because he wants to change society.

RC: Right.

LG: Farther away from communism—I don't think Griffith even answered the letter. He just laughed at it, you know, that anybody would have an idea that he could be interested in that. [Laughing] Anyhow.

CC: So what we were going to do is to have—in the picture what we wanted to do was to be able to have some, not just reminiscence in the film documentary, but almost some like testimonial to the Museum for having done what it's doing.

LG: You should tell about Eisenstein and *Intolerance* because the first big film he did was *Potemkin*. And he takes a big ship and puts that in danger instead of Griffith, who would take a human being, a girl or a man, and put them in danger. That was the difference.

CC: That's true.

LG: But it was the same technique, and he said so in his lifetime, that everything he knew and learned was from Griffith. And not only that; they teach not only acting, but dancing with my films over there. We were asked first in 1928—Mary [Pickford], Douglas [Fairbanks], [Charlie] Chaplin, and me—to come there at their expense as their guests. Well, Mother was terribly ill; I couldn't go. Chaplin never did go; he's far from a communist as Griffith was. Mary and Douglas went, and when she came back she said, "Oh Lillian, you must *never* go there. You couldn't stand all that love." [Laughing] And I had to go there to find out in '69. July of '69, they asked me again, and I went over for 15 days. And you know they don't kiss you, they eat you. One gets this cheek, one gets that, and they mm-mm, they just practically eat you. [Laughter] Because you can't, I can't talk to them; I don't know one word of Russian. And they know all about my films. I was to talk to them about my films. I hadn't seen those films for years. I didn't know anything about it.

CC: So it was just—were they by luck that the Museum came along and that Mr. Griffith was interested in having someone preserve it, that these films were able to be preserved at all?

LG: Well, it was—she [Iris Barry] had the idea. And then along comes Eileen Bowser.

CC: Right. We talked with her.

LG: And before her Richard Griffiths.

CC: Yes, Richard Griffiths.

LG: He was wonderful. He spent hours and days up here with me talking film, everything. He was a great enthusiast.

CC: He really was. Do they have a pretty good record, do you think, of your pictures? Do they have most of the pictures?

LG: Well, you can't tell what time is going to do to film, you know. I've got about 12 or 15 that have stood the test of time.

CC: You mean materially?

LG: Well, the *Birth*, of course; they have misused the *Birth* by the colored people. They say that's against them. It's not.

CC: No.

LG: The villain is the one that is my father; he's patterned after Thaddeus Stevens who told the black people, the black man that attacked—wants to marry me, he says he is going to conquer the white South under the heels of the black South, and make him king of the South. He's the villain. Because they had never been to school; they didn't know how to read or write. And to say that the *Birth* did harm to them—look at what strides the black people made from 1915 when the picture was released to, uh, 19—when did they start to come into prominence?

RC: In the sixties.

LG: Who was the first black mayor? That was 30 years later, wasn't it? 25 or 30 years, much more gone forward for the Black people with the *Birth*.

CC: Also, it was the first time that the Ku Klux Clan was pictured.

LG: And not only that, we fought a war and hundreds of thousands of our people to set them free. They should know that, but they don't. They think it was done for money.

CC: No.

LG: And so that they wouldn't have to take care of them. They were taken care of, when any black people came to the studio, and we did have one black woman, she dances in that, Madame Sul-Te-Wan. And she worked there, looked after us. There were no unions so we were just one big family. There was no difference in people: electricians, property men, actors. You were just the same [INAUDIBLE: 0:28:01].

RC: Working in the film.

LG: Same [INAUDIBLE: 0:28:03]. It was a beautiful place to be. We worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and we liked it. [Laughter] There wasn't any place we could go [to] that was that interesting. There was no social life. If you were asked to lunch with Griffith, it was because he wanted to talk over a story with whomever he asked. You know. All these actors became directors, Mr. [INAUDIBLE: 0:28:32] and all of them. And he trained them.

CC: Josef von Sternberg, was he involved at all with the early pictures?

LG: He was not important. He was not like the others, because he was foreign, to begin with, and he never—

CC: That's true. He came over pretty late, then.[2]

LG: He was with his two friends, and I can't remember their names. They were all three from Germany.

CC: You remember when he did that picture, [*The*] *Docks of New York*, which was an older—but then he made *Underworld*, which was quite...

LG: There was one from the book, it had one word.

CC: *Underworld*? Is that the one?

LG: No, that's not. One word [*Morocco*?]. It was a novel. And I read it. And they made such a fuss over it. And all he did was to photograph every word as it was written. And then it was 86 feet long when it started.

CC: [Laughing] I don't know what that one was.

LG: And to say his pictures are these great things, or Orson Welles, is just nonsense. Just nonsense, because they're not. They said Orson Welles was the first to photograph a ceiling. How often—many times, had Griffith done that before. He [Welles] just took our most famous man and made a villain of him, [William Randolph] Hearst, knowing he would attack him, and knowing that would be

[2] Josef von Sternberg was Austrian, came here with his parents when he was seven years old, went to public school here, dropped out of Jamaica High School in Queens at 17 and worked in Fort Lee, cleaning film stock and as a projectionist.

publicity for him. Just as when he was on radio and made everybody think we were—

RC: At war.

LG: He's got a genius for publicity; that's his talent. And he could have been a good actor, because I've known him. First time I met him [was] up at Mrs. [Margaret] Carrington, who was teaching me voice. I had had a lesson and I was about to go, and she said, "No, wait. I want you to hear a man coming in." And in came this—he was not obese as he is now.

CC: He used to be quite good looking.

LG: But he was overweight. And he was going to recite [William] Shakespeare, to let them hear the voice, and she went to get [the] book. He said, "Uh, uh, just tell me what you want." And she said something from one of them, obscure. He started. And he went on like that. And I just sat there like this thinking, "Why, where did he come from?" And then I asked him where he was born. Well, he gave me a long rigamarole; he was born in Europe. Ha!

CC: [Laughing] He used to tell people he was born in China, or, he'd tell them whatever they wanted to hear. It turned out he was born in Wisconsin, I think.

LG: Anything to make him talked about.

CC: Yes, that's true.

LG: And for the "Night of a 100 Stars," what does he do but come in in an invalid chair. No reason. [Laughter] And at the end of it—I'm telling about Orson Welles, Jim.

JF: He didn't have an invalid chair; he came in in a golf cart, in an airplane cart, in a monk's robe. [Laughter]

CC: [Laughing] Oh god.

JF: He looked like Ava Gardner gone bad. [Laughter]

LG: And then he got up and walked at the end of it, you know, just like all the rest of us. But anything—

CC: Sure; he had to come in on a gondola.

LG: And when they put him up with Griffith, I just boiled.

JF: And once he discovered that Jimmy Cagney could not walk, he forgot all that nonsense. [Laughter]

RC: What I'm wondering about—once the film program was started and once you had been helpful in getting it going, did other people in the film community—?

LG: No dear.

RC: —attend screenings or, at the Museum?

LG: You see, I left Hollywood in '29, late '29, because Mr. Mayer had ideas of publicity for me, and I had made five pictures for him. Irving [Thalberg], let me make three of my own. They had no stories or anything when I went out there, so I did *Bohème*, and then I wanted to do *Scarlet Letter* and he said, "You can't; you're not allowed." And I said, "I'm an American. That's a classic and it's taught in our schools. Why can't I do it?" He said, "Because the churches and the women's clubs won't let you." And I said, "Well, I haven't done it because I can't find a Dimmesdale," the minister. "Oh," he said, "I know someone who can do that." And he took me and showed me *Gosta Bërling* with Lars Hanson. There was my Dimmesdale. And I said, "Mr. Mayer, if I can get the ban lifted, would you let me make *The Scarlet Letter* and bring that man over?" He said yes. So I wrote to the churches, the women's clubs, and they wrote back and said yes, if you will be responsible. But you know what they could do with that minister's character, against religion and I. And they had to—Irving Thalberg, whom I adored and who was responsible, incidentally, for all the success of MGM.

CC: So he wasn't a bad character at all then? Because in the Erich von Stroheim things, they paint him as being dastardly.

LG: Oh, Erich von Stroheim gave him a lot of trouble. I think they got rid of him.

CC: They did; yes. And they stopped *Greed* and made him—

LG: Well he just—

CC: Was he out of control? Erich von Stroheim was really a martinet and a—?

LG: They soon found him out. [Laughter] But Irving had so much work that he was glad to let me take care of my own pictures. So I did make—he showed me two reels of *The Big Parade*.

CC: Oh yes.

LG: Because I hadn't been there in seven years and I didn't know who their people were. And I said, I'd like that director, that leading man, that leading woman, and that character man, Karl Dane. And he gave them all to me. And I had a French woman who was helping me with the script, and they called Frances Barry in, an old friend who had built Mary Pickford's career. And I wrote it down on two pages how it was to be done. She was so grateful, and she did it, and gave it to them.

CC: So it's very much your picture, then.

LG: It was my picture, and *Scarlet Letter*, I picked [Victor] Seastrom because I felt the Swedes, temperamentally, were nearer to our Puritans. It's 1640.

CC: That was a good idea; that's true. Seastrom was the one who had done,

LG: He was wonderful, and Lars Hanson is the greatest actor in Europe, you know, in Sweden.

CC: And then that picture, how did the clubs and all react when the picture came out?

LG: They were both successes. And also, Irving protected me from their press department. I didn't have to go and open pictures.

CC: Right.

LG: I didn't have to be interviewed. I had spent a day being photographed with [Ruth Harriet] Louise up in her—which, and she was a fine photographer. And everything else that I did. But I—Dorothy and I always kept our names out of print, if we could. We felt we'd last longer. And then not only that, we didn't want to disgrace the family. We came from Ohio where you didn't do those things.

CC: My mother was born in the same town you were born in, Springfield, Ohio.

LG: In Ohio? Well then you know that. [Laughter] My great grandmother, Emily Ward Robinson, she wrote poetry. Not only that, she had it published in *Harper's* magazine with her own name.

RC: Oh my. Scandalous; right?

LG: You just didn't do that. [CC laughs] You know, you got your name in the print when you were born, when you were married, and when you died. And no lady did it more than that. So Mother, when we were children, four and five in the theater from that time on, we were billed as—well, I was out with Alice Niles, so I was Baby Alice. And Dorothy was out with another lady, and she had another name. Sometimes just "herself" we'd be billed, like an animal. [Laughing] Just so it wasn't our name.

CC: Did you move back to New York, then, after the *Scarlet Letter* picture?

LG: Well, then, I went—in '29 I came east, because Mr. Mayer had ideas quite different from mine. Anyhow, I met Jed Harris. He was the wonder boy of the theater. Everything he touched was a success. And I had dinner with him with Ruth Gordon, and George C. Mason, the critic, one night. And I listened to this man. Up until then, [George Jean] Nathan knew more about the theater than anyone I knew. And I was completely immersed in the theater from that time on. I never went to one—it would be from '30 to '40. And when I went to get my coat, I told Ruth, "If ever that man wanted me to work for him, I'd work for nothing." Well I had a script in three weeks, [Anton] Chekov's *Uncle Vanya*.

CC: Oh yes, I saw the—

LG: And I read it and said, "If you think I can, Mr. Harris." And so I never talked salary. I had no contract. And Dick Maney was their press man, a big man in the press. And he was worried. He said, "How do you know she'll be there? How do you know she won't get frightened?" Anyway, I did know. He didn't give me any direction. Every time we'd come to a scene, he'd say, "Now you've directed films;" which I had. At 20 I directed my sister in a six-reel film for Paramount. And he said, "Now you do this scene as you would do it in the film." And I felt, well, if he just thinks I'm so bad there's no use helping me. [Laughter] Because we had eight people that were tops in the theater. They were the best you could

get, and he helped all of them. He didn't help me. It took me two years, because as soon as I finished, I told Dorothy, "Oh, he's wonderful, Dorothy, you've got to do a play with him." So she did *Inspector General* with him, and she got on with him. You know, he was famous for making enemies; everybody hated him that worked for him. Dorothy and I just adored him, and so did Patricia Collins; she had worked for him. Because we were professional. We came on with our lines. It was "Mr. Harris." I never had lunch or dinner with him. He was *the* director, *the* boss. And at the end of the first week, I didn't think—I would have worked for nothing. But he gave me the same as he gave the others.

CC: That's interesting because later on, it must have been a long time later, that you did *Uncle Vanya* with George C. Scott and all, in '73; right?

LG: Yes. In early 1930 or late '29, I've forgotten, but right after the crash of October 29th, which was a fine time to open anything.

RC: That's right. That's what's so amazing about the Museum.

CC: That's when The Museum of Modern Art opened, too.

LG: Oh honey, they were jumping out of windows on Park Avenue. We had to move. We lived on 51st and the river, at that time. Mother was an invalid; from shell shock she'd had a stroke. And the nurse came to me one morning and said we were going to have to move; your mother gets no sleep at night. They were jumping off the 59th Street bridge and bodies were coming down that far and the police cars would be out there with their lights, yelling, "It's over here! No it isn't; it's over there!" [RC and CC are laughing throughout] You know, because they had no wiring back and forth at that time. And we moved here to 444 where we still had the river view, but I took the penthouse and Mother had an apartment like this with her nurse and the man that looked after them.

RC: What a time.

LG: And everybody—aristocratic men on the street with their clothes just hanging on them, so thin, so hungry looking, looking into garbage pails for food. That we say we're in a depression now—we're in a depression to have nothing but obesity. [Laughter] That's the kind, if you walk on the street. [Laughing] They weigh three and four hundred pounds. [Laughter]

RC: That's a good point. Well, we need this kind of picture to be painted, and you certainly have colorful memories of both the bad and the good.

LG: And look at the MoMA. Look how that's gone. Oh!

CC: Yes, well, that's terrific.

RC: Incredible.

LG: You know, and it's beautifully run. Mrs. [Blanchette] Rockefeller, she's been there since the beginning, and Eileen Bowser.

CC: She does an excellent job. We talked with her.

LG: And Mary Lea.

CC: Mary Lea Bandy is a terrific promoter.

LG: She's marvelous. It's *beautifully* run.

CC: I think it's wonderful—what, even in the last 15 years or so, I remember I came up in '73 right after I got out of school, and I saw you in *Uncle Vanya* at Circle in the Square, I remember.

LG: Oh, I was playing the nurse.

CC: Right, yes. I remember that.

LG: With George Scott.

CC: Yes.

LG: I'd wanted to work with him. [Laughter] It's, you know—I *love* working with great actors and actresses because that makes it so easy.

CC: That was a terrific production, too. Wasn't it, uh, who was directing that, Mike Nichols?

LG: Mike Nichols; he did it. And no one was allowed in that theater that didn't have to do with that. And even if you were there watching, you were not allowed to speak. There was such discipline. And that's what we had at Griffith's place. You were never late; you were never ill. It was discipline. Even as a child, the only acting lesson I ever had was, "Speak loud and clear or they'll get another

little girl." [Laughter] That I got at five, and I haven't had one since. You can't teach people to act, except to watch the human race and see what they do and do what they do and be human and don't get caught acting. [Laughter]

CC: So there are all these schools and all these things to do—now it's very formal. Does it scare you a little bit now when you look—? I mean it's good that everyone is studying film and watching pictures, but is it a little too much, do you think?

LG: Oh, I think it's terrible. [Lee] Strasberg, you know, he says you have to live through each experience you're acting. All right then, how do you do a death scene? [RC giggles]

CC: And how do you do so many of these things?

LG: Isn't that crazy, that you have to live through...This is so strong.

CC: But what's nice, though, is that, I remember even in 1968, '69, '70, where I went to school, I started the first film society and people first would come in to see pictures like *Broken Blossoms* or even *Stagecoach* and early [John] Ford pictures and [Frank] Capra pictures. And people had forgotten about them. And then as the years went on, now they appear more in television, and now there are retrospectives, and now there—for instance, look at Broadway, upper Broadway, the Regency Theater and all those.

RC: Thalia.

CC: Thalia. There must be almost 10 theaters in New York that show pictures from 1920 up to now—I mean, just showing older pictures.

LG: Well, just 10 days ago I was at Kennedy Center in Washington; they ran *The Wind* twice, and I saw it. And that is as good today—there again is Seastrom—as it was the day it was made.

CC: Yes. That's a beautiful picture.

LG: It's even better; because the pictures are worse around it. I think. Except, have you seen—? I shouldn't say that. Have you seen *Gandhi*?

CC: Yes.

LG: Have you seen *Tootsie*?

CC: Yes.

LG: Have you seen, oh, the other, uh, Horton Foote's—?

CC: Oh yes, the—

LG: Tender...

CC: *Tender Mercies*.

LG: *Tender Mercies.*

CC: That's beautiful.

LG: Isn't it?

CC: Unbelievable. It's extraordinary.

LG: Suddenly we have beauty back like the—

CC: I met Robert Duvall a summer ago when he was starting to do that picture. And it was very interesting because he traveled down to Texas and he started talking like that. And he said they had a particular way of talking, and he was imitating the voice, and he spent a little while down there. And he said, they don't move their mouth at all; they kind of talk like this. [Laughter]

LG: They talk like this, oh, a bottle o' water [INAUDIBLE: 0:45:30] [laughter]

CC: It's like Long Island lockjaw.

LG: Well, if you have your face lifted.

CC: Have you ever heard that one, Long Island lockjaw? The people in Oyster Bay and all, they all kind of talk like that.

LG: Well, if you have your face lifted you can't talk. [Laughter] I mean, they do something—

RC: Oh, your lips are just...

LG: And it shuts your eyes, too.

CC: But *The Wind* is a picture where the protagonist is almost the wind. It's a bizarre thing, the wind itself, it's this—on the prairie, and it has a force in the film that you—it's like a character; it's like a human being, and they react against it and all. It's a very beautiful, very almost metaphysical sort of film.

LG: Do you notice, on television they have subtitles now?

CC: Yes.

LG: They have words instead. You can't understand the people. They've picked faces and not voices.

RC: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

LG: That's why we listen to radio. John Gambling—look at the three generations, all—every word they speak, they're originally, I think, Torontonians, Canada, and then before that English. They speak better.

CC: I think television for instance, people listen to more than they watch, I think. The continuity is sound rather than the picture.

LG: I look at *Dallas* but I oftentimes don't turn the sound up. I just—because the human race looks attractive and clean and you can see into their eyes, and you don't see this part and the nose, you know. Most [of] the cameramen now are so fat [CC laughs] that often—you have to stand up when you want the eye level. You should have, if you're looking this way...

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:47:19