

A conversation with Mike Kaplan, the producer of *The Whales of August* (1987), Lillian Gish's final film

The famed actress “was filled with curiosity, creativity and imagination”

By David Walsh
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Mike Kaplan, along with film scholar and critic Joseph McBride, helped organize the petition urging Bowling Green State University to restore the names of famed actresses Dorothy and Lillian Gish to the film theater that was established more than forty years ago at the Ohio university

Lillian Gish (1893–1993) was targeted by the Black Student Union at Bowling Green and her name taken off its theater because of her participation in 1915 in D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation*, a racist film that presents a radically false picture of post-Civil War Reconstruction and justifies Jim Crow segregation in the South. However, Gish's myriad accomplishments, including the other roles she performed during a 75-year film and stage career and her humanitarian efforts, were ignored in a rush to appease the identity politics frenzy.

The petition was signed by Helen Mirren, Bertrand Tavernier, James Earl Jones, Martin Scorsese, Taylor Hackford, Malcolm McDowell, George Stevens Jr. and Lauren Hutton, among others. The university has so far stuck by its reactionary and unprincipled decision.

Mike Kaplan enjoyed a long friendship and working relationship with Lillian Gish, whom he describes, in our conversation below, as “enchanting” and “filled with curiosity, creativity and imagination.”

Kaplan, born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1943, has had an extraordinary and varied history in the film industry. Since 1965 he has worked as a film critic and editor, film publicist and marketing strategist, independent film distributor, producer, documentary director, award-winning poster designer and even, somewhat reluctantly, actor.

Kaplan has worked with directors Stanley Kubrick, Robert Altman, Hal Ashby, Lindsay Anderson, Mike Hodges, Alan Rudolph, Barbet Schroeder and Abraham Polonsky, among others, along with performers such as Lillian Gish and Maureen O'Hara. He worked with Kubrick for a number of years, including on *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *A Clockwork Orange*. He had an especially long-lasting and rewarding relationship with Altman, about the production of whose film *Short Cuts* (1993) Kaplan made a documentary, *Luck, Trust & Ketchup: Robert Altman in Carver Country* (“Carver” is a reference to Raymond Carver, the American writer whose short stories inspired *Short Cuts*).

Kaplan directed actor Malcolm McDowell in *Never Apologize*, a tribute to Lindsay Anderson (*This Sporting Life, If ..., O Lucky Man!*), based on the British filmmaker's writings, in its world premiere at the Edinburgh Festival in 2004, its engagement at the National Theatre, London and in subsequent performances, as well as its film version in 2007, which had its debut at the Cannes film festival.

Kaplan, as he explains below, first met Lillian Gish during the filming of *The Comedians* (1967, Peter Glenville), adapted from the Graham Greene novel of the same title, about life in Haiti under the savage, US-backed dictator François “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his infamous secret police, the Tonton Macoute.

Gish and Kaplan became friends, and he would later make great efforts to bring about a production of *The Whales of August* (1987), Lillian Gish's last film role, and a major one at that. The film was directed by Anderson and also featured Bette Davis, Ann Sothern, Vincent Price and Harry Carey Jr.

Kaplan currently has an exhibition of a portion of his collection of film posters on display (until May 10, 2020) at the National Museum of Dance in Saratoga Springs, New York.

Kaplan spoke to me recently. It is not difficult to see why he has earned a reputation for honesty and integrity, and generosity.

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David Walsh: If this biographical note is correct, you've worked with Stanley Kubrick, Robert Altman, Hal Ashby, Lindsay Anderson, Mike Hodges, Alan Rudolph and Abraham Polonsky, among others. A list of some of the more interesting names in American and British filmmaking in the past 40 years, or in the case of Polonsky, far longer. And there is also the association with Lillian Gish and other performers, including Maureen O'Hara.

For the benefit of our readers, perhaps for mine as well, without taking too much of your time, could you point to some of your most interesting experiences or relationships in the film world?

Mike Kaplan: I've been around longer than I thought. It's hard for me to isolate the most interesting experiences. When I think of each name and the various memories they evoke, each feels like a different lifetime.

With Stanley Kubrick, I've written about how I met him and about the marketing of *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968], on which I was the marketing strategist for two years.

That first meeting in 1968 changed my life. I was a young, long-haired publicist in the MGM publicity department. After absorbing the dislocated response from the press and invited audiences at the first showings, then recognizing that *2001* was making revolutionary leaps in both the technical and aesthetic demands of filmmaking, I had to make the case to Kubrick that the film had to be repositioned, marketed differently. The public was unprepared for his visceral, spiritual, philosophical, metaphysical, eye-opening epic. It wasn't *Flash Gordon* or what was to

become the *Star Wars* franchise, this was a ground-breaking achievement and a difficult part of the movie. He was on the river below a steep bluff where all the trucks and camera equipment had to be stationed. There was a false body in the river and there had to be lots of water coverage.

So I was this 25-year old kid about to inform the master director—on the evening of his New York premiere—that his five-years-in-the-making creation was headed for a very rocky reception unless we changed course. Stanley had been told who I was and why I was coming to see him, but he didn't know me from a hole in the wall.

We were meeting in the projection booth at Lowe's Capitol Theater. I was petrified. He had just gone through the red carpet and was standing beside the projectors, with his editors, in his tuxedo, bow tie undone. I put out my hand. Stanley wouldn't shake it. I knew he wasn't going to make this easy. I was going to have to prove myself.

"Why doesn't Pauline Kael [prominent New York film critic] like my movie?" were his opening words. The question came out of left field, not what I expected. I didn't follow Pauline Kael. She wasn't my contact nor one of my favorite critics. Often I found her condescending. In person, she became very motherly if you disagreed with her: "I'm so sorry you feel that way!" But I always read her "Ten Best Films" list.

Stanley's question hung in the air. You could cut it with a knife ... "Why doesn't Pauline Kael like my movie?"

"Because she thought *The Bible* [1966, John Huston] was the best film of the year." How I dredged up that answer from some inner survival depths I don't know.

He was a chess master and we were playing verbal chess. He looked at me and nodded. It broke the ice. We shook hands at the end of the movie. From that point on, we hit it off. And so it went, working closely for the next four years through the release of *A Clockwork Orange* [1971]... and friends thereafter.

DW: How was the experience working with Robert Altman?

MK: That was great. I worked with Bob longer than anyone else. That relationship began in the late 1960s and went on for decades. I wasn't always working on one of his films, but we were close until he died. Nearly 40 years.

He was one of the most stimulating people I ever knew, as was Stanley, in a different way. Working with Bob on a movie was like being part of a big family. It was a creative process, but it was also like a party. He incorporated everyone into the process.

He had known about me from my days at MGM. when I shepherded *Brewster McCloud* [1970], which I loved. We spoke then, but he was shooting *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* [1971] at the time. Then we met in London on his way to Cannes for *Thieves Like Us* [1974], and that began the friendship. And then he asked me to act in *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* [1976]. I had never acted at all. So that floored me. I didn't know what to do. I asked Malcolm McDowell, one of my closest friends, who said, "Well, you're going to have to do it." Bob also said, you're going to have to do the publicity as well. He was getting two jobs for one, very Altmanesque,

When we were making *Short Cuts* [1993] years later—and I had spent a long time trying to get the finances, which I wasn't totally successful in doing—he asked me to do double-duty again as associate producer and marketing strategist. I said I would, but only if I could make a documentary about the film. I knew the merging of Altman and Raymond Carver would make a major mosaic and it would be the first look at Bob's filming process. It became *Luck, Trust & Ketchup: Robert Altman in Carver Country* [1993], on which I partnered with the late John Dorr, the founder of EZTV.

I generally don't like being on set unless I have something specific to do. I don't enjoy hanging around. Bob was shooting on the Kern River in California and it was broiling hot. I had to go there because the press wanted access, which we didn't allow. So we met and had dinner. I walked him back to his room. I knew what he was about to shoot was the

We walked back to his room. He shed most of his clothes and crawled into bed, with "I have no idea what I'm going to shoot tomorrow. I have no idea what's going to happen." I left, startled, concerned. All these people and all this equipment, and he doesn't know what he's going to do? He'd never displayed anything but confidence during production.

The next day I arrived on set around noon. He'd already shot eight set-ups! He must have filmed over twenty different set-ups that day. He was flying. It was the opposite of what he told me the night before. His instincts were inspired when he was actually on location and had to figure it out. He did figure it out, brilliantly.

That was part of the adventure of Bob; you never knew what was going to happen.

Years later, Mike Hodges revealed a similar process when we made *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* [2003]. As soon as he was on the Wales locations, he instantly knew what and how he wanted to shoot.

DW: What was the connection to Abe Polonsky?

MK: The connection is ongoing. For the last thirty years, I've optioned his brilliant script of *Mario and the Magician*, based on the 1929 Thomas Mann novella, about a "magician" hypnotizing the public to act against their better interests. Its themes are very current. It was Mann's last work before winning the Nobel Prize. The film was greenlit twice and then fell apart at the last minute. I remain committed to *Mario*.

I met Abe through writer and critic Stuart Byron. He was my first boss after college, introducing me to the *auteur* theory and the overall New York film scene while we labored at the *Independent Film Journal*. He then went to *Variety* and I to MGM. We'd brainstorm distribution patterns and the ongoing moves nurturing *2001*, which gave me the reputation of a "rescuer" for films needing special handling.

Stuart had just seen and reviewed Polonsky's *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* [1969], calling it one of the great movies of our time. He said Universal doesn't know what to do with it and you must become involved in its release. "You're going to have to help."

I was a publicity executive at MGM, not Universal, but I met Abe, loved the film and surreptitiously agreed to consult on *Willie Boy*, recruiting MGM colleagues Joanna Ney and Tom Golden. I think Abe relished the idea we were doing this secretly while working for MGM. He got a kick out of that.

Every meeting with Abe was an entertainment, filled with ironic humor. He wrote and spoke great dialogue. One never ended a conversation with Abe; he always came back with a topper.

Our relationship continued until he died. *Mario and the Magician* remains unfulfilled but I'm convinced it will be made.

DW: Getting to the issue at hand, could you give your view of the removal of Lillian Gish's name from the film theater at Bowling Green State University?

MK: I think it's just appalling, it's almost blasphemous. I'm searching for the right adjective. I didn't know about it until a month ago. I was having dinner in New York with some friends, coming back from a film poster exhibition I had in Saratoga Springs, New York. My friend said, "Isn't it terrible what happened to Lillian?" I said, "What are you talking about?" He told me, sent an article from one of the local Ohio papers and then Joe McBride's brilliant essay in *Bright Lights*.

I hadn't spoken to Joe for many years. I had campaigned for three years to get Lillian the American Film Institute Life Achievement Award and when that happened in 1984, Joe was the writer of the show. We worked together on that.

I phoned him and we discussed what could be done. From that conversation, we agreed to contact various people in film.

I actually called Bowling Green. I was outraged this was happening and

wanted to speak to the president. How could they slander a woman of this character and artistry over the false conclusions being drawn from her role in *The Birth of a Nation*, this one film? She was 20 years old when it was made; D.W. Griffith was a father figure who offered her the opportunity to become an international star. The university wanted to remove her name from the theater that had been there for 40 years! I had spoken there twice and knew Ralph Wolfe, the Bowling Green professor who was instrumental in creating the Gish theater and the force behind it. It was outrageous. I couldn't believe it. A nightmare. How could this be happening in this country?

In my view, the university's "task force report" was a set-up. They knew in advance what their conclusions would be. They didn't want a protest; they were accommodating themselves to "diversity" in some phony fashion. To remove Lillian's name would should how inclusive they were, etc. It's outrageous and cowardly. They are staining her legacy when she's no longer here to defend herself.

DW: Did you ever speak to the president of the university?

MK: No, I didn't speak to him. I received a call back from the deputy chief of staff. He sent a copy of the task force report with a cordial note and the texts they put up near the theater. None of the texts mention any of Lillian's films except *The Birth of a Nation*. They stress how racially provocative it was/is, a lightning rod for any discussion. Nothing about the rest of her life, her humanitarian efforts, her films. I don't think anyone on the task force had seen any of her movies. Outrageous.

The report concluded that the texts on the wall were causing students to feel uncomfortable. The texts were disturbing because they were loaded, deliberately one-sided. It's a disgrace they're dishonoring and disrespecting her. Let alone Dorothy, her sister! She had nothing to do with the film. Dorothy's just thrown under the bus with Lillian.

All their lawyerly language in the task force report is nonsense. It runs counter to everything a university is supposed to be about.

Lillian's name was not on any of the publicity I've seen for *The Birth of a Nation*. She wasn't on the poster. I just saw a handout they distributed in the movie theaters at that time. No actor's name is mentioned. They keep saying she's the star of the movie, that her career was defined by it, which is absurd and flagrantly ignorant of film scholarship. She was a supporting actor in an essential ensemble film. All of her iconic starring roles—in *Broken Blossoms* [1919], *Way Down East* [1920], *Orphans of the Storm* [1921], *La Bohème* [1926], *The Scarlet Letter* [1926], *The Wind* [1928], *Night of the Hunter* [1955]—came after *The Birth of a Nation*.

DW: What were the reactions of some of the people you contacted?

MK: All were very enthusiastic, supportive. They wrote back immediately. They were all appalled. People who knew Lillian and people who didn't know Lillian.

Lillian was the most enchanting person you could meet. Every time I left her presence I felt high. An incredible human being who epitomized the best of America. That's why I wanted to make a movie with her....so that a new generation could see her in a major role. And that's how *The Whales of August* eventually happened. And she was named "Best Actress" by the National Board of Review.

DW: You first met Lillian Gish at the time of *The Comedians* [1967]?

MK: Yes. I was a young publicist at MGM, and had just completed some tedious publicity job. My boss said, you did such great work, you can pick the actor you want to work with when *The Comedians* opens in New York. I had seen the film and thought Lillian stole the picture from everyone else in the heavyweight cast: Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, Peter Ustinov, Alec Guinness. She has a scene where Burton is being terrorized by the Tonton Macoute [the Haitian secret police]. She's the only character who confronts them. I think she even beats Raymond St. Jacques in the chest, she's so disgusted at what's happening—she courageously and convincingly stands up against the evil she sees, an evil that's equivalent to the Ku Klux Klan. She was nominated for a Golden

Globe for her performance.

Enchanting is the best word to describe Lillian. One loved being around her. She was filled with curiosity, creativity and imagination.

Perhaps a month after *The Comedians* opened, she phoned, having just come back from the Moscow Film Festival. The Russians wanted to show three of her films that MGM made—and they are three of her best, *La Bohème* [1926], *The Scarlet Letter* [1926] and *The Wind* [1928]—could I help her? I was floored that Lillian Gish was phoning me, a young publicist, to get her films shown in Moscow. This was a wonderful cultural opportunity, being in the middle of the Cold War. Eventually, it happened, although it took a year of corporate negotiation, which annoyed me. She called me because she didn't know anyone else at MGM she could talk to! That solidified our friendship.

DW: I enjoy the story—of course I don't know whether it's true or not—that one day during the making of *The Whales of August*, director Lindsay Anderson said to Lillian Gish, "Miss Gish, you have just given me a perfect close-up," and Bette Davis observed, "She should. She invented 'em." Which, of course, more or less happens to be true! Her career encompasses almost the entire history of filmmaking.

MK: I don't know the exact sequence of events, or where it took place, but Bette did say that. I can't remember whether it was at Lillian's birthday lunch or perhaps during shooting, as Lindsay says.

DW: So the experience of working on *The Whales of August* was a good one?

MK: It was great and arduous. It took a long time to get *Whales* made. I was nervous, because Lillian was in her early 90s. It was the biggest role an actor that age had ever undertaken on film. We had planned to shoot only a limited amount each day, and so forth, but that's not the way it worked out. The weather kept changing, and there were other difficulties. Lillian was a total professional. Bette was too as were the rest of the legendary cast—Ann Sothorn, Vincent Price, Harry Carey Jr.—but their working methods were completely different. Lillian would go home after the day's shooting, and Bette would attend the dailies and talk to everyone. They really didn't see much of each other aside from the shooting. They were living in different parts of this little island in Maine.

There's another story, which Lindsay Anderson tells in his book, *Never Apologize* [2005], and it's also in Malcolm McDowell's one-man show about Anderson, with the same title. There's an upstairs scene in *The Whales of August* when Lillian is preparing for the big dinner, sorting through her clothes and mementos. You feel through her movements that she has spent her entire life in that room—in fact, it was the first time she was ever in it, because she had difficulty going up stairs.

Lindsay was very pleased with his medium tracking shot, which ended with Lillian sitting in a rocking chair looking out over the ocean. He was happy and said, "Did you like that, Lillian?" pointing out it was reminiscent of the pose in *Whistler's Mother* [famed painting by James McNeill Whistler, 1871]. Lillian always felt that the emotion in a scene came from the eyes. She turned to him and said, "Well, what about the *Mona Lisa*?" Lindsay said, "She had me there." It was the first time I ever heard Lindsay—one of the brightest people I've ever met and a generous, demanding provocateur—admit that anyone got the better of him.

DW: I congratulate you on taking up this issue. But from the sound of it, considering your knowledge and opinion of her, you didn't really have a choice.

MK: No, I didn't. I'm still working on it. It's like being attacked. I feel it as a personal attack. I want to defend her. It's just wrong. It's guilt by association. If this can happen to the great Lillian Gish, a woman of impeccable integrity, then none of us are safe.

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