



Elsie Jane Wilson

Also Known As:

Mrs. Rupert Julian

Lived:

November 7, 1890 - January 16, 1965

Worked as:

director, film actress, screenwriter

Worked In:

United States

by Mark Garrett Cooper

When asked by interviewer Frances Denton to comment in the pages of *Photoplay* on the question of whether or not directing was “man’s work,” Elsie Jane Wilson exclaimed, “I should say it is!” (50). Repeating the anecdote in his history of early women directors, Anthony Slide goes on to argue that it has largely been in the shadow of her actor-director husband Rupert Julian that Elsie Jane Wilson’s profile is sketched in existing accounts of early cinema (Slide 1996, 49–51). This much seems fairly accurate, but the degree of Wilson’s sincerity in replying to her female interlocutor remains an open question. In context, the statement can be read as an ironic one, underscoring the very attitude that working in Hollywood caused some women to rethink. The same *Photoplay* article cites [Ida May Park](#) as saying that “It was because directing seemed so utterly unsuited to a woman that I refused the first company offered me” (49), and then it goes on to describe the directing successes of both Park and Wilson. Wilson’s affirmation of directing as “man’s work” also may reveal something about the dynamics of her marriage, as Slide’s reminder of her connection with Julian suggests. At the time, skepticism about women’s professional abilities often indicated nervousness about their supposed abandonment of domestic responsibilities. In any event, the fact that Wilson is credited with writing two and directing perhaps eleven films between 1916 and 1919 makes it impossible to take her answer to Denton’s question at face value.

Elsie Jane Wilson was one of the numerous actresses who began directing at Universal Pictures in the 1910s. The company first credited her with directing a series of films starring child actress Zoe Rae, all in 1917: *The Circus of Life*, *The Little Pirate*, *The Cricket*, *The Silent Lady*, and *My Little Boy*. Thereafter, she directed two features each starring Ella Hall, Carmel Myers, and Ruth

Clifford. Unfortunately, much of her work has been lost or destroyed over time leaving a fragmentary archive that raises more questions than it answers. In particular, the difficult issue of attribution emerges in attempts to compile an accurate filmography for figures such as Wilson, who was married to a director and, like [Lois Weber](#) and Phillips Smalley, [Helen Holmes](#) and J. P. McGowan, for instance, collaborated on several films with her husband. Elsie Jane Wilson and Rupert Julian began working for Universal Studios' newly established Rex Company in Los Angeles in 1914 and made several films together over the following six years. What is one to do, for instance, when *Moving Picture World* credits Rupert Julian for the direction of *The Savage* (1917), but actress Ruth Clifford recalls in an interview that it was Elsie Jane Wilson who directed her on the film? Was *The Savage* a man's or a woman's work? The same question might be asked of *The Circus of Life* (1917), which the American Film Institute database credits to Julian's direction, but which Universal's house publication, the *Moving Picture Weekly*, claimed as Wilson's first feature in November 1917 (29).

We might begin to answer this question by interpreting a film Wilson certainly directed, *The Dream Lady* (1918), as showing us, first, that orchestrating dreams is woman's work, and second, that such dream work entails a playful approach to gender roles. The picture features an orphan, played by Carmel Myers, who spends her inheritance fulfilling other people's wishes, thereby realizing her own dreams by becoming the Dream Lady. Thanks to the print restored by the French Centre national de la cinématographie, we can understand this title more complexly as an early iteration of what Chris Straayer has called "the temporary transvestite film." As is typical of the genre, gender visibility emerges as a central theme. Myers's character grants a young woman's wish by costuming her as boy, which sets up a series of recognitions and misrecognitions. In one scene, the woman, dressed as a man, kisses Myers's character in gratitude. The leading man, played by Thomas Holding, happens upon the scene and misunderstands the gesture, but his jealousy ends up clarifying his relationship with Myers's character. Further complications ensue, but in the end Myers and Holding are united in a rowboat. Just as it seems they might kiss, Wilson denies our look, cutting instead to the shore where a little girl, the Dream Lady's assistant, covers the eyes of her pet dog.

The Dream Lady (1918) awaits comparison with other extant films that present gender as a kind of performance, such as [Alice Guy Blaché](#)'s *Cupid and the Comet* (1911), as analyzed by Alison McMahan (2002, 229–233), and *The Florida Enchantment* (1914), which we now know was written by [Marguerite Bertsch](#). Further research will also need to be done to determine the extent of Wilson's contribution to many shared projects and, perhaps more importantly, such research may effect the way we think of the nature of such collaborative efforts in the early years of cinema.

Bibliography

Cooper, Mark Garrett. "Studio History Revisited: The Case of the Universal Women." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* vol. 25, no. 1 (Jan. 2008): 16- 36.

“The Cricket.” Rev. *Moving Picture World* (24 Nov. 1917): 1223.

Denton, Frances. “Lights! Camera! Quiet!” *Photoplay* vol. XIII, no. 3 (Feb. 1918): 48- 50.

“The Dream Lady.” Rev. *Moving Picture World* (8 Aug. 1918): n.p. Elsie Jane Wilson clippings file. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.

“Elsie Jane Wilson Directed 'The Cricket'.” *Moving Picture Weekly* (3 Nov. 1917): 29.

“Elsie Wilson and Rupert Julian with Rex.” *Moving Picture World* (4 July 1914): 79.

Milne, Peter. “The Dream Lady.” Rev. *Motion Picture News* (3 Aug. 1918): 793.

“Press Sheet for Carmel Myers in 'The Dream Lady'.” *Moving Picture Weekly* (20 Jul. 1918): 14-15.

Straayer, Chris. *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

Archival Paper Collections:

Elsie Jane Wilson clippings file. [Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library](#).

Filmography

A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Elsie Jane Wilson as Director

The Little Pirate. Dir.: Elsie Jane Wilson, sc.: Elliott J. Clawson (Universal US 1917) cas.: Zoe Rae, Charles West, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: Private Collection.

The Cricket. Dir.: Elsie Jane Wilson, sc.: Elliott J. Clawson (Butterfly US 1917) cas.: Zoe Rae, Rene Rogers, Fred Warren, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Cinema Museum](#), [Library of Congress](#).

The Dream Lady. Dir.: Elsie Jane Wilson, sc.: Fred Myron (Bluebird Photoplays, Inc. US 1918) cas.: Carmel Myers, Thomas Holding, Kathleen Emerson, Harry Van Meter, Philo McCullough, Elizabeth Jane, si, b&w, 35mm., French intertitles. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#).

New Love for Old. Dir.: Elsie Jane Wilson (Universal Film Mfg. Co., Inc US 1918) cas.: Ella Hall, Winter Hall, Gretchen Lederer, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress](#).

2. Elise Jane Wilson as Director and Actress

The Circus of Life. Dir.: Elsie Jane Wilson, sc.: Elliot J. Clawson (Universal Film Mfg. Co., Inc US 1917) cas.: Elise Jane Wilson, Mignon Anderson, Pomeroy Cannon, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress](#).

3. Elsie Jane Wilson as Actress

A Law Unto Herself. Dir.: Sam De Grasse (Rex Motion Picture Co. US 1914) cas.: Elsie Jane Wilson, Rupert Julian, Eve Marius Paigne, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress](#).

A Kentucky Cinderella. Dir.: Rupert Julian, sc.: Steve Rounds, Elliot J. Clawson (Bluebird Photoplays, Inc. US 1917) cas.: Rupert Julian, Ruth Clifford, Harry Carter, Elsie Jane Wilson, si, b&w. Archive: [EYE Filmmuseum](#).

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Elsie Jane Wilson as Director

My Little Boy, 1917; *The Silent Lady*, 1917; *Beauty in Chains*, 1918; *The City of Tears*, 1918; *The Lure of Luxury*, 1918; *New Love for Old*, 1918; *The Game's Up*, 1919.

2. Elsie Jane Wilson as Screenwriter

The Highway of Fate, 1916.

3. Elise Jane Wilson as Actress and Screenwriter

The Human Cactus, 1916.

4. Elsie Jane Wilson as Actress

Daisies, 1914; *The Hole in the Garden Wall*, 1914; *The Imp Abroad*, 1914; *The Midnight Visitor*, 1914; *Out of the Depths*, 1914; *The Triumph of Mind*, 1914; *Bound on the Wheel*, 1915; *The Evil of Suspicion*, 1915; *Gilded Youth*, 1915; *The Lure of the Mask*, 1915; *Mountain Justice*, 1915; *One Hundred Years Ago*, 1915; *Temptation*, 1915; *The Water Clue*, 1915; *A White Feather Volunteer*, 1915; *Arthur's Last Fling*, 1916; *As Fates Decide*, 1916; *The Blackmailer*, 1916; *Bettina Loved a Soldier*, 1916; *The Evil Women Do*, 1916; *The Eyes of Fear*, 1916; *False Gems*, 1916; *The Fur Trimmed Coat*, 1916; *John Pellet's Dream*, 1916; *Little Boy Blue*, 1916; *The Marriage of Arthur*, 1916; *Oliver Twist*, 1916; *The Red Lie*, 1916; *Romance at Random*, 1916; *The Underworld*, 1916; *A Kentucky Cinderella*, 1917; *Mother o' Mine*, 1917; *The Mystery Ship*, 1917; *Perils of the Secret Service*, 1917; *Officer, Call a Cop*, 1920.

C. DVD Sources:

Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers. DVD/Blu-ray. (Kino Lorber US 2018) - contains *The Cricket* (1917) and *The Dream Lady* (1918)

Credit Report

Rupert Julien is credited with directing *The Circus of Life* on FIAF. *Moving Picture World* credits Rupert Julian for the direction of *The Savage* (1917), but actress Ruth Clifford recalls that it was Elsie Jane Wilson who directed her on the film. *A Law Unto Herself* is credited to Edwin S. Porter by FIAF, but Braff and Spher confirm Sam De Grasse. FIAF credits Wilson as Miss. Wilson for this title.

Research Update

January 2023: A 35mm print of *The Little Pirate* (1917), which was previously listed as lost in the filmography, is confirmed to be in a private collection.

Citation

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