



Margery Wilson

Also Known As:

Sara(h) Barker Strayer, Margie Wilson, Marjory Wilson, Marjorie Wilson, Mrs. Otto Meeks

Lived:

October 31, 1896 - January 21, 1986

Worked as:

director, film actress, producer, scenario writer, screenwriter, speech coach, theatre actress, writer

Worked In:

United States

by Janet Walker

By the time Margery Wilson reached her late twenties, she had completed her work as a film director. Prior to that, according to autobiographical accounts, she had received a seminary education supplemented in philosophy and literature by her father, actively pursued social-service work, and given one-woman public performances at clubs, schools, and churches in the Cincinnati area. She toured Ohio and south to Atlanta as a leading lady with the John Lawrence players, founded her own theatre company at sixteen years of age, and embarked to London with her sister Mary on an aborted world tour as musical entertainers (Wilson 1956). Then, in 1914, Margery Wilson traveled to Los Angeles and launched her Hollywood career. Today she is best remembered as Brown Eyes in D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), but her motion picture career was extensive, with three dozen roles including many starring performances to her credit.

In Hollywood, she was under contract to D. W. Griffith, then, as Anthony Slide says, "director-in-chief" at Reliance-Majestic Studios, which would later become the Fine Arts Corporation, (Slide 1998, 171). Working under Griffith (credited as Margie Wilson), she costarred with Dorothy Gish in *Bred in the Bone* (1915) and with Douglas Fairbanks in *Double Trouble* (1915). She played the lead (credited as Marjory Wilson) in *The Eye of the Night* (1916), with John Gilbert as her younger brother, and starred with W. S. Hart in a handful of films including *The Return of Draw Egan* (1916), *Wolf Lowry* (1917), and *The Gun Fighter* (1917), all for the New York Motion Picture Corporation, Kay-Bee. In *Venus in the East* (1919) for Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, Wilson was directed by Donald Crisp and she appeared (credited as Marjorie Wilson) with J. Warren Kerrigan in *The House of Whispers* (1920) for Robert Brunton Productions. Wilson was thus an

experienced motion picture actress before she began writing, directing, and producing her own projects.

Born Sara Barker Strayer in Gracey, Kentucky, by her own report, or as Sarah B. Strayer in Tennessee according to the Twelfth Census of the United States [1900], Margery Wilson lived more than sixty years subsequent to her directing career, during which time she achieved success as a speech coach for actors, a public lecturer in person and on the radio, and as an author of numerous guidance books, or what might be called inspirational non-fiction. She had splendid homes on both coasts, was married more than once, became the mother of two children, both of whom predeceased her, and counted among her associates many authors, artists, business people, politicians and diplomats, and celebrities of the twentieth century, including Will Rogers, William Randolph Hearst, Howard Hughes, Elizabeth Arden, broadcast journalist Lowell Thomas, and painter Pierre Tartoué. Her autobiography, *I Found My Way*, was published in 1956.

This, then, is the context for Margery Wilson's short career as a film writer-director-producer, dating from 1920 to 1923, and a few more years if we add the time during which she toured with her films. Can we count her among significant women film directors, celebrating Wilson's achievements as a woman in a man's profession and mourning the loss of her films as director, of which all that remains are photographic stills? Or shall we remand her to the margins of the directing profession while recognizing her achievements in acting? After all, she directed and/or produced only four films, including one, *The Offenders* (1922–23), that she claims in her autobiography to have directed as well as produced (196), but that the American Film Institute credits to the directorship of Fenwicke L. Holmes.

As an added complication in assessing this history, Margery Wilson's professional achievements raise once again the question of whether it is appropriate to use the term "feminist" with reference to women directors, writers, and producers who competed and overcame the odds against their projects. One approach is Gwendolyn Foster's inclusive understanding of Wilson's work as "a significant part of our feminist cinema heritage" (Foster 1995, 374). And when Anthony Slide, who researched Margery Wilson's career and spent time interviewing her over many years, revised and expanded his 1977 book *Early Women Directors*, he titled the resulting 1996 publication *The Silent Feminists: America's First Women Directors*. If in one decade we nominate these notable women as "feminists", in an earlier decade people may not have thought of them—and they may not have thought of themselves—as such. One can only speculate whether Wilson would have approved Slide's title change. But as Slide himself later recalled with all due irony at "A Tribute to Early Women Directors" held at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, California, in October 1982, Wilson stated clearly that she did not wish to be called a feminist.

Such apparent conflicts over the decades and among interpretative approaches appear less sharp from a broader cultural perspective. The overarching inspirational scenario Margery Wilson created in her autobiography and interviews, and apparently through her actions, was that of her life itself, with the directing and producing work an integrated part of the plot. In particular, she seems to have been conscious always that a woman's choices are constrained by gender relations

favoring male dominance, but still offering plentiful opportunities to the artful woman. The description of her first approach to Hollywood—a streetcar trip to Reliance and Majestic studio, ostensibly to secure a job for her sister Mary by enacting the latter’s beauty and talent—illustrates Wilson’s delight in scenarizing her life for readers, portraying a Wilson persona who was both enterprising and lucky. She relates how she paid careful attention to her garb (“I went to a shoe-shop and had the buttons tightened on my shoes to make my feet look very trim”) and her demeanor (once at the studio, “I turned away to look at the buildings as though I might be considering buying them”). Wilson then writes about how she promoted her sister Mary at the audition: “I walked as she did. I tried to convey her personality. I described her, sang her praises, laughed and cried about her” (1956, 125–128). But this performance, she says with modest surprise, impressed a studio executive and won her own rather than her sister’s acting entrée (127).

Wilson’s guidance books also reflect the ability to set a scene and turn men’s actions to her advantage. In the 1951 *How to Make the Most of Wife* [sic], Wilson advises ambitious husbands, saying that “women are simple souls, not at all complicated and difficult as some of them would like to appear,” yet in effect she here suggests behaviors that benefit the wives, whose husbands are counseled to treat them with kindness and respect (10). In the chapter titled “The Wife as an Investment”, men are coached to protect one of their greatest economic assets: their wives. “Walk WITH your wife down the street, in stores and public places,” “Talk WITH your wife.... Even if you have to recite the multiplication table with a pleased expression on your face, looking at your wife the while, the rest of the world will want to know that animated interesting-looking couple” (16). And the wife will “become” interesting if encouraged, Wilson asserts. These small gestures will build a wife’s confidence and consequently she will run an efficient home, keep up her appearance, and in all ways help to recommend the husband in his business career. The irony for contemporary readers, and one suspects for Wilson as well, is that the partner whose behavior is in greatest need of improvement is not the wife but the husband.

Wilson left film production when she married Otto Meeks, the owner of a ranching empire, and began to raise their children. Ever active professionally, however, she turned to writing radio scripts for her own Los Angeles program on charm. The project expanded to a book, *Charm*, initially published in 1928 and then revised and reprinted many times as *The Woman You Want to Be: Margery Wilson’s Complete Book of Charm*. Additional books followed, some still quoted: *The New Etiquette* (1937), *Your Personality—and God* (1938), *Make Up Your Mind* (1940), *The Pocket Book of Etiquette* (1940), *How to Live Beyond Your Means* (1945), *Believe in Yourself* (1949), *You’re as Young as You Act* (1951), *Double Your Energy and Live Without Fatigue* (1961), and *God—Here and Now* (1978). Wilson maintained her connection to the film industry by contributing to a series of short pamphlets about famous people, writing in her autobiography that she was engaged to write fifty pamphlets drawing on her Hollywood connections (223). Two of these, one on Dolores Del Rio and another on Douglas Fairbanks, are available at the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Given the wide range of her activities, it is not surprising that fewer than thirty pages of *I Found My Way* are devoted to Wilson's directing and producing career. Nevertheless, she seems to have taken great pride in her accomplishments in the film industry. Interviewed in the documentary film, *The Silent Feminists: America's First Women Directors* (Jeffrey Goodman and Anthony Slide, 1993), and in print, Wilson speaks with animation about her struggles and successes, noting with evident satisfaction the respect she earned from studio chief Robert Brunton at whose Melrose, Los Angeles, studios she directed her first feature, *That Something* (1920), in which she also starred, and the comedy short, *Two of a Kind* (1920). At the time *Moving Picture World* reported that Wilson had plans to write and direct an entire series of two-reel "super-comedies" at the studio (Giebler 1920, 93).

Like so many of her industry contemporaries who aspired to produce and direct, Wilson's claims of authorship are not consistently validated by contemporary sources. For instance, while a contemporaneous review of *That Something* in *Moving Picture World* (Robb 1921, 758) seems to corroborate Wilson's singular autobiographical statement "I went to the coast and made a picture of the story" (196), the American Film Institute's online catalog (2003–2009) lists Lawrence Underwood as co-director. Likewise, where *Insinuation* (1922) and Wilson's last release *The Offenders* (1922–23) were marketed as Margery Wilson Productions and Wilson states unequivocally that she directed both (196, 200–210), AFI online lists Fenwicke L. Holmes as director of the latter work.

In any case, *Insinuation* was Wilson's most well-received directorial effort, and here contemporaneous as well as modern sources are in agreement that she was responsible for the story, scenario, direction, and producing of this film in which she also starred (Inman 62). Wilson toured with the film throughout the United States and Canada for several years after it opened. A morality tale about a woman (played by Wilson) whose life is almost ruined by the insinuations of a small-town gossip and a brother who fell in with bad company, the film ends with the woman being saved by her upstanding physician husband, whom she meets when her theatre troupe becomes stranded in the town. A 1922 *Moving Picture World* review applauds Wilson's "elusive charm" in the starring role, the casting of the other roles, including Percy Holton as the "weak brother", and the fidelity as well as the beauty of the film's Vermont setting: "the story they tell is natural, wholesome and absolutely faithful in detail and delineation. The plot of the picture-story is laid amid magnificent mountain scenery that is even more beautiful when covered with a mantle of snow... [The film] will be classified among the top-notchers" (62). Responding to the attention Italian neorealist films were receiving for the practice of motion picture location shooting, Wilson claimed with legitimacy to have been an innovator in this area, although her assertion of priority reveals an incomplete knowledge of the early history of the practice. "So far as I know, this was the first picture made without building sets for interiors, though the Italians in recent pictures are being credited with being the first to do so. I made mine over twenty years ago" (1956, 201). Perhaps the naturalness the reviewer sees in the film is attributable to Wilson's having brought her own past theatre experience to bear in the creation of the story centered on an acting troupe. In any case, something genuine in *Insinuation* inspired the description of the film as "a page taken bodily from the book of life itself" (Inman 1922, 62).

This phrase may indeed sum up the way in which Wilson's film directorial career, short in its span of years, was nevertheless bound up with the other chapters of the richly inventive life she lived. Testimony to the concern she had for her legacy, Margery Wilson donated her papers to the University of Wyoming in 1980, six years before she died at the age of eighty-nine.

Bibliography

Giebler, A.H. "Los Angeles News Letter by A. H. Giebler." *Moving Picture World* 45, no. 1 (3 Jul. 1920): 93.

----- "That Something – Margery Wilson." *Harrison's Reports* Vol. III, no. 15 (9 Apr. 1921): n.p.

Inman, C.M. "Insinuation': Margery Wilson Production Wholesome in Theme and Faithful to Detail." *Moving Picture World* (2 Sept. 1922): 62.

----- "Rotarians View Picture: 'That Something' is Given Special Showing at Atlantic City Gathering." *Motion Picture News* Vol. XXII, no. 3 (10 Jul. 1920): 477.

Robb, Jessie. "'That Something': Metaphysics Predominant Theme of Production of Herman Film Corp." *The Moving Picture World* Vol. 49, no. 7 (16 Apr. 1921): 758.

Schader, Fred (as Fred.). Rev. "The Offender (sic)." *Variety* Vol. LXXVI, no. 13 (12 Nov. 1924): 25.

Slide, Anthony. In conversation with the author. 2004.

----- Interview with Margery Wilson. *The Silent Picture* no. 17 (1973): 17-24.

Wilson, Margery. *Dolores del Rio. Thumb Prints of the Famous*. Los Angeles: Chimes Press, 1928. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.

----- *Douglas Fairbanks. Thumb Prints of the Famous*. Los Angeles: Chimes Press, 1928. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.

----- *How to Make the Most of Wife*. Kingswood, Surrey, Great Britain: The Windmill Press, 1951.

----- *I Found My Way: An Autobiography*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1956.

----- *The Woman You Want to Be: Margery Wilson's Complete Book of Charm*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1942. [Note: Originally published as *Charm* by Margery Wilson, 1928.]

Archival Paper Collections:

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

Margery Wilson Papers, 1914-1978. [University of Wyoming, American Heritage Center](#).

Filmography

A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Margery Wilson as Actress

Double Trouble. Dir.: William Christy Cabanne, sc.: William Christy Cabanne (Fine Arts Film Co. US 1915) cas.: Margery Wilson, Olga Grey, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Cinematheca do Museu de Arte Moderna \[BRR\]](#).

The Eye of the Night. Dir.: Walter Edwards, sc.: C. Gardner Sullivan (New York Motion Picture Corp., Kay-Bee US 1916) cas.: Margery Wilson, William H. Thompson, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#), [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

Intolerance. Dir./sc.: D.W. Griffith (D. W. Griffith; Wark Producing Corp. US 1916) cas: Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, Robert Harron, Margery Wilson, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Bulgarska Nacionalna Filmoteka \[BGS\]](#), [Cinémathèque Québécoise \[CAQ\]](#), [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique \[BEB\]](#), [Svenska Filminstitutet \[SES\]](#), [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia \[AUC\]](#), [Cineteca del Friuli \[ITG\]](#), [Münchner Stadtmuseum \[DEI\]](#), [Filmoteka Narodowa \[PLW\]](#), [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#), [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Museum of Modern Art \[USM\]](#), [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#), [EYE Filmmuseum \[NLA\]](#), [Österreichisches Filmmuseum \[ATM\]](#), [Cineteca Nazionale \[ITN\]](#), [Fondazione Cineteca Italiana \[ITC\]](#), [Cinematheca Romana \[ROB\]](#), [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#), [Academy Film Archive \[USF\]](#), [Filmoteca Española \[ESM\]](#), [Harvard Film Archive \[USI\]](#), [Library and Archives Canada \[CAO\]](#), [Danske Filminstitut \[DKK\]](#), [Museo Nazionale del Cinema \[ITT\]](#), [UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive \[USB\]](#), [Jugoslovenska Kinoteka \[YUB\]](#), [Anthology Film Archives \[USN\]](#), [Lobster Films \[FRL\]](#).

The Return of Draw Egan. Dir.: William S. Hart, sc.: C. Gardner Sullivan (New York Motion Picture Corp., Kay-Bee US 1916) cas.: Margery Wilson, Willaim S. Hart, si, b&w. Archive: [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique \[BEB\]](#), [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#), [EYE Filmmuseum \[NLA\]](#), [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#), [Danske Filminstitut \[DKK\]](#).

The Clodhopper. Dir.: Victor Schertzinger, sc.: Monte M. Katterjohn (Kay-Bee US 1917) cas.: Margery Wilson, Lydia Knott, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Museum of Modern Aart \[USM\]](#), [Academy Film Archive \[USF\]](#).

The Last of the Ingrams. Dir.: Walter Edwards, sc.: J.G. Hawks (New York Motion Picture Corp., Kay-Bee US 1917) cas.: Margery Wilson, Mary Armlyn, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#), [Cinémathèque Française \[FRC\]](#).

Wolf Lowry. Dir.: William S. Hart, sc.: Charles Turner Dazey (New York Motion Picture Corp., Kay-Bee US 1917) cas.: Margery Wilson, William S. Hart, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#).

Without Honor. Dir.: E. Mason Hopper, sc.: George Elwood Jenks, st.: C. Gardner Sullivan (Triangle Film Corp. US 1918) cas.: Margery Wilson, Laura Sears, si, b&w. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Margery Wilson as Director, Producer, Actress and Screenwriter (Margery Wilson Productions)

That Something, 1920; *Two of a Kind*, 1920; *Insinuation*, 1922; *The Offenders*, 1922-23

2. Margery Wilson as Actress

Bred in the Bone, 1915; *A Corner in Colleens*, 1916; *The Honorable Algy*, 1916; *The Primal Lure*, 1916; *The Sin Ye Do*, 1916; *The Bride of Hate*, 1917; *The Desert Man*, 1917; *The Gun Fighter*, 1917; *The Mother Instinct*, 1917; *Mountain Dew*, 1917; *Wild Sumac*, 1917; *The Flames of Chance*, 1918; *The Hand at the Window*, 1918; *The Hard Rock Breed*, 1918; *The Law of the Great Northwest*, 1918; *Marked Cards*, 1918; *Old Love for New*, 1918; *Crooked Straight*, 1919; *Desert Gold*, 1919; *Venus in the East*, 1919; *The Blooming Angel*, 1920; *The House of Whispers*, 1920; *Why Not Marry?*, 1922; *The Offenders*, 1924.

C. DVD Sources:

The Return of Draw Egan. DVD. (Grapevine US)

D. Streamed Media:

[Intolerance](#) (1916) is streaming online via Kanopy

Credit Report

Margery Wilson is often credited as co-director (with Lawrence Underwood) for the film *That Something*. The two-reeler *Two of a Kind* is not listed in AFI, but is discussed in Denise Lowe.

Citation

Walker, Janet. "Margery Wilson." In Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project*. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2013. <<https://wfpp-test.cul.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-margery-wilson/>>

