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Reinventing The Reel

In an archival interview from the documentary *D.W. Griffith: Father of Film*, Lillian Gish, describes D. W. Griffith’s contribution to film saying, “He didn’t do everything the first time, like the close up. But he developed it, gave us the grammar of filmmaking – the cutting, the handling of humanity before a camera – and understood the psychic strength of a lens.” In short, Griffith took already established cinematic conventions and combined them, forming and establishing creative forms of visceral storytelling that are still widely used to entertain today’s often-jaded audiences. Through his use of all-too-familiar plotlines, Griffith drew attention away from the story and put the spotlight on his directing style, effectively teaching American moviegoers what a film’s director actually does.

The key element to Griffith’s success was his canny (and still applicable) insight regarding what excited the general public. By repeatedly heeding the seemingly opposing notions that audiences find comfort in what is familiar and are, at the same time, intrigued by what is new and innovative, Griffith presented fresh ways to present stock characters and situations. In his introduction to Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916) on the 1971 program, *The Silent Years*, host Orson Welles warns the viewers, “There’s a lot of it which is terribly old-fashioned. A lot that was old and dusty, even at the moment this was made. And you’re also going to see an awful lot that would be new tomorrow, because of the genius of the man.”

Griffith’s inventions were rarely of the technical, special effects sort, but rather, he got his audiences to “ooh” and “ahh” by surprising them with unexpected camerawork,
unorthodox staging, and cutting-edge pacing through editing. Additionally, though clearly dramatically manipulative, his films were relentlessly honest in their presentation. He rarely used process shots or phony backdrops, and his actors did their own stuntwork. If there was fakery in a Griffith film, it was rarely obvious. If filming mishaps aided in a scene’s genuineness, or was something the audience had probably never seen before, it was left in the film. In *America* (1924) Paul Revere rides his horse up some stairs to a porch. In trying to maneuver the horse back down the stairs into the street, the horse slips and falls causing today’s viewers to gasp much as those in 1924 did.

A prime example of Griffith’s ability to breathe new and exciting life into the old and creaky is his *Way Down East* (1920). Immediately following its Chicago premier, *Chicago Daily News* film critic Carl Sandburg (yes, the Carl Sandburg) referred to the film as “old American melodrama,” adding:

> As a story, this production has none of the originality that marked *The Birth of A Nation* and *Intolerance*, the high spot masterpieces of Griffith hitherto. In point of acting, photography, and sustained dramatic interest, however, this is fully up to what Griffith has done before. Griffith began by giving us thrilling entertainment mixed with thought and viewpoint of life that challenged thought, whereas his aim in *Way Down East* is solely and merely to provide thrilling entertainment. This he does put over.

Griffith attended the Chicago premier and, responding to the audience request for a curtain speech, said, “I love to come to Chicago with my little plays. In these days of
bolshevism and of tearing down, we need to get back to the old fashioned wholesome moralities.”

Griffith rarely ventured into comedy, a realm in which he was never fully comfortable. (Though, his early “public service announcement,” *Those Awful Hats* (1909), which incorporates uncustomary process shots and cartoon-like sight gags, is genuinely funny.) Today, *Sally of the Sawdust* (1925) is known more as a vehicle for star W. C. Fields than its director. Yet, many of the Griffith melodramatic trademarks are present. The class divisions are prominent and, as in *Way Down East*, *Sally of the Sawdust* has a moment in which a young woman is shunned and ousted from hearth and home. However, as it is basically a comedy, *Sally’s* “Out! And STAY out!” moment occurs at the beginning of the film, signifying that there’s no place to go but up. Also, the ejected woman is not our heroine, but her mother, allowing the audience to shift their allegiance to the title character early on.

As in other Griffith films, the action is authentic. Leading lady Carol Dempster does her own acrobatics, and expert juggler Fields shows off his expert, Vaudeville-honed skill. *Sally* was only Fields’s second movie, and his screen character was slowly being developed into the more familiar Fields of later years. Many of the well-known physical Fieldsian mannerisms are present in *Sally*, as well as a few unfamiliar ones, such as crossing his eyes. Griffith’s inexperience when it comes to comedy is plain in the unfortunate way he films and edits Fields’s routines, either by not allowing the gags to build effectively, or tipping them off too soon. Especially awkward and un-Griffith-like are a joke concerning Dempster’s maturing chest and a scatological gag involving a small dog and Fields’s leg. Later Fields films would contain such material, of course, but
staged much more slyly. (True to form, however, Fields does kick the tiny dog.)

Even with its flaws, *Sally of the Sawdust* contained enough Griffith trademarks to warrant another Griffith/Fields collaboration, the now-lost *That Royle Girl* (1925). Griffith would try comedy again with *The Battle of the Sexes* (1928), which had a contemporary setting. Ironically, critics and the public complained that Griffith’s attempt to be “hip” and modern made him seem too “old-fashioned.”

As his career waned, Griffith started running out of creative cinematic innovations and was ill at ease with the technical ones. However, well into the sound era, at a time when Griffith was thought to be artistically “out of step,” Hollywood’s young directors were finding great success by taking vulnerable-yet-strong performers (i.e. Shirley Temple, Barbara Stanwyck, etc), putting them in well-worn, perilous situations, and applying storytelling and visual technique they had learned from Griffith to evoke sympathetic audience emotions.

In fact, Griffith probably would have been attracted to a scenario involving a young orphaned, unmarried woman brought up in a convent who, in an act of carelessness, gets pregnant. Her baby is wrested from her by unsympathetic nuns and callously given away. Decades later, in a race against time, the woman travels the world in search of her long-lost son who, as it happens, died just a few years earlier. Any viewer who happily wipes away a tear while watching 2013’s *Philomena* owes a debt of gratitude to D. W. Griffith.
Filmography:

*The Birth of a Nation* (1915). D. W. Griffith

*D.W. Griffith: Father of Film* (1993). Kevin Brownlow and David Gill

*Intolerance* (1916). D. W. Griffith

*Sally of the Sawdust* (1925). D. W. Griffith

*Those Awful Hats* (1909). D. W. Griffith

*Philomena* (2013). Stephen Frears

Works Consulted:


[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORwC7gNyUaY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORwC7gNyUaY)