

Milestone Films' *Mary Pickford: Rags and Riches* Collection: The inventor of movie acting

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Intended as a means of introducing younger viewers to silent films, Milestone Films' 2012 *Mary Pickford: Rags and Riches* Collection also provides adults the opportunity to reacquaint themselves with "America's Sweetheart." In so far as Mary Pickford is remembered today, the performer whom director George Cukor credited with inventing screen acting tends to be identified with a little innocent girl persona that safely belongs to an earlier, less sophisticated time.

Pickford was born Gladys Louise Smith in Toronto in 1892. Her father, the son of English immigrants, did odd jobs and left the family in 1895. An alcoholic, he died three years later. Pickford's mother was of Irish Catholic descent. From an early age the future movie star acted along with her two siblings, without much success until she did a screen test for D.W. Griffith in New York in 1909. Griffith saw something in her.

She soon began acting for Biograph Pictures, first arriving in Los Angeles in January 1910. By 1914, Pickford was an immense star. Two years later, only Charlie Chaplin surpassed her in popularity. Commentators suggest she was the most famous woman in the world in the 1910s and 1920s. Her marriage to fellow film star Douglas Fairbanks created one of the first modern celebrity couples. When they honeymooned in Europe in 1920, riots erupted as crowds tried to get to them. Bucking the Hollywood studios, Pickford, Fairbanks, Chaplin and Griffith founded United Artists, a film distribution company, in 1919. Unable to make the transition to talking films, Pickford retired from acting in 1933, although she continued to produce films. She died in 1979.

The *Rags and Riches* collection's three feature-length films—*The Poor Little Rich Girl* (1917), *The Hoodlum* (1919) and *Sparrows* (1926)—provide a sampling of the complexity that Pickford brought to her characterizations. She drew on established acting traditions and her own painful childhood experiences for these roles, and in the process created a naturalistic movie acting style. *The Poor Little Rich Girl* (directed by Maurice Tourneur, father of Jacques Tourneur) was Pickford's first portrayal of a child in a feature-length film (the 24-year old had already appeared in an astonishing 125 shorts and 26 full-length movies).

Gwendolyn (Pickford) is the 10-year-old daughter of a wealthy family. Because her father is always busy making money on Wall Street and her mother is equally consumed by her role in society, Gwendolyn is starved for attention and companionship and her efforts to gain attention often create problems in the household.

All of this changes when Gwendolyn's father loses most of his money in the stock market and her attempts to find comfort from her distracted father are thwarted by several members of the household staff. On the night of Gwen's 11th birthday, the staff members give the girl a strong dose of sleeping pills to keep her quiet so that they can attend a theater party. When she survives a delirious dream (during which she sees life as it really is), her parents decide that money isn't the most important thing after all.

There was nothing unusual at the time about Pickford in her mid-20s playing a 10-year-old. Pickford, as well as Ruth Chatterton, Norma Talmadge and Lillian Gish, had played prepubescents on stage and in one-reel films. In many of her pre-adolescent roles, the 5-foot tall, slightly built Pickford was surrounded by a tall cast to increase her credibility as a child.

For the role of Gwendolyn in *The Poor Little Rich Girl*, Pickford could base herself on what she had learned from her earlier roles as well as her own experiences.

Like a number of prominent Hollywood actresses during the silent era and the 1930s and 1940s, Mary Pickford had endured a traumatic and financially insecure childhood. When her alcoholic father died, her mother was distraught and the family was left in poverty. When a doctor offered to adopt the future Pickford (an offer her mother agreed to, but she refused), her fear of being separated from her mother and siblings was so acute she decided to become the "father of the family" to ensure they would never be parted. Two years later, she and her sister Lottie began acting in a theater for \$13 a week.

Pickford came to understand that children could sometimes feel adult emotions, and while looking after a family denied her a childhood (she would later declare, "I didn't have a childhood, not any"), this same duty made her pay very close attention to her siblings. Looking forward to the school of so-

called method acting, Pickford was able to work through and bring her complex feelings and observational skills to the role of Gwendolyn, resulting in a believable, naturalistic performance.

For the first half of the movie, Pickford plays Gwendolyn as an innocent girl who often acts out her need for attention with the mixed emotions found in children, e.g., when a street bully calls her a “sissy,” her emotions run from anger (she threatens to deck him) to joy (when a mudslinging free-for-all ensues) and finally, frustration with the household help who break up “the best fight” she ever had, all delivered seamlessly and organically.

After her father’s losses in the stock market, Gwendolyn’s self-pity changes to concern for her father’s feelings, a concern she displays by lightly patting his hand. At a time when outsized gestures and bulging eyeballs were often tools for expressing emotions, Pickford understood the power and credibility of minimalism, another of her contributions to filmmaking.

A similar plot underpins *The Hoodlum* (Sidney Franklin, who went on to have a successful career in talking pictures as well). As Amy Burke, Pickford plays a *very* spoiled rich granddaughter of a ruthless, early-20th-century industrialist, living in a mansion on Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue. Amy expects everything to be handed to her and throws tantrums when denied anything.

Her life changes when her father, a “sociological writer,” returns from a trip abroad and, with his daughter in tow, moves to a slum neighborhood in lower Manhattan to write a book about the area. At first dismissive of her new surroundings, she learns to accept and befriend her neighbors, especially William Turner, who is working on an exposé of corporations. In the process, he discovers that Amy’s grandfather is guilty of keeping double books. Together, they make her grandfather see the error of his ways.

Pickford accompanies the stomping and wild gestures of the spoiled Amy with restrained facial expressions that convey conflicted emotions. As was the case with Gwendolyn, Amy is part-little girl and part-woman and in need of elementary human affection; a scene in which she gently “walks” her fingers around her grandfather’s waist is particularly effective at conveying this need.

Pickford’s talent for comedy is also on display in *The Hoodlum*, especially in a scene where she is being chased by a motorcycle (she demands that the chauffeur let her drive the car).

Calling on her minimalist technique, Pickford uses a slight head toss or shrug of the shoulders to express her initial superior attitude toward the working class children. After she becomes acquainted with these children, she gets into a fight during a dice game, while her face expresses both the “tough girl” side of Pickford’s pre-adolescent characterizations and a certain bewilderment at her own actions. *Sparrows* (directed by

William Beaudine and an uncredited Tom McNamara) is the best of the three feature-length movies in the collection. Director Ernst Lubitsch went so far as to declare it “one of the eight wonders of the world.”

A vicious bully, Mr. Grimes, along with his wife, runs a “baby farm” in the swamps of the deep South where orphaned or kidnapped children are overworked and underfed. Molly, the eldest of the children (played by a 33-year old Pickford), is a mother figure for the others.

The movie’s turning point occurs when two of Grimes’ thugs kidnap an 18-month-old infant, Doris Wayne (played by child star Mary Louise Miller). When the police launch a manhunt for the child, Grimes, fearing he will be caught and punished for the crime, threatens to throw the infant into the swamp and thus hide the evidence. Molly then leads Doris and the other children through the alligator-infested swamp to freedom.

Pickford’s interpretation of Molly was undoubtedly rooted in part in her experience raising her younger siblings. God-fearing (she reads the Bible to the children) and feisty, Molly is also a combination protector and mediator where the children are concerned.

In a scene where another infant dies in her arms from malnourishment, Pickford displays remarkable emotional control. Holding back tears, she smiles, slightly, and shakes her head in apparent recognition that the infant has been taken “to a better place.”

From the beginning to the end of the movie, Molly’s insistence that the children’s interests and lives come first is entirely believable, and that kind of believability comes only from lived experiences.

The Milestone *Rags and Riches* collection includes a 17-minute short entitled *Ramona* (1910) and brief pre-film productions in which young children discover silent films in an attic and learn about film history. Each film also contains a separate audio track and explanations to help children better understand what they are watching. Unfortunately, the collection does not include critical commentary concerning the films.

That omission aside, Milestone Films should be applauded for introducing children to silent films through Mary Pickford’s films and reminding contemporary viewers of this gifted actress’s lasting achievements.

See also: *Mary Pickford: Queen of the Movies*. ed. Christel Schmidt, University of Kentucky Press, 2012.



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