More on the removal of actress Lillian Gish's name at Bowling Green State University

A conversation with actor Malcolm McDowell: "Once you erode freedoms like this, and artistic thought, where are we as a civilized society?"

David Walsh
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I spoke to British actor Malcolm McDowell by phone recently about the decision by Bowling Green State University in Ohio to remove famed actress Lillian Gish's name from its film theater because of her role in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), D.W. Griffith's deplorable racist film. The British actor was one of the signatories on a petition protesting this act of censorship.

As have we noted, Bowling Green officials responded to the petition by restating their same unprincipled arguments. They claimed the removal of Gish's name would assist them in carrying out the university's "obligation to create an inclusive learning environment." We wrote: "How so? By removing all controversy and complexity, by sanitizing the past, by surrendering to forces who, frankly, reveal little understanding of America's contradictory social development? The result will not be a more 'inclusive' environment, it will be a more willfully ignorant and repressive one."

Malcolm McDowell has had an extraordinary career. He has appeared in more than 250 films and television programs since the mid-1960s. It is difficult to think of many other film actors in the post-studio system who have been—and remain—so active.

McDowell had the great talent and good fortune to make his feature film debut in a major work, British director Lindsay Anderson's *If....* (1968). The film, about cruelty and humiliation at a British boys' boarding school and an eventual violent revolt, had an indelible impact on an entire generation. Few who watched it at the time—or since—have easily forgotten it.

"When do we live? That's what I want to know," said McDowell's character Mick Travis, in a work that came out only months after the French general strike and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and amidst a widespread youth radicalization. What made *If....* so unusual was not simply its portrait of official tyranny, one could find depictions of abuse elsewhere, but the sensual delight it took in the unfolding of youthful opposition and the filmmaker's obviously unswerving conviction that fierce repression will always and everywhere provoke fierce resistance.

John Russell Taylor, in an essay included in *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary* (1980), argued that *If....* was "an extraordinary film, a film which virtually defies verbal description because it works as only the cinema can, on the indistinct border between fantasy which has the solidity of tangible experience and reality which seems as remote and elusive as a dream. … The whole film is a rich, complex, obscure metaphor of the way we live now, the tone of the times. … Like all major works of art … it refuses paraphrase. It is more than the sum of its analysable parts, and finally exists in its own right as a self-sufficient work of art, sublimely careless of how we choose to read it."

McDowell gained further prominence as a result of his lead role in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), the dystopian work based on Anthony Burgess's novel.

All in all, the actor—born in the Leeds, England area—was associated with Anderson, one of the most gifted British directors of the postwar period and, as a biographer noted, "a fierce anti-Establishment figure," in an important trilogy of films, each of them featuring the character Mick Travis.

McDowell, in his preface to a selection of Anderson's personal writings, *Lindsay Anderson Diaries (Diaries, Letters and Essays)* (2005), describes *O Lucky Man!* (1973) as "a tapestry on film that took on everything from big business, music and science, to politics and Third World countries." The third work, *Britannia Hospital* (1982), was Anderson's "film about the nation state being torn apart by Margaret Thatcher's private enterprise culture" (Paul Sutton in his introduction to the same diaries). McDowell describes this trilogy as the "cornerstone" of his career.

He has appeared in many other movies, including (in the actors's own words, the "horrendous") *Caligula* (1979), *Time After Time*, with McDowell's future wife, Mary Steenburgen (1979), *Cat People* (1982), *The Player* (1992), *Milk Money* (1994), *Star Trek Generations* (1994), *Tank Girl* (1995) and *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (2003). More recently, he featured in *War and Peace* (2007), a mini-series, as Prince Bolkonsky and *Mozart in the Jungle* (2014).

McDowell has performed in films by many prominent directors in addition to Anderson and Kubrick, including Ken Loach, Richard Lester, Joseph Losey, Paul Schrader, J. Lee Thompson, Jack Gold, John Badham, Martin Ritt, Clive Donner, Blake Edwards, Robert Altman and Mike Hodges.

He gave one of his most revealing and intimate performances in a one-man show, *Never Apologize* (2007), directed by Mike Kaplan, which is available online. In the charming and insightful theatrical piece,

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McDowell discusses his experiences with Lindsay Anderson on *If....* and other films. He recounts amusing or poignant stories about other personalities in the film and theater world, including actresses Christine Noonan, Rachel Roberts, Bette Davis and Lillian Gish, actors Albert Finney, Richard Harris, John Gielgud and Alan Bates, and one of the figures Anderson most admired, American film director John Ford—whom Anderson visited when he was on his deathbed in 1973. Anderson, McDowell explains, considered Ford to be one of the few filmmakers who was both a gifted director and a "poet."

In *Never Apologize*, McDowell comments that *If....* "stuck a knife at the heart of the establishment." He later cites a line from Anderson's diary to the effect that maturity and understanding are "only to be achieved when we can look the facts of life directly in the face not obscured by materialist or by sentimental illusion." This seems a good definition of the responsibility of the artist as well.

On the phone, McDowell was gracious and friendly, and remarkably youthful.

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David Walsh: I wanted to speak to you about the Lillian Gish and D.W. Griffith controversy, and perhaps about the general state of filmmaking.

Malcolm McDowell: Thank you for all your help on this. I read your long, detailed article, it was really wonderful.

DW: Thank you. May I just say, if only in passing, thank *you* for your film career. Films like *If....* had a powerful impact on my generation, and probably several generations.

MM: Films like that were made by masters. Lindsay Anderson was a master, along with Stanley Kubrick. I was very lucky when I was a young actor. Particularly with Lindsay, who was a great friend as well, an extraordinary human being, the like of which I've never come across again. A very fiery temperament though—not an easy person. I used to laugh at it, which of course irritated him even more.

DW: Did you happen to meet Lillian Gish?

MM: Oh, yes, I knew Lillian. She came to see me in a production of [John Osborne's] *Look Back in Anger*, the first major revival of the play, which we did at the Roundabout Theatre in New York in 1980. That was turned into a television film, directed by Lindsay. We had dinner or a drink afterward, and she lamented the passing of floodlights in theaters. "Because you can't see the eyes." They were used for musicals and things. I suggested that a few things had happened since their use. So I've been told, she said.

DW: So what was your reaction to the decision by Bowling Green State University to remove Lillian Gish's name from its film theater?

MM: I was absolutely outraged. I thought: what cowards they are. They don't know what they're talking about. It's a knee-jerk reaction to a lot of the nonsense that's going on. You can't make decisions like this in an arbitrary fashion, because there are implications, consequences.

DW: You have a vast list of credits. As an actor with that sort extensive history, over more than half a century, would you care to be victimized on the basis of one of the films you made or one of the directors you worked with?

MM: No, as I say, it's absurd. This is undermining everything about an artist's life. If I had taken a moral stance on each character I've played, I wouldn't have had a career at all. I'd still be in repertory theater doing Agatha Christie.

It was a different time. In Lillian Gish, we're talking about one of the founders of modern filmmaking, as we know it. As Lindsay said, film is an art form, particularly an American art form actually. Just as jazz is a particularly American art form. Lillian and Dorothy were pioneers of this art form.

I have not seen *The Birth of a Nation* in a very long time. It is a racist film, no one is denying that. That's a given and the film deserves its bad reputation. But then you could talk about every early US president having slaves, or being a party to it. History is difficult.

You have to take a career such as Lillian's as a whole, not simply pick one role. She didn't even play the lead in *The Birth of a Nation*, or anything like it. She was a supporting player. She was very taken with her mentor, D.W. Griffith, an amazing talent. I'm a bit at a loss for words about it. I think it's an over-reaction, and ahistorical.

DW: Do you think there are dangers or wider implications in such an action?

MM: That's a bigger discussion. We live in dangerous times. I do think we have to stand up to this. Once you erode freedoms like this, and artistic thought, where are we as a civilized society? It's crazy. I'm upset about it. That's why I'm grateful for what you're doing, bringing it to the public's attention. Most people have not even heard about this. Most people don't know who Lillian Gish is. Any student of film history knows and appreciates her. She's a very important part of the history of film.

She was the most charming lady. I also met her on the set of *The Whales of August* [1987]. She was a delight, just a very beautiful person. And, unfortunately, one can't say that about too many people. I can only imagine that it must have been very difficult for Lillian and Dorothy at the start of their careers. Young girls in a tough business like the film business. She made considerable sacrifices, and there are so many extraordinary scenes, like the one where she's floating on an ice floe [in *Way Down East*, 1920], one of the most irreplaceable, powerful images ever, and that's saying something, with all the green screen stuff we have today.

And everyone who watched those early films, including people like John Ford, Stanley Kubrick and all the great directors, were influenced by them.

Lillian then made the successful jump from silent to talking films, which was rare and difficult to do. If she had been English, she would have been Dame Lillian Gish, and she would have been playing leads at the National Theatre. She worked with so many greats, including Charles Laughton, always a particular idol of mine. She was directed by him in *The Night of the Hunter* [1955]. She had a strong presence, to be a film star from her teens until her late 80s. I don't know how old she was at the time of *The Whales of August* …

DW: She was 93.

MM: It's almost a career like John Gielgud's, who by the way she loved. It reminds me of the story of Johnny G when he was 93 calling his agent, Duncan Heath, and asking, "Duncan, anything for me?" "Darling, there aren't many parts for anyone in his 90s. But as soon as one comes in, I'll direct it your way."

I used to kid Mike Kaplan, who produced *The Whales of August*, because he had cast Lillian Gish—and now he was looking for someone to play her *older* sister! There is *no one older* on the planet! It's going to be a difficult casting decision here. He would go beet-red and laugh. He ended up by making a brilliant decision, coming up with Bette Davis, who wasn't older, but she'd had these strokes, so of course she looked older.

DW: This is very sweeping, but do you have any thoughts on the general state of filmmaking today?

MM: I've seen some wonderful films recently, especially from Europe. There are some extraordinary young actors from England. I only know that because they'll ask me to go somewhere and shoot something with somebody, and I'll look him or her up, and go, "My god, they're brilliant."

One does regret the fact that there are none of those independent-minded movies we used to watch in the 1970s and beyond. This is what we did living in London. We'd see a movie and go out to dinner and dissect it and discuss it for hours. It was one of the most wonderfully cultural things to do. That was part of the fabric of life in London. We'd go see something like the [Roman] Polanski film, *Chinatown* [1974], for example. I'd like to see if they could get that film made today. A brilliant

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director, but he has other problems.

It's crazy. Can you listen to Michael Jackson's music? Because now it's been deemed that he's a pedophile, although he was acquitted in a court of law. So we're told, you shouldn't be listening to his music. But doesn't this have tinges of fascism?

DW: Yes, I think it does.

MM: This is very worrying. I have young sons and I feel for them.

DW: I appreciate your time. We are taking up this issue as part of a struggle in defense of democratic rights, against the attacks on many fronts, including the #MeToo case in so far as it's a witch-hunt and the Julian Assange case, which we think is enormously important.

MM: Thank you for what you're doing.

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