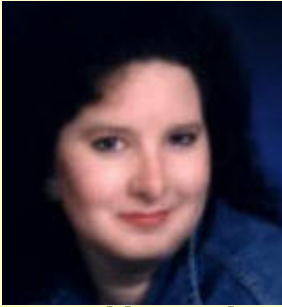


## A Note from One of Those ‘Wonderful People Out There in the Dark

By Graceann Maciolek



Do you recognize the line referenced in this title of this column? If you do, you are probably ahead of me on the topic – classic movies. Specifically, I plan to wax poetic about (drum roll, please) ... Film Conventions. Please bear with me; I’m not talking about events where people dress up like Darth Vader or your favorite Klingon (those are different kinds of conventions), though I confess that I have on more than one occasion attired myself in the garb of a flapper. If you do not recognize the quote in the title, it’s from *Sunset Boulevard*. Gloria Swanson, as Norma Desmond, the forgotten silent film star, is ready for her close-up. Now, with the editor’s indulgence, I’ll get a close-up as well, as I talk about one of my favorite obsessions.

This is a question I hear quite often: “Why do you spend all your vacation days sitting in theatres watching old movies?” Here’s another one: “Buster who?”

Are these rude and dismissive questions? I don’t know. When I’ve answered them 50 times apiece, they’re annoying enough. But the people who ask are sincerely curious about why I love sitting in the dark, watching films that haven’t been shown publicly in many years. For some people, golf or fishing are passions; silent and early sound films happen to be mine. I’ve seen silent movies in vintage movie palaces, churches, hotel ballrooms and converted garages. I’ve been enthralled by the mastery of early cinema. Conversely, I’ve walked out of a screening wondering what all the fuss was about.

Each year I budget my 15 vacation days with an eye toward which of several film festivals are within my reach, both geographically and financially. There are fabulous events every year, and the cost of attending varies wildly depending on location, the types of venues being used for the films, and whether or not celebrity guests will be taking part in the festivities. Some festivals are free of charge, others cost \$100 or more in registration fees. Figuring in lodging, and sometimes airfare, narrows my choices considerably.



There are various reasons why film buffs attend particular events. Some are there to see the films. “Don’t bother me, don’t talk to me, don’t expect me to interact with you. Movies! That’s what I’m here for. I want to say that I watched every film offered in the Festival!” Over a four-day weekend, this entails an inordinate amount of celluloid, and some attendees treat it as an endurance contest rather than a vacation. There are the patrons who attend because the most interesting film memorabilia (eBay notwithstanding) is sold at film conventions. Original lobby cards, portraits and stills of your favorite star, videos and DVDs – you name it, and you’ll probably find it. Depending on the vendor and even the timing, bargains can be plentiful.

Some (and this is the group I’m in) use the event as an opportunity to meet with friends for a reunion weekend which will include film, but in which film will not be the only ingredient, and maybe not even the main ingredient. For instance, I am attending an event on an upcoming holiday weekend. There are a few films that I’d like very much to see on each day of the Festival. The rest of the time, I’ll be catching up with old friends, making some new ones, shopping for memorabilia, and eating pasta. It is all part of the experience for me – films, friends and food are imperative.



Even though I don’t stay in the screening rooms from 9am to Midnight as some of the other attendees do, I have that rather pale and pasty look that seems to be shared by many who attend these events. A lot of us, even when we’re at home, spend a great deal of time in the dark watching the latest restoration. I know that I don’t see a lot of sunshine. Very little risk of skin cancer, but lots of squinting on the rare occasion when I do venture out into the sunlight and many comments in the vein of “turn on some lights in

here; what are you, a vampire?” from visitors to my home.

The upside (and for those of us who love it, it’s ALL upside) is that I’ve gotten to see some marvelous, vintage films in a theatrical setting – films I might not have been able to see at all if it hadn’t been for restoration and the sheer stubborn will to keep these almost-forgotten gems in the spotlight. For instance, I got to see the sublime Marion Davies, a much underrated comedienne, in *The Cardboard Lover* (1928): a film you haven’t seen unless you (1) are in your early 80’s and saw it in its initial release when you were a wee tiny tot; (2) “know somebody who knows somebody;” or (3) were able to travel to Hollywood for Cinecon 2004. No matter where you are, there are opportunities for seeing silent and classic films in a theatrical setting, if you pay close attention. Screenings take place in the most unexpected and delightful places, ranging from 90-year-old theatres, to an outdoor wall in downtown New Orleans.



Personally speaking, love of vintage film has led to some tremendous benefits for me. I have formed friendships that I will treasure and be grateful for to the end of my days. I have danced on the same



floor as Valentino (though obviously not at the same time). I've hugged Buster Keaton's granddaughter and worn one of his famous porkpie hats, direct from her collection. I quite literally sat at the feet of Eleanor Keaton (Buster's widow), and listened to her tell stories about their life together. I have gotten Jane Withers to giggle, Joan Leslie to smile beatifically, and Betty Garrett to laugh out loud in a way that still makes me grin when I remember it. I own inscribed copies of books about classic film icons books that were written by close friends. And,



were it not for my obsession with flickering images and silent clowns, you would not be reading this essay. Some years ago, a dear friend and mentor asked me to start writing about our annual convention celebrating Buster, and from that all my other writing has grown. Whether this is a good or bad thing well, that's up to you to decide. As for me, my popcorn is almost done popping, and there's a dandy "new" Mary Pickford film starting, so I have to get going. I hope you'll join me out there in the dark.

**Suggested Events:** (I'm only including those that I have attended personally)

[www.busterkeaton.com](http://www.busterkeaton.com) - Home of the Damfinos, the International Buster Keaton Society – the Damfinos meet in Muskegon, Michigan every October to celebrate Buster and his films.

[www.cinevent.com](http://www.cinevent.com) - Memorial Day Weekend in Columbus, Ohio. Screenings of rare silent and early sound films, in addition to one of the largest and most varied selections of memorabilia.

[www.cinecon.org](http://www.cinecon.org) - Labor Day Weekend in Hollywood, California. Screenings take place at Grauman's Egyptian Theatre and celebrity guests are in attendance.

<http://www.silentfilmchicago.com/> - home of the Chicago Silent Summer Film Festival, held over consecutive Fridays in July and August at the historic Gateway Theatre.