An elegant and intelligent beauty

The Hollywood film career of Nola Luxford

CAROLE VAN GRONDELLE

Carole van Grondelle spent two years with the 94 year old Nola Luxford in California, interviewing and researching her film, broadcasting and Anzac Club activities, and is currently writing a full-length biography of her life. Ms van Grondelle has a MA (Hons) in History and has worked as a journalist and media consultant. She has been published widely in New Zealand and abroad, including the New York Times.

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New Zealand-born Nola Luxford (1895–1994) was not a leading lady or a star in Hollywood but she was a working actress in both the twenties and thirties. Between 1932 and 1935, for instance, she had credited roles in five early talkies and uncredited ones in several others. However, in this article, I wish to concentrate on Nola's silent film career as that is when we can claim she was New Zealand's most successful actress in Hollywood. During the 1920s, she had credited roles in 11 silent films and in many of these she was first or second female lead. She worked as an extra in another 22.

By Hollywood standards, Nola was one of thousands of working actors hoping fervently for that elusive break that would spell stardom and success. She never got it. Despite that – and indeed because of it – I believe Nola's silent film career has a certain interest. For a start, from a New Zealand perspective, she is one of the few who went to Hollywood in its early years to become moderately successful there. The American film industry is clearly the most powerful in the world, and the most difficult to crack, and has been so since the First World War.

Nola's experience is also intriguing because it illuminates a rarely studied creature – the extra girl. In the words of silent film historian Kevin Brownlow they were 'the casualties of a great period'.[1] While working on Nola's life, I have had to concentrate less on Hollywood's glamour than on the burlesque that goes with making a living in the most competitive industry anywhere.

In this article, I want to look briefly at how Nola got to Hollywood; what it was like to be an extra girl in the twenties; focus on some of Nola's silent films; discuss whether she was any good or not – and some of the possible reasons why she didn't 'make it'; and finally discuss how her film career affected the rest of her life.

Nola (second from right) in Forlorn River, *1925*

Why did a nice girl like Nola Luxford (née Pratt) from a small sheep farming settlement in New Zealand go to live in Hollywood? In 1919 Nola Pratt was living a comfortable, middle class life in Hastings in Hawke's Bay. She worked as a ledger keeper at the Union Bank of Australia (now the ANZ) and for some time had been active in local theatre, putting on concerts to help raise money for the war effort. She was a cultured young woman, played the piano very well, and knew her Shakespeare and Wordsworth. Her father ran a bookshop in town, and the family lived in a very large and fine house that they built about 1916.

Nola was also a noted local beauty with an exceptionally vibrant and attractive personality. A Mrs de Lisle, wife of a Hastings doctor, was very taken with the young Nola Pratt and became one of her

early patrons, putting on special afternoon tea parties etc in her honour. Mrs de Lisle's granddaughter who met Nola in later years commented: 'It was quite the thing to do to get to know this up-and-coming young lady in the Hawke's Bay in those days. She was very beautiful and very alive – the life and soul of events. She seemed to know how to do things and she knew how to charm people. And they responded by showering her with gifts – flowers and perfume'.[2] There were more than just a few Hawke's Bay sheep farmers eyeing her with a view to marriage.

However, Nola's parents had a very unhappy marriage. In April 1919, Nola's father disappeared with the young woman assistant in his shop. This

was quite a scandal and Nola was absolutely mortified. She was an impetuous girl at the best of times, and became desperate to escape the small town gossip. Luckily a few weeks later, an old boyfriend of Nola's arrived back from the war. He had been gone almost four years. His name was Maurie Luxford. Within just four days of his being back on New Zealand soil, Nola and Maurie were engaged, to be married three months later.

Then came a bombshell. On their honeymoon they visited Auckland where Maurie went to see his uncle and legal guardian to take possession of a family inheritance – Nola understood Maurie to be an orphan. But he came back many hours later, very upset, to say there was no money. Nola and Maurie were penniless. Nola said she never really understood what happened that day but because she loved him, she would stand by him and work with him to build a future together.[3] She pawned some of her jewellery, Maurie borrowed money, and they booked a passage to America.

Before their wedding, Nola and Maurie had told all their friends they were going on a big world trip, to visit America and Europe, and then Maurie would get a commission in the Indian Army – they would go and live in one of the British communities like Poona or Lucknow. So no-one blinked an eye when they set sail for California. Since her early teens, Nola had loved the movies and had talked of being a movie actress. No-one had any idea of the catastrophe in Auckland, and Nola never told a soul, including her own mother, for many years. Everyone thought they had decided to stop in Hollywood for a bit of fun, and were having a gay old time. But they stopped there because they had no money to go any further, and because they had read in all the magazines about the stars who were making big money and living incredible lifestyles. Perhaps, they fantasised, they might make their fame and fortune in films too.

So what was Hollywood like when Nola and Maurie arrived in late 1919? Southern California was the land of sunshine, and Nola was immediately entranced. She loved the place, it made her feel full of youth and hope. There were fields of orange trees and wildflowers, and narrow winding roads by the coast. The city of Los Angeles also had a pleasant scale and was growing quickly.

The movie industry was huge – by 1920, it was worth US$1 billion a year and its effect on the world was electrifying. Some stars like Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, Norma Talmadge and Harold Lloyd earned incomes of millions of dollars. A growing array of glossy fan magazines showed them living in their mansions, draped in luxurious clothes, and they became objects of general worship. For example, in 1920, Gloria Swanson, then 23 years old, bought a 22-room, five-bath, Italian Renaissance mansion in Beverly Hills. She then redecorated it with peacock silk, black marble, and a golden bathtub, declaring that while a star, 'I will be every inch and every moment a star'.[4]

There were lots of rags to riches stories, and the possibility that stardom might touch the most insignificant of mortals gave Hollywood a special aura. Tens of thousands of people poured into town. In November 1919 besides Nola and Maurie, another 21,000 new migrants arrived too. They were attracted not only by the movies, but the succession of huge oil strikes and the resulting real estate speculation.

Many of those arriving were young girls with stars in their eyes but, for the majority, Hollywood's golden era was the most desperate time of their lives. Kevin Brownlow said: 'There were chances for less than one in a hundred. The unlucky girls faced poverty, starvation, and sometimes suicide'.[5]

Things were certainly tough for Nola and Maurie in the beginning. They rented a room in a big old house in Bunker Hill with a single-bar heater over which Nola could boil potatoes, and water for tea. They were to live in this one-room apartment for two years. On more than one occasion Maurie and Nola had a nickel to last them 48 hours and frequently the pair went hungry. An enduring memory for them both was sitting on a park bench in the city's central Pershing Square wondering anxiously how they could buy their next meal.

Maurie found work in a department store wrapping Christmas parcels.. Nola landed a job as a filing clerk in the office of a British motorcycle company. One day, two men from the Metro studios visited the salesroom. The manager, who had been impressed with Nola, introduced her to the studio executives. One of the men gave her his card and told her to see the Metro casting director Clifford Robertson. She did so and that day Nola became an 'extra' in a court scene. It was her first film.

Actually, Nola's hard work had just begun. Prior to 1925, there was no Central Casting Office where all movie hopefuls listed their name. Instead, there were many casting offices, and individuals had to make the rounds of studios in a 50 mile radius, seeking interviews, leaving stills of their latest roles, and registering their name at each office as available for work.

Of the pair, it was Maurie who had better luck in their first year. About once a month, he was called out to one of the studios for several days' extra work. Sometimes Nola and Maurie worked together, as they did for the Mary Pickford film *Suds*. Yet it was Nola who got the first credited role late in 1920, as an *ingénue* in *The Tiger's Coat*, and it was she who pursued a film career while Maurie eventually sought an office job.

Although Nola found the film business a tough one, she was quickly hooked. She was never happier than when she was working. She loved to act and go on location and she made numerous friends among the people she met. Film-making was fascinating and fun, and so was life in Hollywood.

During the 1920s, Nola played in comedies, melodramas, society and romantic dramas and westerns. Her roles varied enormously, ranging from a prim, small town society lady as in *The Tiger's Coat* in 1920; to a vamp in a blond wig in *Opened Shutters* in 1921; and a Mexican conchita in *That Devil Quemado* in 1923. She also played an *ingénue*, a fashion model and a London chorus girl, as well as the demure love interest for several ruggedly handsome cowboys. I will now discuss a handful of films in which Nola appeared.

ROUGED LIPS: In 1923, Nola played the second female lead in this chorus-girl melodrama involving some of Hollywood's top names. It was directed by Harold Shaw and starred Metro actress Viola Dana, one of the silent era's best loved flappers. The camera work was by John Arnold who went on to shoot all the major MGM films like *Big Parade*.

GIRL SHY: Later in 1923, Nola landed a cameo role in a film with the celebrated comedy actor and producer Harold Lloyd. Her character caused the longest and most exciting on-screen chase then seen in the movies.

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN: Nola thought this story would launch her into the big time. 'It was a glorious part, and would put me right up at the top', she said. But, sadly, the company went bankrupt and the crew struggled to complete filming before bailiffs shut down the film set. When eventually released, it attracted

ABOVE: Harold Lloyd and Nola in Girl Shy, *1924.*

OPPOSITE: Nola in The Flying Dutchman, *1923.*

Nola's first magazine profile. Under the headline 'NOLA LUXFORD HAS ARRIVED', the writer describes her as a delicate 'white-clad lissom figure with a beautiful face, circled by curly chestnut hair'. She gave a glowing account of her performance which, she said, had a powerful spiritual quality; Nola possessed 'the saddest, most appealing eyes' she had ever seen:

> With her voice that's absolute music, and those deep wells of eyes, and her ethereal air, she reminds me of the women of Maeterlinck – half clay, half stardust, unearthly, yet uttering all the world's woes.[6]

FORLORN RIVER: Nola always thought it amusing that she was chosen for several western pictures because she was terrified of horses and kept falling off them! In 1926 she played the part of Magda Lee, the fiery sweet-

heart of a bandit leader in *Forlorn River*, a Zane Grey film. According to Grey's stipulation that his pictures were shot in their authentic location, filming was done at the Zion National Park in Utah. For Nola, this was her first trip outside California. Each night, the crew, many of them real cowboys, sat around a campfire, exchanging stories of past adventures.

In Nola's most exciting scene, her character Magda Lee is so furious over the bandit leader's fawning over another girl that she rides into camp in the face of a volley of rifle fire, whips out her gun, mortally wounds her lover, then wheels around and charges off in a wild gallop, only to be fatally shot herself, fall from her horse and die.

Nola was later very cross to learn that, at the release of the picture, the producers decided that it was 'not the thing to kill a girl, and so practically all the scenes over which I had nearly died of panic were left on the cutting room floor'.[7]

BEN HUR: In going through Nola's diaries for this period as well as studying her weekly columns for the *New Zealand Free Lance* magazine between 1929 and the mid-1950s, I've been able track down Nola's smaller roles, many unsuccessful film tests and several 'footnotes to film history'.

For instance, in 1926, Nola had a most unusual assignment for one of the great epics of the silent era. Metro Goldwyn studio asked her to have a test made of her hands. 'I rushed away to be manicured and polished my nails in preparedness ', Nola wrote.

> When I arrived at the studio, I was told my hands were to be tested for the hands of Christ in the picture *Ben Hur* and of course my manicure was of no use whatsoever. They wanted hands that were not too rough, and also not too feminine. About 40 tests were made and I was chosen to play the scene with Ramon [Novarro] who was generally considered the equal in looks to Rudolf Valentino, but a much superior actor. [8]

The scene was set by the side of a well. Ben Hur is a slave of the Roman army and they arrive in Nazareth after a long march through the desert. Christ's hands are shown giving him precious water from the well, and caressing his brow. The moment marks a turning point in the film and the start of Ben Hur's fight for freedom.

According to Nola, filming it proved arduous:

> It was a dreadfully hot day and we worked and worked to get the scene right. Poor Ramon was lying down in the mud, in the most uncomfortable position, for hours and hours, but never a word of complaint.[9]

PRINCE OF PEP: Sadly, less than 20 percent of silent film has survived. The only one of these in which Nola had a lead part is *Prince of Pep*, made in 1925, but only two of the five reels exist. The print was made in Holland and all the titles are in Dutch.

So what do we learn from these films? Could Nola act? If she could, why didn't she become a star? I believe she could act, and very well. Having seen her not only in the *Prince of Pep*, but also in *The Tiger's Coat*, and *Girl Shy*, and several of her early talking films, I believe Nola was an attractive, elegant and versatile actress. She moved gracefully, her hands were slender and eloquent, and she had an expressive face that registered a range of emotions with subtlety.

Over the last few years I have corresponded with Kevin Brownlow, the silent film historian in London. He has written most approvingly of Nola, say-

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ABOVE: Richard Talmadge and Nola in Prince of Pep, *1925.*

OPPOSITE: Violà Dana (right) and Nola in Rouged Lips, *1923.*

ing she had an elegant, intelligent type of beauty rather like Florence Vidor and Eleanor Boardman: 'Nola makes a great impression in her brief role in *Girl Shy* – she is perfectly cast and she plays it perfectly. It takes great skill to get such parts exactly right'.[10] He also saw her in a Fred Thomson movie she made called *That Devil Quemado* in which she played a Mexican conchita, but which sadly has now gone missing. He remembered a rescue scene in which Thomson bursts into an enemy-occupied hacienda, grabs Nola, hoists her on the back of his saddle, and the horse and two riders leap for freedom over the gate.

She appeared to be tantalisingly close to getting that 'elusive opportunity' on a number of occasions. For example, in 1922, Nola was asked to test for four lead roles with important directors, but she just missed out in each one. These included being auditioned with Jackie Coogan for the first film version of Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. In 1924, she failed to land several more important roles. In August, for example, she was asked by the Lasky studios if Ernst Lubitsch, the great German director, could see some of her work on screen; she was being considered for a part in *Forbidden Paradise*, a costume comedy-drama starring Pola Negri. And in October, Nola hoped to get the lead role in Cecil B. De Mille's next film *The Golden Bed*, a society melodrama. But each time she was pipped at the post.

Why didn't Nola break out of the extra ranks into the front line of film actresses? Why was she consistently runner-up for lead roles? There are a number of possible reasons, but the first was, without doubt, the tremendous competition she faced. Clifford Robertson, casting director at Metro Goldwyn – who gave Nola her first 'extra' role in 1919 – once remarked that the odds against anyone actually getting into the movies in any meaningful way was, in his opinion, 5000:1. And becoming a star? He reckoned maybe 25,000:1. 'Does that sound too generous? Of course, lightning could always strike and the hopefuls lived for the unexpected'.[11]

Another factor working against her was that in her naivety and need for work, Nola proved herself too versatile an actress. She failed to understand that to be a star she had to define a distinctive film personality, something expressly her own. It was apparently Cecil B. De Mille who told her, after looking through her album of stills, 'You have too many faces'. Nola needed to cultivate a unique face or style that was faithful to her own nature and present herself solely as that type. But she did not. On the contrary, if a director told her she wasn't the 'type', she would work hard to prove him wrong.

Paradoxically, Nola's natural persona – the 'actress with a soul' that she exemplified in *The Flying Dutchman* – was less and less in demand as the 1920s wore on. By the time she arrived in Hollywood, the morality plays that she had enjoyed in Hawke's Bay in the mid-teens were almost out of date. Increasingly, Hollywood movies pivoted on sex, spice and sensation. By the mid-1920s, a new generation of female stars had replaced the old. 'The modern girl evolved from flirt to flapper', wrote film historian Lewis Jacobs, and then 'to jazz baby, to baby vamp, to salamander, and finally to the sophisticated, colourful woman of the world'.[12] But Nola was no flapper; she did not exude sex appeal.

On the other hand, it would be misleading to say that her brand of elegant beauty was unknown on the screen in those days. But as the Jazz Age wore on, it was the exception rather than the rule. And unlike Florence Vidor, Mary Astor or Pola Negri, Nola was not married to or the protégé of a prominent director or studio head, and she did not have anyone guiding or advising her.

A final factor worth mentioning is the significant pressure placed on aspiring actresses to take their turn on the casting couch. Nola felt sure that her refusal to sell sexual favours for parts had at least some bearing on why she was passed over for roles. 'The men in Hollywood took advantage of the girls', Nola said.

> The sex thing was very bad and very blatant. The directors had a lot of power and they used it. They would touch you in such a way as to make clear what they wanted. It was very difficult for someone from a small New Zealand community, where right and wrong were very clear. You had to be very strong.

She left Hollywood in 1927, possibly – just possibly – when she might have been getting somewhere. In the space of about six months, she had lead roles in three films – *King of the Herd, The Meddlin' Stranger* and *Ladies Beware*. But her marriage to Maurie had failed by this time, she was all alone, and she was still struggling financially. She had met a good-looking young man from an important family in Baltimore who had returned there after working as a stuntsman for a while, and who kept writing and asking her to marry him. Finally in June 1927, she did – but that is another part of her life we have no time to pursue here.

So how did Nola's years in Hollywood affect her and her life ahead? It gave her glamour – and an understanding of its power. During her heyday in the 1920s, 30s and 40s, people in Hawke's Bay talked of Nola in the same way as they spoke of the Royal Family. Certainly when she returned to New Zealand in 1929, on her first visit home from America, she attracted an enormous amount of attention. There were press interviews everywhere, and her four weeks here were literally like a royal tour, as she blessed people with her presence in their front parlour for tea. When I went to Hawke's Bay a month ago, I met people who could still remember – 60 years later – catching a glimpse of her as she drove past in a car on that 1929 trip, or, if they had met her, the clothes she wore, that she loved strawberries and cream, or that she wore a small gold ring with a greenstone tiki set in it on the little finger of her left hand!

When Nola arrived in Hollywood, it was a village, and everyone knew everyone. In the early years, Thursdays were the big nights at the Hollywood Hotel and all the film community including the stars went to dance there – and so Nola danced alongside Mary Pickford, Lilian Gish and Charlie Chaplin. Douglas Fairbanks' brother Robert became a good friend, as did Theda Bara's sister Lori – in fact they flatted together when her marriage to Maurie collapsed. She took it for granted that she would mingle with the stars, and she felt comfortable calling on them and asking for favours. For her special radio broadcasts in the 1930s, she gathered many of the stars to sing or recite on air.

Nola also knew the power of a photograph. She recognised the value of publicity, and she learned how to handle the media with great sophistication. There were one or two people in her later life who were very jealous of her capacity for self-promotion.

She also used her film industry knowledge to develop a second career – that of a foreign correspondent, one of New Zealand's first from Hollywood, and she ended up writing for the *New Zealand Free Lance* for 25 years. Her journalism opened numerous other doors and in turn led onto many further opportunities, particularly when she moved to New York. Through her prominence as a film actress, radio broadcaster, enthusiastic joiner of committees, and her membership of such groups as the Overseas Press Club, she mixed with ambassadors and diplomats and heads of state from all over the world. She was often the only woman to speak at the head table.

Partly it was the Hawke's Bay society girl in her, partly her Hollywood experience, and also partly her gift for friendship, but she had the most amazing network that stretched the length and breadth of the country. Patrons of the Anzac Club, which she ran in New York during World War Two, for instance, included many New York luminaries such as Mrs Andrew Carnegie, Mrs Oscar Hammerstein as well as other members of New York's social register. She also arranged for a number of top film stars – and from Broadway and music – to visit the boys there. Many men still remember the thrill of meeting Gertrude Lawrence or Tallulah Bankhead, Yehudi Menuhin or Gracie Fields. Nola took it as her right and due to operate at very high levels.

In the 1930s, *Time* named the brilliant journalist Dorothy Thompson and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt as America's two most powerful women. Nola knew them both. Dorothy Thompson served as a patron on the Board of the Anzac Club; and Nola interviewed Mrs Roosevelt for the *Free Lance* in 1942 and had her visit the Anzac Club on several occasions – in fact, Mrs Roosevelt wrote about Nola in her nationally syndicated newspaper column. In 1943, the First Lady officiated at the Anzac Garden memorial service on Anzac Day.

Hollywood had a profound impact on Nola's life, and even if stardom eluded her, she later used the advantages and contacts it gave her to the best of her considerable ability in a variety of fields.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By* (1968), p.39.

[2] Tape prepared by Mrs Denise Reid, September 1995. In possession of author.

[3] Nola Luxford gave the author this account of her honeymoon during interviews, 1989-1991.

[4] Sam Hall Kaplan, *LA – Lost and Found* (1987), pp. 83-5.

[5] Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By* (1968), p.39.

[6] *Morning Filmograph*, 1923, Nola Luxford Archive.

[7] *New Zealand Free Lance*, 21 May, 1930.

[8] *New Zealand Free Lance*, 9 April, 1930, p.41.

[9] ibid.

[10] Letter from Kevin Brownlow to author, 30 May, 1992.

[11] Bruce Henstell, *Sunshine & Wealth: LA In the 20s & 30s* (1984), p.84.

[12] Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (1971), p.410.