Sybil Seely

Buster’s Most Charming Leading Lady

By Lea Stans

If you ask Buster Keaton fans to name their favorite leading lady, chances are they’ll respond right away with “Sybil Seely.” Charming, natural and gracefully spirited, the brunette ingénue appeared in only five shorts with Buster but has been leaving a fresh impression on viewers ever since.

Even with all the praise, little has been known about Sybil. Who was this young woman who just happened to enhance some of the greatest short comedies of all time?

She was a California girl, born Sybil Travilla on January 2, 1900, only a couple of days into the start of the 20th century. Her parents were Harry Richard Travilla and his wife Lucie Travilla, of French, English and Scottish descent. Sybil was the second youngest of seven children: Edith, Guy, Jack, Ford, Elaine and Connie. The Travillas lived in the Los Angeles area, mostly in San Bernardino. They also lived briefly on Catalina Island, a small island off the coast which was later considered a playground for Hollywood’s elite. Pennsylvania-born Harry Travilla was a businessman, described by one local paper as “one of the most gentlemanly men it has been our good fortune to meet for some time.” He was at various times a hotel-keeper, the owner of a saloon called The Office and a tire dealer.

Sybil had an athletic family. All three of her brothers were champion swimmers who had participated in numerous competitions in Catalina. Jack, nicknamed “The Human U-Boat,” at one time held the record for swimming 128 yards nine inches submerged, while Ford once held his breath underwater for four minutes and 35 seconds. Guy became one of the best stunt divers in California. Their feats that were extolled in newspapers as far away as The Pittsburgh Press.

From 1912 to 1917 the brothers decided to use their talents to make a living as the Travilla Brothers, a popular vaudeville act featuring stunts in a huge onstage tank using a trained seal named Winks, advertised as “The Seal With The Human Brain.” One stunt involved the brothers sitting at a dinner table under the water while eating a meal with Winks. They were successful enough to spend much of 1913 per-

A rare portrait of Sybil Seely

FROM THE JULES FURTHMAN SCREENPLAY COLLECTION, IRVIN DEPARTMENT OF RARE BOOKS AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA LIBRARIES

forming throughout Europe. Later on, one of the brothers and his wife revived the act as “Travilla Girlie and Seal,” although this act would only last a couple of years. In 1917, all three brothers registered for the World War I draft, although by that time...
Sybil's brothers formed a vaudeville act, which may have been part of the inspiration (along with Buster's childhood crush the famous swimming star Annette Kellerman) for the water tank scenes in The Playhouse.

time Jack had become disabled; he would die in 1925.

It's been speculated that Winks the seal might have been the inspiration for Sybil choosing “Seely” (occasionally spelled “Sealey” in various publications) as her stage name. And could her brothers' experiences have inspired Buster to create the scene in The Playhouse where a young woman performs a breath-holding stunt in a tank?

The Travilla Brothers’ success was doubtless important for their family. Father Harry had died in 1905, and was buried in the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California. Sybil’s decision to try out the booming picture business might have been, in part, an effort to help out her widowed mother, and perhaps she was hoping to support herself as well.

Sybil joined the Mack Sennett studio in the mid-1910s as an extra and bit player. It’s not known if she had any previous acting experience. Her first role was in the short Her Nature Dance, which started filming in late 1916 and was released on
April 8, 1917. She played one of several dancing girls devoted to “Greek outdoor dancing,” outfitted in a gauzy “Grecian” costume. Only one other film credit from 1917 has surfaced: Secrets of a Beauty Parlor, and she had none at all for 1918, although it’s possible she appeared in films that are now lost. She was usually credited as “Sibye Trevilla” (pronounced “Sibie”).

By 1919 she had become one of Mack Sennett’s famous Bathing Beauties, which was fitting considering her family background (one might assume that she, too, was a talented swimmer). The cavorting Beauties in their flirty swimwear were used frequently on the Sennett lot and in advertising from 1917 onward, and Sybil’s was one of the many pretty faces that made the Beauties a staple of silent comedy.

Up until the end of the 1910s she continued appearing in Sennett shorts, which featured comedy stars like Ben Turpin, Ford Sterling, Charlie Murray, Louise Fazenda and Billy Bevan. She also had a small part in the Raymond Griffith feature Love, Honor and Behave! (1920).

Sometime in early 1920 Sybil married 31-year-old
screenwriter Jules Furthman. Furthman had been writing film scenarios since 1915, mainly westerns and adventure stories. One day he would be renowned as the Jules Furthman, writer of such respected classics as Mutiny on the Bounty, Only Angels Have Wings, To Have and Have Not, The Big Sleep and Rio Bravo. But around 1920 some of his projects were comedy features for Fox—he even directed three films, one called The Land of Jazz, which had mixed reviews. The newly-weds continued living in the Los Angeles area and working in their respective areas of the entertainment business.

In the late spring of 1920 Sybil’s career took a new turn: She agreed to become the leading lady of up-and-coming young comedian Buster Keaton. Buster had recently finished his three-year stint with Roscoe Arbuckle and had already completed—and shelved—his studio’s first film: The High Sign with leading lady Bartine Burkett. Clearly he was hoping that his first release would be something a little more distinctive. That something would become the lauded One Week.

How Buster came to choose Sybil in particular is anybody’s guess, but there’s a chance that his co-director Eddie Cline had something to with it. Cline had been one of Sennett’s best comedy directors and had been a major factor in creating the Bathing Beauties. It’s possible that he might have remembered Sybil and suggested her. Since she was an “unknown” she might have commanded a more manageable salary than a more seasoned actress.

In One Week Sybil had a lovely onscreen chemistry with Buster, acting with a naturalness that complemented his “blank pan” persona, while still retaining a distinct charm of her own. She was also fearless, gamely doing her own stunts such as stepping from one speeding car into another and clinging to a tall revolving wall. If you watch these stunts carefully there is never any sign of hesitation… Buster must have approved.

She was given generous amounts of screen time, not always the norm for supporting actors back then. Audiences today are sometimes taken by surprise by the slightly risqué gag in which Sybil, in a bathtub, drops her soap on the floor and a hand appears in front of the camera lens so she can retrieve it with modesty. (The setup is similar to a brief scene in Comique short The Garage, in which Molly Malone is also shown washing up.) Even back then, the moment was remarked upon: “There is a spicy touch in one scene,” a review in The Film Daily noted, “but that is inoffensive and perfectly clean.” And indeed, Sybil plays the scene with a breezy nonchalance, smiling to thank the camera once the soap is safe in her hands again.

In Convict 13 Sybil’s role as a socialite is a bit smaller, although her character’s inven-
Buster Has Eleanor's Blessing

HOLLYWOOD (AP)—It isn't every married man who can ask former lady friends to have lunch with him, especially when they haven't seen each other for years.

However, Buster Keaton thought it would be a good idea, and his wife, Eleanor, gave her blessing to the project. Now the problem remains for the veteran dead-pan comedian to locate his former leading ladies.

Some he knows about. For example, the idea of the lunch actually was prompted by his very first leading lady, Sybil Sealy (Mrs. Jules Furthman). She heard about Paramount's new production, "The Buster Keaton Story," and sent him a box of orchids and a note wishing him good luck with the film. She and her husband live in nearby Culver City.

Two-reeler Days

Miss Sealy played opposite Keaton—whose part in the picture is played by Donald O'Connor—in "One Week," a two-reel comedy.

Another leading lady whose whereabouts he knows is the former Virginia Fox, now married to producer Darryl F. Zanuck. She appeared with Keaton in a series of pictures including "Palais." One of his best-known leading ladies was the late Renee Adoree, heroine of "The Pig Parade."

Keaton, who is serving as technical adviser for the story of his life, said there were others besides Sybil Sealy and Virginia Fox whom he would like to invite to lunch. Ann Cornell, Marian Mack and Katherine McGuire are some, but he says he hasn't had any news of them for a long time.

He asks anyone who knows them to pass along the word. Lunch at Paramount.
And r.s.v.p.

ABOVE: Cutting from The Chronicle Telegram, Elyria, Ohio, Aug. 1, 1956.
ABOVE RIGHT: A publicity shot featuring Keaton, Seely and Arbuckle at Keaton's studio.
RIGHT: Publicity shots for The Scarecrow and One Week.

The Keaton Chronicle
caused a lot of confusion. Theories have ranged from Rudi Blesh’s assumption that she might have “proved a little fragile” for Buster’s slapstick to the slightly hard-to-buy idea that she was about the same height as Buster.

A more likely explanation could be something a bit more... well, practical.

The summer of 1920 held special significance for young bride Sybil—even aside from her time at Buster’s studio. On March 20th of 1921 the Furthmans gave birth to their only child, Jules Jr. If you do the math, you see that it’s likely that Sybil was in her first weeks of pregnancy around the time when Convict 13 and The Scarecrow were filmed.

Therefore, it’s plausible that once Sybil discovered she was pregnant, she decided to take a hiatus from films, leading to Keaton having to hunt for a new leading lady. And sure enough, in early September of 1920 the trade papers announced that Virginia Fox had been signed to the Keaton studio—right after The Scarecrow was a wrap.

Sybil’s final 1920 film role (that we know of) was a small part in a Sennett two-reeler called Bungalow Troubles. Apparently, she appeared in no more films until she returned to Buster’s studio for The Boat (1921), filmed several months after the birth of little Jules. It’s been speculated that Buster was considering combining One Week and The Boat into a feature.

After The Boat, she made appearances in a few other Sennett films and in the Sunshine Comedies at Fox, where her husband was a screenwriter from 1919 until 1923. Fascinatingly, one of her Sunshine roles was in Please Be Careful (1922), which starred porkpie hat-wearing Keaton imitator Charles Dorety.

But after her appearance in Buster’s The Frozen North, Sybil retired from the screen to raise Jules Jr. and devote herself to being a homemaker. From what we can learn, her son needed extra care and attention. He was apparently born with a mental disability, although details are unknown, beyond a couple of anecdotes claiming that the Furthmans moved to a “remote” area of Culver City after their son’s noise disturbed their neighbors.

“Remoteness” notwithstanding, by the 1930s the Furthmans were living in a beautiful home overlooking the Bel-Air Country Club golf course in Los Angeles, complete with an elegant curved staircase in the foyer and a swimming pool. Jules Sr. had quickly become one of America’s most famous screenwriters, respected for his ability to write for any genre. Their Bel-Air house is still there, by the way... and can be yours for a mere $7.8 million.

The Furthmans kept a cultured home. Jules amassed collections of ancient coins, fine art and rare books; the couple decorated their house with original works by Matisse, Picasso and Brancusi. Jules also cultivated orchids, eventually expanding his interest into the profitable Furthman Orchid Nursery, a network of seven greenhouses containing around 48,000 plants. (Interestingly enough, a scene in Furthman’s famous The Big Sleep would feature a greenhouse full of orchids.) Once Jules Jr. was a teen, he worked in the greenhouses for his father as an “apprentice nurseryman.”

Sybil herself was a member of the prestigious Bel-Air Garden Club, and would enter flowers in its annual garden shows (she won first prize for the most beautiful orchids in 1936). Both she and Jules were known to supply their flowers for decorations at friends’ events and send them to people as gifts. In fact, when she heard that The Buster Keaton Story was in production, Sybil congratulated Buster with a box of her orchids.

The Furthmans remained happily married until Jules’s death in 1966. He had suffered a stroke in Oxford, England while doing research on a 1603 book containing annotations he believed could’ve been written by Shakespeare. His body was brought home and buried in the Forest Lawn cemetery in Glendale.

Toward the end of her life Sybil lived with her sister Connie in another house in Culver City. On June 26th, 1984, she died at home of cardiac failure. She was buried next to Jules at Forest Lawn. Her marker reads “Beloved Wife and Mother” and “God Is My Life.”

Despite a relatively brief filmography, Sybil Seely has left an enduring impact on silent comedy. Buster was lucky to have found her. Her refreshing presence in his short films was an important factor in their excellence and still adds to their ability to captivate new audiences today. Even if she had only appeared in One Week, she would still be remembered. 

After the movies

FAR LEFT: The Furthmans’ home at 3801 Lenawee Avenue, Culver City, California.
INSET: Jules Furthman Jr.
BELOW: The headstones for Sybil & Jules Furthman demonstrate that their priorities were family and home.
RIGHT: Sybil and Jules playing acting.

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