

## ***A CENTURY SINCE 'THE WATER NYMPH'***

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September 23, 1912: an important date in the history of cinema and the cultural heritage of America.

Several weeks previous, in August, a large advertisement ran in New York City's entertainment trade papers. Taking pride of place in the upper left corner of the ad was an oval headshot of a dark-haired young woman with soulful eyes. The caption: "Mabel Normand." To her right, an oval head-and-shoulders shot of a handsome man, captioned "Ford Sterling." Separating their photos was a word spelled vertically, like a pole: Keystone. The pole rested on a base-word: Films.

In caps beneath the photos: "A SPLIT-REEL COMEDY RELEASED EVERY MONDAY." In the usage of the day, "split-reel" meant two 7- or 8-minute comedies on one reel of film.

Beneath the caps: "Mabel Normand, Ford Sterling, Mack Sennett, and Fred Mace, directed by Mr. Sennett and supported by an all-star cast."

That ad announced the first Keystone comedies: "The Water Nymph" and "Cohen Collects a Debt."

Readers of the time found this ad highly unusual for several reasons.

The actors are featured prominently and named. D. W. Griffith's Biograph Company (where Sennett and Normand got their starts) didn't advertise its actors. Griffith treated his players as incidental to his films. Sennett promoted actors and made them household names. That was a first.

A woman's face and her name dominated the ad's presentation. That, too, was a first.

And the topper: Inserted in the center of the page was a still from "The Water Nymph," meant to shock, and it shocked plenty: Mabel Normand stands proudly clad in what was known as "Kellermen tights." Annette Kellermen was a famous swimmer arrested in the Boston area for swimming in a body-stocking that left nothing of the female anatomy to the imagination.

In 1912, to display a woman's ankle was risqué. Mabel's tights were outrageous.

Sennett had directed himself and Mabel Normand in Biograph's comedies for nearly two years. They'd played with gender role reversals and light slapstick, but Biograph and Griffith insisted on decorum. Moral standards and the authorities that enforced them were supported, not mocked.

Sennett's bold ad was a declaration of war against tradition (Mabel comes first) and against propriety (look at what she's wearing).

On Sept. 23 1912, it's unlikely anyone anticipated the scope of Sennett's audacity.

"The Water Nymph" is downright kinky, yet also sweet, and infectiously alive.

Mack and Mabel, properly clad, are sweethearts who mime a plan to elope. Mack, age 32, looks maybe 25; Mabel shines and looks her age – depending on which source you believe, anywhere from 16 to 19.

Cut to Mack leaving his respectable home, suitcase in hand. His father (Ford Sterling) and mother (unidentified) stop him. Father suggests they go to the beach instead.

Cut to Mack and Mabel scheming. She's not yet met his family. Mack tells her to intercept them at the beach and flirt with his father.

Soon Father, Mother, and Mack sit at an outdoors Coney Island eatery. To contrast what's to follow, Mother is properly dressed: a large hat and many layers of clothing.

Father goes off to swim.

Some footage is missing. There's a bit of confusing "biz" with an effeminate man. Then we're in the bathhouse. Mabel changes and appears in her Kellerman tights. Then, on a pier, men and women in proper (bulky) bathing attire giddily greet Mabel.

She leaves the frame, Father joins the onlookers, and everybody watches Mabel, who struts and poses and laughs, lovely and (for 1912) naked.

Normand was an athlete. She demonstrates several trick dives that make Father increasingly excited. But when it's his turn to dive, he's timid – Mabel dares what men dare not. She performs more trick dives, in poses provocative for their day, her body displayed head-to-toe from all angles.

Soon we're back in the bathhouse, where Father flirts with Mabel. A cut to Mother, wondering where her family's gone. Then the bathhouse: Mabel and Father, fully clothed, walk off arm in arm. Father's flirts some more, Mabel responds, Father hunts for Mother, can't find her, goes back to Mabel, then a brief bit of Mack and Mabel alone with Mack delighted at the proceedings.

Father and Mabel sit at the table that Mother has left. They share what looks like a couple of beers. Cut to Mack, who watches, beside himself with amusement as Father flirts for all he's worth, so carried away that, when Mack interrupts, Father kisses Mack's hand, thinking it Mabel's.

Father's flummoxed. Mother returns. Mack beams.

Title card: "Folks, meet Mabel, my sweetheart."

Father fumes and flusters. Mother is reservedly pleased. Mabel kisses Mother. Father tries to kiss Mabel on the lips, but Mack amiably steps between them. Mack and Mabel kiss as Father stewes in overacted frustration. Mother wants a kiss from Father, but he makes a face and refuses. The End.

That's some family Mabel's marrying into.

The film runs less than 8 minutes.

By "The Water Nymph's" first anniversary – Sept. 23, 1913 – Keystone had released 135 short comedies and, in doing so, established the medium of American slapstick.

Of those 135 films, Sennett directed 92 and acted in 41; Normand starred in 67. Some were improvised romps, but, contrary to legend, some were carefully written and staged. "Barney Oldfield's Race for a Life" (June 1913) runs 13 minutes, during which I count 55 camera positions and 107 edits -- with a close up, tracking shots, car-mounted cameras, parallel cutting, and a dandy special effect.

While D.W. Griffith's imagination was stuck in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sennett reveled in the 20<sup>th</sup>. That first year, Sennett's plots featured ragtime bands; hot air balloons (aerial shots!); Mabel in drag (inadvertently the object of a woman's affection) and in "Speed Queen" (June 1913) Mabel drives a car like mad when most men couldn't drive at all. In Sennett's movies, people go to the movies ("Mabel's Dramatic Career," Sept. 1913) and some can't tell what's screened from what's real.

In Sennett's world, everybody's horny, the authorities are ludicrous, and families are snake pits in which no one can be trusted. Which is to say that, for Sennett, society can't trust itself. He films an America that cares for nothing but instant gratification.

*Photoplay* magazine, 1928: “The Great American Master of Tragedy Interviews the Great American Master of Comedy.”

Theodore Dreiser interviewed Mack Sennett.

Behind Sennett’s “sagging, half-lackadaisical manner,” Dreiser saw a “forceful, searching intellect ... a terrifying wisdom. ... It was interesting just to feel the force and intelligence of him.”

Dreiser: “I return to my first question – your artistic excuse for being – the animating faith that is in you?”

Sennett: “My artistic reason for being? The faith that is in me! I guess I never thought about those things when I started out, but I can give a fair answer now. Everybody wants to laugh at something. Mostly at other people’s troubles, if they’re not too rough. ... And always in some kind of story that could be told very differently if one wanted to be serious.”

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