

THE DRAGON ON SENNETT'S HILL

By Michael Ventura

March 12, 2010

Early in January 1978, MGM was still MGM and looked pretty much as it had in 1948. Just more tired. On the back lot, the mansion from *Gone With the Wind* leaned over and *The Bandwagon's* train station wasn't safe to walk upon. All such defunct sets would be pulled down within days and the struggling studio would sell the land. Mundane houses, shops and offices now stand where there'd been gaudy grandeur. One wonders if the new residents dream strange dreams on that ground.

Heavy rains that winter knocked over a couple of O's on a weary-looking Hollywood sign. Stayed that way for a while. In those days Hollywood smiled with broken teeth.

On Paramount's Western set, you could walk dirt streets and go into the jail and the saloon, careful of the messes on the floor: spotlights, broken chairs, thick wires -- all dusty. (It soon became a parking lot.) Twentieth Century Fox had torn down its open-air sets years before; the skyscrapers of Century City rose upon the site. But Fox's *Funny Girl* constructions were in fine repair, and if you'd grown up in New York, like me, it was a dream-like shock to drive through the studio gate on Pico Boulevard and see an El station, tracks and all -- only to be shocked further into a dreamy state when the office of your scheduled meeting was in a building fronted by a tenement façade meant to portray the streets you grew up on.

We were learning that Hollywood wasn't really a place you went to; it was an altered state that altered you.

In '78 the movie biz and Los Angeles were looking to reinvent themselves just as we who migrated there set up to reinvent ourselves. We were writers from the sunken *Austin Sun* -- Ginger Varney, James BigBoy Medlin, Jeff Nightbyrd, and me. We'd come to work the *Los Angels Free Press* into a national magazine, but that ship sank beneath us, too, after just a few issues. We had no idea that some of us would start a new paper -- *L.A. Weekly* -- by the end of the year, nor that by year's end Big and I would be screenwriters (maybe the only two scribes to hit L.A. who never intended to do movies). When we were offered the deal I forget which of us asked, "Think we can do it?" The other said, "We've been watching 'em all our lives, and we're writers, ain't we? If we can't write at least one, we oughta pack it in."

We four rented a house in a neighborhood that never guessed it would ever be gentrified: Silver Lake, just off Echo Park. Mostly a Mexican area then. The only night I ever drank mescal I challenged several neighbors to a fight. Big, Jeff and Clint (the guy who'd brought the mescal), came running out yelling: "Mescal! Mescal! He's never drunk mescal!" Our neighbors laughed 'til they fell down and declined to beat the stuffing out of me. The next morning I was pouring liquids from all orifices, trying gamely to stay conscious because we expected a call from Martin Sheen. Had he decided for or against Big and I writing his next picture? I thought I could talk but Big assured me I wasn't speaking a language he or Sheen knew. Big did the talking. Sheen said no. (Made the call himself; didn't palm it off to an assistant. In Hollywood, that's exceptionally good manners.)

We weren't kids, but as professional writers we were young. We still had some idea that our words could save the world, or at least the neighborhood, or maybe the block. Turns out, they saved us. I'd rather they'd saved the world, but I'm not ungrateful for the outcome.

Sometime that spring or summer, Ginger and I took a walk down Glendale Boulevard. A block from the house we all shared, we came upon a plaque that marked the site of Mack Sennett's Keystone lot, circa 1912-1930 -- a studio that, at its largest expansion, included the very place we lived. Mabel Normand, Charlie Chaplin, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, Harry Langdon, Gloria Swanson, Carole Lombard, Frank Capra, Ben Turpin, Ford Sterling, Chester Conklin, Cecile Arnold, Minta Durfee -- all once cavorted right there under our feet and under our pillows. Our street was on a steep grade that Ginger and I took to calling "Sennett's Hill."

In that time, when none of us were who we would become, when we had yet to discover how weak and strong we were, how gifted and flawed, how oh-my-god and I-never-imagined and are-you-kidding? we were -- I had a dream. Did I catch it from the shade of Mabel Normand? In her dressing room nearby, 60-odd years before, Mabel would read Freud while she ate ice cream for breakfast and sipped a morning mug of apricot brandy.

I dreamed a dragon. The director Josef von Sternberg once said, "I believe that cinema was here from the beginning of the world." Legends of dragons and dragonish serpents have been with human beings from our beginnings. For the Chinese, Norsemen, Celts, Aztecs, and the shamans of West Africa, Haiti and New Orleans -- across history and across the world -- the dragon has dwelled insistently in the our psyches. Christians celebrate Michaelmas, the Archangel come to earth to slay the dragon -- but they don't honor the dragon enough. The Archangel would not have come to slay a rat. It took the capitol-D Dragon to draw an Archangel into Christian history and myth -- Christianity's way of dominating the Celtic legends that came before its own. But, between the lines, even that Christian myth admits that between Heaven and earth, the dragon is the connecting principle, for the dragon symbolizes the forces of creation and destruction in that mighty state in which they become one and the same.

In my dream the Dragon -- beautiful and terrible to behold -- reigned on Sennett's Hill, enormous in Edendale (ah, Eden). Hollywood was the Dragon I dreamed. Between desert and sea, in that earthquake-shaken place (the Dragon turning over in its sleep), that Dragon created and destroyed while it poured forth imagery that changed everyone.

Something primitive and basic had awakened -- "primitive" as defined, in another context, by Duke Ellington: "exciting, ornately stimulating... with... the power to hypnotize and enervate the will toward total abandonment."

And, primitively, Hollywood's Dragon did what the Archangel feared it would: called forth from the depths the ancient goddesses and gods -- or rather, their stand-ins and representatives, who wielded the old powers without knowledge or care, wildly, in every direction. As Sennett wrote, remembering Keystone's beginnings in 1912, the movies were "about to create a new kind of human being on the face of the world, the movie star." Those new human beings -- a polytheistic pantheon, stand-ins for goddesses and gods -- had no idea of their effect. But they literally sprayed upon their audience energies and forces that society had repressed throughout history.

The old myths warn that merely looking at a deity can change you. And they warn that, at the very least, it is dangerous for mortals to mingle with such beings.

Just by looking at them, we changed. And right away. Changed what we wore, what we did, and how we imagined love and all of life – changed even what and how we desired. Such was the power of the Dragon.

Thomas Edison and William K.L. Dickson invented the motion picture camera. The first “flickers” were merely 50 feet in length, viewed in moments for a nickel on a smallish machine called a Kinetoscope. Recently reading Terry Ramsaye’s 1926 *A Million and One Nights*, I learned that the first “Edison Kinetoscope Parlor” opened in Manhattan at 1155 Broadway on April 14, 1894. “The front of the establishment was garnished with an illuminated electric dragon with fiery eyes.”

Is the Dragon good? Bad? Both? Neither? Who can say? But who among us would be the person we are had not the Dragon triumphantly returned?

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All Rights Reserved.