



MARY PICKFORD
The most popular child in the world

The Portrayal of Child Roles

By

MARY PICKFORD

THE audience at the movies, no less than the audience at the spoken drama, has a fervent curiosity about its favorites. Nothing of the artistry of the producer, director or photographer; nothing of the fidelity with which the play is rendered; nothing of the skill of the star's associates can detract from the ardent interest of the audience in the personal characteristics, the habits, or the salaries, of their film deities. The artistic difficulties and despairs of the actor are matters of calm indifference to them. They simply want to know all the intimate personal details about them.

Consider, for instance, that eternal if unspoken question of every audience when the grown-up actress undertakes a child's rôle; "I wonder how old she really is!"

JUST think what this question implies. It conveys a doubt in the mind of the audience,—a doubt which the actress simply must dispel if she is to make a success of her part. And it isn't any easy task. Imagine trying to persuade and convince a doubting audience that you aren't a day over the age of the child you are portraying.

I remember once going to a moving picture theatre to see one of my own plays, "The Poor Little Rich Girl". Seated in front of me were a woman and her ten-year old daughter. I watched them carefully, to note their impressions. Throughout the film, both mother and daughter were too absorbed in the development of the plot to offer many comments. I waited eagerly for some expression of opinion. Finally, at one time when I was supposed to give the impression of

excited anger, I heard the mother say to the child, "See, that's just the way you behave when you don't get what you want."

The child made no reply.

Not until my play had ended did she speak, and then she began to question her mother about Gwendolyn, "The Poor Little Rich Girl."

"Gwendolyn won't be unhappy again, will she, Mother?" she asked.

Her mother assured her that Gwendolyn would live happily ever after. Then she asked the child, "How old do you think Gwendolyn is, dear?"

"As old as me," replied the child, without the least hesitation.

"But don't you know that Mary Pickford is many years older than you are?"

"Why, she can't be, Mother. She plays like me, and she cries like me, and she's just as big as me."

I HAVE always thought of that little girl's remark as the greatest compliment I ever received. It repaid all my study. For the creation of such an impression upon the susceptible mind of a child entailed many hours of hard work in the perfection of a number of very trifling details of technique.

For instance, there are certain changes in the contour of the face that come with maturity. The face of a child is full, and without the depressions which appear in the face of an adult. The adult who portrays a child rôle must resort to some method of concealing these depressions. Wearing the hair in long curls which fall over part of the cheek is one way of solving the problem. Of course, this cannot be done if one is playing the part of a little boy. Since the short wig, which one must wear as a boy, offers no help at all in that direction, the only thing to do is to resort to some of the major trickeries of make-up.

There are many things to remember in impersonating a child rôle. For instance, the facial muscles of the grown-up are controlled, while those of the child spontaneously reflect passing moods. A child pouts when it is displeased. When children are awed, or surprised, or frightened, their eyes open wide and their mouths droop, but their foreheads remain unwrinkled,—and just there is another difficulty, for when we older people are under the influence of similar emotions, our brows have a tendency to become lined. Then there are the muscles about the mouth; those of the child, unlike those of the grown-up, are relaxed.

ANOTHER technical problem that is difficult to solve is that of carriage. You see, the child moves about freely, its arms swinging carelessly, its shoulders droop very slightly, the knee joints are loose, and the toes point inward. An actress can't be too careful in noting and copying such movements as these in the case of a child. It all takes time and study—more than my audiences have ever imagined. I have found that long association with children and exact imitation of each of their little gestures and expressions have helped me more materially than anything else.

A Few of the Difficulties in the Way of Dress, Make-Up, Manners and Technique

Actresses who undertake child rôles must also thoroughly understand the subject of dressing the part. The waist-line must never be accentuated. A child's dress should hang a little above the knee in a moving picture, while it should hang a little below the knee on the stage, this difference being, of course, due to the fact that on the spoken stage the audience is, with respect to the actor, in a depression, whereas in a moving picture theatre, the impression, no matter how high the screen, is one of even vision.

IN the spoken drama the actress who plays a child's rôle has even more troubles. She has the problem of the voice. A child's voice is high and unsustained. The moving picture actress is mercifully spared the problem of the voice.

If the moving picture actress can convince the children in her audience that she really is a child herself, she has achieved her highest goal. For it is the children in the audience who are her severest critics. Their perceptions are extremely quick, their impressions reliable and their response absolutely sincere. If they are pleased, the actress can count herself a success indeed.

PEOPLE often ask me if the public isn't tiring of seeing child rôles on the films. Such inquirers forget two things, first, that a considerable portion of every moving picture audience, especially in the afternoon, is made up of young people; and second, that the delineation of child character has a perennial interest for grown-ups.

If you are inclined to doubt this, let me ask you what the three greatest legitimate theatrical successes are in New York today. Are they not, first, the Hippodrome; second, "Chu Chin Chow"; and, third, "Jack O'Lantern"?

Are not all of these plays largely devised for the amusement of children, and are not all of them built upon themes of child life?

But, you will say, these are plays, not moving pictures. True, but if the portrayal of youthful rôles is so much a delight in the legitimate theatre, isn't it natural to suppose that it is doubly so in the movies?