



## Hollywood: Her Story September 2020 ENewsletter Ava DuVernay Wins the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize

The Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize was established in 1994 and is given annually to “a man or woman who has made an outstanding contribution to the beauty of the world and to mankind’s enjoyment and understanding of life.” It was established in Lillian Gish’s will in which she stated, “It is my desire, by establishing this prize, to give recipients of the prize the recognition they deserve, to bring attention to their contributions to society and encourage others to follow in their path.” A prestigious award, the stipend associated with the prize is considered one of the richest in the arts in America. Sisters Dorothy and Lillian Gish were both film actresses whose careers spanned many decades. In 2020, Ava DuVernay became the first female filmmaker to receive the prize.



In August of this year, **Ava DuVernay** was selected as the 27th recipient of the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize. Cited for her work to amplify the voices of women and people of color in Hollywood, the selection committee said her 2016 film *13th* was not merely impactful, but a catalyst for change. She has championed inclusion in Hollywood through her Los Angeles entertainment internship initiative and through founding the media collective Array. DuVernay was nominated for a Best Documentary Feature Oscar for *13th* and her movie *Selma* was nominated for the 2015

Best Picture Oscar. She was the first African-American woman to be nominated for a Best Director, Motion Picture Golden Globe.

DuVernay says, “As an artist, I am grateful that I live at a time when access to cameras and distribution platforms, and ways to reach audiences outside of the normal Hollywood infrastructure are more possible for me, a black person, a woman, than ever before. My voice as a storyteller and vision as a filmmaker can be amplified without the permission of the privileged few who have held marginalized creators at arm’s distance for decades.”



**Dorothy Gish** and Lillian Gish both debuted in films in 1912. Dorothy appeared in 100 films over the course of her career. She also enjoyed great success on the stage and was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame. Many of her films were comedies and most were during the silent film era. Lillian said about her sister Dorothy: “Dorothy was much more talented than I am because she had wit. She could make people laugh. And they said I was as funny as a baby’s open grave. I couldn’t make people laugh, but Dorothy could make them cry *and* laugh, so therefore she was the better actress than I was.”



Called the “First Lady of the Silent Screen Era” and “First Lady of American Cinema” actress **Lillian Gish** was the finest actress of the time, with an entertainment career that lasted 75 years. She was nominated for Best Supporting Actress in 1947 for her performance in *Duel in the Sun*. In 1971, she received an Honorary Oscar for superlative artistry and distinguished contribution to the motion picture industry and later worked to preserve silent films. Lillian is credited with pioneering fundamental film performance techniques and directed one movie.

She tells the story of D.W. Griffith’s very first close-up (which is of her in *Way Down East* – 1920): “I never had a double or a stand-in. I did it all myself. The blizzard– I was facing it. The wind on the peninsula was terrible. The snow as it came against my face

melted, and on my eyelashes – icicles! And Griffith yelled at the cameraman, ‘Billy, Billy, get that face!’ And he said, ‘I will if the oil in the camera hasn’t frozen,’ and he got that face!”

Women in front of and behind the camera make the movies that we all welcome into our hearts and homes. Women across all the areas of moviemaking from actress to animator, editor to stuntwoman, costume designer to screenwriter, producer to director have contributed to the success of the movie industry since its founding in the 1890s. Help us celebrate these women who are written into movie history in *Hollywood: Her Story*.

Jill S.Tietjen and Barbara Bridges

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