



## Hollywood: Her Story April 2021 ENewsletter Movie Remakes – *Ben-Hur*



Movie remakes have been a part of movie history almost from the beginning of the industry. One such movie that we often talk about in our presentations is *Ben Hur*. Originally produced in 1907, remakes of *Ben-Hur* were released in 1925, 1959 and 2016. Women played key roles in each of the versions of this classic movie. Let's learn about some of those women.



Actress, stuntwoman, screenwriter, producer, and director **Gene Gauntier** wrote the screenplay adaptation for the 1907 version of *Ben Hur* in two days. She is credited with playing a critical role in the development of scriptwriting conventions and developing the genre of serials. She often wrote what she then performed. About her stuntwork, Gauntier said, "Only youth and a strong constitution could have stood up under it. I was playing in two pictures a week, working in almost every scene, and writing two or three scenarios a week, in the effort to keep up with our production. My screen work was all strenuous, horseback riding for hours each day, water scenes in which I committed suicide or floated on spar in shark-infested waters, climbing trees, coming down on ropes from second-story windows, jumping from roofs or rolling down to be caught in blankets, overturning skills, paddling canoes, a hundred and one 'stunts' thought out to give the action Kalem films demanded. I was terrified at each daring thing I had to do, but for some inexplicable reason I continued to write them. They never seemed so difficult when I was seated before the typewriter in the throes of creating them, but as the moment for performance drew near they assumed unwarranted aspects of terror. A 'double' was never even thought of in those days!"



Screenwriter **June Mathis** was the first female executive at Metro/MGM and the highest paid executive in Hollywood. Working for Metro Pictures, she wrote *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), famously cast Rudolph Valentino in the role of Julio, and was responsible for casting, crew, and production. She had similar responsibilities with Goldwyn Pictures for the 1925 version of *Ben-Hur*, but the director was not comfortable with her roles. He was eventually replaced for a myriad of reasons and she was replaced when Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was formed in 1924, before filming of *Ben-Hur* was completed. In 1926, when she was working for First National, she was said to be the third most powerful woman in Hollywood after actresses Mary Pickford and Norma Talmadge. She wrote more than 100 stories and served as a founding member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Her career was cut short by her death from a heart ailment when she was only forty years

old.



Actress **Betty Bronson's** fame skyrocketed when she was selected to play Peter Pan in the 1924 movie; she was 17 years old. Then, she played Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the 1925 remake of *Ben-Hur*. Upon her marriage in 1933, she retired from filmmaking. She played a few bit parts in the 1960s and early 1970s for television and in films.



British costume designer **Elizabeth Haffenden** won her first Best Costume Design, Color Oscar for the 1959 remake of *Ben-Hur*. Her second Oscar in the same category came in 1967 for *A Man for All Seasons*. Haffenden began her costume designing career in 1933 and later became the head of the costume designing department at Gainsborough Studios. She mentored other costume designers including Julie Harris, another Oscar winner.



In 2002, film editor and sound editor **Dody Dorn** was nominated for the Best Film Editing Oscar for *Memento*. She served as supervising sound editor for *The Abyss* (1989) which was nominated for a Best Sound Oscar. Dorn was the film editor for the 2016 remake of *Ben-Hur*. She said, "It is still a commonly accepted notion that the editor just 'cuts out all the bad bits.' I liken editing more to sculpture. I don't claim to be Michelangelo, but I like to think that when I am watching the dailies projected for the first time, I am seeing the pure essence of the film and that I work toward preserving and presenting that essence in a form that is accessible while still being artful." She also said, "Editing is making choices. During post-production, I work with the director to mine the best film out of the material that was shot. Leaving no stone unturned and going with my gut instincts, two seemingly diametrically opposed concepts, are techniques that I put to use on every film. That strange combination of hard work and divine inspiration probably means, inevitably, that I have left my stamp on the films I've edited."

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*.

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