

## Career Overview, Model # 1

Lule Warrenton

June 22, 1862 - May 14, 1932

We do not as yet have documentation on “Hollywood Girls’ Club” or “the first all-woman film company” that Lule Warrenton was said to have started in 1923. (Slide, 48) Apparently, it was not her first effort to get outside the niche she had occupied since she began at Universal in 1913. Dubbed “Mother” Warrenton, as a character actor she specialized in maternal roles. The first reference to Lule Warrenton as a director can be found in a 1916 article in *The Moving Picture Weekly* featuring the formation of her company within Universal Studios, formed to produce a picture then titled *The Calling of Lindy*. The following year, *The Moving Picture World* announced that with the production of *The Birds’ Christmas Carol*, Warrenton would be “the first and only woman producer with a studio and company all her own.” We now have a historical vantage on such hyperbole and wonder how many times publicity from this period used the novelty of a woman producer or director to promote a picture.

It is of course difficult to construct an account of Warrenton’s career from trade journal articles that were most likely based on press releases, notorious for their inflated rhetoric and unfettered optimism. However, the extant print of the Universal one-reel film, now titled *When Little Lindy Sang*, tells us much more about the kind of subject matter that women tended to take up, even with the limited independence of the short term “company” under the studio umbrella. Warrenton was given the authority to develop a series of shorts for the children’s audience. Most importantly, the film stands out in its subtle treatment of racial prejudice, and would seem to be a social issue as much as an entertainment film. Lindy, played by a talented African American child actress (Ernestine Jones) represents the one black child who is rejected by the students in the all-white class—excluded not for her color but for her loud voice. Their prejudice is turned around when Lindy saves the others by calling out “Fire” in her booming voice. The teacher then saves Lindy who is left in the smoking building. As an example of work in the silent era, *When Little Lindy Sang* is a visual gem that makes an interesting comparison with an earlier treatment of black social subject matter, Alice Guy Blaché’s highly theatrical *A Fool and His*

*Money* (1912), in contrast with which it has a very documentary-like feel. Even the scene in which a white student tries to wash the black off Lindy's face in the water fountain is as much social comment as comedy.

There is no evidence as yet that Warrenton made any more films in this series and this could explain her move the next year to the Lankershim, California, studio of what was called the Frieder Film Corporation where she worked on a children's film series all her own. Working as an independent, Warrenton had a larger role as well as a stake, not only producing and directing but adapting the classic *The Birds' Christmas Carol*. Her second venture was significantly larger in every way, this time a feature, and *The Moving Picture World* credits her with a company of fifty people but then deflates this with the clarification that most in the company are children (by implication, not professional adult actors). Another Frieder Film Corporation feature, *A Bit o' Heaven*, is described in the trade press as "an unusually high-class production filled with charming originality." Still, the next two films were announced but apparently never made, and by September, 1917, eight months after the announcement of her first independent film, Lule Warrenton returned to character acting at Universal.

Some of Lule Warrenton's work as an actress can be seen in the extant *Eleanor's Catch* (1916), a short directed at Universal by Cleo Madison, where Warrenton plays the mother of Eleanor, in a bold reversal-of-expectations comedy where Eleanor (Cleo Madison) is the undercover cop who "catches" the underworld figure she lures into her "net." An unusual situation where the women are shown to be in league against the men, Warrenton is shown here to be full-figured but is not inclined to use her weight for comedy in the mode of popular slapstick. She appeared as well in features directed by Cleo Madison, *A Soul Enslaved* (1916) and *Her Bitter Cup* (1916), both melodramas with Madison cast in the role of a radical factory worker. (See scenario for *Her Bitter Cup*) Warrenton can also be located on the credits for Lois Weber's *Jewel* (1915) and Tony Side suggests that Weber, as the most powerful female director at Universal, would have been influential in Warrenton's career along with those who also directed at Universal during the 1911-1919 high water mark for women at that studio.

The most detailed source of information from the period on Lule Warrenton, appearing in *The Moving Picture Weekly*, confirms a pattern that one sees in more than one example with women film pioneers. Coming to

motion pictures from a longer career in the theatre where she both managed stars and owned her own company, Warrenton's inclination was to try to achieve the same position within the new industry. Her age as much as her experience is the topic of this article which lists her as fifty-two. Tony Slide gives her years as June 22, 1892 to May 14, 1932, which, if this is correct, would have made her forty-six in 1916, not fifty-two. Whether she was fifty-two or fifty-eight when she left Universal in 1922, she would have been several decades beyond most actress-directors who "retired" around the same time. Warrenton could be compared here with Marie Dressler who, because of the maturity of the type she played as a character actor, was able to significantly extend the length of her career. More work needs to be done investigating Warrenton as the founder of the "Hollywood Girls' Club" as well as on her 1923 attempt to start a "women's company," significantly, not in Hollywood but in San Diego.

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#### Filmography:

*A Bit O' Heaven*. Prod./dir./sc: Lule Warrenton (Frieder Film Corp. US 1917)

#### Archival - Film Sources:

*Little Lindy Sang*. Prod./dir.: Lule Warrenton sc: Olga Printzlau (Powers/Universal Manufacturing Co., US 1916)

si. b&w. : 35mm, 1 reel of 1; 600 ft. Archive: LOC. English intertitles.

*Eleanor's Catch*. Prod./dir. Cleo Madison (Rex Film Corp./Universal Film Manufacturing Co., US 1916) Cast:

Cleo Madison, Lule Warrenton; si. b&w. 35mm - 1 reel of 1; 980 ft. Archive: LOC. English intertitles. Other

Sources: vhs: Kino International