



Drake Stutesman

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Diana Serra Cary on March 10, 2006. Photographed by Elizabeth Galecke, www.elizabethgalecke.com. *Courtesy of Marsha Orgeron and Elizabeth Galecke.*

“I Came Back as Nobody”: An Interview with the Former Baby Peggy

Marsha Orgeron

On March 10, 2006 I interviewed Diana Serra Cary, best known for her career as the 1920s child movie star Baby Peggy. Ms. Cary was born October 29, 1918 and began making films at the age of twenty months after being discovered by director Fred Fishback. Her parents signed her to a contract at poverty row's Century Studio, where she was first featured in a series of two-reelers with Brownie the Wonder Dog. Six months later Century producers Julius and Abe Stern declared her a “star,” giving Baby Peggy her own series and production unit. As *Motion Picture News* reported it, “Baby Peggy, the talented, versatile little two year old, famous for her work as co-star to Brownie the wonder dog, has been elevated to stardom.”¹

Baby Peggy was a veritable phenomenon of early child actor stardom. In a 1922 *Motion Picture Classic* Willis Goldbeck described her as, “with Jackie Coogan, one of the two kid stars who have justified individual stardom.”² Critics often noted her knack for comedy and her smile-inducing cuteness, whether making mischief with a box of Edward Everett Horton's shirt collars in *Helen's Babies* (William Seiter, US, 1924) or pretending to be Rudolph Valentino in *Peg O' the Movies* (Alfred Goulding, US, 1923). Adela Rogers St. Johns wrote of her, “Nothing else in the world except a tiny, black kitten—very fluffy—or a very small, white bull pup could possibly be as cute as Baby Peggy.”³ Dorothy Whitehall's “Juvenile Critic” column proclaimed that the young actress' antics in *Peg O' the Movies* made her laugh until she cried.⁴ A 1923 Baby Peggy look-alike contest in Denver, Colorado resulted in a reported onslaught of 3,000 aspirants: “Eleven hundred boxes of candy were given away, and then the promoters quit in despair.”⁵ *Photoplay* called her “not one of your curled and frilled starlets, but a bobbed, banged, comical

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Baby Peggy as a *Shiek*-era Rudolph Valentino in *Peg O' the Movies* (1923). Courtesy of Diana Serra Cary.

child of three, with more humor in one diminutive finger than grown-up luminaries have in ten manicured digits.”⁶ All of this before her fifth birthday.

After her father broke an immensely lucrative contract with independent producer Sol Lesser in 1925, Baby Peggy hit the vaudeville circuit as a headliner, compelled by her parents to continue supporting the family by exploiting her Hollywood fame on the road. In 1932, Baby Peggy—now using the adolescent name Peggy Montgomery—returned to Hollywood, but the silent era was long gone and the former child star had little to broker in the newly reinvented sound-era Hollywood. Again urged on by her parents, Montgomery struggled to find work as an extra, taking largely uncredited bit parts. She had now lived the life of the preeminent child star and the struggling Hollywood extra. A 1932 *Movie Classic* article, titled “Remember Baby Peggy? She’s Back Again—As a Young Lady,” heralds her return to Hollywood and reports a new contract to make two-reel comedies with the Gleason family.⁷ Following an unsuccessful lawsuit, filed by Peggy’s father Jack Montgomery against actor James Gleason and producer Norman Sper for allegedly breaking this nine picture contract, Peggy Montgomery’s 1933 headline read: “Film Actress, 14, Loses \$500,000 Action in Court.”⁸

Ms. Cary permanently retired from the screen when she married in 1938, and left Hollywood altogether in 1943 when she joined her husband at Fort Ord in northern California. Only a handful of the feature films made with Baby Peggy survive, and few of the approximately 150 two-reelers she made for Century are extant.⁹ None of the surviving films are yet available on DVD.



Baby Peggy with a pre-presidential Franklin Delano Roosevelt (far left) at the Democratic Convention in New York City, July 1924. Courtesy of *Diana Serra Cary*.

This is a particular shame given Ms. Cary's capacity for informed commentary and historical insight, which she has amply demonstrated in her four well-researched and smartly written books: *The Hollywood Posse*, *Whatever Happened to Baby Peggy?*, *Hollywood's Children: An Inside Account of the Child Star Era*, and *Jackie Coogan: The World's Boy King*. Ms. Cary has become a major advocate for the rights of child stars, whose parents often control not only their lives but their considerable fortunes as well. Given the resentment she feels for many of her experiences as a child actor, especially the often oppressive world of pretend

and obedience in which she spent her youth (some of which surfaces in the pages that follow), it seems prescient that a 1922 interview with three-year-old Baby Peggy concludes with the following exchange:

“What do you want to be when you grow up—an actress?”

She shook her head solemnly.

“No,” she said gravely, “I want to be a lady.”

“Hum,” I said thoughtfully, glancing edgewise at her mother, who seemed to be a little alarmed, “and can’t you be both?”

“I’m afraid,” said Peggy, twisting a corner of her jacket, “I’m afraid I’m not big enough.”¹⁰

These comments speak not just to the complex and fraught status of the child actor’s relationship to an unnaturally prolonged imposition of childhood (after all, once the child grows up she can no longer be a child star), but also to the imperiled position of the non-star in Hollywood. As the following interview indicates, fear turns out to be one of the major terms used by Ms. Cary to describe the atmosphere of Hollywood during the 1930s post-celebrity part of her career. Baby Peggy and the numerous films she made have received very little in the way of academic attention; but her post-child-star career—her life as a Hollywood extra—has been overlooked entirely. In some ways this strikes me as an unsurprising omission given the degree to which star studies have, indeed, focused almost exclusively upon the most successful of luminaries, something that has been observed by Danae Clark in her work on the many aspects of acting as labor that sit neglected in the shadows of star performances.¹¹ Indeed, had Ms. Cary not been “Baby Peggy” before she became “Peggy Montgomery the extra” it is unlikely I would have been compelled to interview her in the first place. As new fields of study emerge in film studies, I suspect that moving beyond the star in precisely this manner will prove to be a revelatory realm of inquiry.

One of my aims in the following interview, then, is to intervene in this negation of the everyday efforts of the non-star by focusing primarily on Ms. Cary’s post-Baby Peggy years. I also focus on the status of women in Hollywood, in part because the marginal status of the female extra speaks to the larger picture of women’s roles at all levels of the Hollywood system during these years. Although just a teenager when she attempted to make her Hollywood comeback, Ms. Cary’s sense of the pervasive vulnerability of the female extra and starlet is quite striking. Here, too, is an area that remains troublingly peripheral in many histories of film: the degree to which the least powerful in the studio hierarchy—in this case, one might consider both child stars as well as the many unprotected aspirants—were subject to a spectrum of humiliation, exploitation, and violation. This is not a novel concept; however, because of the degree to which Hollywood history has tended to revolve around dominant forces—the studios, the stars, etc.—it is one that is rarely discussed in the kind of detail Ms. Cary provides here.

—M.O.

This interview was made possible by a screening and discussion of Helen's Babies at the North Carolina Museum of Art on March 10, 2006. Diana Serra Cary attended the event, which was facilitated by a grant from the North Carolina Humanities Council. Thanks to Laura Boyes, George Holt, David Drazin, Devin Orgeron, and Tim Lussier for their participation in and planning of this event. Charles Silver and Ron Magliozzi at the Museum Of Modern Art Film Study Center made it possible for me to see two of Baby Peggy's two-reelers and to have access to an extensive clipping file. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Marsha Orgeron: I want to start by talking about the role women played in 1920s and 1930s Hollywood, especially women who were not actresses. There were many women, especially in the teens and 20s, who were directing, writing, editing, and the like. Did you ever work with or observe any women in these capacities?

Diana Serra Cary: The only job of consequence I remember was there was always a scenario girl, a script girl they called them. That could be anybody, but it always struck me that maybe a woman would be more perceptive about little things. Maybe someone told me that? I was awfully young to have known it. If the clock says 8:00 and then the next morning you come to work for another sequence you have to watch the clock, it has to be 8:00 still or it's got to be moved. Women seemed to be good at that sort of thing, so that didn't seem strange. The women I worked with were mostly actresses. I didn't really learn about what women in Hollywood were faced with until I came back in 1932, and then I began to see what was really happening. When we got back to Hollywood I almost immediately realized that there were a lot of dangers.

MO: How old were you when you returned to Hollywood?

DSC: I was thirteen. I had to take extra roles because we needed to eat. My agent kept saying, "Hold out for a part." But we just couldn't do that. So I went to work as an extra, and that's when I saw what the ritual was on the set. The men, more often than not, would cruise the set.

MO: By men, do you mean the actors?

DSC: Yes, the male star and some of the supporting actors. They would just cruise the set and if there was an attractive girl—once in a while they would try me—who wasn't doing anything, they would massage your neck. I would get more tense, and they would say "just relax." They'd hang out and they'd make all kinds of innuendos, which I didn't fully understand but I got the gist. I could see that this was hunter and prey. It was just that kind of an arrangement. So I would manage to maneuver my way out. Then I discovered something by

accident: if I took a serious, scholarly book to work it was just like mustard gas. Men just didn't come near me.

MO: I remember reading in your autobiography, *Whatever Happened to Baby Peggy?*, that your father dismissed your efforts to read and go to the library, to give yourself an education. How interesting that this became what you used to protect yourself.

DSC: Yes, because he thought it was useless. I'd come home and tell him about Dr. Paul Broca and brain surgery and he'd say, "What the hell do you want to know about brain surgery for? You're going to be an actress your whole life." Well, he just assumed that. He never asked me what I wanted to be. Nobody in my family ever asked me my ideas about anything, or ever said "would I like to do that?" Never. As I've grown older I've thought about how that question never happened. It never struck me as unusual at the time, because you're so programmed to do what you're doing. I was only programmed to survive and to keep the whole family afloat and I just didn't go beyond that short term existence.

MO: But you did seek out that knowledge even though it was denied to you.

DSC: Well I wanted to write you see, which was one of the reasons I did that. But I didn't realize that their not seeking my long-term interests wasn't normal. My parents never even thought about my adult life. There was no adult life for me ahead, as far as they were concerned, which is so hard to understand. But child stars don't grow up to be something.

MO: So when you were working as an extra in the 1930s and you would bring your books to keep the wolves at bay, what were the other young women on the set doing?

DSC: Some of them got very wise and cynical, and knew where it would end. It wouldn't end in landing a job or anything else. Some of the extras had the kind of comebacks that you hear on the screen: "get lost" or "buzz off." I wasn't ever good at that sort of thing so I just stayed with my book. One time on *Ah Wilderness* [Clarence Brown, US, 1935] a woman who later became a very famous actress was found behind the flat with the juvenile lead. I was horrified for someone to be found in such a situation. I didn't really know everything that was going on but I knew it wasn't right to be discovered on the set like that. And once I was playing in a movie called *Eight Girls in a Boat* [Richard Wallace, US, 1934] and there were eight girls who won contests in various places. They were green as grass, and they were attractive too.

MO: Were these fan magazine contests?

DSC: Paramount held a contest; they were given to that sort of thing. Several girls who got a start that way stayed in the industry. There's one, Jean Rogers, she was in *Flash Gordon* [Frederick Stephani, US, 1936]. She was the leading blonde in that. She was one that I knew who really landed a permanent spot. But I don't think any of the others did.

MO: How did you end up in that film since you weren't discovered through a contest, you were the veteran?

DSC: I was in a play, *Growing Pains*, in Pasadena, and a studio talent scout discovered me there.

MO: Rediscovered . . .

DSC: Well, they knew who I was and they selected me for the job. It was a schoolgirl part and possibly somebody thought it would be a nice gesture, which some people around Hollywood did. Some were very sensitive to that. Some of these girls I never saw again after that film was over. One girl though, a very pretty girl, I met later again on a set and she was a knockout, she was terrific. She was a brunette, which was somewhat rare. She hadn't changed her hair, and that was notable. And she was dressed, I mean, to the max. So I said, "Gee you look great." And she said "I'm doing pretty well." I said, "Are you working as a dress extra?" It was obvious, she had beautiful gowns and coats and perfumes and so forth. She said, "No, I'm working as an extra and I often work for Frenchy." I knew Frenchy and I just knew he was "handsy."

MO: Who was Frenchy?

DSC: Well, Frenchy was a pimp who worked on the set.

MO: What do you mean worked on the set? Did he have a "day job" at the studio?

DSC: Yes, he worked as an extra. It was a great way to get contacts. When you were on a picture often the assistant director would come over and he says, "OK Peggy I want you to do this and I want you to be teamed up with Frenchy, and Louise you go with Henry and so on and so forth." Well once you were assigned to a guy in a scene, you couldn't be with somebody else. Well every time you tried to go through a doorway this guy had six hands, and he got one hand on your bosom and one on your behind. I figured there was no safe he hadn't cracked, you know. These snaps you got from Western Costume, he knew the combination. I thought, "This guy is dangerous." Later I found out that he worked for the producers. He was a procurer, and he was shopping to find girls for the studios' producers.

MO: How did that work?

DSC: The girls needed the jobs, but many of the girls also felt that you should always try for the next rung on the ladder. No matter who tried to warn them they wouldn't believe. Often they were farmed out by the studio as high class call girls. But the real core of the matter was stock girls. Stock girls were girls who the producers didn't feel had the future as stars. Maybe she's been a work-horse and tried real hard and done all the things you were supposed to do, the balancing books and taking lessons and dancing. People like say, Lynn Bari, who was hired as a stock girl for Fox. By the time I met her in 1936 she had been working for at least three years. She was the funniest gal I ever met in my life. Instead of being the seductive other woman, which she was always cast as, she was a Lucille Ball type of comedian. She told me all about these stock girls; she thought I understood more than I did. She was so funny, but she was also telling a cautionary tale. She told me that they had these banquets at the studios for their exhibitors or their salesman that went around and sold the films to the exhibitors. Once or twice a year they would all come to the studios from Podunk and Peoria and the like. And they would have a big banquet to reward them for such hard work. Then the stock girls would be told that they should be ready for the big banquet on Friday night. Well many of the girls by that time knew what "ready" meant. They would get a costume from the studio wardrobe department—something timely, you know, not Marie Antoinette—very low cut. As they didn't have their own clothes they would get something nice, and they looked beautiful and they were party favors for the guys. They were under contract and so they did it as their duty as stock girls making \$60 a week.

On one occasion at MGM a young woman, Patricia Douglas, was raped.¹² She was twenty years old and she thought the whole party was an audition. She just didn't realize. This guy took her out in the parking lot and raped her. She was a wreck. She ran to the parking man and he saw that she was completely disheveled, and she was hysterical and crying and injured. Somebody took her to the doctor and they confirmed that she had been raped, but they suggested that she just keep it quiet. She got mad and said, "I was innocent; I didn't do anything. How could they do this to me?" Afterwards she sued MGM and it was in all the papers and immediately the MGM lawyers got on the case and painted her as a fallen woman and evil.

MO: They had those PR departments ready to go.

DSC: Yes, they just made hash of her reputation and the case was thrown out of court. It was supposed to stay there but she sued again. This time they smeared her even harder.

MO: So you were aware at a certain point, you were told about this whole world when you were working as an extra.

DSC: I was told about this whole world, by Lynn Bari especially. We were a group of girls fencing in a movie, *Girls' Dormitory* [Irving Cummings, US, 1936]; they never even used our work, but based partly on what Lynn told me I realized how risky it could be. I already knew something about this from auditions from applying to singing jobs. I went down with my accompanist to audition with the dance director Morton Gould. He pointed a cigar at my skirt and said "keep lifting it and lifting it." Then he panicked and said, "How old are you?" I said, "Of course I'm over eighteen" or I wouldn't get the job. Then he said, "The hell you are, you're San Quentin quail." So I learned about that phrase, and I learned about "jailbait."

MO: So everything Will Hays was there to clean up in Hollywood was really happening.

DSC: Oh yes, it was true. But it was mostly true about the studio itself. It wasn't that it was breaking up the morals of the people in the theater as badly as it was the morals of the people in the studio. They would parcel out these girls, just like they did at the banquet. Many an actress seemed to think she needed a predator/patron on her side.

MO: That was a daunting power that the producers had, especially I'd think for young women who maybe were not protected by families.

DSC: Most of these girls who came had no family with them in Hollywood.

MO: Did you find vaudeville to be as predatory an environment when you worked that circuit?

DSC: No. It wasn't that it didn't have some elements, but it wasn't just an occupational hazard. Vaudeville was trying very hard to escape the onus of being burlesque. They wanted to be very clean and they didn't want scandal. So they kept it pretty clean. Vaudeville was nothing like Hollywood; I never was afraid in vaudeville.

My sister was almost raped by an assistant director in Hollywood. It was someone who knew my family, who was a friend of the family. He picked her up one morning at Lawler's school—this was a professional children's school—and he said, "I've got a job for you and it pays \$100 a week." And she said, "really?"

MO: This was in the 1930s during the Depression?

DSC: Yes. Oh my god we were hoarding fifty cents for car fare. The two of us would go together to a dance call and would make \$1.00 for car fare if we didn't get the job. Fifty cents would buy a whole meal for us both. \$100 a

week would have been like working for the oil industry (the few people who had something besides the movies). So she said, "Really?" Her teacher asked her if she knew this man. Louise said she did, he's a friend of the family. Louise said, "It's such a wonderful opportunity." Louise wasn't naïve, but the pieces appeared to fit all together. So he started driving away and they're driving up into the Hollywood Hills and she said, "You said it was at Warner Bros." She knew where Warner Bros. was. He answered, "well, there's a little test I want you to go through before you get the job because they're going to expect this over there, so I want to break you in so you understand," and he started undressing her in broad daylight. She freaked. She said, "I'm going to cause a problem." He said, "No you're not. You're going to be very happy." She said, "Oh no I'm not. I'm not going to do it. I'm going to scream." Then she said, "I'll tell my father." My father (Jack Montgomery) had a gun and he knew it, and he knew my father. He drove her back to school. He said, "You better not say anything to anybody about this. I'm sorry you're not willing to go and get the job." She said, "I don't need it that badly."

I still didn't fully understand what was going on, but I knew I had run out of a couple of offices, a couple of trashy agents down on Santa Monica Boulevard who had little casting offices. I went down there one time to Jack Rose's office and there was an audition—it may have been for a valid job—but once I got there he said, "I didn't know you'd turned into such a babe." I said, "What's the job?" and he said, "Well maybe we oughta have a little talk first." I thought, "uh-oh." So I said, "Well, I don't think I have time right now. When the job comes up you can call me." He said, "No, just stick around. We can have a nice little time. Maybe I can take you out to dinner."

MO: This was when you were a teenager?

DSC: I was fifteen. All this made me think of what my sister had warned me about. So I said, "No." Then he got up and started after me, so we did the whole desk routine. You know, I knew enough to run, which I did very well, so I took one turn around the desk and out the door. There were people out there in his waiting room and he didn't want to be seen chasing me, so I went on my way and I remembered him because I thought, "I'll never go in his office again."

MO: So this is just a daily hazard in the life of a woman—or girl—who is trying to get work? Now, this wouldn't have touched female stars, right? Because at this point you're coming back to recoup a career.

DSC: I don't think you'd ever get into this kind of situation with a major star, a Bette Davis or Katharine Hepburn. But the starlets, the "first time girls," would get verbally harassed and you could see them gradually become tough. They became very hard out of self defense.

Of course, I came back as nobody. My past didn't cut the mustard then. Because after talkies anybody who had been in silents was marked with a brand; it was a scarlet letter, hopeless. You were to be avoided at all costs.

The thing is I've seen young starlets broken in the sense that some young men, mainly juveniles, would just start with a whole dialogue of dirty stories and filthy innuendoes, making passes between the scenes. They would try to get this girl so used to vile language that she wouldn't blush anymore. They'd start off by saying, "Well honey, you're still blushing." And she'd say "I don't mean to." This is in front of the crew. Now the crew members weren't above going on location and picking up the girls. But the crew were blue-collar men, and they didn't like this kind of treatment in broad daylight and in front of them. But they didn't dare to intervene or risk the studio's reprisal.

MO: This is interesting because it returns us to the question I started with about if there were women on the set besides the actresses. You certainly could imagine if there were more women around—working the lights, running the cameras, and the like—that this kind of aggressiveness might not have happened as much.

DSC: The only people who were neutral and needed their jobs who might have intervened wouldn't have dared. And that was the crew. Maybe an assistant director or a decent cameraman, even a director, but they couldn't because the studio ruled their jobs. You were dead in the morning if you reported anyone at the studio. The studio system ran Hollywood.

MO: So were you ever aware of women directing contemporary to your career? Because you were working for Universal in the early twenties and Universal had been a kind of a haven for women directors like Lois Weber and Ida May Park in the teens.

DSC: Before talkies they thought that women could be directors like they thought that they could write titles. But when it came to dialogue and to new scenarios with dialogue, women were considered novelists and men were the ones who could write dialogue, because it was snappy and it couldn't be flowery. They brought in dialogue men from the pressrooms and from Broadway to write sophisticated, rapid-fired dialogue. Some of the men like Ben Hecht were press people, whereas it was assumed women couldn't write like that. After talkies, women were mostly scrapped as writers.

MO: And yet Anita Loos and Frances Marion . . .

DSC: Yes, they did continue. But I didn't interact with them. Frances Marion was on the set with Mary Pickford and her films, but her sets were closed. I didn't know there were any women directors ever except the daughter of



Baby Peggy as the matador in *Carmen Junior* (1923). Courtesy of Diana Serra Cary.

Louella Parsons, Harriet Parsons, about whom I read praises in Louella's columns, and so I assumed she was actively working as a director. She was the only person I attributed to being a female director; I had never heard of anyone else, no one spoke of it.

In fact, the only woman I knew who was a scenarist was Marguerite Roberts. Marguerite started off as a secretary to Winfield Sheehan at Fox. He had been kicked upstairs to be acting head at Fox when Zanuck was not yet in charge. Marguerite started off as just a poor secretary but became a leading

screenwriter. She was extremely successful at the studio and she was given big pictures. She was under contract, she got very good jobs. You saw her name on the credits, but you didn't see her on the set. She was always in the office. There were few women around the set, except for wardrobe people, costumes, make-up, and hairdressers. There was Ruth Harriet Louise, who was a photographer at MGM, but I never knew about her at the time.

MO: In terms of talking about the women who did have power in Hollywood, what about Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper? It's interesting that their power was not on the set, *per se*, but they effectively lorded over things through the press.

DSC: Yes, they could make or break you. Of course, Louella was protected by Hearst and Hedda was protected by Louis B. Mayer. These women kept studio properties—women and men—in line. The atmosphere of Hollywood was just permeated with fear. I was reading Hortense Powdermaker's book, *Hollywood, The Dream Factory*, which is really very good, and on every other page she stressed fear. I thought, "that is why I left Hollywood." The atmosphere was so fearful. And women suffered from a particular kind of fear in Hollywood. It wasn't rape in the park. It wasn't being kidnapped. It wasn't at the drug store. It was at the studio. In the office. In the backlot. It always had to do with the studio.

MO: That whole system of power and control.

DSC: The power and the fear. Because they had the stick and they had the carrot. They really did. They had your fate in their hands. I was up for the concubine in MGM's *The Good Earth* [Sidney Franklin, US, 1937] because Marguerite Roberts spoke up for me and so did Jack Dawn, and he even made me up. I did my eyes sort of Oriental and they photographed me, and I went in to see the man in charge of casting. My father went in with me, which was embarrassing. The casting man looked at me and said, "No, she doesn't have that look in her eyes. She doesn't know anything." I couldn't look seductive, I didn't know what seductive was.

MO: You worked hard *not* to be able to look seductive.

DSC: My father wanted me to get the part but he also didn't want me to have sex. He didn't know how to tell me what to do or what was happening, so he got caught too.

MO: So the women who were above this, let's say someone like Mary Pickford in the earlier days, who was so powerful and had so much control. Did you interact at all with those women?

DSC: Not really. For example, my mother was innocent in show business; she knew nothing about the way things worked. When I first returned to Hollywood at RKO they were casting *Little Women* [George Cukor, US, 1933] and mother wanted more than anything else for me to play in *Little Women*. I said, "Well it would be nice. I'm young enough to play Beth." I had read the book. But I said, "I don't know anybody at RKO." I knew that who you knew counted, but I didn't know a soul at RKO. So mother said, "You know Mary Pickford." I said, "I don't know Mary Pickford." Mother said, "She knows you. All she has to do is tell the people at RKO and they'll have to put you in as Beth." I thought, what fairy stories has she been reading? I said, "Mother they don't do . . ." and then I bit my tongue, because I knew enough not to say that, because it would get back to father. Also, she would accuse me of being sassy. I said, "I don't think it will work." She said, "You sit right down and write her a letter." So I did. And I got this letter back, and Pickford said . . .

MO: You're about how old now?

DSC: Thirteen. She wrote back on her very nice embossed stationary, Mary Pickford at the top, and it said, "I'm sure that you wouldn't have to have anyone endorse you. Everyone knows how good you are and your own talents will always get you there. I'm sure that if you just go over to RKO . . ."—and knock on the door like anybody else! So I said, well so much for that. I went to throw the letter in the wastebasket and my mother grabbed it out and told me to put it in my scrapbook. I thought, "She rejected me, why do I want to keep it?"

MO: One of the things that really struck me when reading your autobiography was that you talked about having constantly to pretend, for example with the fan magazines having to pretend your family money was lost in the stock market crash instead of telling the truth, which was that your parents had spent it all.

DSC: Yes, make up a story. Anything to protect your family.

MO: Given those circumstance what was it like for you having to interact with the media, with the Louellas and the Heddas?

DSC: Well, when I first came back to Hollywood in 1932 Louella had a cocktail party. It was arranged for me by my publicity woman at the time. It wasn't at Louella's house; it was at Frank Morgan's brother's house, Ralph Morgan. A beautiful house in Beverly Hills; they had come out from Broadway like everybody else. Louella was there. I remember she called me over and said, "My dear, how did you get over Tuberculosis?" I thought, "I can't say I didn't have it and yet I can't say I did." So I said, "Well I don't know. I think maybe

that was a story about something that wasn't quite founded on fact." She said, "Oh, I often wondered." Then I've read recently that she had herself recovered from Tuberculosis. She was given time to recover—several months—in Palm Springs by her employer, Hearst.

You know a lot of the vaudeville men came out to Hollywood and my family often expressed in language that was clear, "I do hope she doesn't come down with Tuberculosis, because she's looking skinny and she's sick a lot." So there's no question that Jack and Flo Haley or that somebody we knew drifted that story around.

MO: So you knew this was a very important party . . .

DSC: This was life or death.

MO: Talking about fear again, what was it like talking to Louella knowing that she held your future in her typewriter?

DSC: Exactly, it was terrifying. I was already in a lie—I was pretending to have all my money at this point—I was so confused and befuddled, and me with no hose! A week before I didn't even have sheer hosiery; we were so broke. It was very difficult. But still I wasn't afraid of the press, I was very eager to work with the press. I knew that a lot of the sob sisters from magazines were silly, but many of the others were serious writers and I took them seriously. However, with Louella there was a great element of fear and I picked my words very carefully when I talked to an interviewer for fear I'd be misunderstood or misquoted or seemed to be misinforming them. God knows I was misinforming them! The circle of fear and lies led to more fear and lies.

MO: Do you ever remember giving an interview and then reading it and being upset about how far it was from what you said?

DSC: That didn't really happen. I did have a terrible case when Walter Winchell reported that I was starving in an attic. That was a betrayal by a young friend of mine. He didn't have all his marbles either. He would have killed his mother for a line in Winchell. For him that was a chance of a lifetime to get in Winchell; it didn't matter that we were exposed. The things that people did just to get in one of those columns. When I got that betrayal with the Winchell article, I really blew my stack. That showed me then how terribly frustrated I was, and how much I must have down there that was just repressed. I was very, very, very angry. I couldn't take it out on anybody else so I took it out on Baby Peggy; she was to blame. Everything about Baby Peggy I just stopped when I returned to Hollywood in the 1930s. I was so horrified at the way the studios treated silent films and the people who made them. I saw all those films being burned in the back yards of the studios. I felt

like I don't ever want to see a Baby Peggy picture as long as I live; I'd be horrified. So for years I didn't talk about it. I didn't want to see anything. I didn't mention her. I didn't write about it.

MO: I remember reading about you carrying a box of fan letters and memorabilia along with you, trying to save it. Do you still have that or did that get destroyed when you were trying to purge yourself of Baby Peggy?

DSC: After vaudeville, we moved to a ranch in Wyoming. Our Hollywood trunks were shipped out to us there. There was one trunk full of memorabilia and another full of unanswered fan letters. I felt a certain responsibility to these children. One little girl sent me a rosary, and others sent little things. I just felt responsible. My mother would sometimes read the letters to me and would say, "Isn't that strange? That they would write to you as though they knew you." So we threw away those letters out there, but I remembered them and they haunted me. This created this terrific thing for me during the war. I had these nightmares: I was in London trying to find these people, or in Japan when they were being bombed, and in Germany. Trying to find these people and save them. I had these really strange dreams. This was a one-sided conversation we had all these years, and it set up a relationship that to me was real and meaningful but I couldn't respond to it. Maybe that's why I now answer letters the same day they come.

MO: What a strange thing to know that you are admired, imitated, beloved by so many strangers, and that so many people wanted to be like you or even to be you. Or at least that their parents want this for them. In your book *Hollywood's Children* you write about the phenomenon of women bringing their children West, partly to find a way to make a living during the Depression, hoping that their child could be the next Baby Peggy, or Jackie Coogan, or Shirley Temple. You write, "Clutched in each woman's strong right hand was her passport from domestic oblivion to worldly fame: the small, powerless, and trusting hand of a little child."¹³ How significant a phenomenon do you think this was?

DSC: There were thousands. There was an estimate that one-hundred children every fifteen minutes came into Hollywood. I think that's from one of Hedda Hopper's columns. According to Hal Roach, there were 40,000 kids or more that were interviewed for *Our Gang* [Robert McGowan, US, 1922]. Many of these women had lost their husbands to Tuberculosis. Many women had to bury the family breadwinner during the Depression. They figured what could they do with the kids? Well, we can't get a job, kids, it's up to you now. All of those kids had that message given to them.

MO: The world turned on its head.



Diana Serra Cary on March 10, 2006. Photographed by Elizabeth Galecke, www.elizabethgalecke.com. *Courtesy of Marsha Orgeron and Elizabeth Galecke.*

DSC: My sister was the first one to realize that my parents reversed the normal role. Since I had never seen the natural role, I didn't believe it. I didn't know what the normal role was. Except there was one family I remembered and they always looked after their children, and saw that they had friends, and saw that they got to school, and saw that they had clothes. All of these wonderful things they did for their children. Why? The children weren't earning it. Why would you do that for your children if they didn't work? That's the psychology of the child star: if you don't work you don't get love, you don't deserve it. It took me a lifetime to learn: parental love is supposed to be unconditional. But I had no idea what unconditional was. That's just the way it was.

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Notes

1. "New Century Comedy Star," *Motion Picture News* (October 1, 1921), 1751.
2. Willis Goldbeck, "Seen But Not Heard," *Motion Picture Classic* (October 1922), 40.
3. MOMA Photoplay Collection, Baby Peggy file. Undated draft of article by Adela Rogers St. Johns.
4. Dorothy Whitehall, "The Juvenile Critic Considers Baby Peggy," *Motion Picture* (March 1923), 102.
5. MOMA Baby Peggy clipping file. "Baby Peggy Discovery Contest Swamps Denver Posts' Office." March 29, 1923. The source and page number are not included with the clipping.
6. "A Demi-Tasse Star," *Photoplay* (February 1923), 42. This short piece notes that Baby Peggy had already made thirty-seven pictures and was currently making "a series of famous fairy tales."
7. MOMA Baby Peggy clipping file. September 1932. The page number is not included with the clipping.
8. MOMA Baby Peggy clipping file. *Los Angeles Examiner*. The date and page number are not included with the clipping.
9. The Library of Congress Motion Picture Division has 35mm prints of the feature films *Captain January* (US, 1924), *Helen's Babies* (US, 1924), and *April Fool* (US, 1926). Their catalogue also indicates that Baby Peggy appears in *Screen Snapshots* (US, 1921, 14F), *The Screen Almanac* (US, 1924), and *Hollywood on Parade* (US, 1932, A-3). The Museum of Modern Art has foreign-titled 16mm prints of the two-reelers *Sweetie* (US, 1923) and *Miles of Smiles* (US, 1923), and an incomplete print of *Circus Clowns* (US, 1922). The Netherlands Filmmuseum has a 250-meter fragment 35mm tinted positive nitrate print of *Miles of Smiles* (with the Dutch title *De Tweelingen*); two elements (a 35mm black and white nitrate positive print with bad perforation and a later duplicate 16mm negative) for an abridged Dutch release version (2 reels to 1 reel) with Dutch intertitles for *Peg O' the Mounted* (US, 1924); and a 200 meter nitrate fragment in poor condition of *The Law Forbids* (US, 1924). The British Film Institute has a complete 35mm print of the two-reeler *The Kid Reporter* (US, 1923) with German and French intertitles. The Cinémathèque Suisse (Lausanne) has a 35mm nitrate print of *Le Saveur* (US, 192?). Thanks to Rosemary Hanes, Ron Magliozzi, Charles Silver, Nico de Klerk, Elif Kaynakci, Michel Dind, and Bryony Dixon for this information.
10. Goldbeck, "Seen But Not Heard," 75.
11. Danae Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of Actors' Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
12. For more on the Douglas case see David Stenn's "It Happened One Night . . . at MGM," *Vanity Fair* (April 2003): 282-298.
13. Diana Serra Cary, *Hollywood's Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 89.