

ZaSu Pitts: Actress 1898–1963

By Barbara Giffen



In April 1994, the ZaSu Pitts stamp was issued as one of a group of ten stamps honoring stars of the silent film era. The stamps were designed by Al Hirschfeld. RAP-ed.

A career actress who successfully made the transition from silent movies to talking pictures to television, ZaSu Pitts appeared in over 500 films, according to her own estimates.

She was born in Kansas (she gave varying versions of the date), but moved to Santa Cruz as a child and grew up in the family home at 208 Lincoln Street. Her unusual name was the result of her mother's desire to please both her sisters, Eliza and Susan; taking one syllable from each name, she came up with the distinctive compromise of ZaSu.

From the time she was performing in school plays at Santa Cruz High, ZaSu Pitts' talent for acting was recognized and encouraged. In 1914 she staged a benefit performance at the local Opera House to finance her trip to Hollywood, and set off to join hundreds of other young hopefuls, with promoter Fred Swanton as her agent.

She received her first film credit in 1916, and in 1917 was "discovered" by superstar Mary Pickford. From that time on, she enjoyed steady work, as both ingenue and comedienne.

It was director Erich von Stroheim who recognized ZaSu Pitts' potential for more serious roles, and who sought to rescue her from the lightweight comedies in which she had been appearing. In 1923 he cast her in the lead female role—the miserly Tina—in his legendary epic, *Greed*. From an artistic standpoint, this was undoubtedly the high point of Pitts' career.

An unfortunate quirk of fate prevented her from developing as a dramatic actress. After *Greed*, she was chosen for the role of the mother in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The studio preview of that film opened with one of the short "idiotic" comedies which Pitts had made earlier. When she subsequently appeared in her serious role in the feature, the pre-conditioned audience broke



out in laughter. The devastated director had all the scenes with the mother re-shot with another actress for the final version of the film, and ZaSu Pitts was typecast as a comedienne for good.

By 1925 she was so successful in this vein, however, that she ceased being a contract player for one studio, and was able to freelance. When the talkies came in, she was teamed with W.C. Fields, Thelma Todd, and Slim Summerville, and is generally regarded as one of the most enduring comediennes in film history. She made her final film in 1963, the year she died of cancer.

ZaSu Pitts was known for her friendliness and distinctive style: fluttery hands, plaintive eyes, and "Oh dear me." She took her success in stride, saying,

"I never work at being an actress. I just act natural. Tell me anything easier than that."

Sources

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