

Bio P

ZaSu Pitts: A Filmography

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NEVER A MAJOR HOLLYWOOD star, ZaSu Pitts was nevertheless one of the most reliable and recognizable character actors in the business.

Early in her career, in 1917-18, she co-starred with "America's Sweetheart" Mary Pickford in popular silent classics like *The Little Princess* and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. In the 1920s, she starred in Erich von Stroheim's immense

and controversial magnum opus, *Greed* (based on the Frank Norris novel, *McTeague*), as a pioneer woman corrupted by her lust for gold. In a somewhat lighter vein, she also co-starred with von Stroheim himself in his romantic epic, *The Wedding March*. In between, among many other

films, she appeared in a western curio called *Thunder Mountain*, which was shot in part in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Unlike many other, bigger stars, Pitts made the transition to sound films with perfect ease. In the 1930s, she worked with the great German director of sophisticated farces, Ernst Lubitsch, appeared in the Busby Berkeley musical, *Dames*, with Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler and co-starred with everyone from Will Rogers (*Mr. Skitch*, 1933) to Charles Laughton (*Ruggles Of Red Gap*, 1935). The screen persona of the fluttering spinster that would become her trademark was probably shown to best effect in *Mrs. Wiggs Of The Cabbage Patch* (1934), a dated and obvious melodrama about noble pover-

ty that was enlivened by Pitts' hilarious pursuit of reluctant bachelor W.C. Fields in the comic-relief subplot. This film will be screened at the McPherson Center (705 Front St., S.C.), Friday, April 29 at 7:30 p.m.

During the next three decades, she was never without work, sharing the screen with William Powell and the teenage Elizabeth Taylor in *Life With*

Father (1947) and with the infamous "talking mule" of the long-running Francis series. In 1956, she began a three-year stint on the pre-Love Boat TV sitcom, *Oh, Susannah*, playing the wise-cracking second banana to star Gale Storm aboard an ocean liner. In 1961, the ever-flexible Pitts

was featured in a genuinely (if mild) psychotronic effort, the teen rock movie *Teenage Millionaire*, whose silly plot was loosely pegged to pop performances by Jackie Wilson, Dion and Chubby Checker. Pitts worked constantly until her death at age 65 in 1963, the year which saw the release of her last two films — *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, in which she co-starred with every other film comedian on the planet, and *The Thrill Of It All*, a domestic comedy starring Doris Day and James Garner. And as diverse as these highlights are, they barely scratch the surface of a long, busy and impressive career.

— Lisa Jensen

