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ZaSu Pitts

The girl with the famous eyes and hands

By MARGARET KOCH
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ZaSu Pitts is not the most famous person who grew up in Santa Cruz. But the actress with the sad eyes and helpless hand-wringing gimmick remains one of the best known, although she died almost 20 years ago.

For the record, she pronounced her name Zay-Soo. It was a combination of the names of two aunts: Susan and Za — something or other, no one really knows what the other name was.

ZaSu grew up poor, and the modest house still stands on Lincoln Street. She wanted desperately to become a tragedienne; instead she tickled our fancy and made us laugh and became a famous comedienne.

There yet live in Santa Cruz a few people who were ZaSu's classmates at Santa Cruz High and Dorothy Fargo is one who knew her well here and even later when ZaSu was in Hollywood and Dorothy was studying art in college in Los Angeles.

Dorothy talks about ZaSu with the affection of a long-standing friendship: "Her father died when she was very young and her mother supported the family by running a boarding house. ZaSu always had to work hard when she was growing up."

ZaSu was born in Parsons, Kansas, in 1894 or 1895 and she had a sister and two brothers. Her soldier father left a small pension, but it was not enough to keep the family.

While at Santa Cruz High ZaSu wanted to become a nurse, but her remarkably wistful ability, even then, was apparent to some.

"I always felt she had talent," Dorothy says. "She was very reserved, very quiet. She played tennis — the high school didn't have courts and she went down to the Casa del Rey. She took some part in most of the high school plays although she didn't have much time. She had to help at home and she worked very hard."

The high school plays were performed at Knight's Opera House with Mrs. Aydelotte directing.

"ZaSu had no boyfriends — she had no time for them," Dorothy says.

However, someone else noticed the slender girl who dressed in hand-me-downs and hurried home every day to help her mother. One day, Santa Cruz High Principal George Bond happened to see ZaSu defending herself in a fist fight with some boys who had ridiculed her. Bond became her friend and persuaded her to give a special reading of "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere" at a high school function. Halfway through the reading, the audience laughed and ZaSu fled the stage in tears. Principal Bond sent her back to finish and she received an ovation.

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— Dorothy Fargo, a friend

one of the turning points in her life," Dorothy says.

ZaSu gave up the idea of nursing when her mother sent her to Hollywood to break into the movies.

"She had a terrible time staying in Hollywood and she thought she'd have to give up. Her mother sent her a pittance to live on — she rented a room."

From 1910 to 1920, a number of movies were shot around the San Francisco and Monterey Bay areas, but the film industry left these parts to settle in Southern California. ZaSu's mother somehow felt that her daughter was destined for a movie career.

Dorothy's mother would invite ZaSu over for dinner — often, according to Dorothy. The Fargos knew that she was living on a shoestring.

"One time at our house, ZaSu spotted a discarded pair of high button shoes out on our back porch. She wanted them and we gave them to her. She wore those shoes in her first major picture with Mary Pickford — it was 'The Little Princess.' ZaSu played the part of a slave. She always said it was those shoes that brought her luck and made the picture a success and she wore them in a number of the movies she made."

Frances Marion, a script writer, had noticed ZaSu and was taken with her sad expression. That actually led to her role in the Pickford film and was her real breakthrough in movies, according to Dorothy.

ZaSu's success brought her instant attention. She started at \$5 a day and several years later was being paid \$1,000 a week as a comedienne. She became famous as a "CRA" (comedy relief artist), one of the few who could be depended on by desperate directors to save a show that needed a bit of laughter.

That ability led to her being hired for one scene and being paid more for it than the star of the film was paid for a week's work.

ZaSu, however, always yearned to play tragedies. And Director Eric Von Stroheim finally starred her in "Greed," the drama based on Frank Norris's book "McTeague." Von Stroheim afterward

called her "the greatest tragedienne of them all."

ZaSu starred in a number of films that included "Pretty Ladies," "Casey at the Bat" and "The Other Half." Once in later years, when she was asked how many films she had appeared in, she said "at least 500." Her name had become box office magic and she was paid as much as \$2,500 a day, a huge amount for that time.

"ZaSu couldn't handle money," Dorothy says. "She spent it as fast as she made it. She was a soft touch for anyone in trouble. Finally she hired a manager who put her on an allowance."

Her first marriage to Tom Gally failed and later she married again. She had a daughter, Mrs. John S. Reynolds of Pasadena, and adopted a boy, the son of actress Barbara La Marr who had died.

Two events stand out in her life in the 1940s: in 1944 ZaSu starred in her first stage appearance on Broadway in "Ramshackle Inn." It was a spoof on murder mysteries. The critics applauded unanimously and ZaSu went on to other successful stage plays including "Miss Private Eye," "The Bat" and "The Solid Gold Cadillac."

The second milestone had to do with Santa Cruz. When ZaSu heard that Frazier Lewis, the well-known local candy man, had died, she sent Dorothy to buy his famous secret recipe for his Victoria candy bar. Lewis left it to the local Native Sons of the Golden West.

"I approached them but they said they'd never sell it," Dorothy recalls.

The "secret" ingredient Lewis used which made his bar so superior? "Probably real brandy," Dorothy says with a laugh. "But ZaSu really wanted that recipe. You know, she was always loyal to Santa Cruz until the day she died."

In 1915, Dorothy got an extra part as a socialite in one of ZaSu's films: "A banquet scene in the old Alexandra Hotel in Los Angeles. We sat around at small tables, and we were all dressed up in evening gowns — it was a lot of fun."

Dorothy also went with ZaSu to visit a Harold Lloyd set where he was being chased by a lion. "He fell off a balcony

into a street below — but the balcony was really only three feet above the 'street' — it was fun to see how they faked some things."

Dorothy in later years also went to Shirley Temple's wedding with ZaSu.

In later years, ZaSu built a beautiful home on the coast and Dorothy says two things are vivid in her mind about that house: "The kitchen — ZaSu was a fabulous cook! And a pipe organ set into the wall between two floor to ceiling windows overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Those were two-story windows in the huge living room. ZaSu gave an engagement party in that house for my daughter, Abbie Mae."

Hands. It all comes back to hands and the way ZaSu used them. They were as important as her beautiful eyes.

"Her hands — if you looked at them closely enough — showed the hard work she had done as a girl — scrubbing floors and so on. Here — just look at them in this picture." Dorothy points to them and one can see they are hands that have performed menial tasks.

Cecil Beaton, famed artist, proclaimed ZaSu one of the world's 10 most beautiful women.

A Hollywood physiotherapist said she had one of six pairs of the most beautiful ankles in filmland.

She also was noted as possessor of the most dangerous reputation-dimming ability in films. She merely had to walk through a scene and it belonged to her. The audience would forget everyone else in it.

Films, stage and television, ZaSu conquered them all.

As for herself, she made her own proclamation: "I'm the best babysitter in Hollywood" (with her two grandchildren.)

In the 1960s, ZaSu discovered she had cancer.

"At first she refused treatment, then she changed her mind and finally took cobalt treatments," Dorothy says. "She also went back to acting, but she didn't work as hard as she had before. And she moved to San Marino to be nearer her daughter."

Dorothy and ZaSu telephoned each other almost every day during that difficult time. Then one day ZaSu said to Dorothy "I won't be talking to you much longer. I think my menace has got me." Several days later, ZaSu was dead.

Bond, ZaSu's principal at Santa Cruz High, probably summed up her destiny on the Opera House stage that fateful night when she fled in tears and he made her go back to finish. He said: "Laughter is God's hand upon a troubled world."



ZaSu Pitts helped her mother run boarding house.