

Too Intelligent to Be a Movie Star?

By JUDY KLEMESRUD

Back in 1973, Jill Clayburgh desperately wanted the leading role of the go-go dancer in Joseph Papp's first production at Lincoln Center, "Boom Boom Room." When she didn't get it, she was so disappointed that she decided to move to Hollywood.

"They cast Madeline Kahn for the part," the 32-year-old actress recalled the other day. "And although I think she's wonderful, I thought to myself, 'Hmhmhmhm, maybe it wouldn't hurt if I had a little fame myself. Then maybe I might have a better chance at top parts.'"

So far, Miss Clayburgh's movie parts haven't been all that terrific, but at a time when many actresses are bemoaning the lack of roles, she has been one of the busiest actresses in Hollywood. Earlier this year she starred as Carole Lombard in "Gable and Lombard," with James Brolin, and she currently shares top billing in "Silver Streak," with Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor. And although neither film impressed the critics much, Miss Clayburgh's performances in both were singled out for praise.

2 More Films Due

Commenting on her work in "Silver Streak," Vincent Canby wrote, "Jill Clayburgh is an actress of too much intelligence to be able to fake identification with a role that is essentially that of a liberated ingenue."

She is set to do two more big movies next spring: "Semi-Tough," with Burt Reynolds and Kris Kristofferson, based on the humorous best-selling novel about professional football, and "An Unmarried Woman," with Alan Bates, in which she plays a woman whose husband leaves her after 17 years of marriage.

Is it just a myth, then, that there are no good film roles for women?

"Oh, no," Miss Clayburgh said, sipping coffee with Sweet 'N Low in an East Side restaurant. "I'm just lucky. There is a shortage of good roles, and the reasons are very complicated. Somebody said it had to do with World War II, and how the whole masculine identity thing came after the war. Because look at all the good parts actresses like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford had before the war. And look at the movies today. 'Network' has a really good part, and 'Rocky,' but what else? I think people are so aware of it, and are complaining so much that something's got to change."

Very Shy Actress

"There's one very encouraging sign, though," Miss Clayburgh added. "Women like myself who aren't under 30 are getting parts, like Louise Fletcher and Ellen Burstyn. I remember when All McGraw did 'Love Story' and they made it such a big deal, wow, she was 30 years old!"



The New York Times/Jack Manning

Jill Clayburgh: "I want to be an actress, not a personality."

Miss Clayburgh is a very shy actress whose intense, impatient blue eyes betray her dislike of interviews. She has been known to burst into tears before a television talk show, and walk away. She has canceled others at the last minute, saying "I want to be an actress, not a personality."

She is such a private person that she refuses to allow interviewers to come to the West 79th Street apartment that she shares with David Rabe, the playwright who wrote "Boom Boom Room,"

"Sticks and Bones," and "Streamers." Instead, a 20th Century-Fox limousine takes her to the interviewer, waits outside at the curb, and then whisks her away.

Credits TV's 'Hustling'

"It's not fun," she said, "and the interviews are difficult, but it's something you want to do if you do like the picture and you like the people, and I really like Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor. Making 'Silver Streak' was a

very pleasant experience. Gene is so lovely to work with, so helpful and giving. In one scene, I had to laugh over and over and over, and every time he'd think of something off-camera to make me laugh. He's generous, giving and smart."

Miss Clayburgh, who was wearing a purple printed cotton blouse and snug-fitting black corduroy pants, credits much of the demand for her in films these days to a 1975 television movie called "Hustling," in which she appeared after moving to Hollywood. She played the part of a prostitute in the film, adapted by Fay Kanin from Gail Sheehy's book. "It changed my career," Miss Clayburgh said. "It was a part that I did well, and suddenly people wanted me. Sidney Furie saw me, and wanted me for 'Gable and Lombard.'"

Born in New York

Although it's obvious she isn't very pleased by that much-maligned film, she refuses to criticize "Gable and Lombard." "I find it very hard to knock things after they're done," she said. "I think actors have a responsibility to keep their mouths shut. It's very easy to jump on the bandwagon and say, 'Yeah, it was lousy.' I feel I was lucky to get that part. It didn't hurt me."

Miss Clayburgh was born in New York City to Albert Henry Clayburgh, a wealthy book-cloth manufacturer, and his wife, Julia, who was at one time production secretary to David Merrick. Her paternal grandmother, Alma Clayburgh, was a noted opera singer and New York socialite.

The actress had a privileged East Side childhood, but not an especially happy one. "I started going to a shrink in second grade," she recalled, over her second cup of coffee. "I was very violent and self-destructive then, and my parents sent me to a therapist. I began taking it seriously at the age of 26, and it has helped me more than anything else. I would be dead without it. I support it so wholly that I would never think not to talk about it. It's so wonderful."

Parts Come Rapidly

Miss Clayburgh attended the exclusive Brearley School and then Sarah Lawrence College, where a classmate coaxed her into summer stock at the important Williamstown (Mass.) Theater Festival. Miss Clayburgh wound up in Shaw's "Man and Superman," with one line, and was hooked. After college, she joined the Charles Street Repertory Theater in Boston ("My mother knew someone on the board"), where she worked for a year in the children's company, and then graduated to the adult company.

Once she moved to New York, the roles came almost as fast as they did later in Hollywood. She appeared in several Off Broadway productions, including "It's Called the Sugarplum," on a double bill in 1968 with "The Indian Wants the Bronx," in which a young actor named Al Pacino first

won attention. They lived together for five years. She went on to play Desdemona opposite James Earl Jones in "Othello" in Los Angeles, had the leading female roles in two Broadway musicals, "The Rothschilds" and "Pippin," and starred in Tom Stoppard's dazzling "Jumpers" on Broadway.

'We're Still Friends'

She recalls fondly the years that she and Mr. Pacino were together. One of their apartments, she said, was an East 14th Street fifth-floor walk-up with a bathroom in the hall "and mice all over." Although she would try to kill the mice, Mr. Pacino would trap them in paper bags with cheese as bait, then carry them to the nearest garbage can and let them out.

"We're still friends," she said. "Every once in awhile we get together and have some laughs about the good old

'Look at the good parts Bette Davis had before the war'

days. I knew it would happen for Al—he was such a great actor. And he wanted recognition very badly."

A one-time student of Uta Hagen, Miss Clayburgh characterizes her acting process as "somewhat the Method, but not hardline. I try not to be rigid about what I do. Sometimes something will just be there. It's always so wonderful when things come to you. The more you allow yourself to be open and not too rational, the more things will be given to you. You don't have to beat yourself over the head."

Home on the Coast

Today Miss Clayburgh divides her time between a "canyon style" house in Los Angeles's Beverly Glen area and the apartment she shares with Mr. Rabe on West 79th Street. She and the playwright have bought a book together ("I can't talk about it yet"), and she may star in a film version of it if he writes the screenplay.

Is there any chance that Jill Clayburgh, the once serious stage actress who has been praised for her "intelligence," will ever come home to the boards again? "Maybe every so often," she replied, with a slight smile. "But what I really want to do is more and more important parts in films. I think that will make me feel more secure. When I first moved to Hollywood, I didn't know whether I'd ever have another part, and I don't want to feel that way again."