

*The Trouble
with Merle*



A STUDY GUIDE BY DIANE O'FLAHERTY

A Film Australia National Interest Program

The Trouble with Merle

Merle Oberon was one of the biggest movie stars of the 1930s and 1940s. Studio publicists said she was born into a wealthy family in Hobart, Tasmania—Australia’s island state. In a biography that read like a film script they said that after her father’s death Merle joined her aristocratic godparents in India. Yet rumour was that the exotic almond-eyed actress concealed her true past. It was said she was actually “oriental”, perhaps Anglo-Indian, and born in Calcutta. In Tasmania, many remain convinced she was their island’s most famous daughter, born not to wealthy parents but to a Chinese hotel worker and her married employer. *The Trouble with Merle* looks at celebrity, memory, identity, race and class...and at why Merle Oberon’s origins mattered to people on a tiny island, in a country at the bottom of the world.

Introduction

The documentary holds our interest because of the many intriguing facets of human nature it reveals. It of course centres around the controversy surrounding Merle’s birthplace and her ethnic origins. But that is only one of the questions it presents, and we learn history’s empirical answer to this puzzle even before we see the film’s title. The narrator, who throughout the film acts as detective, says, ‘Merle was really Estelle Thompson, an Anglo-Indian from Bombay’. But her origins are not the only focus. The mystery’s second focus is brought in with the tantalizing question, ‘...if it were that simple, why are there Tasmanians today who still swear she’s one of them?’ So it is not just one story we are following—the film taps many alternative versions of reality from which we learn. Today, the stories have status in Tasmania’s folklore and have been kept alive through memories passed down the generations. This study guide seeks to arouse your curiosity about why various versions of the Merle story co-exist and the reasons why the film values them all.



Merle in *Lydia* (courtesy of Carlton International Media Ltd)

Merle—the celebrity

Merle Oberon’s career was launched in London by her first husband, film producer Alexander Korda. She went on to make over 40 films in Britain and Hollywood including *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (with Charles Laughton), *The Private Life of Don Juan* (with Douglas Fairbanks), *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (with Leslie Howard), *The Dark Angel* (for which she was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress), *These Three*, *Over the Moon*, *The Divorce of Lady X*, *The Cowboy and the Lady*, *Wuthering Heights* (as Cathy opposite Laurence Olivier’s Heathcliff), *Lydia* and *Berlin Express*.

Telling the story—maintaining our interest

All storytellers are careful about ordering their material. *The Trouble with Merle* is very particular with this aspect because it seeks credibility for its multiple versions of reality. It encourages us to maintain a balance of value between empirical evidence and oral history. Each yields useful insights. Delofski as detective takes us on a journey, interviewing people along the way. As we hear each person's evidence, we gain a clearer understanding of how each version of the story has evolved. We learn about people and what impacts on their lives. Symbols and repeated footage unify the film.

- ▶ Merle's origin is only one story we are following. Look at the impact of Harry Selby's finding that Merle was his sister. Find other stories that interest you and look how they have changed their tellers' lives.
- ▶ Find examples where the 'red car' moves us on. Why does the director use this device? What is added by the 'signature music' that accompanies each scene involving the car? Where else do you hear that music?
- ▶ Look at the images of billowing silk that link parts of the story. Why silk and why is it effective in helping us to understand the journey?
- ▶ Both Ann Waterhouse and Jeeti Kochhar act as human links to the next part of the journey. Why do they work as linking devices?
- ▶ Find symbols that interpret the spoken word visually. Explain their significance. You might start with the setting sun.
- ▶ Why do you think the director repeats certain footage?
- ▶ Why does the majority of the documentary concern itself with things Tasmanian? What human needs are being played out here? Why are the stories valuable?



Writer/director Marée Delofski (left) with Tasmanian writer Cassandra Pybus.

People in the film—where do they fit in?

The pieces of the jigsaw provided through memories of those interviewed make a trail for the narrator (and thus the viewer) to follow. The large number of people involved deepens the complexity of the situation.

- Marée Delofski—writer/director—the narrator/detective
- Merle Oberon—smouldering Hollywood star of the 1930s and 40s—central focus
- Charles Higham—biographer who wrote *Princess Merle*
- Glen Kinging—Seven Network Program Director, 1978
- Mike Willesee—*Mike Willesee Show*, 1978

Merle in *The Private Life of Don Juan* (courtesy of Carlton International Media Ltd)

Elements of the mystery genre

In exploring her subject, Delofski signposts her track to prevent us pursuing just one story.

Dead ends

The following segments do not take us further in our understanding of Merle's origins, but they give us other insights:

- Reverend Raiborde tries to find Merle's baptism records
- Vimla Subaiya speaks about Merle
 - ▶ Why are they visually and aurally effective in retaining interest?
 - ▶ What does each segment contribute?

Twists and turns

Often the information we hear seems to be about Merle's origins, but really we are learning something different, but of great importance. Consider the following segments:

- Rosina Mayhead's story of Merle's birth in Montpellier Retreat
- Rosina Mayhead's story of the Indian silk merchant adopting Merle
- Dr Keith Benn's story of Lottie Chintock in his surgery
- Dolly Colah's story of Merle as a teenager
 - ▶ What do we discover about times and about people?

Red herrings

False clues that seem helpful are part of a good mystery. Consider:

- the movie scene where Merle tells Freddie, 'I'm going to London, then Paris...'
- Ann Waterhouse on Merle's mother as maid in '...London in a nasty little flat'
- Bruce Hailey on his grandfather's paternity of Merle
- Edyth Langham on Merle's Chinese blood
- Peter Lawrence about the photographic likeness of Merle and Lottie
 - ▶ What do these examples tell us about the speaker, or historical mores of the time?

Tailpiece

After we see Merle's birth certificate in Bombay, the director allows final comments from three Tasmanians who all insist Merle 'belongs to us'.

- ▶ Why did Delofski choose to end her story with these observations? (We have ample empirical evidence that Merle was of Anglo-Indian descent.)
- ▶ What are the implications of Cassandra Pybus' words, 'the investment in the story is probably in my generation and a generation before'?



Edyth Langham, former journalist who interviewed Merle Oberon in 1978

People in the film— where do they fit in?

Tasmanian connections

Those with memories of "official events" with Merle

- Doone Kennedy—former Hobart Lord Mayor
- Pamela Archer—guest at 'welcome home' reception for Merle
- Darlene Haigh—alderman, Hobart City Council
- Barbara Knight—secretary to Lord Mayor, 1978
- Neil Coulston—Merle's Tasmanian driver, 1978

Those with memories of "personal relationships" with Merle

- Rosina Mayhead—Lottie Chintock's midwife's granddaughter (Lottie was supposedly Merle's mother.)
- Peter Lawrence—believes he is Merle's cousin
- Mickey Nichols—Lottie Chintock's neighbour
- Bruce Hailey—grandson of JW Thompson (said to be Merle's father)
- Ann Waterhouse—her godmother taught Merle in La Martiniere, Calcutta; former Indian resident now living in Tasmania

Those with memories of professional associations with Merle

- Edyth Langham—dog breeder and former journalist
- Evan Best—genealogist
- Cassandra Pybus—writer
- Margaret Glover—archivist
- Dr Keith Benn—Lottie Chintock's doctor
- Maxine Green—Merle Researcher

Location, location

Each country involved in the story has its own charm which contributes to the story.

- ▶ Choose one scene from each country visited in this film. In each case, comment on the type of scene (elements such as colour, content, type of shot and framing) and its relevance to its part of the story.
- ▶ For each location, discuss how the background music or sound enhances the visual.

Issues arising from the film

Who has *power* and who is *powerless* is a telling frame through which to view this documentary. Merle lived 40 years of her life with the myth the Hollywood studios invented. Their power was her price of fame. It affected Merle's life, the life of her husband, the lives of her family members and of many people in Tasmania and India.

Cultural identity

- ▶ Why did the studios make up their story? What does their need for such an elaborate and racist tale tell you about the times?
- ▶ The film implies that having to live a lie took a big toll on Merle's mind. Cite three incidents that show how great a burden in her life the fabrication became.
- ▶ How important is your own cultural identity, and how would you feel if you had to deny it?
- ▶ What might have been the psychological needs that drove Merle to return to Tasmania in her last public appearance?

Class

This notion is about rank in society. Its main focus is what is available to a person and what is denied to them because of their hierarchical place.

- ▶ La Martiniere in Calcutta was for the education of children from wealthy families. What does Ann Waterhouse say about Merle in that school?
- ▶ According to Charles Higham, the studio story of Merle included a father who was 'a very distinguished figure in the diplomatic service'. To what would this have given Merle access?



Top Harry Selby.
Bottom Vimla Subaiya, the former Principal of La Martinière.

People in the film— where do they fit in?

Indian connections

- Hilda Peacock—Principal, La Martiniere
- Vimla Subaiya—former Principal, La Martiniere
- Reverend Raiborde—parish minister
- Dolly Colah—Merle's teenage friend
- Father Richard Lane-Smith—Harry Selby's school chum
- Freda Syer—hostess of dinner party which Harry Selby attended
- Jeeti Kochhar—former neighbour of Harry Selby

The Canadian connection

- Harry Selby—Merle's brother

Folklore

Myths are only stories legitimized by society. A myth emerges because the resultant story satisfies people's needs. As such, myths empower people. They are important because through them we understand people's needs. Confabulation, where a story grows through informal chat (or where memory gaps are filled in with fabrications that the storyteller believes to be facts), is a vital part of oral history.

- ▶ Consider some Tasmanian folklore surrounding Merle's birth in this light.
- ▶ Detail several versions of the myth as presented in the documentary. (Some stories interweave; others stand alone.)
- ▶ How do you account for these various versions?
- ▶ What do the Tasmanian Merle myths fulfil?
- ▶ How can these myths take hold and become part of a country's history and why are they important?
- ▶ What parts of the myth provide romance and hope for ordinary people?
- ▶ Deductive reasoning is where you infer a conclusion from known facts. Find an example where the conclusion reached requires deductive reasoning. Does this type of reasoning always produce an empirically historically accurate conclusion? Why then should it not be discounted?

Memory

A powerful part of being human is to recall knowledge handed down concerning the past. Memories have many social functions, one of the strongest being that they link people who have similar memories and thus may take on the extra status of tradition. However, people's memories are usually affected by factors in their lives other than the event they are remembering.

- ▶ Find examples where memory is biased by a perceived characteristic of the speaker. Account for the occurrence of this situation.
- ▶ Find examples of memories that coalesce, thus reinforcing their veracity.
- ▶ Contrast the stories of Peter Lawrence and Harry Selby. They both rely on recollection. Is one man's story stronger than the other? Why?
- ▶ Find an example of a memory about Merle, which sees the speaker basking in the reflected glory of the star.
- ▶ Take an example of memory based on confabulation and compare it to where the speaker remembers an event without any intermediary. Why is there a difference?



Merle in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* opposite Leslie Coward (courtesy of Carlton International Media Ltd)

Further reading

Charles Higham & Roy Mosley, 1983, *Princess Merle—The Romantic Life of Merle Oberon*, Coward-McCann Inc, New York

The Golden Years—Merle Oberon
<http://www.thegoldenyears.org/oberon.html>

Genealogy websites

National Library of Australia,
Family History and Genealogy
<http://www.nla.gov.au/research-guides/family-history>

Tasmanian Family History Service
<http://www.tasfamily.net.au/>

Genealogy Searching Center
<http://genealogysearch.org/>

Loss

The notion of loss is linked with emotional hurt and emptiness. Loss can make people compensate in unpredictable ways.

- ▶ Constance Selby, Lottie Chintock and Merle Oberon all sustained obvious losses. How did their losses affect them?
- ▶ What other more subtle losses can you glean in the documentary?
- ▶ How does the title relate to the film?



Conclusion

There is a marvellous black and white photo of Merle, eyes downcast, which opens and closes the documentary. This image seems a fine symbol for the actress—glamorous, mysterious and burdened by the demands of a story created by Hollywood studios, a myth that ended up defining not only her life, but also the lives of many others worldwide. *The Trouble with Merle* takes us on a journey that reveals the interrelatedness of people's lives—the effects of ripples created by a seemingly inconsequential stone thrown into an inestimable pond.

The Trouble with Merle

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