Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Hollywoodland

Elisa Leonelli · Sunday, May 19th, 2024

I was interested in the permanent exhibition titled "Hollywoodland: Jewish Founders and the Making of a Movie Capital" at the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures from May 19, mostly because, after moving to Los Angeles from Italy 50 years ago, I lived on Beachwood Drive for 15 years, right under the Hollywood sign, and I photographed it often.

Hollywoodland 1923. Courtesy Margaret Herrick Library

So I was delighted that the Museum asked me the rights to use this photo I took in 1978, when the sign was at its worst state of decay, just before the restoration that same year.

Hollywood sign © Elisa Leonelli 1978

See below how this landmark sign is featured in one of the multimedia displays that interacts with a relief map.

Hollywood Sign

As an entertainment journalist and cinephile with a Master in Critical Studies from USC School of Cinematic Arts, I wanted to learn more about the origins of the studio system and its legendary movie moguls, Jewish men like Carl Laemmle (Universal), William Fox (20th Century Fox), Louis B. Mayer and Samuel Goldwyn (M.G.M), Jack and Harry Warner (Warner Bros), Adolph Zukor and Jesse Lasky (Paramount), Harry Cohn (Columbia), and one woman, Mabel Normand, who briefly owned her own studio.

Mabel Normand

So I watched the documentary *From the Shtetl to the Studio: The Jewish Story of Hollywood*, narrated by TCM (Turner Classic Movies) host Ben Mankiewicz, based on the 1988 book by Neal Gabler *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywoodand*, and enjoyed the many archival photos and film clips.

William Fox Studio

A few years ago, I wrote an article about the history of movie studios in Culver City where I mentioned Thomas Ince, who built the first studio, Inceville, in the Palisades.

Thomas Ince-Inceville

What I did not expect, while visiting another gallery “Significant Movies and Moviemakers,” was to discover an impressive filmmaker I was not aware of, Lourdes Portillo. I watched a video interview where she talked about her work, documentaries like *Las Madres-The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* (1986) about the women who gathered weekly in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to remember their missing children murdered or disappeared by the military regime, and *Señorita Extraviada-Missing Young Woman* (2001) about thirty women found dead in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

Lourdes Portillo

Only later did I discover that she passed away recently on April 20, 2024. The Academy Museum installed this exhibit in February 2023, followed by a 10-day retrospective of her work in May, a well deserved tribute.

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