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Debutantes in movies: Stars of stage and screen

Sue Strachan JUN 20, 2015 - 10:00 PM

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Rumer Willis arrives at the CMT Music Awards at Bridgestone Arena on Wednesday, June 10, 2015, in Myers/Invision/AP) ORG XMIT: TNDC104

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With the debutante season starting -- 62 young women are making their debuts in New Orleans now through Carnival (Click here to see the 2015-16 debutantes) -- comes a swirl of

presentations, parties and balls. While those invited to these special events often find themselves surrounded by Hollywood-inspired glamour, Hollywood, in turn, has found the debutante to be a source of fascination, whether it be an actual debutante as an actress -- such as Dina Merrill -- or an actress who Hollywood and the public assume was debutante, whether it be her upbringing or the parts she played, such as Grace Kelly.

There also is the issue of the difference between a socialite and debutante -- terms many use interchangeably. A socialite is a well-known person in society and is fond of social activities. A debutante is a young woman who is formally presented for the first time to society. In others words, anyone can be a socialite, but not everyone can be a debutante.

For brevity, I am focusing on movies only, as there are myriad TV shows such as "Gossip Girl," "The O.C." and "Gilmore Girls" that have portrayed debutantes and their milieu to mixed results.

And don't forget that New Orleans has its ultimate TV show on Mardi Gras night: the Rex Ball and the Meeting of the Courts of Rex and Comus on WYES-TV.

Have I left out your favorite debutante movie?

Remember, the movie must focus on a debutante, be about debutante balls, or have a scene featuring a debutante ball.

Andy Hardy Meets Debutante (1940)

The ninth full-length Andy Hardy movie starred Mickey Rooney, whose character, Andy Hardy, name drops a New York City debutante to his friends, only to meet her and pretend to be wealthy in order to woo her.

The Philadelphia Story (1940)/High Society (1956)

OK, so maybe I am already cheating a little. But who could resist Katharine Hepburn in "The Philadelphia Story" -- she was in the Philip Barry play and the movie -- and Grace Kelly in Cole Porter's musical interpretation, "High Society, " portraying different versions of Tracy Lord. While there are no scenes at their

debutante ball or party, a woman with Tracy Lord's background more than likely would have made her debut.

On the other hand, ironically, Kelly never made her debut, despite growing up at a tony Philadelphia address. Her father, who started his business as a bricklayer, was deemed arriviste.

The Reluctant Debutante (1958)

What kind of world would it be without Rex Harrison in a movie about debutantes? Urbane and a natural in white tie and tails, Harrison starred in this movie with his then wife, Kay Kendall. The debutante in question was Sandra Dee, whose character was in London for the debutante season and for the last presentation at court in 1958.

It was remade in 2003 as "**What a Girl Wants**" with Colin Firth and Amanda Bynes.

Metropolitan (1990)

The first in a trilogy of films by Whit Stillman, it follows a group of Upper East Side, upper-class college students home for the holidays during

debutante season. Yes, there are white tie and tails and white dresses. A friend who is of this scene (Buckley, Deerfield, Haverford), said the film is spot on, though he cringes at the term, "urban haute bourgeoisie."

By Invitation Only (2006)

This documentary by filmmaker and author Rebecca Snedeker is a personal look at her family and her own relationship to New Orleans Carnival and social traditions. Agree or disagree with how Carnival season is portrayed, the movie allows a glimpse into one of the city's traditions that outsiders would normally not see.

She's the Man (2006)

Based on the William Shakespeare play, "Twelfth Night," this movie stars Amanda Bynes as Viola Hastings who pretends to be her brother, Sebastian, at his school so she can play soccer. While it whimsically follows Shakespeare's play, there is a subplot in which her mother pushes her to be a debutante, with the movie concluding at the ball with Bynes ... in a green dress.

Something New (2006)

A romantic comedy about an accountant, Sanaa Lathan as Kenya McQueen, who meets a landscaper, Simon Baker as Brian Kelly, and the issues that arise due to class and race. The end of the movie has a scene of an African-American cotillion, where Lathan's character, a former debutante, has a slight meltdown.

Debutante Actresses

While national newspapers sometimes can throw the word debutante around with no idea of its meaning -- actresses as diverse as Grace Kelly and Paris Hilton, unless you can prove me otherwise, did not make debuts -- there are a few debutantes who have had the spotlight follow them from one stage to the other.

Cornelia Guest

Dubbed "The Deb of the Decade" in 1986, after being named "Deb of the Year" in 1982, Cornelia Cochrane Churchill Guest became as famous for her partying skills (she was friends with Andy Warhol) as well as getting press, with the New York Times calling her the first

"celebutante." She made her debut in New York City at the International Debutante Ball during the 1981-82 season.

After writing "The Debutante's Guide to Life," she sporadically acted in movies and TV shows, including "Celebrity Cook-Off." Currently, she is a spokeswoman for animal rights, and has published a vegan entertaining and cooking book, and started a vegan catering business.

Daughter of Winston F.C. Guest (cousin of Winston Churchill) and Lucy "C.Z." Guest, she is the goddaughter of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

Dina Merrill

Born Nedenia Marjorie Hutton, Dina Merrill was the only child of heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post (her father created the cereal empire that became General Foods), and her second husband, Wall Street broker E.F. Hutton. A graduate of Miss Porter's School (debutante Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis' alma mater), Merrill dropped out of George Washington University to attend the American Academy of

Dramatic Arts. According to a 1983 article in the Chicago Tribune, "I had a (debut) tea. That was it."

Her film debut was in "Desk Set" (1957), and she appeared in "Butterfield 8" and "Operation Petticoat," as well as numerous TV shows and on stage.

She was married to Cliff Robertson (her second husband), who has a New Orleans connection via the movie "Obsession" (1976), which was filmed here. So, there is a good chance that she stayed in the city during filming. Merrill is now 91.

Margaret Qualley, Rainey Qualley

Born Sarah Margaret Qualley and Rainsford Qualley, these daughters of actress Andie MacDowell and former model Paul Qualley are both actresses and models. They made their debuts at Le Bal des Debutantes at L'Hotel de Crillon in Paris. Margaret's best known part is in "The Leftovers"; Rainey's, in "Mad Men."

Rumer Willis, Scout Willis, Tallulah Willis

The daughters of actors Demi Moore and Bruce Willis, all three girls have made their debuts at Le Bal des Debutantes at L'Hotel de Crillon in Paris. Rumer is the most active actress: She debuted cinematically in 1995 in "Now and Then" and her more recent film is "Return to Sender." She also just won Season 20 of "Dancing With the Stars."

Tallulah, who hasn't acted in a while, was in "Bandits" (2001), "The Whole Ten Yards" (2004) and "The Scarlet Letter" (1995), but appeared on "Dancing With the Stars" to support Rumer, as did Scout, who has appeared in "Bandits" (2001), "The Scarlet Letter" (1995) and "Moonrise Kingdom" (2012).

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