

TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 1
7 P.M. • HUMANITIES
QUADRANGLE
ALICE CINEMA

WANDA

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



Barbara Loden's life would make a fascinating biopic. Born in 1932 in what she termed "hillbilly country" in North Carolina, she experienced an impoverished, unpleasant childhood in a broken family and left home at age 16. In New York City she became a pin-up model, a Copacabana dancer, and, on TV, Ernie Kovacs's scantily-clad sidekick, who had pie thrown in her face and pretended to be sawed in half. After Loden had some success on Broadway, Elia Kazan cast her in a small role in *WILD RIVER* (1960), and a larger one in *SPLENDOR IN THE GRASS* (1961), in which she played a promiscuous flapper. Loden won a Tony Award for Arthur Miller's *AFTER THE FALL* (1964), playing a thinly disguised version of Marilyn Monroe. She and Kazan, who directed the play, were married in 1967.



Loden's sex object persona labelled her as a "blonde bombshell," which she resented, and which inspired her to write and direct her own films, and to give herself an unglamorous role. She spent years developing *WANDA*'s script, some of which drew upon her own experiences: "I've been like Wanda myself. I came from a rural region where people have a hard time. They don't have time for wittily observing the things around them. They're not concerned about anything more than existing from day to day... I was nothing, I had no friends, no talent. I was like a shadow... I had no identity of my own, I just became whatever I thought people wanted me to be."

In the late 1960s there were few women directing narrative films, so it's not surprising that it took Loden five years to raise the film's minuscule \$115,000 budget. To minimize costs, she used 16mm, and worked with a crew of only four. Nicholas Proferes, who doubled as cinematographer and editor, had been a cameraman for D.A. Pennebaker; his skill with a hand-held camera was crucial to *WANDA*'s quasi-documentary feel. Filming took place over ten weeks in or near Scranton, PA, and in Connecticut, and utilized non-actors, except for Loden and Michael Higgins ("Mr. Dennis"). Loden cited as influences Godard's *BREATHLESS* and Andy Warhol; her improvisational acting and directing have most often drawn comparisons to John Cassavetes.

Blown up to 35mm, *WANDA* premiered at the 1970 Venice Film Festival, where it won the Best Foreign Film Award, and opened in February, 1971, in one Manhattan theater. The reviews, including two in the *New York Times*, were generally favorable. Vincent Canby praised "the absolute accuracy of its effects, the decency of its point of view and the kind of purity of technique that can only be the result of conscious discipline." But Pauline Kael and others complained that the film was drab, and that Wanda was far from a role model. Unfortunately, *WANDA* played nowhere else. It was a difficult sell even at a time of "New American Cinema": an unsentimental portrait of a passive wanderer, a bitter depiction of patriarchal oppression, a journey through desolate Rust Belt landscapes, a road movie without the exhilaration of the open road, a Bonnie-and-Clyde drama minus the glamor or jaunty banjo (in fact, without any background music). Loden went on to direct two educational shorts, and worked in theater, but never made another feature film. She died of cancer in 1980 at age 48.

For about thirty years, film history articles and books, even when focusing on new auteurs of the 1970s, or on feminist film, or on the rise of women directors, almost entirely ignored *WANDA*. That erasure reversed dramatically over the past two decades: there are now dozens of analyses/appreciations, including two excellent books: Nathalie Léger's *Suite for Barbara Loden* (2012) and Anna Backman Rogers's *Still Life: Notes on Barbara Loden's Wanda* (2021). Scholarly discourse has finally situated *WANDA* as an essential feminist text and groundbreaking work of indie cinema. Shortly before her death, Loden stated, "There's so much I didn't achieve, but I tried to be independent and to create my own way. Otherwise, I would have become like Wanda, all my life just floating around." As evidenced by her feature film, which we are proud to present in a new 35mm print, she achieved quite a lot.

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY **BARBARA LODEN**

CINEMATOGRAPHY AND EDITING BY
NICHOLAS PROFERES

LIGHTING AND SOUND BY **LARS HEDMAN**

PRODUCED BY **HARRY SHUSTER**
(1970), 102 MINS.

STARRING **BARBARA LODEN** AND
MICHAEL HIGGINS

DID YOU KNOW: YOU CAN VISIT TWO OF THE FILM'S CONNECTICUT LOCATIONS: THE TRUMBULL MALL (WHERE WANDA GAZES AT MANNEQUINS AND LATER PURCHASES A DRESS), AND HOLY LAND USA, AN 18-ACRE RELIGIOUS THEME PARK IN WATERBURY, FEATURING STATIONS OF THE CROSS AND FAKE CATACOMBS.

NEXT UP: PEDRO ALMODOVAR'S DAZZLING, SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL **BAD EDUCATION** (2004), A MULTI-LAYERED MELODRAMA THAT FILTERS FILM NOIR THROUGH THE FILMMAKER'S SIGNATURE THEMES OF SEXUAL IDENTITY, ROLE PLAYING, AND CINEPHILIA., SCREENS ON 35MM **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 9 AT 7 PM**