



Luhan's Transformation Explored

By Kathaleen Roberts / Journal Staff Writer on Sun, Sep 25, 2011

SANTA FE — If Taos was the eddy luring artists to New Mexico, Mabel Dodge Luhan was its vortex.

“She was a very complicated lady,” says actress Ali MacGraw, who will do a special reading of Luhan’s work this week. “She caused things to happen that changed this part of the world in a very powerful way. It’s a powerful story about one woman who turned this part of the world upside down.”

The story of Luhan, an independent, visionary American woman raised in Victorian New York 50 years before the dawn of the women’s movement, will be told in a documentary film, “Awakening in Taos,” by Santa Fe producer and director Mark Gordon.

He decided to helm the production after watching countless movies germinate in New Mexico — its mountains and mesas often doubling for Montana, Wyoming or some other Wild West backdrop.

“I thought, ‘Why not make films in New Mexico about people who lived here?’” he said.

The project has been in development for six years as Gordon worked to get funding. Using the Ken Burns model, he interviewed researchers and experts, as well as friends and neighbors who still remember the woman who brought the world to Taos. The final piece will incorporate vintage photographs, as well as contemporary footage.

Albuquerque’s KNME-TV will supervise and distribute the film nationally

for PBS. Gordon expects to complete filming by spring. The hourlong documentary is slated for release next summer.

In the meantime, MacGraw has agreed to a staged reading of Luhan’s “Edge of Taos Desert: An Escape to Reality” at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Taos’ Harwood Museum of Art to benefit the project.

Also at the event, Blue Spruce Standing Deer, the great-grandson of Luhan’s husband Tony Lujan, will sing traditional Pueblo songs he learned from Lujan.

MacGraw became involved because she happened to sit next to Gordon on an airplane flight. Already an avid fan of Luhan’s “Edge of Taos Desert” (she’s read it five times), she quickly agreed to the reading.

“It’s not just about New Mexico through the eyes of a first-time viewer, but also of a woman with a very complicated life,” she said. “It takes a lot of guts to shake your old life.

“She just woke up one morning and said, ‘This is bull—,’” MacGraw said. “Her doing of that had spoken to me every time I’ve read it.”

Of course, Luhan’s 40-year relationship with a man from Taos Pueblo forms the romantic heart of the story. “There’s this remarkable love story of her dreaming of Tony Lujan in Taos and the sense that the face in the dream matches this very charismatic tribal leader,” MacGraw said.



Ali MacGraw will read from Mabel Dodge Luhan’s “Edge of Taos Desert: An Escape to Reality” at the Harwood Museum of Art as part of a fundraising event for the “Awakening in Taos” documentary project.

Disillusioned by World War I, Luhan moved from Greenwich Village to Taos in 1917. Before heading West, she had moved from Buffalo, N.Y., to Florence, Italy, where she and her second husband restored a palatial DeMedici villa. In Paris, Mabel met Gertrude Stein, who introduced her to Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, forging a modernist link that would continue to germinate in Taos.

A banking heiress and artist-collecting grande dame, Luhan moved back to New York after her European sojourn and started what would become a nationally known salon. Her patrons included Margaret Sanger, Emma Goldman, Charles Demuth, Max Eastman and John Reed.

She was a sponsor of the famed Armory Show of new European modern art in 1913.

“That brought Gertrude Stein and the modernists to the attention of the American public,” Gordon said. Stein even wrote a pamphlet about Luhan’s life.

Luhan married her third husband, painter Maurice Sterne, in 1916. By this time, she was a nationally syndicated columnist for the Hearst organization. It was Sterne who coaxed her west of the Hudson. He “wanted to paint the Indians of Santa Fe,” Gordon said.

“She sent him ahead on his own on their honeymoon. It wasn’t a good sign,” he added with a laugh. “But she had a dream of a man with a dark face replacing her husband.”

Teepee and drums

In Taos, Luhan bought a 12-acre property on the advice of Tony Lujan, whom she would marry in 1923. Tony set up a teepee in front of the small house and drummed there each night until she acquiesced. Luhan sent Sterne away, supporting him with monthly payments until their divorce was final.

(Luhan took her new husband’s last name, but Anglicized it, spelling it Luhan instead of Lujan, so her friends back east would know how to pronounce it).

D.H. Lawrence accepted an invitation from her to stay in Taos in 1922. Their fraught friendship would resurface in his fiction. Other luminaries orbiting her salon included Marsden Hartley, Ansel Adams and Georgia O’Keeffe.

“She was a creative genius, and she was highly intelligent,” Gordon said. “She could be extremely kind and generous. She could also be selfish and self-centered. She had agendas, so people would experience her as manipulative.”

Some accounts have described Luhan as bipolar, a word Gordon eschewed.



Mabel Dodge Luhan in Taos, Circa 1923.

“I hate to use those labels,” he said. “She’s been reverse diagnosed. Certainly, she could be manic; she could be depressed. She was a very complex individual.”

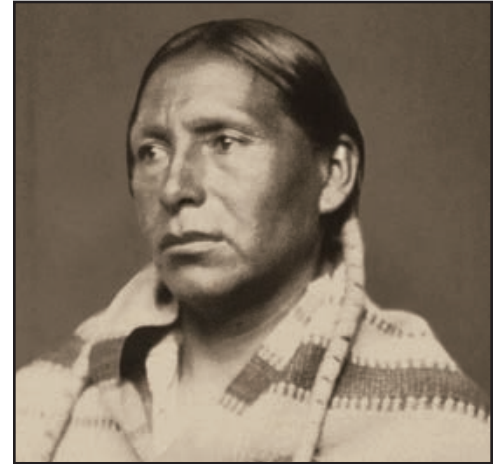
“She was looking for an alternative to the direction she saw civilization going,” he continued. “She came from a Victorian background. She hoped she would prevent others from being repressed and abused like the Victorians were.”

In Taos, Luhan discovered a community of people deeply connected to one another and living in harmony with nature, decades before the hippie invasion of the 1960s and ’70s.

“She was 50 years ahead of them,” Gordon said.

MacGraw discovered as much when she moved to the Santa Fe area in 1994 after fire destroyed her rented Malibu home. Today, she is known for her community philanthropy and her involvement in everything from the Santa Fe Animal Shelter to the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market to the “Dollars for Schools” website, where teachers can request funding for specific school projects.

“I do a tremendous amount of a little bit,” she explained.



Tony Lujan of Taos Pueblo became Mabel Dodge Luhan’s fourth husband in 1923.

“I think so many of us transplants find so many things” here, she said. “It’s very, very different for me from either New York or L.A. It is just like coming to a new country, which I love. What keeps me here is the sense that this (area) is filled with extraordinary people who feel they can contribute to the valuable things in life and this community.”

Gordon also hopes to produce a feature-length film about Luhan. MacGraw declined to say whether she was hoping for a part.

“I have no opinion about that at all,” she said. “I would like it to be a great movie. I care that it resonates with truth.”

Luhan died at her home of a heart attack in 1962 and is buried in Kit Carson Cemetery. Her house, once owned by Dennis Hopper — who wrote the script for “Easy Rider” there — has been designated a national historic landmark.