

A reputation hardly worth salvaging

The late astronomer Carl Sagan brought a bizarre libel suit against Apple Computer in 1993. The company had been using the name Sagan as an internal-only code name for one of its ongoing projects. Sagan, through his attorney, asked them to stop using his name. Apple re-christened the project Butt-Head Astronomer; Sagan sued for libel in a California court.

US District Court Judge Baird dismissed the case, implying in his order that, for Sagan to prove Apple was referring to him, he would have had to prove he was in fact the world's only butt-head astronomer.

This incident came to mind as I was watching *Captured on Film: the True Story of Marion Davies*, which takes on the mildly valiant but rather pointless task of salvaging the reputation of a 1920s actress whom no one really cares about any more. (Turner Classic Movies. Tuesday, February 14, at 8pm ET/PT.)

Davies' major claim to fame is that she was supposedly the basis for the character of Susan Alexander, the no-brain, no-talent mistress of the title character in *Citizen Kane*.

Orson Welles repeated throughout his life that, while Kane was clearly based on William Randolph Hearst, Susan was largely a made-up plot device. The strange thing is that the main proponents of this rumour – the people who saw a one-to-one correspondence between Susan and Marion – were Hearst and Davies themselves.

As with Sagan, the couple brought more attention to the matter with their own hoo-ha. Had they not

dragged in lawyers, it is likely that the image of Davies as a gold-digging, failed actress might have dissipated into rumour, instead of what it is now: one of the most widely accepted, canonical legends of Hollywood history.

But then again, if not for the Kane connection, it is unlikely that Davies would be remembered at all.

The TCM documentary, which is airing in conjunction with the network's month-long film festival featuring Davies' work, attempts to convince us that Davies is a "gifted actress".

The examples this programme has chosen to prove its point are not very impressive. We are shown a clip from a Hearst-bankrolled film called *Little Old New York* (1923), in which Davies supposedly combined "her comedic ability with high drama".

Her character in this film dresses as a boy to collect an inheritance; it is one of the worst drag-acting jobs

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in the history of film.

A Davies buff interviewed for the documentary makes a fool of herself trying to spin Davies' failure as an asset: "[In this role, Davies] doesn't seem to feel she needs to apologise, or even take the attitude that anyone believes she's really a boy."

The programme's apparent purpose is to come to the aide of a trod-upon underdog. It is strange that



Underdog or failed actress? Marion Davies in 'Not so Dumb'

Hollywood has such a fickle notion of who the underdog is; first it was the oppressed artist Welles, now, apparently, it's Davies.

Through it all, the media mogul's spirit lives on: the documentary looks and feels as though it were underwritten by Hearst himself.

■ This isn't the only documentary this week that is overly ambitious in what it promises to prove. *Secrets*

Asru, a 3,000-year-old mummy from Thebes. Asru is examined using techniques that have been performed many times in crime laboratories, but never before on a mummy.

The scientist "is disappointed to find no evidence of narcotics or painkillers".

But this documentary won't stop until it gets what it wants, doggedly re-playing its strange, poorly-lit re-enactments of ancient Egyptians getting high from sniffing lotus flowers. This makes no sense at all, since the documentary goes on to explain that the lotus contains no narcotic whatsoever.

One scientist, who seems to be cognisant that it is now up to her to live up to the documentary's promise, speculates that any anti-oxidant, including the lotus, "acts as a form of Viagra, which would have been as important for women as for men".

Making documentaries must be like running a pharmaceutical company: to obtain funding for either venture, one has to promise to cure erectile dysfunction.

of the Pharaohs, about ancient Egyptian civilisation, promises "disease, drugs, pain, sex, and the mysterious blue lotus". (PBS. Tuesdays, February 13-27 at 8pm ET. Check local listings.) Could Egyptology survive without its continual promise of finding something weird and dirty?

This time, the wild speculations of debauchery are based on an autopsy of