

**Nellie Conley  
(1873-1959)**



Nellie Conley, whose stage name was Madame Sul-Te-Wan, was a pioneering stage and film actor who became one of the most prominent black performers in Hollywood during the silent era, with a career that spanned more than seven decades.

The Louisville native is best known as the first African American actor who in 1915 was contracted to appear in one of the most controversial films in American Cinematic history, D. W. Griffith's groundbreaking, *Birth of a Nation*.

Young Nellie's interest in performing was awakened when, as a young girl, she would deliver laundry to Louisville's Buckingham Theater. There the white female actors, who were her mother's customers, often invited Conley to watch the shows. Quietly, she studied the entertainers: their dance steps, vocal mannerisms and routines. The following day, young Conley would rehearse the act in front of classmates, vowing that, she too, would be an actor someday.

Throughout the 1920s, Madame Sul-Te-Wan would establish herself as a publicly recognizable character actress, most often appearing in "Mammy" roles alongside such popular actors of the silent film era as Tom Mix, Leatrice Joy, and Mae Marsh. Some of her most memorable roles of the era were in the 1927 James W. Horne directed Buster Keaton comedy *College*, and in the 1929 Erich von Stroheim directed drama *Queen Kelly*, starring Gloria Swanson.

As a black woman in the period of segregation, Conley was consistently limited to roles as minor characters who were usually convicts, native women, or domestic servants, such as her role as a cook in the 1933 box-office hit *King Kong*. In 1937, Conley was cast in the memorable role of "Tituba" in the film, *Maid of Salem*, a dramatic retelling of the events surrounding the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. The film was financially successful, and Conley's performance garnered critical praise. Despite the motion picture industry's limitations for African American performers, Conley worked consistently throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

Conley played in a number of silent films and many award winning features. Some of her roles included: "Slave," *Birth of a Nation* (1915), "Maid," *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927), "Hattie," *King Kong* (1933), "Jim Alley's Mother," *In Old Chicago* (1937), "Carmen's Grandma," *Carmen Jones* (1954), "Witch Women," *Tarzan and the Trappers* (1958), and she also appeared in *Porgy and Bess* (1959).

The successful actor once defended what some critics said were demeaning roles for African Americans: "I'd rather play a maid than be one," she said. Conley died February 1, 1959. She was 85 years old.