

One-Hit *Wanda*

UCLA restores Barbara Loden's sole directorial effort

By [Karina Longworth](#)

"**Barbara Loden has youth, beauty**, talent, a [Tony Award](#), her name in *Who's Who* — and the fascinating [Elia Kazan](#) for a husband. What else could she ask for? Everything, she says."

That was the lede of a January 1968 *McCall's* profile of Loden, the actress turned writer-director of the 1970 indie film *Wanda*. Barely seen on initial release and virtually ignored for years, *Wanda* has since become recognized as a feminist landmark of counter-Hollywood film. A new print, lovingly restored by the [UCLA](#) Film and Television Archive with support from the [Film Foundation](#) and [Gucci](#), premieres Saturday at UCLA.

Typically glib lady-rag highlight reel of a woman's life though it may be, that *McCall's* opener also unwittingly summarizes one of the conflicts that animates *Wanda*.



Barbara Loden, writer-director-star of Wanda

Born into an Ohio family described by Kazan as "working-class" and by Loden's collaborator and rumored lover [Nicolas Proferres](#) as "white trash," she drifted to New York at 17 and became a showgirl. Even after falling into the would-be charmed life of a Hollywood wife at age 35 (she and Kazan spent years seeing each other while both married to other people), she resisted that position's presumed complacency until her death of breast cancer in 1980, at age 48.

Loden's own restlessness gave the lie to the "having it all" fantasy sold by media targeted to women — a lie that *Wanda*, a film about a woman who has nothing save her body, exposes. Having miraculously ascended from the bottom of white society to one of its upper rungs, Loden made a movie about the kind of life she left behind.

She was inspired to make the film by a true story in which a woman, charged as an accomplice to a bank heist, thanked a judge for sending her to jail. Loden told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1971 that watching Jean Luc-Godard's *Breathless* and the films of [Andy Warhol](#) gave her the courage to make

Wanda as an experimental narrative outside of the system. She planned only to star in it, but she couldn't find the right director and at some point realized, "If I wanted to get it done I'd have to do it myself." Of directing, Loden said, "It was like being a housewife. You do everything."

Shot on 16 mm for just over \$100,000 (invested by family friend Harry Schuster), by a crew of four (Proferres, an associate of documentary filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker, served as cinematographer and editor), *Wanda* stars Loden as the title character, a wife and mother in a broken-down Pennsylvania coal-mining town. Wanda passively lets a court grant her estranged husband custody of her kids, drifts into strangers' beds for lack of anything else to do, falls asleep in a movie theater and gets robbed, ambles into a bar robbery-in-progress and ends up going on the run with the strangely straight-laced crook (Michael Higgins).

Kazan later would identify *Wanda* as part of "a class of women known as floaters. ... [They] float, like debris." In a profile of Loden, Rex Reed described the character, with his trademark finesse, as "an ignorant slut." In the same story, Loden called her "an ordinary person."

Wanda premiered at the Venice Film Festival in September 1970 and won the international critics' prize. Kazan complained in his autobiography that this recognition changed his wife, and not to his liking: No longer dependent on her looks for the bulk of validation, Loden subsequently became indifferent to wifely duties. "I realized I was losing her. But I was also losing interest in her struggle," Kazan wrote.

Over the next decade, Loden completed multiple screenplays and attempted in vain to get another feature off the ground. One, titled *Love Means Always Having to Say You're Sorry*, was even announced in the trades as another Loden/Proferres/Higgins joint. But none of these projects ever came to fruition, and when Loden died, she left behind *Wanda* as her only full-length directorial effort.

The prints of *Wanda* that have circulated over 40 years have a kind of dishwater palette that Loden didn't intend; the restoration has revealed a much more vivid and variant chromatic range. With the square aspect ratio of 16 mm preserved, *Wanda*'s somnambulant, nomadic journey plays out like a hazy dream rendered in 24 vintage Polaroids a second.

UCLA's Ross Lipman, who discovered *Wanda*'s original, unfaded camera negative in an about-to-be-demolished film lab four years ago and went on to spearhead the restoration, noted in an interview last week that of all the influence credited to *Wanda* — it's been cited as a progenitor of John Cassavetes' films of the '70s, and it seems like a clear ancestor to Vincent Gallo's *Buffalo 66* — its most immediate impact was on the work of Loden's husband. Having already dramatized Loden's muselike power in his novel and 1969 film *The Arrangement*, Kazan hired Proferres in 1972 to shoot and edit his own self-financed, nonunion project, *The Visitors*. "She totally influenced Kazan," Lipman says.

Some of Kazan's more controversial statements suggest an unwillingness to admit that influence. In an interview after Loden's death, he took credit for writing *Wanda*'s script, calling it "a favor I was doing for her, to give her something to do." But Kazan's memoirs, Lipman says, suggest Kazan's attitude toward his wife was not consistently condescending or patriarchal. "Sometimes he's building her up, sometimes he's tearing her down, but he's always in awe of her."