



THE

*Nick Zegarrac's*

*Hollywood*

ART

*Marie Antoinette*





# DOOMED MONARCHY

## The Trials and Tribulations of **MARIE ANTOINETTE** (1938)

It was the costliest film ever attempted by a studio; a sumptuous feast for the eyes, destined for the annals of screen immortality. In every detail, it should have been the most magnificent spectacle ever created; and, although arguably, it fell short of these superlatives, **Marie Antoinette** (1938) proved to be just as turbulent an undertaking for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer as those last fateful days inside the French court of Versailles.

As an artifact of the 1930s **Marie Antoinette** figures prominently into the Thalberg era at MGM: a studio known for “*more stars than there are in heaven.*” Any intelligent critique of **Marie Antoinette** must begin with a back story about MGM’s hierarchy. For it is a fairly secure assumption that the project would never have been undertaken without the persistence of Vice President, Irving G. Thalberg. At a diminutive five feet, eleven inches in height – Thalberg may not have been terribly prepossessing physically, but his stature as a film maker had yet to be unsurpassed.

Indeed, the first time unknown contract player Norma Shearer met Irving Thalberg she thought she was speaking to an office boy. After showing her the way to his office, Thalberg quietly took his seat behind the imposing desk, explaining, “*I am Irving Thalberg.*”

(Top: Norma Shearer in one of the many wigs and costumes she wore in the film. If not in deed, then in look and feel Shearer was the spitting image of the ill-fated French monarch. Middle left: Louis B. Mayer, the undisputed monarch of MGM. Middle right: Irving Grant Thalberg – coined the ‘boy wonder by Carl Laemmle, a moniker well deserved, since Thalberg instinctively knew a good story idea and had an uncanny knack for producing hit films. Middle: the standard bearer in quality; Leo, the MGM lion. Bottom: one of many rooms in MGM’s prop department. The studio’s draftsmen were capable of creating sets from virtually any period in world history.)



# NORMA & IRVING

...a love story

He was born Irving Grant Thalberg in Brooklyn New York on May 30 1899, of German extraction and cursed with a fragile heart that would later lead to other ailments. He was, as actress Luis Rainer once described him, “a fine, intelligent, marvelous, extraordinary” individual with an insatiable appetite for great literature and an almost manic thirst for knowledge.

There was something of the fatalist in Thalberg too. He was convinced he would not live to see 30 – a prophecy that was not far off its projected mark. There was also something of the skeptic in him. For example, immediately following the Warner Brothers release of **The Jazz Singer** (the first talking picture in 1929) – Thalberg issued a statement to the trade papers saying that “*the talking picture has its place...but I do not believe it will ever replace silent movies any more than I believe Technicolor will replace B&W*”.

In hindsight, Thalberg's statement seems rash and dismissive and, also in retrospect, decidedly misguided on both accounts. However, there was not much else during his all too brief tenure at MGM that the ‘boy wonder’ was wrong about. Abandoning college for a chance at a high level executive position under Carl Laemmle, then the president of Universal Studios, Thalberg rose through the ranks quickly. Unfortunately, Laemmle had a son, Carl Jr. and soon Thalberg realized that the autonomy and control he craved to produce the kinds of pictures he wanted to make would never be his at Universal.

So, in 1924 Thalberg signed with Louis B. Mayer and MGM. The conglomerate of Metro Pictures, L.B. Mayer Productions and Samuel Goldwyn Pictures had recently incurred great difficulties and considerable losses on two elephantine projects; Eric Von Stroheim's **Greed** and the original silent version of **Ben-Hur** (1929).





Driven by work, Thalberg quickly gained control into every facet of the motion picture business. Apart from exuding an almost invisible manipulation of the studio's daily operations, Thalberg also possessed an uncanny knack for choosing stories that made money; the net result - MGM was the only studio to show a profit during the Great Depression.

However, if Thalberg was the ultimate puppet master of his domain, he was also gracious and insistent about remaining conspicuous throughout the creative process. He once said that "*credit you give yourself isn't worth a damn*" and to this end, no film made during his tenure ever carried his producer's credit. (Exceptions to this rule were made only after Thalberg's death with both **The Good Earth** (1938) and **Goodbye Mr. Chips** (1939) bearing a fond dedication to Thalberg affixed to their main titles). Although Thalberg's personal participation on individual projects was arguably minimal; the one exception remained in his fastidious guidance of his wife, Norma Shearer's career.



Shearer was born Edith Norma Shearer in Montreal Canada, on August 10, 1902. She won a beauty contest at age fourteen, but reportedly was rejected in the follies by Broadway impresario, Florenz Ziegfeld Jr in 1920, for having a lazy eye and somewhat 'fattish' legs. Undaunted by this early rejection and persistent to a fault, Norma's extra work in movies brought her to the attention of Thalberg in 1923.

From their first aforementioned auspicious meeting, Norma made her romantic intentions well known around MGM's back lot - "*I'm out to get him.*" In 1927, she did just that in a modest (at least, by Hollywood standards) and private wedding ceremony.



(Previous page top: Norma and Irving on their wedding day. Bottom: Norma and Irving with L.B. Mayer on the MGM backlot. This page, top left: Norma as a child; middle: a photo of the newlyweds; right: with Irving Jr. Right: a seductive headshot for *The Divorcee* (1930). Bottom: accepting her Best Actress Oscar for *The Divorcee*.)





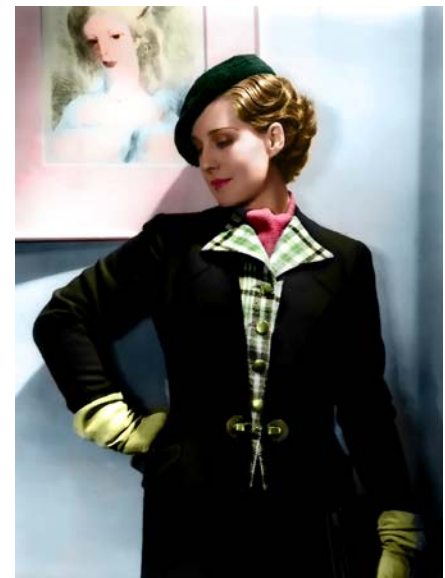
(Above: the varying degrees of Norma Shearer. Left: as charming innocent (middle), smoldering seductress (top right) ultra sophisticate (right) 'queen of the lot' and (below) elegant clothes horse. Whatever the mood, Shearer seemed to move with glycerin ease from 20s vamp to '30s saintly womanhood.)

In many respects, Norma and Irving were ideally suited for one another. In the business of making movies both were headstrong yet, each complimented the other in private life. Thalberg truly worshiped Norma as a star that he could mold. She acquiesced – at least partly, to his request to retire from the movies after marriage – by playing the role of a doting wife and mother in between films – laying out his clothes before they went out in the evening.

By 1929, Thalberg's commitment to his wife's career had transformed Shearer's respectable popularity into that of a star of the first magnitude. Shearer's one and only Best Actress Oscar for **The Divorcee** (1930) had cemented L.B. Mayer's belief in her bankable, though earlier he had had initial doubts.

But any and all speculation regarding Shearer's staying power – and her tenable position as 'queen of the lot' was eclipsed by a review in the New York Times that immortalized her acting prowess.

***"There is no other personality quite like Norma Shearer. When you check the stars and the leading women of all the other studios today this fact becomes all the more apparent. She is always sparkling, gay, always clever, always a trifle naughty, stopping just at the right second, advocating the right thing to do for every woman...to live, laugh, love as her heart dictates, quite the sort who makes her own conventions, the type who can do the very thing that in other women would be cheap or common."***





# FACT VS FICTION

## The 'REEL' to 'REAL' of MARIE ANTOINETTE

If the moniker 'queen of the lot' had effectively stuck to Norma's reputation by 1933, then Thalberg's extravagant obsessions in mounting **Marie Antoinette** as a lavish production rivaled those artistic precepts born from the monarch in history.

Queen Marie Antoinette was born on All Souls' Day, November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1755, in Vienna and baptized under the names Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna. She was the youngest daughter of Maria Theresa and Emperor Franz Stephan. As an Archduchess, Marie grew into a life of sublime privilege, her marriage to Louis Auguste, the dauphin of France, more an affair of state than an affair of the heart.

Ironically, her schooling was limited, though she dabbled in music most proficiently and even played a duet with child protégée Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in the Palace of Schönbrunn. On April 21, 1770 Maria left Vienna for France. She would never return to her native country. En route to her new home she was the guest of Cardinal Louis de Rohan, the man who would later crucify her reputation with the French people over the so-called "Diamond Necklace Affair."

A court of intrigues and temptations, Versailles captivated Maria's fascination with all its glittering superficiality. Without formal education or, for that matter self control, Maria became the brunt of insipid gossip. Her husband, the Dauphin Louis-Auguste, was a backward young man with a bit of cruel streak. Whether from sexual frigidity or just an innate detestation made from being forced to marry anyone, the future king of France did not consummate his marriage to Antoinette for seven years.

(Top: CLICK Magazine's July 1938 cover split a portrait likeness of the real Marie Antoinette on the left with half of Norma's visage made up in similar make up and hair on the right. The level of accuracy achieved through makeup and design, as well as Shearer's uncanny likeness to the real monarch, are frightening.

Bottom: a 1783 portrait of Marie Antoinette. Though clutching a book, the real Marie was hardly an intellectual.)







(The men of Marie Antoinette, above left: a portrait of the real Louie Auguste XVI in all his stately finery. Middle: actor Robert Morley in MGM's lavishly created robes of state. The film was Morley's first. Right: John Barrymore as the aged King Louie the XV, looking devilish through his monocle. Next page: Madame Du Barry (Gladys George) arrives at the ball. The film cast Du Barry as a courtly usurper who yielded an unprecedented amount of authority over the king.)

In the film, **Marie Antoinette** there remains a marvelous scene of pure fiction in which Madame Du Barry, King Louis XV's mistress sends Louis-Auguste and Maria an empty cradle as an obvious snub on their second 'childless' anniversary. The inscription reads: ***"as it is obvious this cart you are unable to fill, go back to your schnitzel and kraut, leave the duties to some baggage that will."*** During the first half of the film, the screenplay by Donald Ogden Stewart, Ernest Vajda and Claudine West credits Du Barry as the instigator in driving a wedge between Marie and adulation from the French people. Gifted character actress Gladys George puts a rather spiteful spin on Du Barry; one that is driven by greed and generally out to conquer the monarchy for herself.

In fact, Madame Comtesse Jeanne Du Barry was a courtesan of illegitimate birth and the mistress of Jean Du Barry before gaining Louis XV's favor in 1768. A social climber, who lacked both the venom and ambition of her predecessor, Mme de Pompadour, Du Barry married her lover's brother, Guillaume, comte Du Barry in 1769. Her influence over the king was minimal, though she did become his lover too.

In the movie, Du Barry is also responsible for the distant relationship between father and son. She is portrayed as a conniving manipulative shrew of formidable power within the French court. In reality, Du Barry was arrested by the Revolutionary Tribunal on charges of treason and guillotined in 1793.

In 1774, King Louis XV died. Dauphin Louis-Auguste ascended the throne and Marie became Queen of France. Her mother, the Empress petitioned prudence and decorum from her daughter in a litany of correspondences, but Marie would have none of it. In fact, her self indulgences escalated to gaudy excesses even though her reputation with the people of France had already degenerated into creating a reputation for herself as a wanton foreigner.

It behooves pointing out that the filmic Antoinette's carefree naughtiness is misperceived as a rebuttal for the rejection she has received by her husband. At the time Louis XV expires, the filmic Marie has resorted to having one intimate love affair (presumably unbeknownst to anyone in or out of the French









court) with a Count Axel Ferson (played by Tyrone Power). Hence, by the time Louis-Auguste becomes King of France in the film, Marie has mended her wicked ways.

The intrinsic logic behind MGM's revisionist history is both acceptable and necessary, if not by purist standards at least by Hollywood's. Norma Shearer's early career had leant itself to playing déclassé women and vamp-like creatures. But in 1934 the Catholic League of Decency and the Hayes Office for self regulation in motion picture entertainment made it clear that **"the tawdry, the cheap and the vulgar"** would no longer be acceptable on the screen. As a result, all female roles of late 1930s vintage would either have to be ladies or die trying. Hence, by the time **Marie Antoinette** had its premiere, the expectation that the queen would be a benevolent ruler, besought by ill timing and moderately bad judgment was practically a given.



Norma Shearer's interpretation of Antoinette is therefore very Christ-like. As example; the quotation most readily recanted throughout history from the real Antoinette is her blunt and thoroughly obtuse rebuttal remedied with regards to the starving populace of France – **"Let them eat cake!"** This line is never uttered in the film **Marie Antoinette**. The character of Antoinette cannot be perceived to be a devil-may-care wanton, but rather, must appear as a martyr, whose greatest sin was to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

This saintly critique of Antoinette in the film extends to the 1785 notorious "Diamond Necklace Affair." History explains that the Cardinal de Rohan was duped by a trickster named Jeanne de la Motte into purchasing a lavish necklace in the queen's name. Rohan, who had fallen out of the queen's good graces believed that la Motte's commission meant a return to favor with her majesty. Instead, la Motte smuggled the jewels to England and made a tide little profit in the deal.

(Antoinette's pedigree for quality. Top: Anita Louise as the Princess Lamballe gets assistance for a torn sequin from one of the many seamstresses on set. Middle left: Production Designer Cedric Gibbons with actress Dolores Del Rio who played Du Barry in a 1932 film for Warner Bros. Middle right: composer Herbert Stothart. Bottom: couturier extraordinaire, Gilbert Adrian, known simply as 'Adrian' on the MGM back lot. His designs throughout the 30s influenced an entire generation of designers that began their careers in the 1960s.)







(Top left: waiting around for take two on the extravagant Versailles ballroom set. In the middle are Norma Shearer, in white and Gladys George as Du Barry. Top right: as the film neared completion, MGM's publicity department went into overtime, crafting a barrage of articles and cover stories for the fan magazines. On June 6<sup>th</sup>, Screen Pictorial did an impressive six page spread on the film with great detail paid to the cost of props and costumes. Below: Norma in yet another publicity still showcasing another of Adrian's stunning costumes. In all, Norma wore 34 gowns in the film, each weighing in excess of 80 lbs.)

When the expected payment to the jeweler for the necklace failed to materialize, the jeweler took his claim of defaulted payment to the crown.

Appalled by this deception, Marie ordered that Cardinal de Rohan to stand trial – a fateful error in judgment. For although Jeanne de la Motte was convicted of the crime - the cardinal was acquitted by the Parliament of Paris – a miscarriage of justice openly celebrated as a victory over **“that Austrian.”** Hence, the general consensus driven home by the masses was that Marie had been involved at some level in the conspiracy to buy the necklace and had used Rohan as her scapegoat.

After Marie's earlier extravagances had bankrupted the royal treasury, the Estates-General emphatically refused to vote on an increase in taxes to compensate for the queen's expenditures. Instead, they swore an oath to give France a constitution. The seeds of revolution had been planted.

Forced into abdication, Louis XVI attempted an appeasement by agreeing to a constitutional







(Above left: an etching of the real Louis Philippe Joseph duc d'Orlean and (above right) actor Joseph Schildkraut as Philippe, seen here with Gladys George's Du Barry.

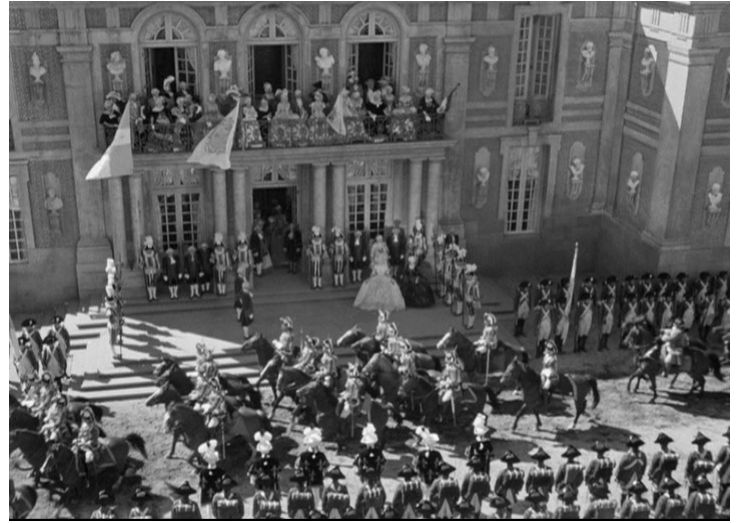
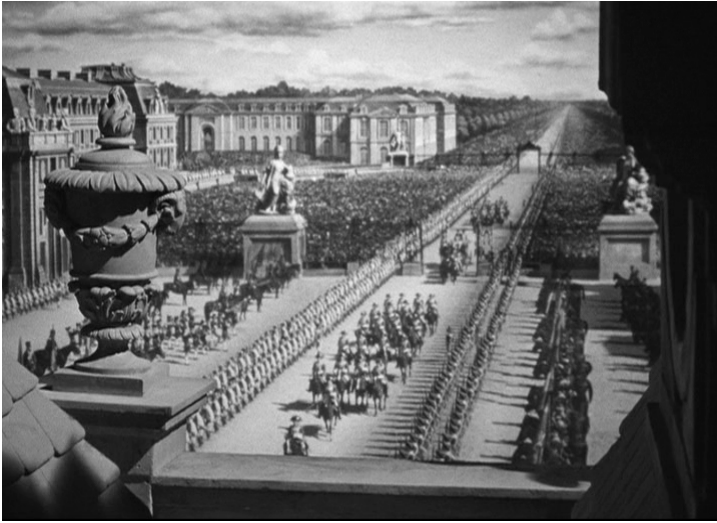
Two stunning examples of Cedric Gibbons sumptuous set design. Right: the grand hall in the Palace of Schonbrunn - Vienna and (below), the Archduchess' atelier.)

monarchy. But the Revolution attacked the Catholic Church; a move akin to turning against their king. Fearing for their lives, on June 20th, 1791 the royals fled Paris. They were apprehended en route and incarcerated in the Temple Prison. On January 21st, 1793, Louis was publicly beheaded.

In the film, these final elements of court intrigue and daring escape are interwoven into the fictional romantic hero of Count Axel Ferson, played by 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox heartthrob Tyrone Power, and the villainous Duke Phillippe d'Orleans, played by character actor Joseph Schildkraut. Ferson is arguably the film's most flawed and fictitious attempt at fashioning a romance to this historical epic. But Phillippe bears further discussion in historical fact.

In life, Louis Philippe Joseph duc d'Orlean was born to prominence on April 13, 1747 and called Philippe Égalité. He was a member of a cadet branch for the House of Bourbon, the dynasty then ruling France.





(The opening moments of the film establish its trademark opulence. Top row left: a long shot of Marie's carriage arriving at Versailles. Only the soldiers on horseback in foreground are real. The rest is a miniature photographed on glass. Top right: a close up of the palace exterior with Marie's carriage arriving. Middle row, left: Marie meets the groom's two brothers. Middle row, right: surveying the magnificent Versailles throne room. Bottom row, left: Marie's wedding to Louie Auguste in the grand candlelit cathedral. Bottom right: a close up of Marie and Louie Auguste, his solemn façade contrasted by her elation.)



He actively supported the revolution. Schildkraut's Philippe becomes the demigod that replaces Gladys George's Du Barry as the heavy in the second half of the film. After the affair of the necklace Phillippe is offered a sizable portion of the king's estate in return for his influence in helping to quell the revolutionary flames; a regency never granted in historical fact. In fact and film, Philippe was perceived as something of a patriot, though he too was eventually guillotined.

On October 14<sup>th</sup> 1793, Marie Antoinette was formally charged with high treason and illicit sexual practices. This latter charge was tacked on to dissolve any remaining sympathies that women might have with Marie as a mother. There are few who would disagree that the last days of France's monarchy were tumultuous and chaotic.

Yet, in the film, this chaos is barely glimpsed, but instead left to Norma Shearer's prowess as an actress to convey, almost entirely without words as she is being led to the guillotine; her face bearing such deep emotional scars – a strange and virulent concoction of sheer terror and complete surrender – that the cumulative effect on the audience is one of resigned lost innocence caught in a maelstrom of mass brutality.

On Oct. 16<sup>th</sup>, 1793, the day of her execution, the real Marie Antoinette wrote a letter of farewell to her sister-in-law, Madame Elisabeth, who was still in the Temple prison. The loose translation is "***I have just been condemned, not to a shameful death, which can only apply to felons, but rather to finding your brother again. I seek forgiveness from all whom I know, for every harm I may have unwittingly caused. Adieu, good, gentle sister.....I embrace you with all my heart as well as the poor, dear children....***"





## GETTING UNDERWAY

By the mid-1930s, Irving Thalberg commanded the respect, prestige and authority of most moguls in Hollywood – all, it seems, but his own boss, L.B. Mayer. Although Mayer quietly admired Thalberg's zeal for producing some of the finest movies ever made, he was furthermore and merely tolerant of his executive's talent in producing one money maker after the next for his studio. The point of contention that frequently brought these two men to the edge of blows was Thalberg's magnificent obsession with mounting Norma's film career.

MGM's factory apparatus produced and released 52 films per annum – an absolutely staggering output by contemporary estimates. Mayer firmly believed in this assembly line art. Thalberg did not. Moreover, Thalberg had desired to make fewer films but make them more lavish than any of MGM's competitors.

(Above: setting her sights on the glittering lifestyle denied to her by Louie Auguste, Marie ventures on her own through a series of lavish parties and artist's balls. Her pursuit of pleasure eventually brands her a wanton with the people of France, a dangerous moniker as the tide of revolution swells to a political fervor that threatens to topple the French monarchy.)







Ultimately, Mayer's edict ruled; 52 movies were produced each year under his reign, but many were given lavish budgets. Midway through the decade, Thalberg's contract was renegotiated and his duties severely curtailed. Mayer used Thalberg's ill health as the excuse to prune back his V.P.'s influence over the creative output – a move that infuriated the young genius and arguably led to his second heart attack while on holiday.

Under Thalberg's new agreement, the producer responsibilities were splintered between men loyal to Mayer and his son in law, David O. Selznick, and those remaining loyal to and working for Thalberg. This passive/aggressive 'clash of the wills' ultimately culminated in two of the studio's most exquisitely mounted super productions of the decade – both made by Thalberg and both starring Norma Shearer: **Romeo & Juliet** (1936) and **Marie Antoinette**. However, although **Marie Antoinette** was begun at the same time as **Romeo & Juliet** it would not be released until 1938.

Mayer, who shared Thalberg's interest in costume dramas did not care for Thalberg's overspending and daily Mayer observed that **Marie Antoinette** was increasingly becoming a project of great personal excesses. Undoubtedly, **Marie Antoinette** would be big. But Thalberg's expenditures were now guaranteeing that it would also be colossal. Would such cost threaten to bankrupt the studio?

(Top from left to right: Norma Shearer poses for publicity stills in three of the 34 gowns she wears throughout the film. Right top: Philippe seduces Marie at an artist's ball after declaring that he is the only man to whom she has refused her kisses. Middle: Marie meets Count Fersen (Tyrone Power) for the first time. She begs him to impersonate a Russian in order not to lose an expensive necklace to a wager from her brother-in-law. Bottom: implored by Count Mercier (Henry Stephenson), Marie agrees to speak to Du Barry in public at the upcoming ball given at the palace.)





(Top row, left: the ball progresses with (right) Louie keeping a watchful eye on the intimacy between his wife and Philippe. Middle left: intending to keep her promise to Mercier, Marie is forced into a confrontation by Du Barry. Middle right: with Count Fersen, realizing love for the first time. Bottom row: realizing that the King has died and that she is now Queen of France.)





For **Marie Antoinette**, Thalberg envisioned a four hour Technicolor road show epic— a practice made popular more in the 1950s than 1930s and marked by its exclusive engagement status instead of an immediate general release. As a patron, one paid more for a road show. It came with the expectation of a floor show prior to the feature and an overture, intermission, ent’racte, as well as a commemorative program. As an attendee, one was expected to dress for the event the same way as one did for going to see a performance of live theater.



A point of distinction that cannot be overlooked in Thalberg’s preproduction on **Marie Antoinette** was his fastidiousness to mount a film with an uncanny and firm grasp on historical settings. Together with producer Hunt Stromberg, Thalberg amassed a small library of text books on 18<sup>th</sup> century France. Most films of the 1930s, either produced at MGM or elsewhere, were not as concerned with this level of accuracy. In fact, films from this vintage reveal a general lack of genuine authenticity for period settings in favor of some glamorous deco derivative, as much created in the imaginative art departments of the studios as born from the actual historical record.



Consider Ernest Lubitsch’s **The Merry Widow** as example; made in 1934 by MGM and supposedly taking place within the fictional Russian province of Marshovia, and later, Paris. From Moscow to Versailles, the sets in the film are pure art deco – full of smooth lines, rounded corners, yet candle lit as they must have been in 1885, the year the story **The Merry Widow** takes place.

This strange blend of early 20<sup>th</sup> century art nouveau and deco influences combined with trappings from some misplaced historical vintage are precisely what make such rigid critiques in historical analysis on films of this period virtually impossible and frustrating for those fool hardy enough to pursue the undertaking. Yet, as an audience, deco became an accepted part of the cinema milieu; its ultra smooth, crisply polished floors and patina of ultra sophistication haplessly incongruous with the historical record.



(Left top and middle: elated to see Count Fersen, only to learn he is departing for the Americas, Marie and Axel share a passionate embrace. Middle: after being confronted with stone-throwing peasants, Marie confides in Louis. Their marital bond is strengthened with unusual frankness, love and understanding. Bottom: confronting Philippe with a bribe in the hopes that he will halt the revolutionary flames being fanned in their direction. A murderous Philippe confesses that he is awaiting their demise.)

However, Thalberg emphatically did not want such a clash of design esthetics to exist on **Marie Antoinette**. His intent for the preservation of the integrity of the film's surroundings was very much in evidence from the start. MGM's head of research, Nathalie Bucknail, disseminated materials assembled by Thalberg and Stromberg to all departments: 59,277 specific reports on historical research, 1,538 books and approximately 10,615 photographs. Carter Spetner and Dave Barkell made prints from many of these pictures and replicated the art work in them for both the tapestries and paintings seen in the film.

MGM's formidable art director Cedric Gibbons and his associate William Horning designed and supervised the construction of 98 full size sets depicting the palace of Versailles. The curiosity in this enormous undertaking, especially given Thalberg's attention to authenticity, was that none were an exact replica.

The real entrance to Versailles for example, has no grand staircase as the one seen in the film. There is also no representation in the film of the famed hall of mirrors which would have been virtually impossible to photograph without seeing technicians and crew reflected back in the glass. Regardless of this artistic license, the sets proved authentic enough to earn Gibbons the respect and seal of approval from the French government.

In later years, MGM recycled portions of **Marie Antoinette**'s sets in many of their subsequent releases. Antoinette's bedroom, for example, became the hotel suite for servicemen in **Anchors Aweigh** and a ballroom setting for the climax of **For Me And My Gal**. The throne room of Versailles appeared as the great hall in **The Swan** and C.K Dexterhaven's grand foyer in **High Society**. Many backdrops in **Ninotchka** and its remake, **Silk Stockings** derive their elegance from **Marie Antoinette**. Numerous props, costumes and sets reappeared throughout the cost cutting 1950s in films supposed taking place somewhere in Europe – among these, **Scaramouche** (1954), **An American in Paris** (1951) and **Gigi** (1959). Mayer may have been incensed by Thalberg's initial spending but he was well compensated in the mileage he got from that stock pile during the next two decades.

(The last act of **Marie Antoinette** is a showcase for Norma Shearer's acting. Top: confronting the rabble with proud fear while clutching her son (Scotty Beckett). Middle: saying goodbye to Fersen for the last time. Middle: witnessing the beheading of the Princess Lamballe. Bottom: resigned to a noble death.)







Edwin Willis, head of the prop department, spent three months in France purchasing a stunning assortment of antiques, furnishings, paintings, statuary, scrolls, art objects, and even original letters – in all, the largest consignment ever to clear LA Harbor customs. Thalberg had Gibbon's art department import expert woodcarvers from Europe to reproduce lavish frames and moldings for the palace interiors. Charles Holland, the studio's chief draper, supervised the sewing of elaborate festoons from brocades, fringes, galloons and gimps purchased in France by Willis. Max Factor & Co. made 903 ornamental white wigs for the principal actors alone and another 1,200 less ornate for the extras.



Of all this attention to detail, one of the most remarkable, yet underrated aspects about **Marie Antoinette** is its score by Herbert Stothart, who was to MGM what Max Steiner had been during this same period over at Warner Brothers – a work horse. Stothart's in-house musical styling effectively set the pace and tone of all MGM films from the earliest talkies until Stothart's death in 1949.

A Broadway composer who abandoned the stage for movies because it paid better (and he probably realized, like so many actors, directors, etc. that films have a greater immortality than works of the stage) Stothart's great gift to American cinema has since been classified by his very light touch – so much, that some say his compositions all but disappear on the screen.



For **Marie Antoinette** – Stothart's forte derived a tender balance between the over indulgent grandeur of pre-revolutionary France's pomp and circumstance and post-revolutionary reservation. There is a genuine epic quality in his orchestral arrangements during Marie's initial arrival to Versailles, the marriage processional and Marie's various balls and parties. These more bombastic compositions are thereafter neatly offset by a rather poignant love ballad – originally sung, but only heard as backdrop in the finished film.

The other great contribution to the film that has yet to be acknowledged was that of MGM's resident fashion guru: Gilbert Adrian, known distinctly (like Garbo) only by his last name. ***“Clothes are a woman's first duty to herself,”*** Norma Shearer once declared, ***“It is when she is conscious of being well dressed that she can do her best work and get that superiority complex that makes for success.”*** Arguably, no one wore clothes



better than Shearer and equally, no one designed them with quite as much aplomb as Adrian.

Within a few short years of his arrival at MGM in 1928, Adrian had invented the concept of the one man costume designer/couturier and was one of two men Thalberg chose to accredit with the MGM style in a 1932 Fortune magazine interview. By 1938, Adrian was at the top of his game, setting so many trends in women's fashion that sixty years later designers continue to borrow from his wealth of inspiration for some of their own. The pill box hat designed for Garbo in 1932, as example, was resurrected by Halston for Jackie Kennedy in the 1960s, and in 1978, Adrian himself was honored with the very first retrospective of fashion at the Smithsonian Institute.

Part of Adrian's early success at MGM was that he realized clothing could not be theatrical with the advent of sound. As Adrian explained, ***"all the designers are thinking of fashion in terms of dramatic moments instead of genuine, real moments that occur in life. What I am attempting to create for the screen are ultra modern clothes that will be adaptable for the street."***

On **Marie Antoinette**, Adrian began his research into the period with a journey to the Royal Archives in Vienna. Effectively, he recognized that the French court during Antoinette's reign was a gilded menagerie for gaudy fashion and he was determined to recreate this magnum opus in frivolity to its last detail on celluloid. To this end, Adrian designed literally thousands of costumes – most of them very cumbersome to maneuver in; thirty four that were worn by Norma Shearer in the final film.

Purchasing mass quantities of silk, embroidered velvets and gold and silver lace, Adrian also hired a small army of French seamstresses to recreate the patterns worn by the real Antoinette. He employed a milliner from Russia's Imperial Opera Company to provide guidance for hats and headdresses. Weighing in at just under 110 pounds, Antoinette's wedding dress alone – with its 500 yards of hand-embroidered white satin covering a steel-wired harness specifically manufactured for the occasion, added a staggering 108 pounds to Norma Shearer's 5 ft 3 in. frame. In fact, for each of Shearer's 34 costumes, a special metal hanger had to be invented.

L.B. Mayer, a fairly practical and patient man, who believed that his motto of "do it big and give it class" extended only in so far as to outdo the rest of Hollywood's output, might have put a stop to Thalberg's extravagance at this point. But on Sept. 14, 1936 Mother Nature remedied his concerns. Thalberg died of a massive heart attack at the age of 37, leaving the unfinished







trappings of his as yet un-filmed super production to Mayer's discretion. Norma Shearer, understandably shaken by the loss, departed MGM for nearly a year during which time Mayer made several key alterations made to the film that arguably foreshortened its critical and financial success.

First to go was Thalberg's desire to shoot the film in Technicolor. Aside from being a laborious and cumbersome photographic process in those early years, Technicolor was incredibly expensive. A studio could expect to nearly triple its costs by shooting a movie in color. With all the extravagance incurred by MGM thus far on **Marie Antoinette**, Mayer was decidedly not interested in tripling anything else on the project except its profits.



The problem in revising the shoot for B&W was that all the sets and costumes had been designed with Technicolor in mind. A B&W movie has its sharply contrasted image quality partly because of the lighting techniques employed on the set, but primarily because costumes and sets have been painted in colors that will photograph a certain density in B&W. As a result of choosing B&W over Technicolor after the fact, most of **Marie Antoinette** as it appears today registers in tonalities of middle gray (or silver) rather than in the burgeoning severity of true B&W.

Mayer's next course of action was to prune the film's running time down from four hours to just over two without a fanfare, intermission or entr'acte. But by far the most damaging decision Mayer made after Thalberg's death was to replace director, Sidney Franklin with Woody S. Van Dyke, affectionately known around the lot as 'One-Take Woody'. Franklin, who had been on the project from the start, had protested Mayer cutting the shooting schedule from ninety days to barely two months. But more important, Van Dyke was known for his frugal approach to making movies and his overall ability to commit a project to celluloid on or before the cut off date.



Norma Shearer reluctantly agreed to Van Dyke as her replacement director and forever afterward regretted her diplomacy on the matter. In their working methods, Shearer and Van Dyke were at opposite ends of the artistic spectrum – she, desiring time to rehearse and shoot to get it just right; he anxious to move on to the next shot after only one or two rehearsals. Perhaps, in part to compensate for these ego-crushing frustrations on set, Norma attempted a flirtatious romance with costar Tyrone Power.

Her advances were ill-timed and ill-received by Power and merely added to tensions throughout the shoot. In fact, at one



point, Power teased that he would demand “stunt pay” to accompany Shearer to the film’s premiere. Following that event, the film was screened briefly as a road show, then quickly dumped on the market as a regular feature where it did respectable business at ‘popular prices’.

The premiere, as impressively mounted as the film itself, became a lavish affair at the Carthay Circle Theater – complete with statuary and props imported from MGM to lining the streets and grandstand on all sides with gargantuan sprays of flowers. All of Hollywood turned out for the big night. Norma did indeed arrive on the arm of Tyrone Power – looking rather uncomfortable - but dapper, nevertheless. It was a long awaited premiere: three years in prep’ and two years in the making. Arguably, the critics expected more from the film. A few criticized the fudging of historical fact, a point of contention that is often strangely overlooked in other period movies, made both then and now.



On celluloid, history is usually sufficiently cleansed of its more unpleasant aspects – particularly during Hollywood’s golden era. John Ford’s **Young Mr. Lincoln** as example, only deals with Abraham’s ascendance from country attorney to aspiring politico, without even acknowledging the bitter end to come. **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn** marks a quaint snapshot of the old south absent of lynch mobs and carpetbaggers. **Destry Rides Again** and **Dodge City** celebrate the old west as a lusty battalion of virtuous prostitutes, playful codgers and rough-neck men wearing black. What became of the carnage that evicted Native Americans from their lands - remains a question mark unexplored by the likes of Errol Flynn, Randolph Scott or John Wayne. So if **Marie Antoinette** did not entirely adhere to the truth in historical record, given the climate of 1930s American movies – the slight is not only forgivable, but actually expected at some level.



In hindsight, **Marie Antoinette** was Norma Shearer’s second-to-last flowering as MGM’s ‘queen of the lot.’ Although she could have continued to make movies throughout the 1940s, Shearer was far more business savvy than most of her contemporaries, and certainly more of a tough cookie than recent critics have often given her credit for.

(Top: Ironically, many of the publicity photos of Shearer as Antoinette focused on the superficiality of a Queen in love with her own image. Middle: Shearer poses with arch rival Joan Crawford for congenial publicity. Bottom: with second husband, Martin Arrouge.)



Possibly, L.B. Mayer was holding a bit of a personal grudge against Norma for having to pay out Thalberg's shares in studio profits to her after his death. Mayer's replacement of director, Sidney Franklin with Van Dyke signaled just one way that Mayer might have felt he could exude more control over Shearer's career or, at the very least make it known that her stay at Metro – should she choose to remain - would not be a comfortable one.

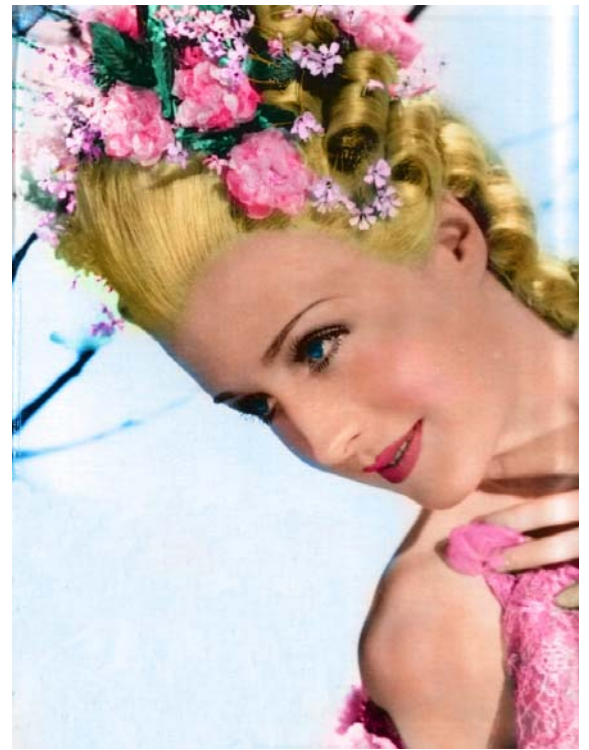
However, Norma probably realized that the days of more mature actresses reigning as stars was fast approaching its glittery end. By the late 1930s all of the big name female talent that had put MGM on the map – including Greta Garbo – had left that magic kingdom. Joan Crawford, Norma's greatest rival, would be ousted from MGM a few years after Shearer's departure – though Crawford's enduring legacy in films would continue to flourish at Warner Brothers and later, Columbia. As a rule, Crawford was the rarity and not the reigning example of the trajectory most movie careers took.

On the whole, it can safely be said that Norma left MGM with little regrets. Producer David O. Selznick thought that he might offer her the part of Scarlett O'Hara in **Gone With The Wind** (1939) outright, but public objection killed that deal. Throughout the 1940s, Norma seemed to suddenly lose interest in film making. She continued to turn down meaty projects like **Mrs. Miniver** (1942) and retired permanently from the screen in 1942 to marry Sun Valley ski instructor Martin Arrouge who was twenty years her junior. From then on - Hollywood did not take up Norma's time.

## POPULAR BACKLASH

In more recent times much has been made of Irving Thalberg's personal attention and guidance of Norma's career at the discounting of Shearer's own formidable prowess and talents as an actress. The crow initiated by the rival actress of her vintage, Joan Crawford who once said of Norma, "**How can I compete with her...she sleeps with the boss**" has effectively managed to eclipse the fact that whatever special treatment Shearer received under Thalberg's tenure was, in fact, completely deserved.

By the late 1970s and early 80s 'star-bashing' had become a blood sport bordering on a national past time. There seemed to be 'nothing sacred' left in Hollywood that the wicked pen of a ravenous biographer – in some cases working backward





from nothing more than cheap rumor and innuendo – could not destroy in his/her cleverly barbed prose.

From flagrant lies about Cary Grant’s homosexuality to Christina Crawford’s **Mommie Dearest**, the spitefulness that sold copy during this period very much echoed the old adage put forth several decades earlier by pop culture mandarin, Walter Winchell; **“the quickest way to become famous is to throw a brick at somebody famous.”**

The age of complete deconstruction of ‘stars’ and their stardom, as rarified shimmering spirits, had come about for a three fold reason; first – because the studio system, that had once coddled its assets, carefully sanctioning all press releases regarding them while fabricating near perfect private lives, had become a relic of the past even by the late 1950s. Hence, that barrier of protection between stars and the outside world was lost.



Second – the old guard of glamour and good taste had subsided, leaving in its wake a motley crew of rough and tumble characters seemingly disinterested in their own P.R. If the press and public discovered cracks in the façade of new celebrities from this age of the anti-hero, then this fallibility in life made the new breed more palpably charming and more real to the paying customer.

Third – whether from rivals in the industry itself – professional jealousy had become a saleable commodity in post-golden age Hollywood. Any second tier player, extra, director, disgruntled child star, ex wife/husband or former mistress/lover, willing to reveal their experiences while mingling with the legends, was easily guaranteed a lucrative book deal to spill the sordid details in print.

What is most disheartened then about the critical attacks that were mounted on the legacy of Norma Shearer was that most had no basis for these trappings to draw from. Norma had been beloved by most all who knew her. If she had been a born flirt in her time, she had also been deeply committed to Thalberg and later, to second husband Martin Arrouge – the latter a staunch champion of his wife’s privacy, and who absolutely refused to entertain any comments in the press regarding his wife even after she had lost touch with reality.

Generous with both her time and money, Shearer had brought many burgeoning talents into the light, including actress Janet Leigh and director Robert Evans.



(Top: critic Pauline Kael was one of the first to outwardly discount Norma Shearer’s contributions to the movies as inconsequential. During the 1970s the glamour that Shearer and her movies represented seemed hopelessly out of touch. In fact, it was more relevant and timely than ever, particularly in a cinematic landscape that was readily populated by gritty, unflattering portraits of women. Middle and bottom: two more views of Norma’s patrician beauty.)





(Above left: with Irving. The good years were too few, but thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated. Top right: with a friend at the beach in 1939. Right: Norma's early career was more risqué than her later tenure in films, as is evident from the flirtatious pose struck for this 1929 photo.)

Hence, *'the bricks'* being lobbed at Shearer's credibility as an actress during the late 1970s and early '80s were directed at the only remaining portion of her legacy not Teflon-coated by her sterling reputation – her films.

As she grew older, Norma lived to see many of these so called 'critics' malign her reputation as an actress. The critiques and retrospectives of Norma's work written in the late seventies in particular are peppered in bitter barbs and unjustifiably scathing epitaphs about her body of work – mean-spirited and brutally cynical to say the least.

Critic Pauline Kael was one of the first to take an axe to Norma's acting ability, claiming that *"...she was never much of an actress..."* and *"...never rose above conventional adequacy."*

A more fitting, and accurate critique from this period derived from a program release printed for a commemorative retrospective of Norma's filmic work screened at George Eastman House in Rochester New York.

***“The more that one tries to isolate the qualities that made Norma Shearer unique, the more one heads into an area of a kind gracious dignity – a serene quality of bearing and attitude that eludes sensible definition.***

***For certainly she played a good share of audacious, sometimes even wicked and often déclassé women – but never without that special Shearer aura along with most of the other positive attributes that have vanished wholly from a morally dismal world. The ghost flowers are gone: the bluebirds are rare, and the likes of Norma Shearer are nowhere to be seen in contemporary films.”***

In poor health during the last decade of her life – Norma often became disoriented and frequently confused whatever male figure was standing before her to be that of her late first husband, Irving Thalberg. Legends, you see, do pass their prime, though age never alters the legend for the rest of us.

At the height of her career, Norma Shearer was a uniquely talented individual who defied conventional wisdom - and the odds to become one of the most celebrated actresses Hollywood has ever known. At her zenith she commanded a \$6000 per week salary. She was the toast of most everyone who knew her and a great confidant to any aspiring young talent willing to embrace the tutelage and courage that her years of experience so readily provided.

On June 12<sup>th</sup> 1983, Norma Shearer succumbed to pneumonia at the Actor's Home in Woodland Hills, CA. Yet, time continues to be on her side. As an actress, Norma Shearer exudes a profound serenity and respectability. That undercurrent of fortitude, poise and spirited conviction are all attributes wholly absent from our current insincere ensemble of leading ladies. What Norma Shearer most vivaciously embodies then, as now is an odd contradiction between something unattainable, yet decidedly accessible – she is a glimpse into human perfection: ever more the star than the legend; further the woman than the star and quite definitely fundamental to movie audiences right now, even as the ghost flowers of her caste have departed into their grand paradise; forgotten bluebirds affixed in that shimmering celluloid sky.

