




**THE**

*Nick Zegarac's*

*Hollywood*

**ART**

**DIETRICH - and the rest says it all**



*“If she had nothing more than her voice she could break your heart with it. But she has that beautiful body and the timeless loveliness of her face. It makes no difference how she breaks your heart if she is there to mend it.”*

- Ernest Hemmingway



Any attempt at quantifying what made Marlene Dietrich such an enduring iconic figure over the last 100 years presents the film historian with an immediate quandary. She was not filmdom's greatest movie star, nor the stages most prolific chanteuse. Yet she dominated and captivated her audiences both on the screen and in live performance. While others of her generation were in a constant scramble to redevelop their own 'image,' Dietrich just 'was,' existing in a vacuum of her own device, and, quite fascinating no matter the venue.

At the peak of her career in the mid-1930s, Dietrich was Hollywood's highest paid actress; the symbol and very essence of screen eroticism and sexual androgyny. Dietrich's own frankness about this tabloid curiosity about her own rumored bi-sexuality was summed up by the great lady with "*In America sex is an obsession. In other parts of the world it is a fact!*"

Like that other luminous European import of her generation – Greta Garbo – Dietrich was more of a presence than mere body; a movement rather than image. She seemed to appear as ageless spirit – supple and pure and free of earthly bonds. If Garbo was the movie's sphinx, Dietrich was

its haunting enigma; a ravishing creature of immense contradictions – both personal and professional. She was, and remains, the celebrity's perennially radiant sun.

There was little in her youth to suggest as much – a period in her life that Dietrich kept secretive and silent while others were penning their tell-all memoirs later in life. She was born Maria Magdalena in Berlin Germany. But the date initially published – 1904 – has since been proven off by at least three years. She was, in fact, given life on Dec. 27, 1901 - the stepdaughter of Edouard von Losch. Her real father, Erich Otto Dietrich was part of the aristocracy – a Prussian officer who died while Dietrich was still an infant.

Dietrich studied violin – her first love - and acting at the Deutsche Theaterschule. She made her film debut in a very brief walk-on in 1923's *Der Kleine Napoleon*. A modestly more substantial role in *Tragodie der Liebe* the following year garnered Dietrich some encouraging notices. But more to the point, it introduced her to production assistant, Rudolph Sieber – her first husband. The two were married when Dietrich learned she was pregnant. A daughter, Maria was born to the couple the following year.

Driven to succeed, but quickly tiring of her lack of advancement in films, Dietrich worked diligently in a series of undistinguished minor roles, usually as the coquettish socialite, most notably and effectively in G.W. Pabst's *Die Freudlose Gasse* (1924), before departing for a two year self-imposed 'retirement.' She was hardly idle. Apart from her duties as wife and mother, Dietrich became a main staple of the cabaret circuit. She resurfaced periodically in films like 1926's *Manion Lescaut* and Alexander Korda's *Madame Wuensch Keine Kinder*.

Yet, it was live performance that captivated and consumed Dietrich's passion during this period. She seemed naturally at home on the stage and was able to communicate intimately with her audiences. So the legend goes, premiere German director, Joseph von Sternberg caught her act in the cabaret *Zwei Kravatten* and instantly cast her in his pending film project; *Der Blaue Engel* (a.k.a. *The Blue Angel* 1930). After screening a rough cut of the film, Paramount executives offered Dietrich her first American film – *Morocco*. Within several months, Dietrich had back-





to-back successes playing in New York City. Overnight, she had become an international star.

Paramount embarked upon an aggressive publicity, announcing in the trades that they had ‘discovered’ a star to rival Garbo. Their enthusiasm was perhaps a shay premature. Dishonored (1931) a like-themed spy caper to Garbo's Mata Hari was judged by critics as a thinly veiled attempt at aping Garbo’s mystique. Shanghai Express (1932), an infinitely more satisfying and original film, solidified Von Sternberg and Dietrich’s combined successes in America.

Popularity, however, was short lived. A series of ill-timed projects, beginning with Blonde Venus (1932) in which Dietrich’s ambivalent sexuality proved more off-putting than erotic for American audiences, served only to illustrate the great divide between Europe’s relaxed sexual mores and America’s rigidity. Rather than rethinking their strategy, Paramount – as MGM had done with Garbo and her mentor; Swedish director, Mauritz Stiller - chose to separate star and director.

The move was only partly for the sake of art and profit. Earlier in the year, Dietrich had been named in an ‘alienation of affection’ suit filed by von Sternberg’s wife. Dietrich, who neither denied nor confirmed that she and her director had had an affair, later mused about the accusation, saying, *“Once a woman has forgiven a man she must not reheat his sins for breakfast.”*

Tepid box office continued. The Song of Songs (1933) was only a minor embarrassment. But the costly epic The Scarlet Empress (1934) as well as The Devil is A Woman (1934) were colossal financial flops that threatened to push Paramount’s balance sheet into the red. Clearly, von Sternberg’s vision had run its course. Amidst a flurry of speculation that both von Sternberg and Dietrich would go back to Germany (Chancellor Adolph Hitler had, in fact, ordered Dietrich to return to her native land), von Sternberg instead went public with a statement that he had taken his star as far as he could and would henceforth beg off future projects.

Paramount quickly launched Dietrich into a light-hearted comedy, Ernest Lubitsch’s Desire (1936) – a solid and quantifiable hit that suggested Dietrich might become a very lucrative comedian. However, quite unhappy with Lubitsch’s handling of I Loved A Solider (1936), Dietrich was loaned to David O. Selznick for The Garden of Allah (1936). Though Dietrich looked ravishing in Technicolor, the film failed to catch the public’s fascination. By all accounts, it appeared as though Hollywood had suddenly tired of their most exotic foreign star.



# MORE THAN BLONDE VENUS



*"....this woman was not created by contemplation to be what everyone wants her to be, one for many. She emerges, is displayed, her wings rise, and, behold, she returns the look!"*

-Elfriede Jelinek



Indeed, “the look” was beginning to run into minor controversy on the Paramount back lot by the time Dietrich reluctantly agreed to appear in Ernest Lubitsch’s *Angel* (1937); a project that rekindled her frequent and heated disagreements with the director. Even before the production wrapped, a disquieting rumor began to surface; that Dietrich was a star too much in love with her own image and quite unable to work with anyone whose opinions contradicted her own. Her reputation worsened after director Mitchell Leisen refused her for his film, *French Without Tears*. Following even more diminished box-office returns, Paramount quietly bought out the rest of Dietrich’s contract, ending their association.

It was during this brief absence from the screen that Dietrich quietly developed her love/hate relationship with the studios. In the years to come, the studios would borrow heavily on Dietrich’s international fame – a trade for which Dietrich received hefty paychecks. In Germany, however, she was seen as something of a sell-out; denounced for her noncompliance with Hitler’s ‘requests’ to return to her homeland. Henceforth, her films were banned in Germany.



Meanwhile in Hollywood, for nearly two years Dietrich was virtually unemployable. Although projects were frequently proposed and rumors of a ‘comeback’ populated the fan magazines of the day, audiences had cooled to her once captivating asexuality. Undaunted, by the downturn in her popularity, Dietrich accepted \$50,000 – a fraction of her usual salary – to appear opposite James Stewart in Universal’s *Destry Rides Again* (1939). A surprise smash, Dietrich was quickly snapped up by Universal Studios.

Her follow-up, *Seven Sinners* (1940) continued Dietrich’s resurrection, as did Rene Clair’s *The Flame of New Orleans* (1941) – though the latter lacked artistic distinction. But then came a trio of flops – *The Lady is Willing*, *The Spoilers* (with John Wayne) and *Pittsburgh* (all in 1942). Resigned to do something else with her life, Dietrich left films for nearly two years – embarking on a tireless tour to entertain American troops, raise money and help sell war bonds.

Appearing frequently at The Hollywood Canteen, Dietrich was a popular favorite amongst service men, despite – or perhaps because of her defiance to return to Germany. But she was quick to set less glamorous women at ease with her no nonsense critique of what men found attractive. “*The average man,*” she reasoned, “...*is more interested in a woman who is interested in him, than he is in a woman with beautiful legs.*”

Dietrich solidified her contempt for the Nazis by becoming a U.S. citizen in 1943 and frequently appearing on the radio for Allied Radio with her anti-Nazi broadcasts. “*The Germans and I,*” she declared, “...*no longer speak the same language.*” Awarded America’s Medal of Freedom and France’s prestigious Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor, Dietrich became a galvanic figure in the pro-Allied resistance.

MGM offered her a luscious part in their lavish – if absurd – Arabian Nights tale, *Kismet* (1944) opposite Ronald Colman. She also appeared as part of the all-star wartime cavalcade in *Follow The Boys* (1944). But controversy dogged Dietrich’s refusal to appear in Marcel Carne’s *Les Portes de la Nuit*. Then considered France’s foremost director, Carne was not accustomed to dealing with selective actors. Dietrich found the script appalling and stuck to her guns. Marked





as an obvious snub, her decision yielded negative reviews when she subsequently starred for Carne in *Martin Roumagnac* (1946).

Returning to the United States, Dietrich had modest successes with *Golden Earrings* (1947) and *A Foreign Affair* (1948). The birth of a granddaughter that same year earned the star the moniker, "*the world's most glamorous grandmother.*" One of Dietrich's most satisfying performances followed, in Alfred Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* (1950). Cast as the haughty star of England's music halls, Dietrich would later revive the character of Charlotte Inwood as part of her stage show repertoire in the late '60s.

If Hollywood's fascination with Dietrich seemed secure, the feeling was not mutual. Reuniting with James Stewart for *No Highway in the Sky* (1951) and then appearing in *Rancho Notorious* (1952), Dietrich officially bowed out of film-making for the next four years. Seemingly content to tour the United States, performing her trademark songs with a rather risqué monologue, Dietrich's popularity as an all around entertainer continued to grow.

Though she refused to star in several high profile film projects during this period, Dietrich did a cameo for producer Michael Todd's *Around the World in 80 Days* (1956). Her stint as a madam in a San Francisco brothel paved the way for a starring role in *The Monte Carlo Story* (1957). Dietrich was better served as the spurned wife of a man suspected of murder in *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957). Orson Welles' tapped Dietrich for the role of a proprietress of a seedy bar/whorehouse in his penultimate directorial project; *Touch of Evil* (1958). It's dynamic failure at the box office was enough to convince Dietrich that she and movies had reached a crossroads.

Again, Dietrich vanished from the celluloid spotlight – this time for three years, until Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961). It was a part tailor-made for Dietrich. As the stoic, broken-hearted Madame Bertholt, Dietrich embodied the prewar woman trapped in postwar sensibilities. Accolades followed, but it was the end of an era. Except for a fleeting glimpse in 1978's *Just a Gigolo*, Marlene Dietrich would never again return to films.



AND THE BAND  
PLAYS ON...

*“Marlene - with the unambiguous allure of the woman of yesterday and the ambiguous charm of the woman of today who has man not only about her but also within her.”*

- Hanna Schygulla



The final act of Marlene Dietrich's life probably brought her the most personal satisfaction. *"I never liked making movies,"* she once told a reporter. But Dietrich loved to perform. She launched into one of the most ambitious intercontinental stage tours ever – appearing across the world to record sell-out crowds.

Her shows consisted largely of personal reflections peppered with Dietrich's inimitable gift for poking fun at her own glamorous image, all the while retaining that impeccable luster that was at odds with her commentary. *"How do you know love is gone?"* she once mused, *"If you said that you would be there at seven and you get there by nine, and he or she has not called the police yet - it's gone."*

Playing to the crowd as an icon of love and love making, Dietrich turned everything into a private joke and let the audience in on it for a few hours. *"Latins are tenderly enthusiastic,"* she would say, *"In Brazil they throw flowers at you. In Argentina they throw themselves."* Dietrich continued on a schedule that most actresses half her age would have found exhausting. She even came full circle, returning to Berlin by invitation, where it seems the intervening years had mellowed public animosity over her earlier defection and denouncement of her people.

By the end of the 1970s, Dietrich curtailed her public appearances to all but a sporadic few. Instead, she withdrew into the insular sanctuary of her Paris apartment, content to let the years take hold. Ill health confined her to bed for the last twelve years of her life, but she remained active in her telephone conversations and written correspondences with close friends and associates saying, *"It's the friends you can call up at 4am that matter!"*

TOP: Marlene and her daughter, Maria attend a public function in mid-1967. Like both Joan Crawford and Bette Davis' daughters, Maria wrote a scathing tell all biography in 1994 about her mother after her death. The book begins with a seemingly benign appraisal of Dietrich's film work and her professional associations but then degenerates into a Kitty Kelly-esque critique of lesbian relationships. It paints a portrait of the star as a maniacal control freak who attempted to turn her own daughter into a lesbian so that she wouldn't have to compete with her for the love of any future men in her life. How much of this hatchet job is fact is a matter open for further discussion, though regrettably, it makes for compelling smut.

In 1992, Maria auctioned off her mother's vast warehouse of props, costumes, posters and other memorabilia. MIDDLE: In a publicity photo for her one woman live stage show 'Marlene'. BOTTOM: as the devious femme fatale destined to seal Tyrone Power's fate in *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957).





On May 6, 1992, Marlene Dietrich died in her sleep. Services were held at La Madeleine in Paris on May 10, and her last request to be buried next to her mother in Berlin was honored on May 16, 1992. *“When you’re dead, you’re dead. That’s it,”* Dietrich was fond of saying.

So, what would she make of her enduring legacy now - almost 20 years removed from her own passing and some fifty years distanced from her last major film role?

Well, Dietrich once said that the only place to see courage and grace were in the bullring – yet, in her own meteoric rise to international fame, her numerous setbacks and multiple comebacks, she exhibited both courage to defy any obstacles set in her path, and the grace not to harbor lingering resentment for those discouragements along the way.

In this final assessment, Marlene Dietrich was perhaps ultimately mistaken about death – most certainly about her own. She continues to live on – in spirit, memory and as an enduring icon, materializing from an allure that time quite simply has been powerless to distill.

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***“She remains what she has been for many years - an absolutely strange delight, whose gift lies outside her achievement as an actress, is not tied to a specific time and does not depend on the taste of the moment, not even on common sense.”***

**Cecil Beaton**