Impossible Beauty

Greta Garbo

From the beginning, the camera loved Greta Garbo as it loved no other. After seeing the chubby 19-year-old Swede in her first movie, *The Saga of Gösta Berling*, MGM’s Louis B. Mayer rushed to sign her. “He was hell-bent,” Mayer’s daughter, the theatrical agent Irene Selznick, remembered shortly before her death. “He said it had not to do with beauty. ‘It’s what she conveys and the expression emanating from her eyes.’”

Garbo never won an Oscar, but she may well have been the greatest motion picture actress of all time. She also possessed one of the most extraordinary faces of the 20th century—not simply beautiful, which it was, but simultaneously inscrutable and expressive. In her heyday—from the silent pictures of the mid-’20s through the talkies of the ’30s and movies as diverse as *Grand Hotel* (which won the Oscar for Best Picture of 1932), *Camille*, and *Ninotchka*—the actress was the most luminous creature the screen had ever seen. “She is as beautiful as the aurora borealis,” noted Cecil Beaton, the photographer and set designer, who had a major crush on her for much of his life.

It’s no surprise that Garbo’s contemporaries waxed ecstatic. Marlene Dietrich schemed to meet her in order to see for herself whether Garbo’s eyelashes were really as long as rumored (they were). Adolph Hitler wrote her fan letters. An Arab sheik once offered her $50 million to attend a dinner party (she declined).

BY MARJORIE ROSEN

(At right) A face for the ages: Greta Garbo in 1932’s *Mata Hari*
“The story of my life is about back entrances and side doors.”
yet during her lifetime—she died in 1990 at the age of 84—Garbo could scarcely endure the adulation. “The story of my life,” she once told a friend, “is about back entrances and side doors and secret elevators and other ways of getting in and out of places so that people won’t bother you.”

It’s an irony that the actress’s most famous line—“I want to be alone,” she tells John Barrymore in Grand Hotel—was so reflective of who she was: an isolate who embraced solitude and secrecy. “You must realize I am a sad person,” Garbo told Beaton. “I am a misfit in life.”

From an early age, she exhibited the solitary nature that would become her trademark. Born in Stockholm on September 18, 1905, to Anna Lovisa and Karl Alfred Gustafson, an unskilled laborer, Greta Lovisa Gustafson was the youngest of three children. From birth until she left for Hollywood in 1925, the family lived in a fourth-floor cold-water flat in the city’s poorest district. “I never enjoyed playing with others,” she once said, “but preferred to sit alone with my dolls and picture books.” Actually, she preferred a friend’s tin soldiers. And she often dressed up in her brother Sven’s clothes, once introducing herself as “Gustafson’s youngest boy.”

Kata, as she was nicknamed, was stagestruck from the age of 7, when she took to passing by local theaters to watch the actors go in and out. “My sole wish,” she recalled, “was to creep inside the magic stage door.” Dropping out of school at 13 to care for her ailing father who died soon afterward, she worked as a lather girl in a barbershop and then in a department store...
The Most Private Lives

Though Greta Garbo was perhaps the best-known recluse among movie stars, she certainly wasn’t the first celebrity who tried to control her privacy despite great fame. Many other people of note have led secluded lives to greater or lesser degrees, some because of a simple but fierce desire to be left alone, and others because of mental illness. Among them:

Howard Hughes. The eccentric billionaire (thanks to his father’s invention of the Hughes drill bit) was a paranoid, hypochondriac recluse from 1957 until his death in 1976, though he managed to control his many business interests from sealed-off hotel suites. Addicted to codeine, he was always fearful of germs and disease, and insisted his food be delivered in paper bags by drivers wearing white cotton hospital gloves.

Stanley Kubrick. Since the 1960s, the legendary filmmaker of 2001: A Space Odyssey and A Clockwork Orange generally sequestered himself at his huge estate near London, interacting with the world by telephone. When he did leave home—but not England—to make one of his infrequent films, his phobia about infections caused him to ban anyone with a cold from the set. He died at home in 1999.

Thomas Pynchon. The notoriously private novelist has been called the Greta Garbo of American letters. Best known for Gravity’s Rainbow and Vineland, he is so publicity-shy that he doesn’t allow his picture to be used on his own book jackets; all photos of him date back to the 1950s. In 1996 he told a magazine writer who tracked him down that he does not consider himself a recluse, however; he goes out to shop at stores in his Manhattan neighborhood and spends weekends in the country with his family.

J.D. Salinger. Now 83, the lauded novelist of the 1951 classic Catcher in the Rye has refused to publish any new work since 1965, and lives in seclusion with his wife on a farm in Cornish, New Hampshire (though he is seen around town and the locals protect his privacy). He denies all interview requests or attempts to photograph him. He did travel to New York in 1986 to give a one-day deposition in his successful fight to stop publication of an unauthorized biography.

Brian Wilson. After a nervous breakdown in 1964, the producer and composer for the fabulously successful Beach Boys became a drug-addicted, manic-depressive recluse. He essentially stayed at home for over two decades as he battled mental illness, and spent two of those years locked in his bedroom. Today he is in good health and having been playing live concerts since 1999.

The Unabomber. For 18 years, enigmatic Harvard graduate Theodore Kaczynski lived like a hermit without plumbing or electricity in a flimsy Montana cabin he’d built, a two-hour walk from his nearest neighbor. During that time he became a serial killer, sending at least 16 package bombs that killed three and maimed several others. The mailings were part of his personal battle against science and technology in society. Arrested in 1996 and labeled a paranoid schizophrenic by his lawyer, he agreed to a plea bargain in 1998 to spend the rest of his life in prison.

On July 6, 1925, the anxious 19-year-old landed in America on the arm of her mentor, Stiller. When she arrived at MGM, her new boss Louis B. Mayer immediately put her on a diet. She succeeded remarkably well; for the rest of her life she was a food faddist and diet nut.

From the start her impact on the movie community was like a tidal wave. After all, she was the only actress at MGM to begin as a star rather than to climb up the ranks. The actress Louise Brooks, an astute chronicler of Hollywood life, declared, “From the moment Torrent went into production, no contemporary actress was ever again to be quite happy in herself.” In that 1926 film, Garbo played a Spanish temptress whose heart was broken by a nobleman; she generated so much heat that the movie was held over at the Capitol Theatre in New York.

It was instantly clear that the girl was unique. Onscreen, she projected a kaleidoscope of ambiguities—desire and aloofness, independence and passivity, femininity and androgyny—and perfected a type of vamp whom the critic Gilbert Seldes dubbed, because her characters were always suffering, “the Pained Lady.”

What elevated Garbo’s third movie, Flesh and the Devil, another run-of-the-mill melodrama about a bad girl who ruins a good man, was her pairing with matinee idol John Gilbert. Together, they ignited the screen. Offscreen, they ignited each other, beginning an affair so serious that Garbo moved in with Gilbert and even agreed to marry him. But on the wedding day, she never showed up. Soon afterward, she moved out.

The pair would make three more movies together, even though Gilbert continued to pine for his leading lady. But Garbo continued to insist, “It is a friendship. I will never marry.” And she never did.

By the end of the Silent Era, Garbo was one of MGM’s most glittering stars, earning $5000 a week and receiving more than 20,000 pieces of fan mail a month. But she
increasingly maintained a reclusive lifestyle and returned regularly to Sweden. She also dressed in men's clothes, and acknowledged her own sexual ambivalence by referring to herself as "he," or making provocative statements like, "I have been smoking since I was a small boy."

While her gift was the ability to create the perfect romantic illusion on screen, in life Garbo seemed fearful of true personal intimacy with either men or women. Certainly she had her share of devoted companions, who may or may not have been lovers—among them, the lesbian writer Mercedes de Acosta, co-star Nils Asther, conductor Leopold Stokowski, author Erich Maria Remarque, and the homosexual nutritionist Gaylord Hauser. Louise Brooks claimed that the actress made a pass and they spent one memorable night together. But Garbo was unwilling, or unable, to sustain anything real. Her devoted friend (and, briefly, her lover), the bisexual Cecil Beaton, observed after an irritating holiday with her, "She is incapable of love...and does not know the meaning of friendship. She would make a secret out of whether she had an egg for breakfast."

With the advent of sound, MGM's ads proclaimed, "Garbo Talks!" to herald the star's first "talkie," *Anna Christie* (1930), a tepid adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's play about a waterfront prostitute redeemed by love. Moviegoers were now besotted with Garbo's husky, accented voice, and *Anna Christie* became a hit, earning its star an Academy Award nomination as Best Actress. She also distinguished herself as the lonely fading ballerina of *Grand Hotel*, as the famed spy in *Mata Hari* (1932), and as the title character in *Queen Christina* (1933). She also gave a breathtaking performance in 1935's *Anna Karenina*. But perhaps her most extraordinary effort was *Camille* (1937), opposite Robert Taylor, in which she played a dying courtesan who proves her love for a nobleman by sacrificing her happiness with him. Almost 30 years later, critic Pauline Kael wrote, "Garbo's *Camille* is too intelligent for her frivolous life, too generous for her circumstances; she is a divinity trying to succeed as a whore. It's a sublime, ironic performance."

The frothy *Ninotchka* (1939), directed by Ernst Lubitsch, was the star's first comedy and her own favorite among her work. This time the ads boasted, "Garbo Laughs!"—and she did, enchantingly. Even so, her leading man Melvyn Douglas later remarked that Garbo didn't have "an ounce of humor in her," but that Lubitsch had brilliantly mobilized "all her eccentricities for comic effect."

Upset by the failure of her next movie, another contemporary comedy, *Two-Faced Woman* (1941), also opposite Douglas, Garbo vowed not to work again until she found a story she loved. It would be her last picture. Meanwhile, she began spending more and more time in New York, and in 1953...
bought an apartment in the elegant East 50s. She decorated it in shades of pink, and started buying antique furniture and art—Renoir, Bonnard, and Soutine.

As Garbo grew older, with no immediate family, she sought to create one from her array of sycophants and friends. She cultivated a relationship with her brother's daughter, Gray Reisfield. She also remained close to screenwriter Salka Viertel and Viertel's son Peter Viertel, and his wife, actress Deborah Kerr, often vacationing with them in the Swiss ski resort of Klosters. Jack Larson, who played Jimmy Olsen on TV's Superman, joined the group on several occasions and recalls of Garbo, "She was as warm as she could possibly be; and I had this feeling that she was a woman who wanted to have a good time, but didn't know how... Cecil Beaton called her a 'hermit-about-town.'"

She also had a cheap streak, preferring that friends take care of her, loan her their homes, feed her their food, dispense their professional advice, always for free. "Yes, she liked to be taken care of," says Larson. "And by the rich. She liked to go on yachts." Garbo counted as friends Aristotle Onassis, Cecile de Rothschild, and, especially, the Russian-born attorney George Schlee and his wife Valentina, a dress designer. For a while, the threesome was inseparable, but soon Garbo and Schlee became a twosome, and he told his wife that he was in love with the actress. When he died in Paris in 1964, Garbo was shattered.

Like her screen counterparts, Garbo the woman embodied a myriad of contradictions. On one hand, she seemed to be a self-styled feminist who dressed and loved and did as she pleased. On the other, she was a narcissistic, eccentric, penny-pinchning woman who never quite figured out what she really wanted. "I've messed up my life," she sighed in 1977, "and it's too late to change that."

In her later years, Garbo became a familiar figure walking the city's streets and dodging ever-present photographers. By 1987, however, the walks became less frequent as she became hobbled by ill health—diverticulitis, arthritis, kidney problems, cancer (she had a mastectomy in 1984), and a mild heart attack in 1988. She died of kidney malfunction in New York Hospital on Easter Sunday, April 15, 1990, and five days later was cremated. Her entire estate of $32 million was left to her niece, Gray Reisfield.

True to Garbo's wishes and her lifetime longing for privacy, the whereabouts of her ashes have been kept secret to this day. ♦

MARJORIE ROSEN IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS MAGAZINE.