



## Dietrich, Marlene (1901-1992)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Probably no one, gay or straight, of any gender, could tear her or his eyes from the sight of Marlene Dietrich, leaning back with lewd abandon, grasping a shapely gartered leg as she growls out her most famous signature song, "Falling in Love Again." That song, and the role of Lola Lola, the sizzling slut with a heart of ice, brought Dietrich to international stardom in Josef von Sternberg's 1930 landmark film *Der blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*).

Born Maria Magdalene von Losch on December 27, 1901 to a bourgeois family in Berlin, Dietrich had been a promising student of the violin until a hand injury forced her to give up playing. In 1924, she married Rudolf Sieber, a film director who introduced her to acting; but it was Josef von Sternberg who would be the most powerful influence on her career.

In *Der blaue Engel*, von Sternberg created a powerful allegory of German society and spirit in the aftermath of World War I. Within this allegory, Dietrich's character symbolized a harsh and unfeeling decadence that threatened both to captivate and to destroy what was good and innocent in German culture.

Although Dietrich had had several previous film roles, her portrayal of Lola Lola crystallized her stage persona forever. While that persona would be softened and glamorized for her American films, for the rest of her career Marlene Dietrich would be the dangerously sexy femme fatale with the cool and sardonic exterior.

In the early 1930s, both von Sternberg and Dietrich left Germany and its rising Nazi party to settle in the United States. Dietrich soon became a deliciously controversial figure in American cinema. Although she remained married to Rudolf Sieber, it had soon become what would later be called an "open marriage." They remained close, but did not live together, and both had other relationships, often publicly.

Dietrich always retained her continental sophistication, and she scandalized society almost as much by wearing trousers in public as by her numerous love affairs with both men and women. In the 1930 film, *Morocco*, audiences were shocked and titillated when Dietrich's character, a nightclub singer in glamorous tails-and-top-hat drag, finishes up a number by kissing a female audience member on the lips.

According to Marjorie Rosen, the actress once said, "In Europe it doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman. We make love with anyone we find attractive." Rumors of her numerous affairs with such celebrities as Frank Sinatra, John Kennedy, Edith Piaf, and writer Mercedes de Acosta only added to the Dietrich mystique.

Dietrich became an American citizen in 1937. During World War II, she denounced the German government and, at some risk, entertained Allied troops abroad. After the war, she followed a successful film career



**Top:** Marlene Dietrich (last row, alone) and the cast of a Viennese production of *Broadway* before Dietrich's Hollywood career began.  
**Above:** Dietrich entertaining allied troops during World War II.

with an equally successful cabaret act. Her cool, knowing, self-mocking persona appealed both to gay men and lesbians, who comprised a significant portion of her nightclub audiences.

In some ways, however, the actress felt trapped by her own glamorous image; and, as she grew older, she became obsessed with concealing her changing body.

In 1975, the last of several on-stage falls resulted in a broken leg, and Dietrich finally retired from performing altogether. She moved to Paris and lived the rest of her life in semi-seclusion, surrounded by mementos of her career and her romantic exploits.

Dietrich died in Paris on May 6, 1992. At her request, she was buried beside her mother's grave in Berlin. She was welcomed back to the city of her birth by both the tributes of her friends and fans and the protests of neo-Nazi groups and others who considered her support for the Allied cause in World War II treasonous.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.