



Garbo, Greta (1905-1990)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Once billed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer as the "Swedish sphinx," Greta Garbo is perhaps best known for her mystery. Raised in a culture that did not pursue or value celebrity, Garbo was frightened and horrified by the almost predatory interest that the American public took in movie stars.

Although she was a skilled and complex actress who created many memorable screen personae, she retired when she was only thirty-six, not only from films, but from any kind of public life.

Afterwards, she lived in New York City in virtual seclusion for almost fifty years, refusing interviews or photographs, and emerging from her apartment only when protected from public view by big hats and sunglasses.

Still, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the way she withheld herself, the public was mesmerized by her in a unique way. One need say only the name "Garbo!" to evoke a gentle, passionate dignity as deep and complex as the Swedish sphinx herself.

Garbo began life in poverty as Greta Lovisa Gustafsson, the daughter of a janitor in Stockholm, Sweden. When her father died in 1919 of tuberculosis, Greta had to quit school at the age of fourteen and go to work.

Her good looks helped her get jobs in a couple of advertising films before she was discovered in 1922 by unabashedly homosexual Swedish filmmaker Mauritz Stiller. He cast her as the female lead in *Gosta Berling's Saga* (1924) and got her a role in a German film, *The Joyless Street* (1925).

Stiller took control of the actress's career, changing her last name to Garbo. When he went to the United States to work for Louis Mayer at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Stiller took his protégée along.

Mauritz Stiller did not succeed in Hollywood, but Greta Garbo was destined to become a star. She made fourteen silent films, among them *The Torment* (1926) and *Flesh and the Devil* (1927), where she tended to play the beautiful *femme fatale*, luring men into passion.

Garbo made the rocky transition from silent films to talkies flawlessly. Her husky, accented voice fitted intriguingly with her ethereal beauty, enabling her to create more complex characters than she ever had in silents.

In *Anna Christie* (1930), *Anna Karenina* (1935), *Camille* (1936), and others, she played a tragic heroine, passionate, but doomed. In the delightful 1939 comedy *Ninotchka*, she mocks this gloomy sensuality with charming self-deprecation, causing MGM to tout the film with the single headline, "Garbo Laughs!"

In 1941, prompted perhaps by the failure of *Two-Faced Woman*, her comedy follow-up to *Ninotchka*, Garbo



Greta Garbo in 1925.
Photograph by Arnold Genthe, July 31, 1925.
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took a break from filmmaking. Although she reportedly considered several projects for a comeback, the title roles in *Hamlet* and *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, among them, her break turned into permanent retirement.

Garbo's smoldering aloofness, combined with her penchant for cross-dressing, ignited the passions of men and women alike. Although she never married or settled down, she had famous relationships with actor John Gilbert (whom she stood up at the altar in 1926), photographer Cecil Beaton, and businessman George Schlee among many others.

Garbo almost certainly had lesbian affairs as well, including well-known liaisons with actress Louise Brooks and writer Mercedes de Acosta, and perhaps also an affair with Marlene Dietrich.

For seven decades lesbian audiences have drooled over the dashing figure of Garbo in drag as she appeared in *Queen Christina* (1933), dressed in pirate's garb, loose pants and shirt, with soft suede boots to the knee. In this film, through her "butch" mannerisms and cross-dressing, Garbo conveys a lesbian subtext that undermines the heterosexual plot.

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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*.