

Source: The great movie comedians Leonard Maltin
Harmony Books, 1978, 1982

Dressler, Marie

COBOURG PUBLIC LIBRARY

JAN 15 1990

A-Dressler, Marie (07-12)

p.1

9

MARIE DRESSLER



It has been said of many great performers that they can make you laugh one moment and cry the next. Often this is wishful thinking, critical extravagance, or press-agentry at work. But in the case of Marie Dressler it is true. She was a supremely gifted comedienne who achieved real screen stardom only when she revealed the humanity behind her broad comic facade.

This is certainly clear in her dramatic roles, but it is even more impressive in the unpretentious slapstick comedies she made with Sennett graduate Polly Moran in the late 1920s and early 1930s, for here, the shallowness of Moran's talent serves to emphasize the depth of Dressler's.

No less dramatic is the saga of Marie Dressler's career. As her friend Will Rogers noted in 1934, "There never was a career—one time big and then clear down, and now up again—like hers."

Early in life she resigned herself to the fact that she was big and had a homely face; she never let it stand in her way, and she was to find many years later that people around the world found beauty in her *character* that was much more important than superficial good looks.

Born in Canada to an itinerant piano teacher and would-be musician, Marie happily left home to seek her fortunes and traveled America in a series of barnstorming theater companies, doing everything from grand opera to comic opera. "She did the most wonderful burlesque opera . . . because she had such



Marie and Jane Winton watch Marion Davies' antics in *The Patsy*.

a wonderful voice," Will Rogers recalled.

Anxious to succeed, she never stopped, and when one troupe folded, she looked around until she found another job, whether it was in the chorus or in a slightly more exalted speaking part. Eventually she worked with Lillian Russell, Anna Held, Weber and Fields, and other show-business luminaries.

Marie recalled her first taste of stardom in 1896. "*Lady Slavey* was my first big success. I wasn't quite twenty-five when we moved from Washington, where we opened, to the Casino in New York. We played the Casino two years and took the show on the road for two more. It had taken me exactly eleven years to make Broadway. Eleven years of tank towns and hard work and little pay—sometimes no pay at all. But it was worth it all to hang out of a window now and watch my name in electric lights on one of the finest theaters in the country. Even today, out here in Hollywood, surrounded by stars who weren't born then, I can still feel the thrill of those first weeks at the Casino."

During the national tour of *Lady Slavey* a Connecticut woman went to see Miss Dressler backstage, with her strapping son in tow. Her name was Mrs. Sinnott and she wanted advice on how her son could pursue a stage career. Marie Dressler was patient with the naïve young man (who like herself was a transplanted Canadian) and went so far as to give him a letter of introduction to Broadway producer David Belasco.

Some fifteen years later that young-man-made-good brought Marie Dressler to the screen; his name was Mack Sennett, and he was eager to go beyond the one- and two-reel comedies he was making at the Keystone Studio and produce a full-length comedy feature. His backers wouldn't hear of it until he mentioned the name of Marie Dressler, for she was an internationally known stage star whose reputation might carry the film's success.

Stuck for an idea, Sennett and his writers decided to adapt Miss Dressler's stage success *Tillie's Nightmare* into a screenplay, which they called *Tillie's Punctured Romance*. There was trepidation at first on the part of theater owners who weren't yet accustomed to feature films of any kind, let alone comedies, but once *Tillie* found its way into a major theater its success was insured. It became one of the great comedy hits of all time.

It is also one of the most boisterous comedies of all time, combining the bombast of Marie Dressler with the unpolished energy of the entire Sennett crew. There is nothing soft or subtle about the film: In wooing Marie, Charlie Chaplin playfully hurls a brick at her head, and a short time later when Charlie's girl friend, Mabel Normand, first sees him with Dressler (in the middle of the street, dodging traffic), she remarks, "What's this he's got—one of Ringling's elephants?"

Marie presides over much of the film's pandemonium: A farm girl lured to the wicked city by bouncer Chaplin, she gets roaring drunk in a restaurant and lumbers about in a series of foolish dances. Later, when she thinks she's inherited a fortune and throws a party in her new mansion, she goes berserk, firing a gun, hurling a cake, and causing general havoc. In the film's climactic chase she's standing at the edge of a pier when the Keystone Kops patrol wagon rides up and slams into her derriere, shoving her off the pier into the water. Bum-

A-Dressler, Marie P.O.
(07-12)

bling attempts to hoist her out of the drink cause her to be dunked four more times before she reaches safety and has a chance to dry out.

The pants-kicking humor of *Tillie's Punctured Romance* does little to bolster Marie Dressler's reputation as a great comedienne when seen today. What impresses one most is her refreshing uninhibitedness, her ability to throw all caution to the wind in playing a rambunctious character. This must have been electrifying on stage, but of course on film it's a bit *too* broad. Dressler needed direction, and in her first film she wasn't accepting any.

Mack Sennett later wrote, "No matter that this was her first motion picture, she was a great star, this was her story, and she was still inclined to remember me as an awkward boilermaker from Northampton."

Nevertheless, *Tillie's Punctured Romance* was a hit, and while Marie Dressler had no thought of abandoning the stage for a film career, she enjoyed this success and followed it with a pair of so-called sequels, *Tillie's Tomato Surprise* in 1915 and *Tillie Wakes Up* in 1917.

Tillie Wakes Up is significant because it was written for Marie by her friend Frances Marion. Marion had met the star when she was a cub reporter trying to snare an interview; they became good friends and their paths would cross significantly over the years. By 1917 Marion was a successful screenwriter, fashioning original stories for Mary Pickford, Alice Brady, and Clara Kimball Young. Therefore, her script for Dressler is more thoughtful than anything Sennett could have provided. Marie plays a neglected wife who heeds the advice of columnist "Beetrees Flarefacts" to get a Romeo on the side, and Johnny Hines is an unhappy husband who becomes Marie's partner in a daylong "fling" at Coney Island.

Marion doesn't eschew slapstick in her script (as Tillie, Marie gets drunk and decides to rest on a "bed" of peanuts at a vendor's stall, causing the container to collapse under her ample weight), but she offers Dressler her first dramatic screen moments, as a woman whose heart is broken by her callous husband. Perhaps through knowing her offstage, writer Marion realized how sincere and affecting Dressler could be portraying sadness—and what an effective contrast it was to her usual flamboyance.

With minor exceptions she was off-screen for the next ten years. A series of two-reel comedies for the World Film Company in 1917 and 1918 was not well received. During World War I she worked tirelessly to sell Liberty Bonds and to entertain soldiers in army hospitals. She virtually suspended her career "for the duration." When she returned to the New York booking offices after the Armistice, she found herself being called "old-hat" and a "former star."

She continued to work wherever she could and found enormous acceptance in London. But by the mid-1920s her career was on the wane, and after Allan Dwan chanced to offer her a role in his film *The Joy Girl* when he spotted her in a New York restaurant, she told him that he had saved her life: She had planned to jump out a window that very night, a victim of utter despair.

At this point, a mutual friend alerted Frances Marion, who was now a contract writer at M-G-M in California, that Marie was idle. Marion immediately set to work on a script called *The Callahans and the Murphys*, which she



George K. Arthur, Polly Moran, Jack Benny, and Bessie Love share a laugh with the well-dressed Marie during a break in the filming of *Chasing Rainbows* at M-G-M in 1929.

A-Dressler, Marie (07-12) C3

Marie Dressler makes a formidable screen debut in *Tillie's Punctured Romance*, with Mabel Normand, Charlie Chaplin, and Edgar Kennedy.

Dressler as Marthy, the waterfront hag, with Greta Garbo in *Anna Christie*.





Roscoe Ates seems unimpressed with Marie and Polly Moran's campaign poster in *Politics*.

Polly Moran pleads with bank president Marie in *Prosperity*.



A Dressler Marie C.4
(07-12)

brought to producer Irving Thalberg with the suggestion that he cast Polly Moran and Marie Dressler in the leads. Moran was already on the Metro roster; Thalberg banked on Dressler's longtime stardom and dismissed the notion that she was "washed up."

Marie Dressler returned to Hollywood to play this tailor-made role as the matriarch of a raucous Irish clan who's constantly at odds with her equally boisterous pal, Polly. Somehow their relationship survives the rockiest disruptions, usually caused by selfish, status-seeking Polly. Sentiment and slapstick were the main ingredients of this film; as Marie and Polly toast their children's impending marriage, they get progressively drunker and wind up pouring beer down each other's blouses!

The Callahans and the Murphys seemed a surefire hit, but the Irish population throughout America picketed the film and caused M-G-M great embarrassment. The studio had never anticipated such response and quietly withdrew the picture from circulation—and with it, Marie Dressler's latest bid for stardom.

She did not, at this point, rest idle, as some histories have indicated. She was featured with Polly Moran in an adaptation of the comic strip *Bringing Up Father*, which *Photoplay* magazine aptly labeled "rolling-pin humor." Then she costarred with Marion Davies in *The Patsy*, a sidesplitting comedy directed by King Vidor in which she played Davies' domineering mother. It was energetic, physical comedy, and there were times when it seemed Dressler might actually flatten Miss Davies in the commotion.

In 1929 she free-lanced, winning undistinguished roles in such films as *The Vagabond Lover* with Rudy Vallee and a two-reel talkie short called *Dangerous Females* with Polly Moran, in which the veteran comedienne did their best to contend with a microphone and very weak material.

Then came *Anna Christie*.

Frances Marion was handed the task of adapting Eugene O'Neill's play as Greta Garbo's first talking picture. As she worked on the screenplay for M-G-M, she realized that the role of Marthy, a waterfront hag, was made for Marie Dressler, and as she had done three years earlier, she went to Irving Thalberg and persuaded him to give her a chance.

"To placate her," Marie later recalled, "they agreed to test me as Marthy. They were serene in the confidence that even Frances would see that I was through. To everybody's surprise, except Frances Marion's, the test came out favorably. And when the picture was shown, it was an enormous success."

After seeing the finished picture, Greta Garbo drove to Marie Dressler's home to give her a large bouquet of flowers in appreciation of her outstanding performance.

It was indeed a triumph. For this agreeably meaty role, Dressler dared to unleash her inhibitions just as she would for comedy, but this time to portray a pitiful old rag-mop of a woman. Her performance made people sit up and take notice—and that included the top brass at M-G-M. Because of this they were receptive to Frances Marion's next proposal.

While observing Marie during the filming of *Anna Christie*, Marion started writing another screenplay expressly for her—and for another recent M-G-M

*A Dressler Marie P.S
(07-12)*

THE FILMS OF MARIE DRESSLER

THE SILENT FILMS

Tillie's Punctured Romance—Mack Sennett 1914
Tillie's Tomato Surprise—Lubin 1915
Tillie Wakes Up—Peerless-World 1917
The Scrub Lady—Dressler 1917 (short subject)
The Agonies of Agnes—Dressler 1918 (short subject)
Cross Red Nurse—Dressler 1918 (short subject)
Fired—Dressler 1918 (short subject)
The Callahans and the Murphys—M-G-M 1927
The Joy Girl—Fox 1927
Breakfast at Sunrise—First National 1927
The Patsy—M-G-M 1928
Bringing Up Father—M-G-M 1928
The Divine Lady—First National 1929

THE SOUND FILMS

The Hollywood Revue of 1929—M-G-M 1929
Dangerous Females—Paramount-Christie 1929 (short subject)
The Vagabond Lover—RKO 1929
Chasing Rainbows—M-G-M 1930
Anna Christie—M-G-M 1930
The Girl Said No—M-G-M 1930
One Romantic Night—Schenck-United Artists 1930
Let Us Be Gay—M-G-M 1930
Min and Bill—M-G-M 1930
Reducing—M-G-M 1931
Politics—M-G-M 1931
Emma—M-G-M 1932
Prosperity—M-G-M 1932
Tugboat Annie—M-G-M 1933
Christopher Bean—M-G-M 1933
Dinner at Eight—M-G-M 1934

Marie Dressler also reportedly starred in some short subjects filmed in Europe during the early 1920s. She appeared with many other M-G-M stars in a 1932 short called *Jackie Cooper's Christmas*.

Opposite page

Billie Burke and Marie Dressler in *Dinner at Eight*.

