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Betty Lee. *Marie Dressler: The Unlikeliest Star.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997. x + 318 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2036-2.

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Usual Magic

If one were to reflect on popular cinematic greats that emerged out of early Hollywood, stars like Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford and Marlene Dietrich would probably come to mind. Few would recall Marie Dressler. In the early 1930s, though, many–including executives at MGM studios– claimed that Dressler was "the most popular screen performer in the world." Indeed, the beloved actress drew more audiences to the silver screen than most movie stars of her day.

Dressler's fame, however, quickly faded after her death in 1934, and until recently little was known about her. That has changed with the publication of *Marie Dressler: The Unlikeliest Star*, by Betty Lee. Utilizing various sources, including news archives and memoirs, Toronto Globe reporter Lee presents a thorough biography of the everywoman superstar.

Marie Dressler was born in Coburg, Ontario, in 1868. The offspring of a loving mother and tyrannical father, she left home at 14 with her older sister to join a performing stock company. Together the siblings traveled the Midwest playing bit parts in small stage productions of popular musicals at a time when "touring entertainment" was booming. Shortly after taking to the road the elder sister married, but Marie found her passion in the theater. Dressler was an unlikely star, as Lee appropriately suggests in her subtitle. Overweight and homely, she suffered from stage fright throughout her life. Despite the odds, by the turn of the century the young actress was widely accepted as a skilled performer, best known for her comedic roles and slapstick humor. She appeared in numerous Broadway productions and vaudeville shows and often received rave reviews.

A natural comedienne, Dressler made her screen debut in the silent film Tillie's *Punctured Romance* (Keystone Productions, 1914), starring funnyman Charlie Chaplin. Following the accomplishment of the "first full-length, six reel motion picture comedy" were other important roles, including films produced by Dressler's production company. An entrepreneur at heart, she also tried her hand at theatrical management, dairy farming, and amusement park concession. As committed as she was to personal success, the actress was also public-spirited. At the onset of WW I she delivered inspiring speeches at war relief rallies, devoted much of her time and finances to the sale of victory bonds, and by her own admission sold more than anyone else in the United States. She ardently gave herself to other causes as well, including women's suffrage and actors' rights.

Lee observes that "theater historians have intimated that social and professional doors closed for the actress because of her militant involvement in the 1919 actor's strike." (She had been elected president of the Chorus Equity Association of America.) The author, however, fends off the notion, instead offering other excuses for the her downfall. Seven years passed, though, before Dressler appeared in another motion picture. Her return to the screen in 1927 marked the start of a remarkable comeback, particularly for an aging, unemployed actress. Initially cast in small comedic roles, she made a bold career move when she took on dramatic characterizations which proved to be a huge success. In the 1930 film *Anna Christie* (MGM) Dressler played the part of a vagrant and Lee notes that her "artistry in depicting a woman who had retained her basic pride and dignity endeared the character to audiences everywhere." The movie also featured young starlet Greta Garbo–in her first talking picture–but it was the veteran's performance that received most attention.

Upon gaining recognition as a strong character actor Dressler was kept busy with an exhausting filming schedule and a host of roles that sought to showcase her talents. Well into her sixties she made one movie after another–six in 1930 alone–including a tragicomedy titled *Min and Bill* (MGM), in which she was teamed with Wallace Beery. The film was a box-office hit and Dressler's outstanding performance won her the 1930-31 Academy

Award for Best Actress. Another highlight in the aging actress's career was her appearance with John Barrymore, Lionel Barrymore and Jean Harlowe in the 1934 comedy *Dinner at Eight* (MGM). Dressler played a lady of distinction and as Lee suggests the star worked her usual magic: "she was hilarious but believable, with that unmistakable touch of pathos." But the author reveals that the exhausted actress was not well during the filming of the movie: "she was allowed in the studio only three hours a day ... and a sofa was [kept] nearby out of camera range so that she could rest between takes." Dressler had been battling cancer for some time and the following year, in July of 1934, it claimed her life.

During her lifetime Marie Dressler authorized two autobiographies, both written by ghost writers. Undoubtedly, though, those accounts don't deliver as thoroughly as does Lee's work. The first of the two, *The Life of an Ugly Duckling* was released in 1924. The second, *My Own Story*, was only three quarters finished when it was released posthumously. While Lee draws from the two memoirs, her exhaustive research proves comprehensive and engaging. A key source was the unpublished journal of Dressler confidante, Claire Dubrey, which provided insight into the personal and professional activities of the actress. In fact, parts of Lee's work like excerpts from a gossip column, disclosing details about relationship between the popular star and high society notables.

Lee succeeds in presenting a thoroughly enjoyable biography, one that brings into focus a picture of one of the most popular stars of early American cinema. Throughout one can sense the appreciation the author has for the star, a warm and lovable human being who "bet her chips and collected her rewards in the great game of life." *Marie Dressler: The Unlikeliest Star* is a long overdue contribution to the history of movie greats. The book includes 36 black-and-white photographs, a filmography, a bibliography and extensive notes on each chapter.

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