

Marie Dressler, the Unlikeliest Star

By Joan M. Boyd

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SHE WAS a good old girl. Yes, that's what you think while reading author Betty Lee's biography, *Marie Dressler, The Unlikeliest Star*. It's a very satisfying book and it merits a careful reading. The prologue says what Marie Dressler was all about, really all about, and her story which follows is one of the most enjoyable I've ever read. It's dispassionate, it's non-judgmental, the author gives you time, date and place consistently, which isn't easy, considering the profession Marie was in and the number of times she bought and sold properties when she became affluent, and even before she became affluent. In our day, Marie Dressler would have been called a 'risk taker'. Her career was lived through five decades, at a time when there was constant opportunity for a great stage career, if you had the talent, skill, friends, luck and sheer perseverance to make a life in theatre and movies. She had all of these, and in this well-written book we follow the adventures of a brave and talented woman in her climb to fame. Throughout we are given fascinating histories, in both social and political terms, of show business during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Marie Dressler was born Leila Maria Koerber in 1871 in the little town of Cobourg, Ontario, Canada. She died of cancer on July 28, 1934, in her home on North Alpine Drive in Beverley Hills, California. She inherited many of her father's genes for he was a big, strong man who studied music as a young boy in Austria. Marie became a big, strong woman with a lovely singing voice. She published two books and although she embroidered the truth many times over, both in her writing and in her life, she "made sure her autobiographical ramblings stressed at least three points: she disliked her father, she adored her mother, and she came from a family of class, money, and even a touch of the aristocracy".

In her copious notes, Miss Lee writes that her life of Marie Dressler was drawn from three major sources: the Robinson Locke Dramatic Collection in the Billy Rose Room of the New York Library of the Performing Arts; an unpublished memoir written between 1927 and 1934 by Dressler's close friend Claire Dubrey; and Dressler's two autobiographies.

How she found Claire Dubrey's memoirs is a surprising tale. "After writing to film historian Tony Thomas in 1993 about research difficulties with the Dressler project, Thomas advised me to ask Sonja Bolle, editor of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, to publish a request for help. I asked if anyone reading the newspaper could forward information concerning individuals who had been Dressler associates during her years in Hollywood. I included a short list of names, one of which was that of Claire Dubrey, who had frequently been mentioned as a Dressler intimate in the news reports and information I had managed to locate. To my delight, I soon received a note -- written on prescription notepaper -- from a Los Angeles pediatrician who told me that Dubrey was still living in West Hollywood and that she was one hundred years old and extremely frail." From this lead the author traced the memoirs through Claire Dubrey's housekeeper. A parcel with "Marie Dressler" clearly marked on the paper wrapping, had apparently remained untouched for sixty years. Betty Lee has dedicated her book to the "Memory of Claire Dubrey", who died in 1993 four years before the book was finished.

Photographs show Marie Dressler on stage, on screen and in her private life. In performance she made deliberate use of her features and her large frame to transform herself into an ugly duckling to make people laugh even more at her slapstick antics and the delivery of her lines. In reality she was a tall, commanding figure of a woman, who was certainly very presentable in her appearance and very personable in demeanour and behaviour both on and off stage.

In 1883 Marie Dressler was 14 years old. That was when she left home, with her nineteen year-old sister. They began working with the Nevada Stock Company. After her sister left the company, Marie stayed, playing mostly in small towns in the mid-west United States. She went on from there to join the Starr Opera Company, "where she found she liked singing better than dancing and dreamed of performing such Wagnerian roles as Brunhilde. Deep down, however, she realized that although she might have the physique and stamina for grand opera, her naturally pleasant voice was scarcely trained for the work". Although she did not become an opera star, she shared something with Enrico Caruso: she suffered from stage fright all

her life. After many years in repertory in small towns, she finally arrived on Broadway. At first, her efforts went unrewarded, but in 1897 "Dressler struck gold". She received very good reviews from the critics and public adulation for her performances in *Higgeldy Piggeldy*, and *Tillie's Nightmare*.

In 1914 she was persuaded by Mack Sennett to enter films and was recognized as a skilful comedienne when she appeared and starred in *Tillie's Punctured Romance* with Charlie Chaplin. It was a distinct departure from the stage play and audiences loved her. A young actor named Milton Berle was in the cast, plus the entire corps of the zany Keystone Kops and the delightful Mabel Normand. Her great successes came with Wallace Beery in *Min and Bill* and in *Tugboat Annie*. She won the Best Actress Academy Award in 1931 for *Min and Bill*. She went on dividing her time between film and theatre and proving her ability in *Anna Christie* with Garbo, in *Emma*, and with her never-to-be-forgotten sharp and witty role as a high class society lady in *Dinner at Eight*. In the star system of Hollywood which based its values on actresses who were talented, attractive and glamorous she, almost alone as a very plain woman, achieved as much public success with her character portrayals as her more beautiful counterparts. She became, in trade terms, the leading box office actress in Hollywood and MGM's most reliable money-maker.

Her final film, *Christopher Bean*, was released in 1933 after a great birthday party was held for her on November 9th by Louis B. Mayer. He invited eight hundred celebrities to the MGM lot in Culver City for a lavish dinner ending with an eight foot birthday cake, weighing at least five hundred pounds. At the end, Mayer was on his feet, waving his arms and shouting "Happy Birthday, Marie!" The following July, when Louis B. Mayer was in London he was informed of Dressler's death and quickly issued a statement to the press: "Surely there never breathed a woman more beloved than our own Queen Marie. The Screen has lost one of its greatest characters. Personally, I have lost a very dear friend."

Marie Dressler went in for rough and tumble humour on the stage but her feet were firmly on the ground as she used her talent and guided her career. To quote the author: "But more than simply able, Marie Dressler was an actress for her time. She was a master of her craft who spoke honestly to her audiences, whether she was clowning through a vaudeville show in 1912, making 'em laugh in a 1916 silent comedy, or moving audiences to both guffaws and tears in a Depression-era photoplay."

There is no examining of psyches, very little conjecture and no lies told in this scholarly and comprehensive biography which includes a Filmography, a Bibliography and Index. No one previously has written and published such a detailed portrait of this long-neglected actress.

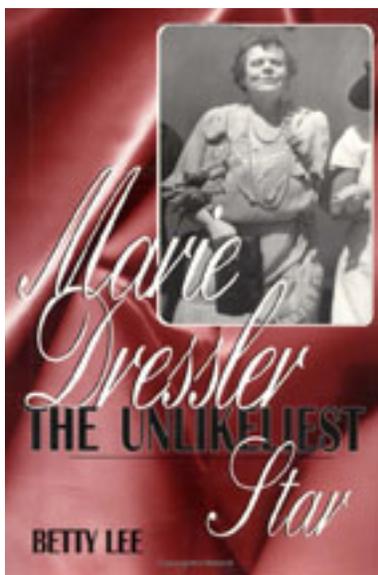


Figure 1: **TITLE:** *MARIE DRESSLER, THE UNLIKELIEST STAR* ¶ **AUTHOR:** Betty Lee ¶ **PUBLISHER:** Kentucky University Press, 1997, 318pp. ¶ **PRICE:** USD 35.00

Author Information

Joan M. BOYD's lifetime interest has belonged to the stars of silent cinema. Since retiring from the Ministry of the Attorney General of Ontario, Canada, she is turning her attention to writing about them.