

Desire

With “Desire, filmgoers can see the great Marlene Dietrich after she has cast aside her Svengali, Josef von Sternberg, and launched out on her own with her then lover, Gary Cooper, her co-star in the film.

In “Desire,” sultry jewel thief Madeleine (Dietrich) steals a string of pearls in Paris and inveigles the naïve American engineer Tom (Cooper), who is driving on his vacation to Spain, to transport her and the pearls out of France. However, getting the goods back from him proves to be difficult for Madeleine without falling in love with the laconic Tom.

Marlene was one of the true goddesses of the cinema. As a well-off kid growing up in Berlin she unsuccessfully tried the violin and work as a chorus girl before settling in as a drama student at the prestigious Max Reinhardt school. Soon she was playing small roles in theater and silent films, as well as working in cabaret. She married in 1924--a Czech production assistant—and they had one child, but the couple mostly agreed to live apart over the next 40 or so years.

Breakthrough success came when German-American director von Sternberg picked her to star in his film “The Blue Angel,” based on a popular German novel. As the seductive vamp Lola Lola, with whom a strict professor becomes hopelessly infatuated, she was an international



smash. Even before that film was released in America, however, she had already signed a contract with Paramount Pictures and gone to Hollywood, essentially to work with von Sternberg. Her first U.S. film, “Morocco”—incidentally, also with Gary Cooper—was a big hit (at left, Dietrich and Cooper in “Desire”). To build on her popularity, “The Blue Angel” was released in a complete English version as well the German classic.

In Hollywood, Dietrich basically was von Sternberg’s meal ticket. He directed her in six of her first seven films, exploiting her to the full as a sultry, sensuous woman of mystery who drove men mad with her exotic beauty and smashing legs. In pictures like “Shanghai Express,” “Dishonored,” “Blonde Venus,” and “The Scarlet Empress,” Marlene was the studio’s answer to Greta Garbo at MGM. Her last collaboration with Von Sternberg was “The Devil Is a Woman” (1935) which proved a box office disappointment, and after that she went on to work with other directors.

In 1937, while filming in England, she was approached by Nazi agents anxious to have her work again in Germany. It was said that even Joachim Von Ribbentrop, then Hitler’s ambassador in London, made a personal and generous offer from the Führer himself. She turned them down flat, and her refusal produced a ban on her films in Germany. She soon thereafter became an ardent anti-Nazi. Marlene became an American citizen in 1939, participated in anti-Nazi propaganda broadcasts, and regularly entertained US troops—under near battle

conditions—for which won a Medal of Freedom from the US Army.

After the war, her films were more occasional, but she did work with some great directors— both “A Foreign Affair” and “Witness for the Prosecution” for Billy Wilder, “Stage Fright” with Alfred Hitchcock, “Touch of Evil” with Orson Welles—but she was far better known as the the “world’s most glamorous grandmother” when her daughter gave birth to a son in 1948.

By the late 1950’s, her film career was fading, but she began a spectacular new life as a recording star and cabaret artist, returning, in a way, to her Berlin roots and to the persona of Lola Lola. She was the subject of biographical film “Marlene” (1984) made by Maximillian Schell, which just audio of her voice and which showed no contemporary footage of her. She died in 1992.

While “Desire” is often identified as a picture by Ernst Lubitsch, it was directed by Frank Borzage, a Hollywood veteran from silent days. An unabashed romantic and sentimentalist, Borzage pioneered in the use of a soft focus photography and a gauzy look, techniques perfectly consistent with Dietrich’s screen image. His filmmaking peak was in the late 1920’s to the mid-1930’s, when he made “Seventh Heaven” (for which he won the first director Oscar), “Street Angel,” and “A Farewell to Arms.” His one collaboration with the great Dietrich was a happy one, and one to remember.

(The film runs 89 minutes.)