

THE

Nick Zegarac's

Crawford

ART

the
CRAWFORD
Edition

Joan Crawford

stardom personified

In 1953, so an unconfirmed rumor goes, a reporter working for one of the disreputable scandal sheets in Hollywood was asked to do an interview with screen queen Joan Crawford. "What do you want?" the reporter asked, "A nice girl or a bitch?" to which the editor thought for a moment, then smiled, "Ah, make her a bitch." It's an unconfirmed story, like too many that continue to swirl around this legendary diva; that she beat her children with frequency and with relish; she starred in a so called 'blue movie' before getting famous, that she was bisexual and pursued Bette Davis, thus causing the infamous rift between the two.

There's no getting around it. After Crawford's death in 1977 the hatchets came out, steadily chipping away at the once peerless reputation Joan had toiled so religiously to maintain throughout her lifetime. To what extent Crawford deserves the label 'Mommie Dearest' – that scarlet letter tattooed across her forehead ever since the publication of Christina Crawford's biography – the Joan Crawford who became sheer mythology in her own time, who clawed her way out of the dime-a-dance speakeasies and Charleston-ed all the way from the ballroom into several movie contracts, who could shed a tear on cue and from whatever eye her director so desired, who is rumored to have slept with virtually all of her directors and leading men simply to get a part; this is the Crawford that for good, bad or indifference, must continue to receive very high marks. Crawford – the go getter, the achiever, the no-nonsense, thoroughly committed professional who by her own account was "a real lady in the parlor and a total whore in bed."

Crawford was most assuredly a control freak. But she also exhibited extreme kindness, albeit with a purpose. Her enduring friendships were not with her fellow actors and most certainly never her lovers or husbands; but the crew who worked behind the scenes to make her appear the sleek and seductive impala. Bette Davis abhorred Crawford. Then again, Davis didn't much care for the competition in general. And Crawford, was competition and a genuine threat to Davis' supremacy at Warner Bros. after 1945's **Mildred Pierce**. It was, in fact, a rather silly rivalry. What suited one star arguably never could suit the other. While Davis was





(Previous pages: title page): Crawford in 1933 at the height of her MGM success, her extraordinarily angular features perfectly capturing the light. Crawford was one of stills photographer, George Hurrell's favorite subjects. Indeed, she was also designer Gilbert Adrian's most desirable model. "She had a large head and a very small body," Betsy Palmer, Crawford's costar in **Queen Bee** (1955) pointed out, "But oh she was mighty." (This page, left): Crawford poses in 1931 for **Possessed**. In later years Crawford's appearance became harsh and almost warrior-like, but in her earliest movies she was an exciting new face with a sensual, careworn and strangely sad quality. **Possessed** was the second pairing of Crawford with Clark Gable, their on again/off again torrid sexual liaison very much on and sizzling at the time **Possessed** went before the cameras. Crawford took the 'relationship' seriously, but fidelity was not exactly Gable's thing during this period in his life. Crawford was quietly disillusioned but kept her disappointments to herself. Gable had that effect on women and Crawford was no exception to the rule. (Middle): Crawford as the prostitute Sadie Thompson in **Rain** (1932). Mayer had advised her not to do the role, saying that it would be bad for her image. Reluctantly, Mayer caved and Crawford made the movie – a terrible flop in her career, and yet, one of the rarities in which she near completely steps out of the 'Crawford persona' to give a thoroughly thrilling performance. (Right): with Robert Taylor in **When Ladies Meet** (1941). Crawford plays Mary an authoress whose latest novel is about a mistress who steals a married man from his wife. Mary writes and thinks of the affair in idealistic platitudes, in reality basing her prose on her giddy romance with her married publisher, Roger Woodruff (Herbert Marshall) while assuming the wife in the equation is a terrible person. Taylor's Jimmy Lee is desperately in love with Mary and decides to show her the error in her logic by introducing Mary to Roger's wife, Claire (Greer Garson), thereby dispelling the myth that she is to blame for Roger's unhappiness and infidelity.

unsentimental about her own physical appearance, often willing to distort it to the point of ugliness to convincingly play a part, Crawford prided herself on maintaining an imperishable glycerin façade. While Davis relished pushing her acting to its limits Crawford preferred to work within her comfort zone. Crawford would never be caught dead looking disheveled on camera, or in life for that matter. "When I leave this apartment," she once told a reporter, "I am Joan Crawford...first, foremost and always. If you want the girl next door – go next door!"

It is difficult to assess Crawford's greatness today, particularly in the shadow of Bette Davis, who enjoyed criticizing her on the talk show circuit long after Crawford was unable to defend herself. It is an even greater impossibility to think upon the legend without a more devious pall being cast on Crawford's public image by adopted daughter Christina's scathing tell-all, **Mommie Dearest**. Yet it is important to recall that this biography was written partly out of spite and in an era when it had become all too fashionable to tear down the icons of golden age Hollywood with frequency and nothing better than rumor as backup. Yet to simply write off Joan Crawford as a self-obsessed gargoyle incapable of love or even basic human kindness, to perpetuate the myth without reexamining the star...in short, to conjure up the psychopath in place of the woman – is as untrue and as salacious as perhaps to simply ignore this latter 'contribution' altogether. While the snap assessment of Crawford as a monster has been looped into the public consciousness like the cheap roll of a Pianola, the truth of Joan Crawford is far more complex than first meets the eye.

The surface of the marvel - this we already know; that she drank and slept around and readily punished her children for infractions of any and all kinds. But the horror of it all, as best exemplified by the line "Wire hangers! Wire hangers!" supposedly screeched into Christina's ear in the dead of night, and brought vividly to life in the uncanny performance of Faye Dunaway; this artifice masquerading as a substitute for real life – this is not the whole truth either. Nor should it ever be misconstrued as the totality of Joan Crawford behind closed doors. On the screen Joan Crawford was the epitome of the



(Above): Crawford in 1925, the year she had her breakout in **Sally Irene and Mary**. Crawford loved to dance and spent her hours away from MGM winning loving cups for her Charleston. In her youth, she was a girl who liked to laugh, who found the pleasures of life readily and who created a sensation wherever she was. That early taste of publicity bode well for MGM, but it also trapped Crawford in an impossible culture of 'youth' and 'vitality' that she increasingly seemed unwilling to surrender long after the edicts of time itself had suggested the ship had sailed and Crawford was no longer on it.

'shop girl makes good'. She could be sly. She most definitely could be sexy. But she could play sad, and arguably *was* very sad once the cameras stopped rolling; childhood insecurities infrequently wreaking havoc on her marriages, extra-marital relationships, her inability to accept getting older, and finally to leave behind a public image that could withstand the onslaught of muckraking innuendo being heaped upon it.

But then again, does this impressionistic view of Crawford as something dreadful and completely spawned from the **Cabinet of Dr. Caligari** not seem incongruously unsentimental and untrue to the woman who, after a gaffer fell from the ceiling onto the floor a soundstage where she was working had the man rushed to the hospital, and thereafter sent her car to make daily inquiries as to his condition, and, even quietly wrote checks without fanfare or even the need to publicize her philanthropy as she helped his family during his recovery? Or what of Crawford's annual Christmas gift-giving; an event where virtually each and every one of the crew who had worked on her latest movie were given presents of quality, handpicked by Crawford; her free time spent on the careful selection process? Does any of this sound like a demigod; wholly unscrupulous, wicked, cold-hearted and/or unthinking?

No, Joan Crawford may have been many things to many people, and in fact, exhibited different qualities to various people. But in the final analysis there was one distinct quality she shared with the whole world – that of a great and enduring star. The sparkle is still in her crown if one chooses to look for it. Joan's career was undeniably her pride and joy. It still is. Crawford on camera is the exemplar of the movie queen. She can break our hearts, frighten us to death or make us laugh. With a flashing eye or devilish smile she can set the screen afire, an immaculate creature of so many rare and illusive qualities that continues to emit lightning sparks. Only Bette Davis could command such an audience. And only Davis remained a rival to



(Above): Crawford at work and at play. (Left): looking particularly pleased with the amount of fan mail she's received at MGM. While most stars were content to pawn off their responsibilities to the studio's publicity department, Crawford indulged in an almost religious devotion to answering virtually all of her own correspondences with handwritten notations. "I take my fans seriously," she once told a reporter, "Because they pay to see me and at a time when they could just as easily use the money for other things. That means something to me, you know. It says to me that I am important to them. How can anyone ignore that?" (Middle): Crawford studying hard on the set of **Laughing Sinners** (1931). "She knew her lines. She knew your lines. She knew where her marks were and where the light was coming from...all she wanted you to know is your lines," said Ben Cooper of his **Johnny Guitar** (1954) costar. (Right): posing with first husband Douglas Fairbanks Jr. at their backyard pool shortly after their wedding. Crawford and Fairbanks Jr. were married in 1929. The marriage lasted barely four years thanks to Crawford's frequent dalliances with Clark Gable. Still, the couple parted amicably and Fairbanks Jr. even remained a close friend. When **Mommie Dearest** was posthumously published, reporters descended on Fairbanks Jr. anticipating that he would have his own horror stories to tell. Instead, Fairbanks simply shook his head and said "The Joan Crawford that I've heard about in '**Mommie Dearest**' is not the Joan Crawford I knew back when."

Crawford and vice versa. But the actresses are as different on screen as they arguably were much too similar behind the scenes. Both never found lasting happiness in marriage or their love affairs. Each had a child who sought to destroy their reputation. At least Christina had the sense – good or otherwise - to write and publish her lurid memoir after Crawford was already cold and in the ground. B.D. Hyman (Davis' daughter) couldn't wait for her mother to die.

Crawford in her prime was a bewitched creature of extremes. She perhaps was not mother material, but like all pursuits she undertook, this too seemed achievable with just hard work, time and money being spent. That she so grossly miscalculated the importance of motherhood within the delicate balance of being 'a star' – the kind that lives it 24/7 – is perhaps a misfortune for all concerned; one, that defied her understanding and her patience and made her later years away from the spotlight as unpleasant and as insecure as the unstable childhood she had so desperately sought to leave behind. Men were of absolutely no use or help to her. One husband defied her; another permitted her to have casual affairs (because he too was relatively disinterested in maintaining any sort of fidelity); still another up and died, leaving Crawford with a mountain of debt. In some ways, Joan Crawford lived for the moments she could show herself on the screen, the only place where a goodly number of her movies at least afforded the proverbial happy ending that in life was so cruelly denied.

Yet Crawford never threw in the towel. She never gave in and, most definitely, never gave up. In later years this willfulness was misconstrued; the persona of 'the bitch' taking hold even as Crawford's physical features began to adopt a very harsh edge by the mid-1950s. Her jaw became more square, her eyes somehow growing larger - colder; her body as toned as ever, but now adopting the muscularity of a warrior princess. And Crawford was unwilling to accept age as an inevitable part of the life cycle. Come hell or high water she would remain eternally young, or at least pretend that the bloom of the ingénue had yet to completely rub off. For a while in the early fifties Crawford could still get away with it. But by the time she appeared in **The Best of Everything** (1959) it was painfully clear to everyone except Crawford that the natural progression of time had taken its inevitable toll.



(Above left): domesticity was never Crawford's thing. While at MGM she employed a full-time maid and cook, a chauffeur and a groundskeeper to keep up the immaculate appearance of a hombody. But even at home Crawford dressed as though she were about to throw a party. Director Vincent Sherman, who began a torrid affair with Crawford while the two were making **The Damned Don't Cry** (1950) said that Crawford was always mildly amused by what she laughingly referred to as her "*piss elegance*". (Middle): with Douglas Fairbanks Jr. attending a costume ball at San Simeon in 1930. Crawford and Fairbanks Jr. were much in demand and quite social within the Hollywood community. While Joan virtually lapped up every minute of it, Fairbanks would later comment that it was a 'crazy time.' "*I am not a socialite, though I seem to have got the reputation for being one. I have some very good friends who happen to be in so-called society; but society as such is a bore and holds no fascination for me.*"

(Right): No – not Crawford and Fairbank's wedding portrait but a still to promote **Our Blushing Brides** (1930); something of a sequel to Crawford's smash hit, **Our Dancing Daughters** (1928). Fairbanks early career was going nowhere fast and Joan encouraged the studio to have him cast opposite her in the movie to help bolster her career. "*If you really want to know someone, you must see their emotions off guard,*" Fairbanks later mused, "*That's how I know Joan Crawford could never have been cruel to her children. I really knew her when she was still Billie, as she liked to be called in the early days. In a relationship as close as ours, I had the chance to see her in every kind of personal situation.*"

Getting older is not appealing to most of us beyond the age of twenty-one. But for a star as ensconced as Crawford the prospect of having to sacrifice it all to the inevitable passage of time must have been terrifying. Without her glamor she seems to have evaporated before our eyes, like the fizzle of champagne bubbles past their expiration. And this is precisely when the tabloids chose to attack, plastering images so grossly unflattering that when Crawford caught a glimpse of them on a supermarket shelf she ran from the store to the nearest taxi and back to her apartment, telephoning a friend to say "*...if that's what I look like, they'll never see me again.*"

Crawford made good on this threat. She became a recluse inside her one bedroom New York apartment, a far cry from the glamorous houses she had once owned and lived in in Los Angeles. On May 10, 1977 she died of a heart attack, some have speculated brought on from deteriorating health due to pancreatic cancer. In the years that have passed since, Joan Crawford has been infrequently resurrected for a new generation on television and on home video – her films readily the most popular programming on specialty cable channels. But as those who knew her pass into the next world, the real Joan Crawford once again has begun to slip onto the endangered species list; misrepresented, mislabeled or entirely shrugged off as just another old-time glamor gal who didn't know when to hang up her dancing shoes and go home.

It is a mistake to think of Joan Crawford in these terms; one bordering on some grand unromantic artistic travesty. For Crawford was, is and remains a star of the first magnitude. Whatever her flaws in life, she is untouchable in her art; something elusive, striking, all powerful and wondrous all at once. She wears her clothes like a mannequin. But within camera range she exists as few of her generation did. Certainly, no celebrity from our present age comes anywhere near her hundred kilowatt star dust without the very real danger of sustaining third degree burns.



the Girl Most Likely

***"Hollywood is like life...
you face it with the sum total
of your equipment!"***

- Joan Crawford

Joan Crawford: perhaps no other name in showbiz conjures to mind as much elegance, egotism and maternal demagoguery all in the same instance. Crawford is more than a woman – even more than a film star. She's iconographic: the name having no middle ground amongst popular opinion. Child activists decry her as the abusive harridan exaggerated in the memoir *'Mommie Dearest'* while legions of her fans – then and now – are as fiercely loyal to the preservation of her image as the supreme movie star. It seems a fitting tribute. After all, Joan Crawford was perhaps more staunchly devoted to them than any of her children, and most definitely more than to any of her husbands, answering her own fan mail with hand-written personalized notations. On the set, she was a force to be reckoned with; a consummate technical professional who knew virtually everything and anything about the *'picture making'* business. Female co-stars cowered in the shadow of the power she exuded both on and off camera. Male co-stars were often emasculated by her authority, and every director – so it has been suggested elsewhere in print – had *his turn*, though arguably not *his way* with her.

Joan Crawford is the ultimate star; a creature so over the top and larger than life that she at once inspires and defies parody. True enough, Crawford's films rarely represented the very best that Hollywood had to offer. Of her many movies,



(Above): contented to be just one of the girls flanking director George Cukor on the back lot in between takes on **The Women** (1939). Anita Loos' stage play was transformed into sublime bitchery with an all-star cast that only MGM in its heyday could muster. Campaigning hard to be cast as the ruthless mantrap Crystal Allen, Mayer had asked Crawford why on earth she would desire to play such a viper. "*I'd play Wallace Beery's mother if the part were right!*" Crawford spat back. Indeed, as much as Mayer believed Crawford's slip in popularity was due to the public's loss of appetite for her, Crawford's belief that dull parts in formulaic pictures were directly to blame. Crawford made the most out of her wicked woman and chewed up the scenery. It's an exceptional performance; **The Women** – a phenomenal hit. Interestingly, Crawford's success did not equate to more of the same. Only two years later both Crawford and Shearer were gone from MGM; Crawford to Warner Bros. and Shearer contented to leave the spotlight behind, retiring to Sun Valley with her second husband Martin Arrouge. From left to right: Florence Nash as authoress Nancy Blake; Phyllis Povah as the odious Edith Potter; Rosalind Russell as notorious gossip, Sylvia Fowler; Crawford as the diabolically feline mistress, Crystal Allen; director George Cukor; Norma Shearer as virtuous Mary Haines; Paulette Goddard as the enterprising vixen, Miriam Aarons; Mary Boland as scatterbrain Flora - the Countess de Lave and Joan Fontaine, as the innocent Peggy Day. **The Women** is great fun: exceptionally written and exuberantly performed – a pluperfect comedy gem.

only a handful stand out. Yet what makes a Crawford movie – *any* Crawford movie – so memorable is Crawford herself. She is a stunning porcelain skinned mannequin; a clothes horse, beautifully backlit and forever on the prowl for the public's adoration. When frequently asked to quantify her personal animosity toward Crawford, arch rival and grand dame, Bette Davis drew a parallel between her innate '*talent*' versus Crawford's '*manufactured stardom*'. Yet, a more critical review of Crawford's flops – films in which she boldly attempted to step beyond that studio-created mold – illustrate Crawford as every bit the talent Davis was; sold differently to the public, perhaps. But Crawford's marketability at MGM was predicated on creating this radiant, elegant thing of beauty. To her own credit, throughout the years Joan Crawford maintained this image. It was, after all what the public was paying for; what they arguably wanted to see.

Without question, Crawford could be harsh. Perhaps more than anyone, she understood the fickle nature of the movie business; knew the ropes of finagling better contracts by heart and recalled too well what an uphill climb her career had always been – but especially prior to the gold-star treatment at MGM and how easily it might – and in fact 'did' – slip away. But no one was going to take anything away from Joan Crawford. Arguably, no one ever has. If Crawford's relentless pursuit of perfection kept her youthful, then it also trapped her inside an impossible time capsule from which there was no escape. All five of Crawford's marriages were more short-lived than some of her ephemeral film plots. Although Crawford remained



(Above left): posing with MGM's couturier Gilbert Adrian in 1933. Adrian's designs for MGM's formidable roster of female stars set more fashion trends than virtually any other designer working in the business, with his contemporary clothing frequently knocked off for the department store rack. Crawford was Adrian's favorite actress to attire. "She (Crawford) is the perfect reflection for this modern age," Adrian is quoted in *Modern Screen*, "Sleek and statuesque. When I design clothes, no matter the movie somehow I always have Joan in mind." (Middle): Crawford with co-star Robert Taylor in Clarence Brown's *The Gorgeous Hussy* (1936) a woeful attempt to cast Crawford as Peggy Eaton, the niece of President Andrew Jackson (Lionel Barrymore). Taylor is Bo Timberlake, the man she loves who, unfortunately is killed early on, leaving Peggy to pursue a flawed romance with John Randolph (Melvyn Douglas). Crawford had hoped to expand her range in this period melodrama. Regrettably, and despite her period costumes, she remains a contemporary fixture in the film, defying the vintage look. (Right): striking a pose in one of Adrian's gowns for *Letty Lynton* (1932), the film that arguably first established 'the Crawford look' or at least the look we generally associate today with Joan's enduring iconography.

on amicable terms with all her former husbands she was also quick to recognize that there was only one great love in her life – her career.

Despite rumors, lurid tales and unsubstantiated innuendoes readily printed in gossip rags and the tabloids of her time, and even beyond, Crawford was arguably her own worst enemy – particularly in later years. Her bitterness at slowly slipping from the top turned inward to self-destructive alcoholism. Outwardly, that slippage manifested itself as almost insane jealousy and often inarticulate rage toward the younger actresses rising through the ranks. So what are we to make of Joan Crawford; piteous or proud? Perhaps Crawford's last words, reported to have been uttered on her deathbed, suffice: "Don't you dare ask God to help me!" Clearly, as far as Joan was concerned there was no need for help – even from the Almighty. And there was also nothing to forgive either. In life, Crawford may have done her worst, but always in service to some greater good that has often been overlooked since her passing through a calculated manipulation of, at least some of, the facts surrounding her personal life and an endless mockery of that carefully constructed image overblown by drag queen impersonators.

Yet, the legend endures. Why? Perhaps, because Crawford conquered during her lifetime; because she wrote her own ticket in blood, sweat and tears and fought to maintain an image that later took on the coloring of being affected and sad – but always true to the person we continue to think of as Joan Crawford. To discover another side of her after death was a blow to our collective conceit for having so blindly bought into the myth. But even with this alternative reality, Crawford continues to reign as few of her generation have been able to: an indomitable tower of electricity always to remain a star; partly, because there is no one, then or now, to compare to her, but mostly because she digested the rigors of stardom as her daily diet. She took her breaks and her disappointments seriously. Nothing was ever left to chance. What she wanted she had. Joan didn't ask – she demanded and she took. Yet, Crawford could be gracious too – almost to a fault. There is little to suggest that Joan would have preferred either her life or career to go the easy route. She thrived on adversity, yielding to no one and nothing; her journey from Lucille Fay Le Sueur to Billie Cassin to Joan Crawford a seamless morphing into an otherwise rough and tumble existence from cradle to grave.



(Above left): Gable and Crawford in the aptly named, **Possessed** (1931). Crawford couldn't get enough of Gable whom she once described as "pure animal magnetism. He was the king wherever he walked and the manliest man I have ever known." (Above right): with Franchot Tone in this publicity still for **Dancing Lady** (1933) a spectacular claptrap in which Joan's hoofer, Janie Barlow, is torn between an earthy romance with Gable's stage manager, Patch Gallagher or devil-may-care romp with Tone's cultured playboy, Tod Newton. Life imitating art? Tone was from the east and cultured and not at all the Hollywood type. But he proved to be Joan's type...at least for a while. Crawford and Tone began their affair on the set of this movie and married on October 11, 1935. Throughout their four year marriage Crawford continued to carry on with Gable while Tone satisfied his own urges with a string of starlets. (Right): scenes from **Dancing Lady** with Gable, Crawford, Ted Healy and Fred Astaire!



In the final analysis, Joan Crawford was a diehard perfectionist rather than a slave to her art. Whatever the part required she gave to it in spades. When asked by Louis B. Mayer, the head of MGM why she had campaigned so hard to play the part of Crystal Allen – a backstabbing bitch in **The Women** (1939), Crawford deftly replied, "I'd play Wally Beery's mother if the part were right!" And Joan was not kidding. She didn't simply want success. She sought it out. How well Joan Crawford succeeded in her career is a matter of public record – not a question for the ages to decide. As a star Crawford exudes a mystique, a power and prestige. She is woman as beacon – the sad-eyed gal who isn't going to let a little thing like the Hollywood boy's club and patriarchal nepotism stand in her way. She may not pin her motto in a place where the janitors can see it, but she can play hard ball like one of the guys. She's her own person through and through and well above par in our collective cinema firmament. She *is* Joan Crawford – star. If necessary, God bless and forgive her for it.



In the beginning...

*"You have to be self-reliant and strong to survive in this town.
...otherwise, you will be destroyed."*

- Joan Crawford





(Previous page): in very distinguished company, indeed. Crawford takes center stage in an all-star roster that included (from left) Lewis Stone (as Doctor Otternschlag), Lionel Barrymore (as a dying man, Otto Kringlein), Wallace Beery, Greta Garbo, John Barrymore and Jean Hersholt (as Senf – the porter) in Edmund Goulding's **Grand Hotel** (1932). It was the first time a major studio had ever put more than one star in a single movie, and including Crawford amongst this glittery assemblage signified the level of stature her own movie stardom had attained in a relatively short time. Many, if not all of the aforementioned had had distinguished stage careers before signing with MGM. Crawford was the only one to be expressly groomed by the studio – their creation, as it were – and she proved that in such formidable company she could hold her own. **Grand Hotel** had been a German play by Vicki Baum before it became one of MGM's glossiest confections and an Oscar-winning Best Picture besides. Crawford is cast as Flaemmchen, the saucy stenographer employed by General Director Presing (Beery) who desires more than dictation from her. Flaemmchen, however, has her eyes on the sympathetic Baron Von Geygern (John Barrymore) who is trading on his title to mask the fact that he has been reduced to a penniless stooge working for a Berlin crime syndicate intent on stealing some priceless pearls from Grushinskaya, a suicidal ballet dancer played to perfection by Garbo. Regrettably, the Baron falls madly in love with his intended victim and is unable to rob her, thus setting into motion a series of tragic circumstances that will culminate in his own murder. Flaemmchen shifts her empathy from the Baron to Kringlein, the pair making plans to go to America to seek medical treatment. **Grand Hotel** is a glorious and soapy confection, one of the undisputed highlights of the 1930s with peerless performances from all concerned. Remade in 1945 for the postwar generation as **Weekend at the Waldorf**, the plot became maudlin and watered down. This photo of the principle cast is a cheat – a composite of individual portraits superimposed together onto a still of the hotel lobby set.

(This page, left): flanked by co-stars Dorothy Sebastian and Anita Page in 1928's **Our Dancing Daughters**, widely regarded as Crawford's 'breakout' movie. Crawford plays a nightclub hooper mistaken by Johnny Mack Brown for being the bad girl while Page really is the wicked one. (Middle): Louis B. Mayer proudly escorts Crawford to the Mocambo in 1939, the year Joan renegotiated her MGM contract for lesser money but more choice roles. Mayer once glibly commented *"The money I made from Joan built the writer's building!"* Mayer admired Crawford's shrewdness and business savvy, just not enough to keep her around after her box office had begun to slip. (Right top): Crawford in 1934 basks on a blanket in her backyard with various stills taken of her by Lazlo Willinger and George Hurrell. Crawford frequently spent her time off religiously autographing photos for her fans, in many cases attaching detailed hand-written letters of thanks for their support. (Bottom right): with Lon Chaney Sr. in 1927's **The Unknown**, a dark story about a carnival knife thrower, Alonzo (Chaney) who pretends to have no hands, then has his arms amputated because he knows of Nanon's (Crawford) aversion to being touched. Believing that having no arms will make him the ideal lover for her, she instead declares her heart belongs to the strong man (Norman Kerry) whom Alonzo then tries to have torn to pieces during a routine act involving trained horses. It wasn't high art but it made a lot of money and brought Crawford to the public's attention as never before.

In 1925, MGM VP Harry Rapf acquired a ten week contract of an unknown hooper who was all the rage in Hollywood's nightclubs. Around town her Charleston had already become legendary and her closet full of loving cups and trophies proved it. That girl was Lucille Fay Le Sueur and her ability to maximize her own potential through limitless drive and ambition was cause for generating much self-publicity. MGM was eager to present Le Sueur as a 'new find' but Louis B. Mayer – then the undisputed monarch of MGM – thought 'Sueur' sounded too much like 'sewer.' Something had to be done. Still, the girl had spunk, and perhaps even 'star quality'; the latter exercised to wasted effect opposite Norma Shearer in **Lady of the Night** (1925). That same year, Le Sueur was given a choice role in **Pretty Ladies** opposite Zazu Pitts, this time as a glorified chorus girl. Although her brief appearance managed to break through to positive public response the film was a dud and Le Sueur worried that her brief tenure at MGM would come to not.

She made a friend of then popular leading man, William Haines. He confided his homosexuality to her (a kiss of death for his career in he was ever found out). But Le Sueur respected Haines and took both his friendship and his secret to heart with



Above): costar Conrad Nagel 'introduced' Crawford in her first talkie; **Hollywood Revue of 1929**. As herself, Crawford sang and danced 'Gotta Feelin' For You'. Given Crawford's penchant for dancing and her trophy case full of loving cups, viewing her routine today in this movie she seems rather flatfooted and obviously lip-synced as she breaks into her dance but forgets to mouth the words to her own prerecording. Nagel's intro to Joan, as "*the personification of youth, and beauty and joy and happiness*" seemed to mark Crawford as a flapper extraordinaire at a time when the whole 'go to hell' era of the 1920s had come crashing down. But Crawford's extraordinary gift for mutation, adopting a chameleon's skin over and over again throughout her career would serve her very well.

sincere loyalty. After hours, Le Sueur made a name for herself inside the local hot spots around town – her penchant for booze, boys and badinage cause for slight consternation inside the studio's publicity department. Eventually, Le Sueur latched on to a young man from a wealthy family. Although the boy was willing, the family was not. They quickly judged Lucille as 'unsuitable' and put a stop to the relationship. It was merely the first snub in a long line of such romantic indignations yet to follow.

Born into poverty on March 23, 1906, Lucille Fay Le Sueur developed an innate mistrust of men almost from birth. Her father, Thomas did not stick around to see his daughter's first birthday. However, baby Lucille also despised her mother, by all accounts an aspiring Vaudevillian who moved through three fleeting romances of her own during Lucille's formative years and took in wash in between these failed relationships to keep the family clothed, housed and fed. Daddy #2 was a theater manager, Billie Cassin from whom Le Sueur would borrow his name to launch her own career as a hooper at Roseland Dance Club on Broadway.

Eventually, Le Sueur's mother moved the family to Los Angeles and Le Sueur – with nothing more than a fourth grade education – made her way through studio auditions as a dancer. Groomed at MGM in the deportment and style of a lady, Le Sueur took to her accoutrements easily enough and even embraced Louis B. Mayer's idea of a name change. The studio ran a contest. Joan Arden was the first name chosen. Unfortunately, it belonged to another actress who refused to give it up. Hence, the runner up - Joan Crawford - became the moniker by which young Lucille would forever more be known. She didn't particularly care for it at first – believing that Crawford sounded like Crawfish.

Yet, as Joan Crawford she appeared in MGM's **Sally, Irene and Mary** (1925) – an early hit that proved to be her first big break. Oddly enough, this success did not lead to more of the same until one year later when Crawford was next seen to good effect in **The Taxi Driver** (1927). She outshone her costars by a mile in this rather depressing programmer and was cited by Variety as a '*fresh new face.*' That same year, Crawford had two of her best show pieces; the first, as a conniving circus performer opposite Lon Chaney in **The Unknown** (1927); the second as a twenty-cent tart in **Twelve Miles Out** (1927). Even at this early stage in her career Crawford had a firm understanding of one essential in show biz – that it was more prudent and smart to



(Above): today we are all too familiar with seeing celebrities looking ordinary and even haggard in candid photos taken by the paparazzi that the 'glamour' of that 'glamorous lifestyle' once perceived as old Hollywood seems to be lacking. But it is important to remember that stardom in the 'good ol' days' was a full-time job. Studio-sanctioned PR presented stars as ethereal creatures. They never had a hair out of place or a pimple on their skin. Hence, photos of stars 'at home' were just as staged, properly lit and posed as publicity stills shot to market a new movie. This illusion of perfection was to crumble after the debut of Confidential magazine in the mid-1950s – the first tabloid publication that sought to chip away at the fakery. Crawford absolutely adored this sort of artificiality, believing that it gave the public not only what they wanted but what was needed to perpetuate the mythology of Hollywood itself. "We were never relaxed," Christina Crawford has commented on those times, "Even my birthday parties were staged. God help me if I got my party dress dirty." (Right): Crawford and her adopted children give thanks before breaking bread at a local restaurant. (Middle): Crawford poses with Christina and 'the second' Christopher in 1944 on the front lawn of the family's home. Crawford had adopted another child whom she named Christopher back in 1941. The birth mother fought to regain custody of the boy – and did so one year later - but then sold him to another couple for \$250,000. Joan was devastated upon hearing the news. (Bottom): with adopted daughters Cynthia and Cathy, Crawford in 1970. Joan adopted the girls after their biological mother died in 1947. Cynthia died in 2007, but Cathy continues to hold to the opinion that the Joan Crawford depicted in Christina's bio is not the woman she knew. Consequently, the siblings have had no contact with each other.



cultivate a roster of friends behind the camera. The grips, the prop masters, costume, hair and make-up assistants, lighting crew; these were the people responsible for making a star shine at her best. They deserved special consideration and Crawford gave it to them.

In later years, after her stardom had set in, Crawford maintained her diligence with behind-the-scenes personnel; handing out personalized and often expensive gifts to each and every one of her 'friends' at Christmas. It was good PR – not the kind readily exploited as philanthropy inside the gossip sheets, but serving a purpose nonetheless. Ironically, Crawford was less congenial toward the higher ups at MGM; L.B. Mayer and VP in Charge of Production Irving Thalberg – the two men who could either make or break her fledgling career. Worse, Crawford made no bones about her general dislike of actress, Norma Shearer who was married to Thalberg. "How can I get a decent part around here," she would openly tell anyone who would listen, "Norma sleeps with the boss!" As penitence for her chutzpah Thalberg was quick to 'reward' Crawford by placing her in a B-western **The Law of the Range** (1928) – a film that neither damaged nor advanced her career. Crawford took the hint and her lumps in private. Her opinion of Norma would not change. But her determination to beat her rival in the business had just received a shot in the arm.

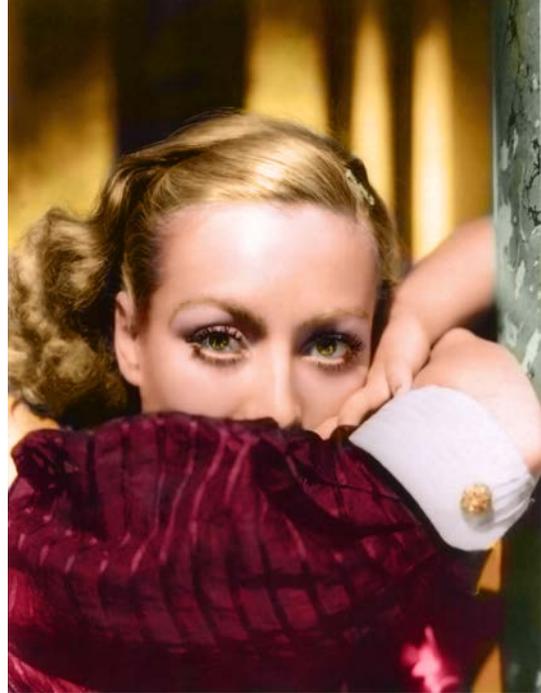




**STAR
RISING**

***"I think that the most important thing you can have - next to talent -
is, of course, a good hairdresser!"***

- Joan Crawford



In retrospect, MGM was rather careless about Joan Crawford's early foray in the movies. They toyed with their 'new find' as they tended to with a lot in those days, liberally experimenting until something either clicked with the audience or, in the worst case scenario, didn't and the contract player was then relegated to B-movies or discarded all together. In Joan's case, the studio next cast her in **Our Dancing Daughters** (1928) – the tale of a nightclub-loving hooper who makes good and wins the man in the final reel. It was typecasting in the extreme and it worked beautifully. Left to her own devices, Crawford emerged as her own distinct personality, prompting imminent writer, F. Scott Fitzgerald to comment that *“Joan Crawford is doubtless the best example of the flapper. The girl you see in smart nightclubs, down to the apex of sophistication, toying iced glasses with a remote, faintly bitter expression, dancing deliciously, laughing a great deal with wide hurt eyes; young things with a talent for living.”*

MGM elevated Crawford's salary to \$500.00 a week and helped her buy her first home on Brentwood Avenue. She was suddenly their hottest commodity and the studio wasted no time in exploiting her popularity in a series of largely forgettable roles that the public ate up. Still, as popular as Joan was, her social standing within Hollywood's hoi poloi continued to lag. The year before, Crawford met Douglas Fairbanks Jr. through an impromptu letter of congratulations she had written him following his debut on Broadway in **'Young Woodley'**. A romance began in earnest, but the affair had all the ear-markings of another short-lived romp when Fairbanks Sr. and his wife, Mary Pickford openly frowned on Joan appearing at their seaside home - Pickfair. Although Fairbanks Sr. and Pickford considered themselves Hollywood royalty they were, in fact, *neuvo riche* at best, and by 1929 both their stars had already begun to cool. Thus, there were very few degrees of separation between them and Crawford who was perhaps a very real, very cruel reminder of where they had both come from. Nevertheless, Douglas Jr. continued to court Joan in private, the whirlwind culminating in an elopement in June of 1929 – just one month after Crawford's iconic stature in the movies had been cemented – literally – along with her hand and footprints in the forecourt of Grauman's Chinese Theater.

The press shamelessly labeled their union *'the marriage of the century'* and lavished an absurd amount of coverage on the couple's every move. Although Fairbanks Jr. tended to shy away from this sort of publicity, Crawford devoured every headline and interview. For her, the endless barrage of photo ops meant that she had at last arrived. At MGM, Crawford was cast opposite the studio's A-list male superstar, Clark Gable for the first time in **Dance Fools, Dance** (1931). Gable, who was married to the much older Josephine Dillon at the time, began to take his late night suppers with Crawford instead – an affair that continued for several years. That same year Crawford starred with Gable in two more solid offerings; **Laughing Sinners** – in which she was a repentant harlot saved by Gable's Salvation Army worker – and **Possessed** – a scintillating crime/melodrama.



(Above): scenes from a disaster. **Ice Follies of 1939** was meant to be a lavish spectacle costarring Crawford with James Stewart and Lew Ayres. Regrettably, the final product was little more than a woefully conceived lover's triangle with Crawford miscast as a shrinking violet who inadvertently breaks up a lucrative ice-skating partnership when she falls madly in love with one of the skaters. The finale was an elaborate ice follies shot in Technicolor. MGM had experimented with the expensive 3-strip color process on another Crawford movie that same year – **The Women** – but only to showcase Adrian's new designs in a spectacular fashion show sequence that featured none of the principals. In **Ice Follies** audiences saw what Joan would look like in color and the sight was gorgeous indeed, cast in a recreation of Cinderella's ball and shimmering in blue chiffon and a faux-diamond tiara. Unfortunately, nothing could salvage the movie from becoming a dud; its failure blamed on Crawford's slipping popularity when in reality it was just a poorly scripted trifle the studio had hoped to salvage by casting some big names to mask the otherwise shoddy mess of a story.

(Right): Crawford looking rather sinister in this publicity photo taken for **The Women** with co-star Norma Shearer. Crawford's jealousy of Norma was predicated more on the fact that she received A-list treatment at the studio because of her marriage to VP Irving Thalberg. When Thalberg died in 1936 Crawford assumed the playing field would be leveled at MGM. It didn't happen. Instead, Mayer began to lose interest in both their careers. Shearer retired gracefully in 1942. Crawford left MGM kicking and screaming. (Bottom): George Cukor gathers his stars for a powwow before shooting the climax to **The Women**, Mary Boland (in foreground) and Crawford, standing directly behind her, seeming particularly pleased with his direction.



Throughout these early movies MGM had experimented with developing 'a look' for Crawford. Nothing modest or matronly would do. But nothing seemed to stick until in 1932, Crawford officially came into her own, somehow all of a sudden, and with physical trademarks that would endure throughout the rest of her career – the exaggerated eyebrows, larger than large lips and accentuated eyes. She also developed a symbiotic working relationship with MGM's leading couturier, Gilbert Adrian (known simply as Adrian). Together, Adrian and Crawford set movie fashion and style trends around the world with her next film – **Letty Lynton** (1932) and, in that same year, in **Grand Hotel**. In the latter film, Crawford was billed in the esteemed company of two Barrymores (John and Lionel), Lewis Stone, Jean Hersholt and the MGM's resident enigma – Garbo. Although Crawford was honored by this inclusion in MGM's top tier of talent her singular regret was that she and Garbo had no scenes together. Nevertheless, **Grand Hotel** was MGM's all-star Academy Award-winning masterpiece of the year and Crawford's casting in it signaled the beginning of a meteoric rise as one of the studio's most bankable stars.



Good Years

**"I never learned to spell 'regret'."
- Joan Crawford**



After **Grand Hotel**, Joan Crawford might have climbed to even greater heights. Instead she campaigned to be loaned out to United Artists for **Rain** (1932) – a seething melodrama in which she played the fiery and embittered prostitute Sadie Thompson. Mayer had strenuously advised against it, saying “*You’re a trademark now. Don’t play with that!*” But Crawford refused to surrender the part. She bargained and Mayer eventually gave in. But just as he had predicted Crawford’s performance, though exceptional in all its sustained bitterness, was not the role her fans wanted to see her in and the film tanked at the box office. At approximately this same time Crawford became the subject of a blackmail attempt by a pair of hustlers who threatened to expose a porn movie Crawford had supposedly made back in 1925. Mayer and Thalberg were alerted and a private screening was arranged. Reportedly, the girl in the movie was so far off that Mayer told the blackmailers, “*If that’s Joan Crawford, I’m Greta Garbo,*” before storming out. Mayer countered their threat of leaking the movie to the press with one of his own – a liable lawsuit that effectively scared off the blackmailers and put an end to the rumor once and for all.

Crawford returned to MGM vowing never again to veer so far from the built-in expectations of her fans. Her first duty was to appear as a sort of goodwill ambassador for a publicity junket meant to showcase up and coming talent.



(Above left): the last two movies Clark Gable and Crawford made together are probably two they'd rather forget: 1936's **Love on the Run** and 1940s **Strange Cargo**. By 1936 Gable had drawn a line in the sand where their on again/off again affair was concerned. Crawford accepted that and the shoot went pleasantly enough. But the sexual attraction they had once shared off camera seemed to deprive them of any on-screen chemistry now. **Love On The Run** is a rather obtuse comedy about a runaway bride and a cub reporter who marry and then find themselves embroiled in some high profile espionage in Europe while **Strange Cargo** is a fairly bizarre tale of an unlikely romance between a cabaret singer and a prison escapee, both besought in their desire to flee from their troubled lives by a rather spooky Christ-figure played by Ian Hunter.

It would be a fortuitous assignment. The specifics surrounding the now legendary lifelong rivalry between Joan Crawford and Bette Davis perhaps had its beginnings here. Crawford was already a star; Davis, a newcomer to the Warner back lot. Evidently, Crawford's arrival at the event occurred at precisely the moment Davis was addressing members of the press; Crawford's built-up popularity effectively upstaging the ingénue. Whether Crawford intended it this way or even timed her entrance to coincide with Davis' speech is quite another matter. But it is highly unlikely. Davis had no cache in Hollywood ergo she could hardly be considered a threat. And Crawford, at least in her youth, was not nearly as malicious as Davis would soon prove to be.

Certainly, in later years Crawford and Davis were bitter enemies. However, at this point in their respective careers Davis had not been able to break through the invisible ceiling into widespread popularity while Crawford was well into her second decade of fame. Viewed in this light it seems rather unlikely that Crawford would have viewed Davis as competition. Career wise, Crawford was hotter than ever. MGM spent lavishly on her next movie, the elephantine (and somewhat garish) response to Busby Berkeley's film musicals at Warner Brothers – **Dancing Lady** (1933); costarring Clark Gable again. The film also featured Franchot Tone – a cultured New Englander who would soon be monopolizing a lot more of Crawford's time. Meanwhile at home, the rift between Crawford and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. had reached a critical breaking point. While Crawford had relished playing the part of Hollywood hostess to a series of glittering private parties, Fairbanks had felt his own career slip into the shadows. Their numerous affairs aside, Crawford's marriage to Fairbanks ended in May 1933 and shortly thereafter she began a very public liaison with Tone.

Crawford's next picture also starred Gable – **Chained** (1934). By now, the on again/off again affair with Gable had mildly cooled, in part due to Joan's romantic dalliances with Tone which had gained considerable steam in the press. But while filming **Chained** Crawford received an unexpected visitor to the set: her biological father. It was a bittersweet reunion, made all the more tragic by Crawford's ongoing love/hate relationship with her mother and brother, Hal. Crawford would later write of her father with a strange, sad affection. *"Both of us were trying to make a relationship and never quite succeeded. On the last day in town, I looked across the soundstage and saw his eyes filled with tears. He waved goodbye and blew me a kiss...and I never saw him again."*



(Above): Director Frank Borzage (left) observes as the 'cute meet' plays out between factory worker Jessie Cassidy (Crawford) and steamship magnate John L. Hennessey (Spencer Tracy) in **Mannequin** (1937). It's all too easy to vilify L.B. Mayer for dropping Joan's contract. In point of fact, Mayer tried everything to resurrect Crawford's popularity, pushing her into movies with the studio's most high profile leading men. Believing that Crawford had veered too far from her working class 'shop girl makes good' persona Mayer thought **Mannequin** – a throwback to that formula – might do the trick. It didn't. Jessie's social-climber, who ditches her boyfriend Eddie Miller (Alan Curtis) to grasp at the brass ring of life, seemed an awkward fit at best. There was no spark or energy to the romance and Crawford did not get on with Tracy behind the scenes. When **Mannequin** ended Crawford was glad to be rid of her costar and perhaps vice versa. The movie came and went without so much as making a ripple at the box office – much less a splash. But the biggest insult came later that year when *Variety* – the industry's Bible – published an article labeling Joan – along with several other prominent actresses – as 'box office poison'. The moniker stuck and Mayer began to try to figure out ways of easing Crawford out of her studio contract. This isn't as insidious as it sounds. Mayer had a business to run and Crawford was no longer bankable.

In retrospect, Crawford's relationship with men in general had always been very complex. Arguably, she craved their affections and attention, yet quickly grew tired of them once the initial flourish of excitement had ended; somehow unable to reconcile her private life within her own career. In truth, Crawford's career had always been paramount and would remain so until her death. In 1935, Crawford made **I Live My Life** – a minor melodrama in which she emerged as a truly independent woman of the world. In reality, she was preparing for another marriage – to Franchot Tone on October 11, 1935 – despite the fact that she had recently told a fan magazine that *"...if anyone catches me marrying again, I hope they give me a good sock in the mouth!"*

Crawford's marriage to Franchot Tone could not have been more different from her first to Fairbanks Jr. The newlyweds spent quiet secluded evenings at home. Tone introduced Crawford to high culture; art and literature and

even encouraged her to expand her range and do radio-plays of imminent stage classics by Ibsen and Shaw. Ironically, with this newly acquired sophistication a sudden downturn in Crawford's box office popularity occurred. MGM cast her with Gable once again in **Love on the Run** (1935) a romantic comedy in which their usual sexual chemistry was strangely absent. For **The Bride Wore Red** (1937) – costarring Tone - Crawford adopted an entirely new look that failed to gel with her fans. In that film, Crawford and Tone played faithful married lovers though in reality theirs was an open marriage. Tone's frequent dalliances with starlets (at one point he was accepting calls on Crawford's dressing room wire while she was being made up in between takes), eventually broke both Crawford's spirit and the marriage. Each began to rapidly deteriorate.

On the set of her next film, **Mannequin** (1937) Crawford indulged in her own brief affair with costar Spencer Tracy. Unfortunately, **Mannequin** was also not well received by the public and L.B. Mayer began to reassess his commitment to Crawford's stardom. Mayer offered her a measly one year extension on her soon-to-expire contract. Instead, Crawford shrewdly assessed the writing on the wall and bargained for a five year renewal at a considerable cut to her per picture salary; informing Mayer that she no longer wished to play "goddamn shop girls." In hot pursuit of rejuvenating her career, Crawford sought out the part of Crystal Allen, a malignant mantrap in George Cukor's all-star **The Women** (1939). The film co-starred old rival, Norma Shearer. So long as Shearer's husband, Irving Thalberg had managed her career, Crawford was begrudgingly contented with the roles Norma cast aside. Now, with Thalberg prematurely dead and buried the two old rivals would be neck and neck in the same movie. Undoubtedly, Cukor feared that his project would prove the catalyst to spark an all-out catfight.

Although filming of **The Women** went relatively smoothly, there were a couple of tense instances that bear mentioning; the first involved Crawford's commitment to feeding her costar lines while the camera filmed Shearer in close-up. It is a customary practice that when the camera is on one actor, the other playing in the scene will stand behind the camera to provide a counterpoint that the star being filmed can respond to. Instead, Crawford chose to sit off to the side and ignore Shearer entirely while she gave her performance, knitting to distract Norma with the clickity-clack of her needle work. In response, when it came time for Crawford's close-ups, Shearer all but refused to come out of her dressing room, leaving Crawford with a blank space to react to.





(Previous page): **A Woman's Face** (1941) was Crawford's last attempt to break out of the 'Crawford mold'. Anna Held (Crawford) is an embittered recluse, her face horribly disfigured. She meets German aristocrat, Torsten Barring (Conrad Veidt) at her out-of-the-way beer garden in the Black Forest. He discovers her blackmailing operation and suggests the two conspire to kidnap and possibly even murder Lars-Erik Banning (Richard Nichols); the son of Consul Magnus (Albert Bessermann) in order to gain access to the heir's fortune. Fearful of being exposed for her other spurious dealings Anna agrees to become Lars' nanny. But earlier in the story, Anna is befriended by a kindly surgeon, Dr. Gustav Segert (Melvyn Douglas) whose experimental surgery is successful at restoring Anna's beauty, though, he suggests, can never cure what truly plagues her inside. **A Woman's Face** is a bizarre tale told mostly in flashback at Anna's trial, superbly staged by George Cukor and expertly played by Crawford and particularly Veidt who is both charming, yet menacing. Regrettably, the audience did not take to the story and the movie bombed at the box office. Today, it is widely regarded as one of Crawford's finest – and rightly so.

(Above left): Crawford's last few films for MGM were not her best. **Reunion in France** (1942) was an incongruous tale of a downed RAF pilot (John Wayne) who is hidden from the Nazis in war-torn Paris by elegant clothes horse, Michele de la Becque (Crawford) whose boyfriend, Robert Cortot (Philip Dorn) is actually helping fund and supply the German military machine with armaments. Crawford takes a job as a Paris model in an improbably fashionable couturier, living lavishly at a time when no one in occupied France could even hope to put food on the table, let alone wallow in such luxuries. **When Ladies Meet** (1941) casts Crawford as a thoughtless authoress, Mary Howard, who begins an affair with her married publisher, believing his lies that the wife (Greer Garson) is a terrible person without ever having met her. Thankfully, Crawford's own boyfriend (Robert Taylor) decides to intervene, introducing the wife to the mistress before either knows who the other actually is. A friendship ensues and Mary realizes what a little fool she's been. Playing the 'other woman' was not good for one's career, however, and Crawford could see the writing on the wall. Although she deeply resented Mayer for giving up on her career, Crawford asked to be released from her MGM contract. She would disprove Mayer's snap rush to judgment over at Warner Bros. But it would be three long years of unemployment before this coup was fulfilled.

In the second instance, Cukor was soon to discover that neither Crawford nor Shearer wished to be the first to arrive on set for publicity photos. Instead, the ladies sat in their respective limos, circling the parking lot until Cukor went out to fetch them. Once on set however, both actresses behaved as professionals and the production wrapped on time and under budget. When **The Women** was released, it proved to be a colossal smash. Awash in her newfound success, Crawford became more determined than ever to attain greater control over her personal life. For almost a year she had become a creature of habit, bewitched by gardenias and obsessed with household cleanliness. But by now, Crawford wanted something else entirely, something more from life. She wanted a child.

Unable to conceive Crawford used a Las Vegas baby broker to adopt Christina (originally named Joan Jr.) after social services rejected her legitimate application. Then, as now, the arrival of a baby to a star was news in Hollywood. Hence, when gossip columnist Louella Parsons came to cover the story and suggested to Crawford that she provide her with a scoop on Franchot Tone's latest spate of extramarital affairs, Crawford instead publicly announced that she was divorcing Tone – a rumor in print made concrete on April 11th of that same year when Joan filed for divorce.

The next few films at MGM continued Crawford's brief resurrection; **Strange Cargo** (1940) with Gable, and **Susan and God** (1940) a turgid comedy about religious fervor depriving a woman of familial happiness. Cukor and Crawford reunited for **A Woman's Face** (1941) – in retrospect, one of the best movies in both their careers. Unfortunately, Crawford's performance as an emotionally tainted/physically scarred creature of self-destruction did not bode well with the public's fascination and L.B. Mayer, who had already begun to focus his energies on the next generation of stars, quietly allowed



(Above left): Crawford schmoozes with Gilbert Adrian, third husband, Phillip Terry at her side at the Brown Derby in 1943, and (right), in its lobby with crooner Tony Martin. After leaving MGM, Crawford fell into her third marriage partly out of desperation. Terry was a congenial sort, but unproductive as an actor and Crawford picked up the slack and the tab for their elegant lifestyle. Meanwhile, Jack Warner had offered Crawford a studio contract as a way to keep his own grand diva, Bette Davis in line. Crawford accepted the contract, but refused just about every role Jack threw her way, conscious of the fact that the future of her entire career rested on achieving early success. She reluctantly agreed to play herself in a cameo – an actress entertaining the troops at the **Hollywood Canteen** (1944, right) before latching onto **Mildred Pierce** (1945) – arguably the role she was born to play. James M. Cain’s novel deals with an incestuous mother/daughter relationship that the movie, of course, could not explain. Instead, the story was heavily rewritten to Crawford’s strengths – a variation on the classic woman’s weepy with a hint of film noir thrown in for good measure. It was an intoxicating concoction and under Michael Curtiz’s brilliant direction, it brought Crawford the much deserved Best Actress Academy Award.



Crawford’s screen image to steadily slip. **When Ladies Meet** (1931) cast Crawford opposite Greer Garson. The film did box office but it was rather obvious that the focus of the story had shifted to Garson’s ascending stardom. Crawford played to her strengths, but she was not singled out for her performance in reviews.

By 1942’s **Reunion in France** – an absurd wartime melodrama – Crawford realized she had reached the end of the line at MGM. She asked L.B. Mayer to buy out her contract, hoping against hope that they might renegotiate the terms. To her great dismay, Mayer agreed to the buyout instead. An eighteen year association ended quietly, with no one bidding Crawford farewell on her last day at the studio. That same year, Crawford indulged in one of her more superfluous whims – a brief and disastrous marriage to B-actor, Phillip Terry (right) and the adoption of a second child. During the next three years, Crawford would play war bride to Terry’s enlisted G.I. With no film work on the horizon, Crawford closed up her fashionable Brentwood home, save a couple of rooms, and let virtually all of her staff go. In the evenings to divert her frustrations at home, Crawford attended The Hollywood Canteen – a ‘meet and greet’ venue for enlisted men that had been established by the Hollywood film community in support of the war effort.





***"I love playing bitches. There's a lot of bitch in every woman...
a lot in every man too!"***
- Joan Crawford

OLD WOUNDS & NEW BEGINNINGS

Had it not been for the maverick showmanship of rival studio head, Jack L. Warner, it is doubtful that Joan Crawford's postwar film career would have been successful or perhaps even resurrected. However, Crawford's dismissal from MGM had come at a particularly fortuitous crux in the volatile relationship between Warner and his own diva, Bette Davis. Always at odds with his most famous female star, Warner saw Crawford as a counterbalance to Davis' – a way of keeping Davis' ever-increasing demands at bay and in check. If Davis refused to do a project, Warner reasoned that he could always threaten her with the prospect of casting Crawford in her stead.

Unfortunately for Jack Warner, he underestimated Crawford's own resilience in refusing projects until she was absolutely satisfied with the material being offered. Although the ink of Joan's contract had dried in 1942, she would not appear in a Warner Bros. movie until nearly three years later. Crawford's personal satisfaction eventually settled on **Mildred Pierce** (1945) a film noir based on James M. Cain's scathing novel of family incest and marital deceptions. Originally, the project had been offered to Davis, and then Rosalind Russell. Both turned it down. Told of Crawford's interest in the property, director Michael Curtiz was less than enthusiastic until she agreed to do a screen test. The test won over Curtiz almost immediately and the resulting film became both a critical and financial success, winning Crawford her one and only Best Actress Academy Award.

For the next few years, Crawford continued to dominate with a string of hits – an achievement not lost on Bette Davis, whose own box office and backstage clout continued to slip in proportion to Crawford's success. Crawford's next two movies **Humoresque** (1946) with John Garfield and **Possessed** (1947), a psychological melodrama costarring Van Heflin, elevated both her stature and her popularity. She was suddenly *the* grand dame at Warner's; a note of distinction once exclusively



"Get out, Veda. Get your things out of this house right now before I throw them into the street and you with them. Get out before I kill you!"

- Joan Crawford



(Above): Crawford's second golden period was at Warner Bros., the studio whose ripped from the headlines gritty crime/dramas seemed an incongruous match for Crawford's imperious movie queen. And yet, beginning with **Mildred Pierce** (1945), Crawford's star ascended through the ranks with ease and assuredness as few except Crawford herself might have predicted. She was, of course, older now and able to apply the hard knocks of real living to her characters – most of them suffering females who struggled with a ruthless determination to maintain their toehold in a male-dominated social structure, often by destroying themselves; always with the willful destruction of others. (Top left): admiring her Best Actress Oscar from the comfort of her own bed. The official story is that Crawford had been stricken with a virulent bout of the flu and was unable to attend the annual ceremony. Christina Crawford tells a different story; that Joan - racked with anxiety and frantic excitement over the possibility that she might not win, buried her head under her pillows while the rest of the family listened to the telecast via radio in another room and delivered minute by minute reports as to what was happening. When Joan's name was announced as the winner reporters descended upon Crawford's home for the presentation of the award made by director Michael Curtiz. (Top right): as Louise Howell, the nurse increasingly struggling to decipher reality from her growing schizophrenia in **Possessed** (1947).

The title had been used before for another Crawford picture. But Curtis Bernhardt's movie is neither an update, nor a remake of the 1931 classic starring Crawford and Gable. In this version, Crawford plays a retired nurse who marries a wealthy widower (Raymond Massey) after his wife commits suicide, but who continues to harbor feelings for David (Van Heflin); a disreputable playboy who is chasing after her husband's much younger daughter, Carol (Geraldine Brooks). Eventually, Crawford puts an end to their affair by pumping several bullets in her former lover before going completely mad. (Bottom left): with co-stars Steve Cochran, Richard Egan and David Brian in Vincent Sherman's **The Damned Don't Cry** (1950), the sordid tale of a woman masquerading as an elegant socialite to conceal her real identity from the mob. (Bottom right): with co-star Zachary Scott in Michael Curtiz's **Flamingo Road** (1949).

Crawford was a little long in the tooth for the part of Lane Bellamy, an ex-carnie who is taken under the deputy sheriff's wing only to be threatened with incarceration or worse by the unscrupulous political puppet master, Sheriff Titus Semple (Sidney Greenstreet). Lane eventually lands on her feet by marrying mobbed-up politico, Dan Reynolds (David Brian) only to be accused of a murder she did not commit. Crawford's tenure at the studio yielded to some very fine performances in some very hard-hitting melodramas that saw her play everything from a doomed cougar to an imploding crazy woman. By the mid-1950s the renaissance was over; Crawford slowly slipping into obscurity with dull pictures like **Goodbye My Fancy** (1951) and **This Woman is Dangerous** (1952). But Crawford still had more than a few surprises left for her fans to relish.



(This page): one of Crawford's finest performances was as Helen Wright in Jean Negulesco's **Humoresque** (1946); a superior melodrama blending the noir style with the world of classical music and co-starring John Garfield as self-obsessed violist, Paul Boray, who becomes romantically entangled with Crawford's notorious cougar. Helen is a near-sighted drunk whose casual affairs with many men are tolerated by her sad-eyed husband, Victor (Paul Cavanaugh). Paul's friend, Sid Jeffers (Oscar Levant) forewarns Paul that his tryst with Helen can only end in tears. But Paul's too into his music and himself to care. When Victor grants Helen her freedom she hurries to share the good news with Paul only to realize he is more interested in his career than in her. Disillusioned, Helen returns to the beach house alone, drinking herself into a state before walking off into the sea to drown. **Humoresque** is a boldly executing, thoroughly riveting drama of obsession and desire. Crawford was never better than this.

occupied by Davis. Crawford's next two films were almost as good. In **Flamingo Road** (1949) she plays a sideshow performer who refuses to be chased out of town by co-star Sidney Greenstreet's corrupt city official, and in **The Damned Don't Cry** (1950), Crawford ran the gamut of emotion and situations to deliver a high caliber performance as a sales girl masquerading as a socialite. In between Crawford even found time to spoof her own image with a cameo in **It's A Great Feeling** (1949) – slapping costars Jack Carson and Dennis Morgan across the cheek. When asked why she had struck them, Crawford shrugs her shoulders and coyly replies, *"I do that in all my pictures!"*

During **Flamingo Road**, Crawford had begun a behind-the-scenes affair with married director Vincent Sherman. It was fleeting at best and ended bitterly when Sherman refused to divorce his wife. Crawford could perhaps forgive the snub. But she would never let Sherman forget it. By the time the two collaborated on **The Damned Don't Cry**, director and star were at odds. At one point during the shoot, Crawford was admonishing her son Christopher for a minor indiscretion. When Sherman quietly suggested that perhaps there was another time and place for such hysterics, Crawford redirected her anger at Sherman, attempting to trip him as he exited her trailer. In retaliation Sherman turned around and severely struck his star in the face.

After the release of **The Damned Don't Cry** Warner Bros. chose to loan Crawford out to Columbia Pictures for **Harriet Craig** (1950) a rather semi-autobiographical tale about a woman who is obsessed with maintaining a perfect home. Upon completion, Crawford took an overdose of sleeping pills – perhaps accidentally - and had to be rushed to hospital to have her stomach pumped. Next, Warner acquired the Broadway hit **Goodbye My Fancy** (1951) a





(Above): two of Crawford's less successful efforts at WB: (left) **Goodbye My Fancy** (1951) and (right) **This Woman is Dangerous** (1952). In the first, Crawford played Agatha Reed, a U.S. senator once expelled from university for an alleged affair with her professor, Dr. James Merrill (played by Robert Young), who is now the school's president. Told she is to receive an honorary degree, Aggie returns to her alma mater; rekindling the embers from that long-ago romance, but now challenged by a new love in her life. **Goodbye My Fancy** was based on a popular stage play and ought to have been a hit for Warners. It was not, despite Crawford receiving some excellent reviews. Concerned that Crawford's popularity might be on the wane, Warner's rushed into production **This Woman is Dangerous**, a sloppy rehash that brought Crawford back to her old gangland haunts, but this time cast her as the unscrupulous Beth Austin. Suffering from a stigmatism that will soon leave her blind, Austin agrees to go into hiding and submit to a controversial operation. The surgery is a success, but Beth falls in love with her doctor, Ben Halleck (Denis Morgan) and has a change of heart, something her former gangland lover, Matt Jackson (David Brian) will not permit.



(Right): about to be hanged by Emma Small (Mercedes McCambridge) and a posse of men led by ineffectual sheriff, John McIvers (Ward Bond) in Nicholas Ray's bizarre western melodrama, **Johnny Guitar** (1954). Crawford played Vienna, a saloon keeper whose romantic ties with the Dancin' Kid (Scott Brady) and his notorious mob land her in hot water with the law. Vienna falls for travelling minstrel, Johnny 'Guitar' Logan (Sterling Hayden) who helps save her from certain death but not from a showdown with Emma at a remote cabin in the hills. The feud between McCambridge and Crawford on the set of this film is legendary. Both were alcoholics at the time and their mutual contempt seemed to exponentially overflow in direct proportion to the quantity of booze each had consumed the night before. When one of McCambridge's scenes elicited spontaneous applause from the crew, director Ray took notice that Crawford could barely contain her rage. When the movie had its debut a critic for *Variety* described it as '*Beauty and the Beast*' with Sterling Hayden as 'beauty'. It was not a success, but today **Johnny Guitar** has its much-deserved cult following. It is a great – if unusual - western.



bittersweet melodrama of tainted love set in the idyllic conclave of academia. The movie's lackluster performance convinced Jack Warner that Crawford's appeal had at last begun to slip. 1952's **This Woman is Dangerous** was a B-movie that effectively terminated Crawford's association with the studio. But Crawford's first project as a freelancer, **Sudden Fear** (1952) became a substantial hit for RKO just when one was desperately needed; proving once more that with the right material Crawford could still ring registers around the country.



Evidently, MGM agreed. Production chief Dore Schary – who had ousted Mayer from his seat of power in 1950 - wooed Crawford into a comeback. The studio that had quietly kicked her out now laid red carpet at her feet from its front gate to her dressing room door for **Torch Song** (1953) – a musical so absurd and inane that today one wonders why Crawford accepted the assignment in the first place. **Torch Song** is almost a parody, its music borrowed – nee, excised from discarded snippets belonging to other MGM musicals; Crawford's vocals dubbed by Betty



(Above left): Crawford strikes an imperious pose befitting her performance in Randall McDougall's **Queen Bee** (1955); the story of Eva Phillips; a self-obsessed woman living on a southern plantation with her emasculated husband, Avery (Barry Sullivan) and ex-lover, Jud Prentiss (John Ireland). Determined to possess or destroy anything she touches, Eva unleashes tyranny on her unsuspecting cousin, Jennifer Stewart (Lucy Marlow) and sister-in-law, Carol Lee (Betsy Palmer) who has become engaged to Jud without knowing anything about his past. The 'crazy lady' threshold merely glimpsed in **Possessed** (1949) was given its full flourish herein, Crawford devouring the scenery and everyone standing in front of it.

(Middle): being helped with her cloak by Lester Blaine (Jack Palance) in **Sudden Fear** (1952). A minor programmer released through RKO, **Sudden Fear** became a sizable hit, not the least owed to Crawford's ability to emote genuine anxiety as she learns her husband is conspiring with a new love to bump her off. (Right): Snuggling up to Chuck Walters on the set of **Torch Song** (1953). Earmarked as Crawford's comeback, **Torch Song** was little more than a maudlin hand-me-down about a Broadway diva in love with a blind pianist (Michael Wilding). The openly gay Walters, who also directed the movie was requested by Crawford who made feeble, often embarrassing, attempts to seduce him throughout the arduous shoot. Everyone was glad to be done with it. **Torch Song** was a turkey.

Wand. The movie also contains a grotesque blackface routine performed to a recording Wand made for Cyd Charisse. Two-Faced Woman was originally filmed by Charisse for **The Band Wagon** (1953), then later excised and restaged with Crawford in heavy brown make-up and curly wig surrounded by a troop of faux Latin Lotharios. The plot of **Torch Song** is pure pulp, concerns a Broadway diva in love with a blind pianist played with tepid reserve by Michael Wilding. When the movie was completed it proved an unmitigated disaster and Crawford's 'comeback' at MGM ended as quickly as it had begun.

Esther Williams has told some interesting tales about what occurred before, during and after the cameras stopped rolling. Crawford had come to Williams' dressing room to beg for the services of director Charles Walters who was finishing up **Easy To Love** (1953) for Williams; then shooting on another part of the MGM back lot. As there were only a handful of scenes left to shoot Esther willingly agreed to the loan out, at which time Crawford made it known that she intended to pursue Walters romantically. "But Joan, he's gay," Williams reported told Crawford. "Oh, hell what does it matter?" Crawford is rumored to have replied with a sly wink.

Another story told by Williams has Joan standing alone on a soundstage after cast and crew had gone home for the day, screaming, "Why have you left me? What have I done?" presumably to the imaginary audience that had stopped going to see her pictures. But perhaps the funniest tale of the lot involved the first day Joan arrived to begin shooting **Torch Song**. Attended to by friends with some rather lavishly appointed gifts from sycophantic well-wishers, Esther decided to play a joke on Crawford by offering her a half-empty bottle of vodka wrapped in toilet paper. "My gag gift was a chilling reminder that (Joan's) bubble wasn't real and she never forgave me for it. She didn't speak to me again – ever. Two weeks earlier I'd been the most wonderful person in the universe when I gave her my director. Now I was on her shit list for life!"



Refusing to fade into obscurity

She was the perfect image of the movie star and, as such, largely the creation of her own indomitable will.

— George Cukor

In her youth and at her zenith at MGM, Joan Crawford had always been on the cusp of setting new fashion and style trends. What eventually became known as *'the Crawford look'* was largely a collaborative effort between Crawford, Adrian and MGM's makeup artist extraordinaire, William Tuttle. However, beginning in 1951, partly because she was nearing the age of fifty, Crawford's *look* steadily grew more harsh and unappealing. Although Crawford's body remained as toned and solid as ever, thanks to her relentless regime of physical exercise, Crawford's face became almost warrior-like. Her eyes were now cold and bulging; her hair cropped and dyed a reddish brown; her overdrawn lips appearing to swallow the lower half of her face. Her jaw line had turned square and heavy too. Hence, in review of Crawford's next movie, a bizarre western melodrama, **Johnny Guitar** (1954) one critic aptly nicknamed the film *'Beauty and the Beast with (costar) Sterling Hayden as beauty.'*

The film also sparked a painful rivalry between Crawford and costar Mercedes McCambridge. Both were closet alcoholics. When one of McCambridge's scenes solicited applause from the crew, Crawford responded by tossing all of her costar's costumes into the street. This scandalous incident eventually found its way into the new gossip tabloids that had replaced the once glowing studio PR sanctioned publicity rags of old. Even so, Crawford's galvanic reputation continued to cling together. Her next two movies were made over at Columbia: **Female on the Beach** and **Queen Bee** (both in 1955). Neither set the world on fire but both sold enough tickets to convince studio executives that there was still some magic in Crawford's Teflon-coated stardom.

Today, we would refer to Crawford as a 'cougar'; her ravenous need to seduce her young male costars bordering on nymphomania. Cliff Robertson, Crawford's costar in **Autumn Leaves** (1956) - a perfunctory melodrama at best - recalls a moment during rehearsals when he was summoned to Crawford's home to go over their lines. Obliging the request, Roberts



found Crawford reclining near the pool, slipping a bare leg out from her terrycloth bathrobe to reveal she was wearing absolutely nothing underneath. But when it came time to shoot the movie Crawford behaved like a total professional. When asked by their director Robert Aldrich whether or not the pending scene would require tears Aldrich suggested to Crawford that she might consider that option to which she was quick to reply, *"Fine. Which eye?"*

The last memorable role in Crawford's cinematic canon would be **The Story of Esther Costello** (1957); a film in which she played a woman who discovers that her husband has been sexually abusing their adopted deaf/mute daughter. From this high point, Crawford's time would increasingly be spent on a most unlikely endeavor, as spokeswoman for the Pepsi-Cola Corporation.



“Recently I heard a wise guy story that I had a party at my home for twenty-five men. It’s an interesting story, but I don’t know twenty-five men I’d want to invite to a party.”

- Joan Crawford

While filming **Queen Bee**, Crawford had indulged in an affair with costar John Ireland. However, almost overnight, she also began a more lasting romance with Alfred Steele – the President of Pepsi-Cola. In hindsight, Crawford’s marriage to Steele on January 14, 1956 could be easily misconstrued as opportunistic. Crawford had in fact probably deduced that she was no longer the most desirable commodity sought after by film producers. Or perhaps she had finally grown tired of making movies, though never of being in the media spotlight. Whatever the reason, Crawford quit the screen for the next three years. She became a fixture synonymous with the Pepsi brand and toured the country with Steele, partaking in an active membership on the company’s board of directors and, in the process, becoming a savvy businesswoman. Home now became a \$300,000 New York apartment overlooking Central Park – lavishly appointed with endless closet space housing all of her dresses, shoes and other accoutrements.

Unfortunately for the couple, their marital bliss ended abruptly when Steele died of a heart attack on April 6, 1959. At her husband’s funeral, a genuinely heartbroken Crawford was approached by a rabid fan who demanded an autograph. When Crawford quietly turned away to hide her grief and tears, the fan abruptly tore off her mourning veil. In retrospect, it seems almost unfathomable that Crawford would have contemplated such an extended leave of absence from the screen. By all accounts, she and Alfred Steele had been sublimely content in their private lives. But with Steele’s passing Crawford was to come to a more brutal realization. She was broke. There wasn’t even enough money to pay the taxes. Filling this void with modest television work and a trite cameo in 20th Century-Fox’s **The Best Of Everything** (1959), Crawford took whatever opportunities came her way, the best undoubtedly Robert Aldrich’s invitation to costar in **Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?** (1962); a movie that put Crawford in close proximity to arch nemesis Bette Davis once more.

(Previous page): Robert Aldrich had his hands full on the set of **Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?** (1962). “Joan never hated Bette as far as I could tell,” long-time friend Betty Barker once said, “The animosity was all the other way.” Indeed, Bette Davis repeatedly challenged Crawford and Aldrich throughout the shoot, trying the director’s patience. “It was odd to see how intimidated Crawford would get,” costar Victor Buono once commented, “They would rehearse a scene together and Bette would look at Joan from under her eyelid and say something like ‘Is that the way you’re going to play it?’ and Joan would say ‘yes’ and Bette would just shrug her shoulders. I could see Joan losing her nerve. It was belittlement – subtle. But it worked.” Davis did, in fact, have the more plum role in the movie and she relished its theatricality. After Davis ‘accidentally’ kicked Crawford in the head during their confrontation scene Crawford was taken away to get stitches, sobbing and heard saying “I just don’t know why she hates me so much.”

(This page): It’s love she’s after. Joan wed Pepsi Cola magnet Alfred Steele in 1955 and moved from L.A. to New York. By all accounts the couple was very happy. But Joan spent money like it was water and quickly depleted Steele’s fortunes. Steele’s death in 1959 revealed just how bankrupt their personal finances were and Joan took a more proactive position as a board member and as Pepsi’s advertising executive. Several of the board members tried to quietly buy out Joan’s shares. But she staunchly refused to sell. Instead, from 1959 to 1973 Crawford made her image synonymous with the brand, becoming Pepsi’s worldwide ambassador; a move that did not bode well with many in the executive boardroom who felt the star’s old-time glamour was out of touch with Pepsi’s moniker ‘The choice of a new generation.’



(Above): from the mid-1950s onward, Crawford's movie career went into steep decline. And yet Crawford continued to work, accepting whatever roles came her way. In 1959's **The Best of Everything** (left and center) she played Amanda Farrow, a hard-bitten lady publisher having an affair with a married man. Crawford is ruthless as the lady executive who berates her assistant, Caroline Bender (Hope Lange) until the latter rises like cream to the top of her profession – then, inexplicably decides she doesn't want it. Crawford had very little patience for the new crop of actresses who had risen through the ranks since her own time. *"They think it's so easy,"* she told director Jean Negulesco who had collaborated with Crawford on **Humoresque** (1949); one of Crawford's best movies, *"Ah...what do they know?"* And yet Crawford could also be quite giving on the set. *"There was a scene,"* co-star Diane Baker recalled in an interview, *"...and after we had shot it she turned to me and said, 'Did that work for you or would you like to do it again?' I said it was fine, but thought it was very giving of her to ask for my opinion. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't that."*

Crawford also appeared on television, committing to several episodes of **General Electric's Star Theater** whose host was Ronald Reagan, (above) here seen rehearsing with Joan for her role as Ann Howard in 1959's episode, **'And One Was Loyal'**. After **Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?** offers flooded in to do more of the same. While Bette Davis quietly rode out this tide and was quite selective about the roles she took after 'Baby Jane', Crawford became something of a scream queen in some very low budget horror movie fodder; including **The Caretakers** (1963), **Strait Jacket** (1964), **I Saw What You Did** (1965), **Berserk** (1967) and her last, and some would say absolute worst movie ever – **Trog** (1970), pictured at bottom right with actor Joe Cornelius – cast as the half human/half ape prehistoric mammal - sharing a Pepsi between takes on the set.

The real problem with Crawford's later career is that she refused to accept aging as a natural part of life. Frequently, she would dress for TV interviews as though the bloom of youth and glamour had yet to rub off and wax affectionately about old time Hollywood with a girlish charm unbecoming her years. When Christina Crawford suffered an attack of acute appendicitis Joan insisted on taking her place on the TV soap opera, **The Secret Storm** (1968-69). The producers reluctantly agreed to the 'fill in'. But Christina was mortified when she tuned in from her hospital bed to see Crawford, then 64, pretending to play a flirtatious character in her late 20s.

From the start, the shoot proved to be a match made in hell. Jack Warner not only slashed the budget shortly before production began but he also forbade Aldrich to produce the film on the Warner back lot, declaring *"I wouldn't give you a dime for those two old washed up broads!"* As Aldrich commenced, the rivalry between his costars flared to near epic proportions. During one scene where a paralyzed Crawford attempts to have her sister (Davis) committed to an institution only to be violently confronted, Davis *'accidentally'* kicked Crawford in the head, necessitating two stitches. In another scene, where Davis binds Crawford to a hook to keep her from leaving her bedroom, Crawford declared that the rope around her wrists was too tight, to which Davis simply replied *"It has to look real!"* before applying a tape patch to Crawford's mouth to stifle any further objections while she (Davis) and Aldrich discussed the scene.

However, Crawford had her own revenge during the scene where Davis drags Crawford's lifeless body out of bed and down a flight of stairs. Informed earlier by Davis not to act as a dead weight while she was being carried (Davis had a bad back) Crawford did just the opposite, sending Davis to the hospital for nearly a week. Despite these delays and the perpetuation of these animosities, **Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?** was a monstrous hit. Unfortunately, the film's grand guignol stifled either actress' chances of ever playing a regular role again. Meanwhile, Aldrich was already planning a reunion picture for Crawford and Davis: **Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte** (1964); a macabre tale about first cousins driving each other insane. However, when Davis began to act up on the first few days of rehearsal – even going so far as to install a Coca-Cola machine on the set out of spite for Crawford's allegiance to Pepsi – Crawford suffered a minor nervous breakdown, quietly choosing to bow out of the project. Her role was eventually filled by Olivia De Havilland.



***"Send me flowers while I'm alive...
They won't do me a damn bit of good after I'm dead!"***

- Joan Crawford

Last Act Finales



(Above left): Crawford strikes a very glamorous pose in 1933 and again in 1957, uncannily the same despite the obviousness that time has taken its toll on her veneer. Arguably, the Joan Crawford remembered today is of this latter ilk, the rather severe looking maven with large paralyzed eyes glaring back at the camera (right), rather than the almost virginal and sad-eyed creature who began her Hollywood career with such promise and beauty. These two images are irreconcilable, but they speak to the divided nature of Crawford's memory. While fans continue to adore her, an equal portion of the population finds her a tragic, contemptible figure of fun to be ridiculed, bashed and unceremoniously deposed from her throne.

The last act of Crawford's career is hardly what she would have preferred. Beginning with 1964's **Strait Jacket** a tacky B-grade thriller for William Castle and culminating with 1970's abysmally inarticulate **Trog**, the Crawford canon degenerated into a bizarre blend of schlock B-horror movies and cameo appearances so perversely below par that even today it remains quite baffling as to how and why Crawford should have accepted these projects in the first place. After all, after **Baby Jane's** success, Crawford was once again solvent and popular. She could have bided her time.

Christina Crawford's snap critique that has distilled her adopted mother's persona into that of an unrepentant gargoyle with a rabid fascination to be perennial in the public spotlight seems, in hindsight, grossly unfair. While it is true that Crawford adored her fans, she was also not reserved in her condemnation of all that Hollywood had become by the early 1960s, telling guests during a televised interview with Dick Cavett in 1968 that the industry had changed for the worst. *"Today they are little cliques full of little people and you may have it!"*

So why did Crawford remain in Hollywood after 1960? Alfred Steele's assets left to Crawford upon his death included shares in Pepsi that, when push came to shove, his fellow executives chose to ignore, effectively disowning her from the company ledgers. Although Crawford was hard pressed for cash immediately following Steele's death, she eventually showed a modest profit from the settling of his estate that, coupled with the success of **Baby Jane** ought to have been enough to sustain her for the rest of her days. But Crawford suffered from an insatiable need to be adored. Furthermore, she had succumbed to an even greater tragedy – refusing to accept her own age.



(Above): it remains impossible to conclude any retrospective on Joan Crawford's life without at least briefly acknowledging the stigma and the pall that continues to swirl around the publication of Christina Crawford's biography, **Mommie Dearest** in 1978 and the subsequent movie made in 1981 starring Faye Dunaway. As early as 1976 Crawford had become aware that Christina was writing a tell-all and was immediately dismissive of the idea. *"I suppose she doesn't think I'm going to leave her enough money,"* Crawford told longtime publicist John Springer, *"I think she's using my name strictly to make money! I've come to the conclusion that what Christina has wanted all along is to be me...or at least have what I have. I wanted to share everything but in the end I couldn't reach or influence her. She's her own person – one who has brought me a lot of pain. The problem was I adopted her. She never adopted me."*

When Crawford died in 1977 of a heart attack Jack Valenti, the president of the Motion Picture Association of America encouraged a moment of silence to honor her passing, adding *"There is no way that the portrait that was painted of her by her daughter and received as truth wouldn't have cast aspersions on her name. That blurred the professional and the personal. I knew this lady. I know she had done many good deeds anonymously. She was always dependable for helping out with worthy charities and that's the way I want to remember her."*

For the movie, **Mommie Dearest** director Frank Perry encouraged Dunaway to embellish. While Dunaway's Crawford-esque look is uncanny, the resultant spectacle remains, as film critic Roger Ebert astutely pointed out, *"Morbid...I can't imagine who would want to subject themselves to this movie."* Ironically, when asked by David Frost to pick her favorite then 'new' movie star, Crawford had singled Dunaway out. That was in 1970. Dunaway has since disowned both the movie and her performance in it. Her biography makes only a fleeting reference, saying she sincerely wished director Perry had honed in her performance.

As an interesting postscript, Cathy Crawford gave an interview to Vanity Fair in 2008 saying of Joan in part, *"Mommie was strict...but she gave me a backbone and courage and so much I could never say it all...but oh gosh...the most important gift she gave were wonderful memories to last me a lifetime."*

Always proud and immaculate about her appearance, Crawford continued to dress as though the clock had stopped ticking for her somewhere in the mid-1940s; her penchant for appearing in leg-revealing and strapless garments thoroughly savaged in the tabloids. When Crawford arrived at a tribute to Rosalind Russell the paparazzi's flashbulbs caught the image of an old and wrinkly woman looking foolish beyond her years. *"If that's the way I really look they'll never see me again,"* Crawford commented to a close friend when she saw the photos. And for all intent and purposes Crawford held true to this promise. She became a recluse, even going so far as to keep secret her diagnosis of pancreatic cancer that would eventually claim her life.

In hindsight Crawford's Last Will and Testament, that left *"no provision for my daughter Christina or son Christopher for reasons well known to them"*, prompted the 'tell all' memoir, **Mommie Dearest**. The book, a first in the publishing industry, popularized the dismantling of iconic pop figures. It was eventually made into a movie in 1981 with actress Faye Dunaway delivering an eerie camp performance; one that Dunaway later disowned for reasons never entirely disclosed to the press. Ironically, in the years preceding her own death Crawford had praised Dunaway as the only actress of her generation likely to exhibit 'star quality.' Now, that very luminosity had been put to use in support of stripping bare the Crawford mystique. So too, in more recent times, have many of the situations depicted in the book come under closer scrutiny from the other siblings Crawford adopted after Christina, particularly Cathy Crawford.

The undoubted reality is that Joan Crawford ought never to have considered becoming a mother. She was, after all, a driven creature of varying ambitions; all energies converged on attaining and maintaining her peerless screen image. *"If you've*



(Above): Crawford poses with her adopted children, Christina, the second Christopher, Cathy and Cynthia in 1949. (Middle): attending to a few last minute details in 1955. Even Crawford's dog was immaculately groomed. (Right): graciously accepting the Best Actress Oscar for Ann Bancroft's performance in **The Miracle Worker** at the 35th annual awards ceremony; the same year Bette Davis was nominated for **Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?** The rumor is that when Bancroft's name was announced Joan casually sidestepped Davis backstage, saying "Out of my way, amateur." Whether or not this story is true, Joan's acceptance speech was a direct quote from Bancroft, plainly read by Crawford without such embellishments; Crawford honoring Bancroft's request with dignity befitting a Hollywood legend. The presenter is Maximilian Schell.

earned a position be proud of it. Don't hide it," Crawford once told a reporter, *"When I hear people say, 'There's Joan Crawford' I turn around and say, 'Hi! How are you?'"* Indeed, the public always came first in Crawford's estimation. Perhaps, it is one of Hollywood's small ironies that a similar code of career ethics belonged to Crawford's arch rival - Bette Davis. In retrospect, both Crawford and Davis seem to have run parallel courses, converging as a train wreck on the set of **Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?** Both Crawford and Davis were prone to extremes and personal obsessions. Each was driven to excel at their respective alma maters and both ended up with unrepentant children who wrote unflattering alternate truths to their lives from the skewed perspective of a parent's shadow.

Yet, despite **Mommie Dearest**, Joan Crawford's star is much more pervasive and everlasting today. *"There's that 'you're only as old as you feel business'",* Joan once suggested, *"...which is fine to a point. But you can't be Shirley Temple on the good ship lollipop forever! Sooner or later, damn it, you're old!"*

Yet, Crawford never quite took her own advice. In the 1960s and 70s she readily appeared to be tempting the specter of youth with flashes of flirtation as she waxed affectionately about the good ol' days in Hollywood while on the talk show circuit, all the while unconscious of the fact that her own youth had passed. Her stardom was by then practically a relic from that bygone age.

"I was born in front of a camera," Crawford used to say, *"I don't know anything else."* Yet, Crawford's self-perception of her own stardom is perhaps problematic. She had not been a child star as Shirley Temple or Judy Garland. She did not perform in Vaudeville. She came into her career through a back door; the poor girl who first dazzled customers as a hooper at local dance halls. She was a teenager by then and in her mid-twenties before the camera fell in love with her for the first time. Yet, Joan Crawford remains a star.

The 'how' and 'why' of that stardom is perhaps two questions best resolved by viewing a retrospective of her films. For it is on film that Crawford truly lives; casting a white hot beam of light that does not necessarily warm so much as it sizzles. That her private life has been tarnished, probably for all time, does not diminish the essence of Joan Crawford – star. That reign is likely to remain intact for all time.