

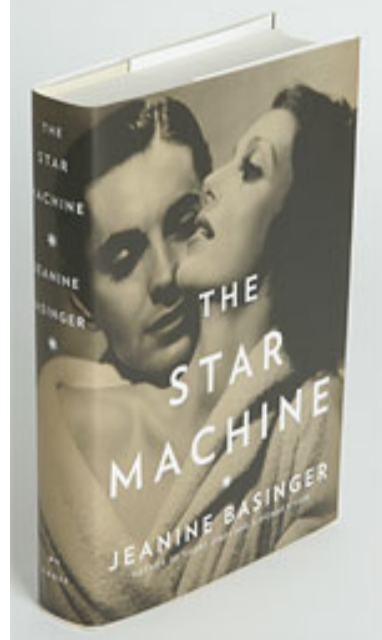
The High Price of Glamour

By Edward Kosner

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In the three decades from the birth of talking pictures to the end of the Eisenhower Age, Hollywood filled movie screens with 500 pictures a year. They were crammed with stars -- from Fred Astaire to Loretta Young, with Bogart, Bacall, Cagney, Cooper, Crawford, Davis, Flynn, Gable, Garbo, Grable, Grant, Hepburn, Ladd, Loy, Muni, Powell, Power, Robinson, Stanwyck, Stewart, Tracy, Wayne and dozens more in between. It all seems so innocent and beguiling in these Hollywood days of Brad and Angelina and Tom the Scientologist, but it wasn't.



The alchemy that turned Constance Ockelman into Veronica Lake and Joe Yule Jr. into Mickey Rooney is the subject of Jeanine Basinger's "The Star Machine," an industrial-size history of the Hollywood star system that has more going on in it than a Busby Berkeley number in an old MGM musical. Chatty and factoid-ridden, the book retells the familiar story of star manufacture as if it were an original idea. True movie fans will recognize most of this material and probably won't care much about the rest.

"The illusion of stardom is always the illusion of ease," writes Ms. Basinger. But behind the ease was a ruthlessly efficient process that identified, assessed, remade and promoted potential stars, then typecast them in strings of familiar roles until they exhausted their appeal, rebelled or ran away. "I wasn't a sex symbol, I was a sex zombie," recalled Veronica Lake, the girl with the peek-a-boo wave who became a star because she was tiny enough to make her frequent co-star, the 5-foot-4½-inch Alan Ladd, look like a leading man.

Dentists and Speech Coaches

Mammoth studios like MGM and 20th Century Fox commanded phalanxes of make-up artists, plastic surgeons, dentists and coaches for speech, singing, dancing, fencing and posture to overhaul promising candidates. Then there were top-of-the-line costume designers to dress them, lighting wizards and ace cinematographers to film them and flacks to plant stories about them in Modern Screen and even Life magazine. The primpers and crimpers spared no one. The exquisite Maureen O'Hara barely escaped a nose job, but the Broadway dancer Eleanor Powell was zapped with ultraviolet rays to eliminate her freckles and had her pores shrunk for close-ups. Rita Hayworth, who started in Charlie Chan movies as Rita Cansino, was turned into a redhead and had her hairline raised by electrolysis so she'd look less Latin. Lana Turner's eyebrows were shaved off in 1938 so she could play an Asian in "The Adventures of Marco Polo" -- and they never grew back.

DETAILS

THE STAR MACHINE

By Jeanine Basinger
(Knopf, 586 pages, \$35)

• [Read an excerpt.](#)

The resulting beauties were unlike anything ever seen before or since. "If you want to see the girl next door, go next door," said Lucille Le Sueur, a freckled redhead from San Antonio who emerged from the machine as the sleek Joan Crawford.

Essentially the same routine produced male stars as diverse as Mickey Rooney and Tyrone Power, who actually came from an old stage family. But the problem, as Louis B. Mayer and other tyrannical moguls discovered, was that their obedient millionaire chattels were human creatures who sometimes refused to follow the script.



Lana Turner, on-screen in 'Ziegfeld Girl' (above) and in a 1947 publicity still (below)

A few, like Deanna Durbin, the busty operatic soprano who burst into glorious song in two-dozen smash hits for Universal in the 1940s, simply walked away -- moving to a farm outside Paris where, for all anyone knows, she still lives happily ever after. Tyrone Power sulked his way through money-making costume dramas and pirate extravaganzas until Darryl Zanuck relented in 1948 and let him play a circus geek (the sideshow freak who eats light bulbs and bites the heads off chickens) in "Nightmare Alley." Power's fans hated it, and he never had a challenging role again until "Witness for the Prosecution" in 1957, the year before he died from a heart attack at age 44.

And then there were stars who really stepped wide of their marks. Lana Turner, the sexy drama queen of MGM, took up with a handsome hoodlum named Johnny Stompanato. One spring night in 1958, Stompanato menaced Turner in her Hollywood mansion until Lana's 14-year-old daughter, Cheryl Crane, rescued her by stabbing him to death -- or so the story was told. Errol Flynn, the dashing star of "Captain Blood" and "The Adventures of Robin Hood," caroused himself to death at 50, at the last in the downy arms of a 16-year-old named Beverly Aadland. More than a little star-struck herself, Ms. Basinger, who heads the film studies program at Wesleyan University, neglects to mention the widespread whispers that Cheryl Crane took the fall for Lana, who actually wielded the knife, and the author crops out the nymphet Aadland from Flynn's sad demise.

Turner's notoriety and Flynn's peccadilloes (the early ones at least) actually enhanced their star power. Their studio masters shrewdly incorporated their scandalized behavior into the personae they portrayed on screen, just as the lines were blurred between other stars and the characters they played. Henry Fonda once declined to play Henry Fonda in a film, explaining: "I don't know that character." Or as Cary Grant once said: "Everybody wants to be Cary Grant -- even I want to be Cary Grant."

Worn Thesis



As "The Star Machine" chugs along, Ms. Basinger includes so many exceptions to her general rule about the studios' manufacturing and control of stars that her worn thesis begins to disintegrate. Charles Boyer, a success in France and Germany, came to Hollywood and became an even bigger star without the ministrations of the studio wizards. The great lover was married to the same woman for 33 years and committed suicide the day after she died. Doris Day achieved stardom, but the equally accomplished Rosemary Clooney never made it. The young Van Johnson made a splash with Esther Williams in "Thrill of a Romance" in 1945, but a boy-wonder contemporary of Johnson's, Sonny Tufts, became a punch line. It was the audience that spotted buck-toothed, goofy Mickey Rooney as Andy Hardy in a low-budget quickie called "A Family Affair" in 1937 and, as Ms. Basinger writes, "MGM had a bonus star on their hands."

For an academic, Ms. Basinger has not only a shaky grasp of usage but also a zest for cliché; worthy of "Entertainment Tonight." "All systems are go" in movies "helmed" by directors "who have their work cut out for them" but without "letting the cat out of the bag" deliver a picture "to die for."

In the end, of course, it's all about talent and grace and charisma, and after 553 fraught pages of text Ms. Basinger finally admits: "What is unequivocally true about the creation of movie stars then and now is this: It's a mysterious process."

Now she tells us.

Mr. Kosner's memoir of his career as editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, "It's News to Me," was published last year.

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