Greta Garbo's WAR ON HOLLYWOOD

Being a newcomer in Hollywood – and from remote Sweden on top of that – actress and soon-to-be-legend GRETA GARBO showed stubborn determination both on and off the screen. But telling film mogul Louis B. Mayer where he could shove his lousy contract offer was so far unheard of in Los Angeles. Scott Reisfield discloses the actions that jeopardized her career.

Louis B. Mayer (left), Greta Garbo and fellow Swedish actor Lars Hanson in 1927, a year after her breakthrough with Torrent. At this time, Garbo and Mayer matched their strengths against each other, a battle she won.
Garbo listened and made her own points. By all accounts, it was a long meeting. Eventually, Garbo had heard enough. She stood up and uttered the words that would echo through Hollywood for six months.

"I think I should go home now," she said boldly, turning her back on the big Louis B. Mayer.

Mayer was in fact the man responsible for bringing Garbo to Hollywood. He had seen her in *The Saga of Gosta Berling*, directed in 1924 by the famous Swedish Mauritz Stiller whom Mayer tried to lure to Hollywood. His daughter relates how Garbo forged Mayer’s attention, “It was her eyes. He said. ‘She reminds me of Norma Talmadge.’ There was no resemblance, but what they had in common and what he must have meant was the capacity to convey feeling through their eyes. Dad said, ‘I’ll take Stiller all right. As for the girl, I want her even more than Stiller. I can make a star out of her. I’ll take them both.’”

Producer Hal Roach Jr would recall, “They had this picture from Sweden, 14 reels with Swedish subtitles, a very complicated story called *Gosta Berling*. The leading part was played by a girl named Jenny Hasselquist, whom I know from Vic tor Sjöström’s earlier pictures. But there was a supporting role played by a girl I didn’t know. There were about seven or eight of us in the room. Nobody could follow the story. It was complicated, the titles were in Swedish, and nobody would have sat through the picture if it hadn’t been for this girl. They just waited for her to come on. Every time she came on, all the cutters went ‘Ahhhh.’”

Mayer met Stiller and Garbo in Berlin on November 26 and made an initial offer, but it would take another two months before the contracts were signed, giving Garbo a three-year version of the standard five-year and non-negotiable deal MGM offered its actresses, providing them with enough time to grow their skills and guaranteeing the company the time to harvest its investment. It was Garbo who insisted on the time limit. She didn’t want to be chained to MGM for too long. It is believed that Mayer’s willingness to break the holy rule said a great deal about his trust in Garbo.

The issue of Variety magazine published on April 8, 1925, contained a small article that was the first mention of Garbo to the American public. The article began, “Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer will spring a new screen star on the American public very shortly in the form of Greta Gerber, a Swedish picture star.” The misspelling of Garbo’s name would be a harbinger of future common and what he must have meant was the capacity to convey feeling through their eyes. Dad said, ‘I’ll take Stiller all right. As for the girl, I want her even more than Stiller. I can make a star out of her. I’ll take them both.’”

Producer Hal Roach Jr would recall, “They had this picture from Sweden, 14 reels with Swedish subtitles, a very complicated story called *Gosta Berling*. The leading part was played by a girl named Jenny Hasselquist, whom I know from Victor Sjöström’s earlier pictures. But there was a supporting role played by a girl I didn’t know. There were about seven or eight of us in the room. Nobody could follow the story. It was complicated, the titles were in Swedish, and nobody would have sat through the picture if it hadn’t been for this girl. They just waited for her to come on. Every time she came on, all the cutters went ‘Ahhhh.’”

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Stiller and Garbo boarded the steamship *Drottningholm* on June 26, 1925, and arrived in New York 10 days later. The MGM people greeted them with a bit of pomp, and it seemed like a good start, but things at the film company moved slowly, and Stiller and Garbo had to be patient. In fact, they stayed in the Big Apple for two months. Stiller immediately started to renegotiate his MGM contract. Garbo posed for PR photographs and participated in at least two newspaper interviews. She suffered from the heat wave in a big city she didn’t know and surrounded by a language that she hardly spoke. She felt alone and homesick.

In a letter to her dear old friend, actress Mimi Pollak, Garbo put her frustrations on paper: “You have no idea how much I am thinking about home, now when the theater season begins. You are in Stockholm, you are all probably together drinking, smoking and God knows what. Oh, sometimes I am sick with longing. Here everything is ugly, you know. I am so tired, I want nothing. I just sit down wherever I can and stare, thinking of nothing else than the day I am leaving for home.”

They left for California on August 30 by train, but Hollywood didn’t change anything. Garbo hadn’t started working yet and felt as lonely as she had been in New York. She also worried about Stiller, who was unhappy.

Garbo didn’t start filming until almost four months later. It was a melodrama called *Torrent*, which made her the hottest actress in the world. She combined popular appeal with spectacular acting technique. She was the first method actress before the technique even had a name; her on-screen presence seemed real in ways that others had not achieved.

Perhaps Louise Brooks expressed the arrival of Garbo at MGM best, “From the moment Torrent went into production, no actress was ever again quite happy with herself. The whole MGM studio, including Monta Bell, the director, watched the daily rushes with amazement as Garbo created out of the stateliest, thinnest material the complex, enchanting shadow of a soul upon the screen.”

**Always**

Above: Garbo and fellow actor John Gilbert, with whom she had a romance in 1927. Gilbert wanted to buy a car. And what a car! Garbo and her brand-new Rolls-Royce Phantom I, 1927 model, follow left. Always the prey for reporters and paparazzi, Garbo is surrounded by the media when arriving in New York in 1938. Below right: At an Athenian café in 1955 together with friends, Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis (to photograph) being the most notable.
In spite of the critics and public acclaim, Garbo was disappointed. This was the second time she had to portray simplified characters. She hadn’t been educated at the prestigious Stockholm Royal Dramatic Theater to play in simple melodramas. She hadn’t been cast for such roles when working with the best directors in Europe.

Her third MGM movie, Flesh and the Devil, was also a melodrama. Being directed by the well-known Clarence Sinclair Bull, Garbo definitely didn’t approve of. It looked like MGM was in reality a trap. The film company had chosen a director and actors Garbo definitely didn’t approve of. It looked like Mayer’s strategy was to make Garbo realize that all the threats of ruining her career were real. But he was mistaken. Garbo continued her work as if none of this mattered to her without giving Mayer the slightest of her attention.

The next film planned was Love, based on Leo Tolstoy’s novel Anna Karenina. A quality story and, finally, a quality role for Garbo! No, not quite. What originally seemed as a concession by MGM was in reality a trap. The film company had chosen a director and actors Garbo definitely didn’t approve of. It looked like Mayer’s strategy was to make Garbo realize that all the threats of ruining her career were real. But he was mistaken. Garbo continued her work as if none of this mattered to her without giving up on her demands. MGM stopped shooting after two weeks and destroyed 100,000 dollars worth of film. MGM’s management posed to be her next movie, The Temptress (1926). She refused to attend the wardrobe testings for what was supposed to be her next movie, Women Love Diamonds, explaining that she didn’t want to play such roles anymore. She considered Mayer’s arrogant indifference as a breach of contract. That’s when Mayer ordered his star to the “chat.” She left the meeting, facing a harsh future with no job or income and with MGM threatening that her visa wouldn’t be prolonged. MGM put every form of pressure they could imagine on her. Garbo put on a tough front, but deep inside she was devastated.

She wrote again to Pollak: “I have behaved really stupidly. I have stayed home from work for some time now, because I don’t want to go there. They tried to force me and they threatened me, but I still didn’t go. I hate being tied to the film company. Since I stopped going there, they haven’t paid me which I think is mean! I don’t know how this will end ... I don’t know what’s gonna become of me and my work.”

But she really didn’t have to worry. Mayer had to resolve the dilemma. He liked Garbo’s professional approach to filmmaking and the results she delivered. Garbo was a different kind of woman from those he usually dealt with – she was serious and principled. Unsuccessful in his attempts to intimidate Garbo, finally he cut a deal. Garbo agreed to a new five-year deal at a much higher salary and with control over half her roles.

Flesh and the Devil was a box office hit when it opened in January 1927, and MGM realized that Garbo was too valuable to lose. But Mayer was persistent in his attempts to compel Garbo into submission. He initiated a smear campaign in the media to depict Garbo as a megalomaniac. A negative media campaign supported threats to deport her. The pressure did not rattled Garbo and she stood her ground for six months.

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In 1926, Garbo moved back to Sweden and died the next year much to Garbo’s great grief.

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