



James Stewart (left), Jean Arthur, and director Frank Capra relax on the set of Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). Arthur was Capra's favorite actress and made three films with him.

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HEYDAY OF THE STUDIO STARS

BY DAVID LOW '76

IN HER NEW BOOK, CHAIR OF FILM STUDIES
JEANINE BASINGER EXAMINES
HOW THE HOLLYWOOD STUDIO SYSTEM
MANUFACTURED MOVIE STARS.

In 1933, film producer Samuel Goldwyn brought to Hollywood the beautiful and talented European actress Anna Sten in hopes that she would rival Greta Garbo, one of the greatest stars of her time. Sten made two films in 1934 and 1935 in which she gave worthy performances, but both of them were box-office failures. Goldwyn had made a mistake promoting her as “the next Garbo” because the public wouldn’t buy it.

Hollywood studios manufactured and controlled the careers of movie stars from the 1930s through the 1950s, but the system wasn’t perfect. Studio titans couldn’t always be certain if an actor had that special quality of stardom that would catch on with the public. Gary Cooper had it, and so did Joan Crawford, but how could you create others like them? That “x factor” was an elusive part of the process that made it inherently flawed.

In her penetrating and entertaining new book, *The Star Machine* (Knopf), Chair of Film Studies Jeanine Basinger explores how the studios tried to assure the economic stability of the movie business through their imperfect control of stars. She examines the work of several major and minor stars to show how the star machine affected their careers.

“It’s a crackpot business that sets out to manufacture a product it can’t even define,” she writes, “but that was old Hollywood.”

The idea for Basinger’s book grew out of the interviews with major movie stars she had done over the years.

“One of the things that always interested me talking to them was how hard they worked and how seriously they took their profession,” she says. “Being a movie star was actually a job, like being a schoolteacher or a fireman. Movie stars had to be on time, stay until closing, and be on their toes all day. Movie stars may have seemed like they were in an exalted position, but they were worker bees like you and me.”

Contrary to what the average person might think, in the days of the studio system, the public didn’t discover movie stars by themselves.

“Mainly they were discovering a preselected group that the studios had carefully groomed, defined, and dressed up to put on the market for them,” Basinger says.

In the glamour days, Hollywood produced about 400 to 500 movies a year, rapidly and efficiently, which meant they needed a large number of stars on hand to attract viewers into the theaters, and the studios made all kinds of them. Basinger writes: “There were big-name stars and little-name stars, A-list stars and B-list stars, male stars, female stars, dog stars, child stars, western stars . . . , and, always waiting in the wings to step in when the established stars got too uppity were youngsters under consideration to become the next big stars.”

The star machine was a true factory, so a movie star could be easily replaced if he or she became uncooperative, lost favor with the public, or simply didn’t find a following.

The star-making process had its pros and cons. Movie stars were cherished and respected by the public and had work that was well paid at a time when many Americans were not so fortunate. They had the opportunity to work in a creative business that could offer them lifelong joy. They could dress well and live lavishly. The studios protected them from the media, and any scandals or mistakes they made would be kept out of the newspapers.

Once they had signed the usual seven-year contract with a studio, however, movie stars had little freedom over their careers.

“Some people refer to the star machine as a very sophisticated slave system,” Basinger says. “Stars were

the camera. “This was accomplished by working the star to death,” Basinger writes. Cary Grant, for instance, made 24 movies under contract to Paramount Pictures from 1932 to 1936, and he was considered a star by 1937. Anyone groomed toward stardom had to start at the bottom and be developed and tried out in a number of movies to see how the public responded. You were never really a star until your name appeared above the title.

“People don’t often realize that this was a business where you had to earn your stripes and go up the ladder. You had to be reliable,” Basinger says. “This was a business that did not have time for the weak, the sickly, or the unreliable.”

The star system could be limiting to artistic growth because studios manufactured stars who were recognized by the public as particular types, which they had to play from film to film. Occasionally, stars were allowed “departures” from their usual roles, but the public rarely responded favorably.

“When Clark Gable played a tough guy like Rhett Butler kicking down Scarlett O’Hara’s door, everybody was happy,” Basinger says. “When he wore a bowler hat and played the Irish politician Parnell, nobody was happy.”

The person who thrived in the business first of all had to be embraced by the public and then the right roles had to be found at the right studio which could create the right vehicles for his or her type.

“Those who succeeded,” says Basinger, “also needed to have the right attitude. They needed to be willing to do what they were told, to work terribly hard, and to

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truly owned by studios. They did not make decisions about what films they were in and what roles they would play. They worked long days from 6 a.m., six days a week. If they weren’t being filmed on the set, they had to do interviews, pose for promotional photos, take lessons in acting and diction and manners, and do costume fittings for their next assignment.”

Movie stars had to learn a new kind of acting in front of

strive for excellence within the system. They needed to be obedient. If they weren’t and created problems, the studio would step on them.”

Studios weren’t happy when a star suddenly wanted time off or complained or wanted to marry someone the public wasn’t going to like.

“The star machine could make its product,” says Basinger, “but unfortunately for the business the product

was a human one. Sometimes a person liked being a star and sometimes not. The thing about stardom is that you don’t really know what it is until you experience it, and then it’s too late to get out of it.”

Basinger spent four years researching and writing *The Star Machine*. She decided not to write about the era’s legendary actors such as Fred Astaire, Bette Davis, Gary Cooper, and Katharine Hepburn, who had been covered extensively in other books and whose uniqueness “transcended their formative years when they were subjected to the ruthless manipulations of the studios.” Instead, she writes about the careers of several non-legendary stars who were well-known in their time and who were examples of the product that the machine could develop and turn into profitable, box-office draws.

Basinger watched and rewatched all the old movies of the stars she covers in her book. She consulted documentation and letters about studios in archives across the country and drew upon her past interviews with stars and directors. She spent time carefully selecting the photographs in the book. She also looked closely at her personal collection of movie magazines from the time, including *Photoplay*, *Modern Screen*, *Screenland*, and others.

“These magazines are invaluable in tracking a star’s progress,” Basinger says.

The magazines promoted upcoming releases and told fans everything about the stars the studio wanted them to know, with beautiful layouts, color portraits, and ads. At the beginning of his career, an actor’s face might appear in candid snapshots in the gossip section, but as the star became more prominent, he would be featured in a lead article in the front of the magazine.

Basinger particularly enjoyed writing about Tyrone Power, whose career exemplifies the limitations of the star machine process. Power was “the epitome of 1930s glamour for men. . . . He was shaped easily and efficiently into his type, and fit it so well that he couldn’t become the serious actor he wanted to be.” Power was always cast as a male sex object and couldn’t transcend that role.

“Despite his success, I think he was a tragic figure,” Basinger says. “He had an enormous acting talent and came from a serious acting family. But people were happy just to watch him be beautiful. He was frustrated by what he could have done and didn’t get a chance to do.”

Basinger devotes several chapters to stars who became enormously popular with the public but who ultimately



Versatile French actor Charles Boyer played a villain opposite Ingrid Bergman in *Gaslight* (1944).

didn't fit well within the star machine system. For instance, Lana Turner and Errol Flynn were two glamorous, fun-loving, attractive stars whose notorious lives off-screen finally hurt their careers.

Deanna Durbin and Jean Arthur were two successful stars who eventually left behind their fame. Durbin was a talented young singer who was signed to her first contract by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer at age 13. By age 15, she began to be heavily promoted in fan magazines, and with her first feature, *Three Smart Girls* (1937), for Universal Pictures, she became an overnight sensation. Audiences loved her innocence and her type, a “feisty, little Miss Fix-It, a peculiar form of Cinderella.” She appeared in 21 feature films in 11 years and helped save Universal from financial ruin. However, as she grew older and matured, Durbin no longer wanted to play spunky young girls, and the studios didn't want to hear her complaints. So at 28 years old and one of the highest paid stars in the industry, she married and moved to France, never to be heard from again.

Jean Arthur was an unusual case, because she became a movie star twice but never found happiness in the industry. She became a leading lady during the silent era, and in the 1930s and '40s became a movie star again. She was a special talent, an intelligent, exuberant actress with a singular voice who finally found her type when she was cast as a brash, go-getting newspaperwoman in Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936). Arthur was happiest when she was left to act in the privacy of a movie set. She never felt comfortable with the public side of being a star and avoided publicity.

Basinger admires two of Hollywood's biggest stars, Irene Dunne and Loretta Young, who managed to forge film careers for decades outside the studio system, developing their own projects and picking roles that suited them.

“Dunne and Young were truly remarkable pioneer women,” Basinger says. “When their seven-year contracts ran out, they did not renew them. They took control of their own careers in a tough business.”

One longtime star who was able to adapt and thrive within the studio system was Charles Boyer, the only French actor who had a long career in Hollywood. Basinger was pleased to reevaluate his work for her book.

“Boyer was a wonderful actor,” Basinger says. “He had enormous depth and range. He could do comedy and drama to the outer limits especially well. When you look at him with his big, bedroomy eyes and a French accent,

you think, this guy's career should last five minutes. But he was intelligent, adaptable, talented, and could keep his career going.”

The resilience of the star machine found its ultimate challenge with the onset of World War II. When the war broke out, many of the big male stars were drafted, while others volunteered, including Tyrone Power, Jimmy Stewart, and Clark Gable. New male stars needed to be created, and new stories were created as well, about young men going to war and the women whom they were involved with. Basinger writes that the star machine “retooled and found some big-time stars for the duration: young fellas and girls next door, zanies and exotics, dogs and kids, and one certified all-American box office champion [Betty Grable].”

Among the most successful stars developed at this time were the fresh-faced Van Johnson, with “his boy-next-door, natural qualities” and the lovely June Allyson with her gravelly voice, the perfect World War II girl-next-door. Both Johnson and Allyson could sing and dance and perform both musical and more serious roles.

Another big star created by wartime was the wildly energetic comedienne Betty Hutton.

“Hutton seemed to represent the underlying insanity of the time,” Basinger says. “She had a crazy, out-of-control persona and yet she also had a very sensitive vulnerability about her. Zany was a word that was very popular during the war, and zaniness was Betty Hutton and all the kinds of crazy entertainment that people went to for escape during those years.”

The biggest star during this time was Betty Grable, whose pinup photo became the favorite of GIs overseas and an emblem of World War II. She found fame by chance as a replacement for another popular leading lady, Alice Faye, in the 1940 Technicolor film *Down Argentine Way*, when Faye got appendicitis. Grable and the film caught on big with audiences, and a huge star was born. She was a top-10 box office draw 10 years in a row from 1942–51.

Basinger concludes her book with a chapter about stardom today. Contemporary movie stars make enormous sums of money and do not have the restrictions of the studio system. However, they have to pay for all the help and support that was given to a star within the studio system. They also have to protect themselves constantly from the public and bad publicity.

The movie business now isn't concerned with manufacturing movie stars as much as manufacturing blockbuster

hits. The industry, of course, still wants to find bankable stars but it can buy them for use in a single film. Stars can also be found in other mediums, such as sports, music, and television.

“Today movies can be successful without movie stars. A movie like *Transformers* doesn't need to have any real stars in it, and it can be a blockbuster,” Basinger says. “And small, independent films can come out with people who aren't well-known and still be very successful.”

Stars can still be manufactured and often that happens on television.

“The Disney Channel does it all the time,” Basinger says. “You create stars by taking unknowns and placing them in a vehicle that defines them and that people want to see.”

Stars today no longer possess the air of mystery or the exalted status they had in the past.

“They aren't as magical because we aren't as distanced from them,” Basinger says. “They're in our faces everywhere we look. Our illusions about them cannot be maintained the same way as in the past. We know too much about them. We, as a public, seem to tire of them very quickly.”

Nevertheless, when Basinger traveled around the country talking about her book, she found audiences eager to listen about past movie celebrities.

“I was struck by how much people wanted to hear about this topic,” she says. “No matter what anybody says, people are still fascinated by the concept of movie stardom.”



STARS ON DVD

The Awful Truth (1937) with Irene Dunne, Cary Grant

The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938) with Errol Flynn, Olivia de Havilland

The Bishop's Wife (1947) with Loretta Young, Cary Grant

Down Argentine Way (1940) with Betty Grable, Don Ameche

Gaslight (1944) with Charles Boyer, Ingrid Bergman

In the Good Old Summertime (1949) with Judy Garland, Van Johnson

The Mark of Zorro (1940) with Tyrone Power, Linda Darnell

The Miracle of Morgan's Creek (1944) with Betty Hutton, Eddie Bracken

Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936) with Jean Arthur, Gary Cooper

The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946) with Lana Turner, John Garfield