

Women Like That

Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich & Mercedes de Acosta

Queen Christina, debonair in high boots and brass buttons, grasps the face of Countess Ebba between her hands and kisses her squarely on the mouth.

Amy Jolly, carefully dressed in tails, white tie and top hat, steps off the stage to stroll among the audience as she sings. She spies a pretty girl at one of the tables and kisses her. She takes a flower from behind the girl's ear and asks, "May I have this?"

In 1933, Greta Garbo played the title role of *Queen Christina*, the real-life monarch of Garbo's native Sweden from 1632-1654. Marlene Dietrich played Amy Jolly, a fictional cabaret singer in the 1930 film, *Morocco*.

For gay women in the early '30s, these flickers of lesbian content were decidedly a thrill. Even today to watch Greta Garbo stride across the television screen and say, "I have no intention of dying an old maid. I shall die a bachelor!" is enough to make us gasp in delight. Even more exciting for us now is the knowledge that two of Hollywood's most beautiful and glamorous actresses did indeed kiss the girls.

Garbo and Dietrich are still considered the most alluring stars of the 1930s. There were many similarities between their images and careers, and even their private lives. Both were from northern Europe: Garbo was Swedish and Dietrich German. Each had a sensual, mysterious image; both wore men's clothes (from the same tailor no less); and, although they did not meet until the '50s, from about 1933 to 1938 they shared the same lover, a woman named Mercedes de Acosta.

De Acosta was no less glamorous or intriguing than her famous girlfriends. She was something of a star collector and wooed some of the most glamorous women in Hollywood. She claimed to be descended from Spanish nobility, although her family emigrated to the US from Cuba and that is more likely where they were from. She was a screenwriter at MGM, part of a thriving community of creative gay and bisexual women in New York and California which included Edna St. Vincent Millay, Willa Cather, Mary Martin, Janet Gaynor and many other women well-known in their day.

In the late '20s, when silent films were still being produced, Garbo was in Hollywood making films and perfecting her image as a beautiful and mysterious woman. She quickly became one of MGM's biggest stars.

francesca susanna

Marlene Dietrich was in Berlin where she performed sexually ambiguous roles on stage and began to receive film offers. She had seen Garbo in several films already, and when Dietrich's first movie *Prinzessin Olala* (Princess Ooh la la) was released in September of 1928, the *Film Kurier's* critic wrote, "...here's another Garbo!"

Dietrich made several more films while still in Berlin, including *The Blue Angel*, creating her signature heavy-lidded gaze and languorous sultriness. Critics continued to compare her to Garbo, to accuse Dietrich of purposely mimicking her. Dietrich did indeed, in those days, admit to being much taken with Garbo and her mysterious beauty, and she remained obsessed by the Swedish star for decades.

In the summer of 1931, de Acosta was invited to the home of another foreign screenwriter, Salka Viertel, who was from Germany and was also great friends with Garbo, whom she had invited. De Acosta and Garbo were immediately smitten with each other. Garbo was antsy in Hollywood and changed residences numerous times. The next time she moved she was within half a block of de Acosta's house. Then de Acosta moved right next door to Garbo. Finally they moved in together.

As lovers will, they quarreled. In July of 1932, Garbo went home to Sweden for eight months leaving de Acosta heartbroken. De Acosta did not remain in this state for too long. On an outing to the theater with a friend, she exchanged looks with a woman seated in the row in front of them: Marlene Dietrich. The next day Dietrich called on de Acosta bearing a large bouquet of white flowers.

More flowers followed as well as a barrage of other gifts: Lalique vases, clothes, lamps. De Acosta sent them back to the department store they came from, but nonetheless, that autumn, the two women began a love affair that "ragged" until May of 1933. In April of that year, Garbo returned from Sweden, and de Acosta and Garbo resumed their relations.

Hollywood was then undoubtedly the seedbed of what

is now called polyamory. All three of these women carried on with other lovers while with each other. No one seems to have thought anything of it. It was de Acosta's modus operandi; although she preferred her girlfriends to be monogamous with her, she did not practice it herself. She wrote to Dietrich quite candidly of her feelings for Garbo (she was tied around the star's little finger) and Dietrich responded sympathetically.

Until the '50s, the actresses' bisexuality was only speculation. In 1955 *Confidential* magazine outed Dietrich to the world, linking her to a young woman called "Frede" and to Jo Carstairs, a wealthy butch with whom Dietrich was involved in the late '30s. At the time Dietrich was no longer making films but performed in Las Vegas, a change of venue which proved a lucrative venture for her. The exposé didn't hurt her reputation at all, although it probably would have 20 years earlier.

In 1960 de Acosta published her memoirs, *Here Lies the Heart*, which detailed many of her affairs, including her relationships with Garbo and Dietrich. Up to this point de Acosta had remained on more or less good terms with both women. Dietrich remained a generous friend to de Acosta for decades, even reading and commenting on drafts of her memoir. Garbo, as mysterious and fiercely reclusive as her old Hollywood image, was outraged. When de Acosta phoned her on New Year's Day, Garbo hung up on her and refused to speak to or see De Acosta again. ▼

Further Reading:

Blue Angel, by Donald Spoto, Doubleday, 1992

Loving Garbo, by Hugo Vickers, Random House, 1994

Garbo: A Biography, by Barry Paris, Knopf, 1995

Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film by Andrea Weiss, Penguin, 1992

Francesca Susanna is a writer interested in lesbians through history. She lives in Burlington. This is the first of an ongoing series.

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