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"Blue Boy" in Vienna

One photograph often turns up in Marlene Dietrich biographies: it portrays her as "Blue Boy". Sometimes it is attributed to a fancy-dress ball in Berlin at the end of the twenties, at other times to a play, and at still others it is seen as evidence of her lesbian inclinations. In fact, it was taken in 1927 at a photographer's studio in Vienna called d'Ora. The actual occasion is not known. "Blue Boy", the picture of eternal youth, is a copy of Thomas Gainsborough's painting of the same name. The motif was particularly popular among "educated gentlemen friends"; in Marlene Dietrich's case, it bears early testimony to what was seen in Hollywood as her provocative "cross-dressing". Her memories of Vienna, of her lovers - actors Willi Forst and Igo Sym - were presumably what caused her to save the costume. Though it is also a symbol of that sexual permissiveness which characterized bohemian life in Vienna and Berlin. "In Europe it doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman. We make love with anybody we find attractive", she is said to have told producer Budd Schulberg on her first passage to America.

After marrying Rudolf Sieber in 1923 and the birth of her daughter Maria in December 1924, she resumed her work in films and on the stage after a year's absence. Her success was, however, rather limited. The parts she played in films were conventional: coquettes and elegant ladies with a disposition for the demimonde who either lived to experience a happy ending in the hands of a rich beau or were tragically killed by a fatal but redeeming gunshot. Until the beginning of 1928, the roles offered to Marlene were mostly mediocre and sometimes not even that. Nevertheless, she had become the family's breadwinner, her husband working as a poorly paid production manager for Harry Piel, an actor in rather trashy films.

Marlene Dietrich's artistic development was hardly significant during her years in Austria. Privately, however, it was a period of great passion. An ardent affair with Willi Forst while shooting **café elektrik/die liebesbörse** (1927, Gustav Ucicky) established a lifelong friendship. Igo Sym

taught her to play the "singing saw", and a plaque on the instrument with the dedication "Igo, Vienna 1927" indicated more than just a professional relationship.



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The legendary „singing saw“

In 1944/45, the "singing saw" became Marlene's trademark while entertaining American GIs. Igo Sym, on the other hand, later sided with the Nazis. After the German invasion of Poland, he was involved with the Gestapo. He was executed by a commando of the Polish underground government on March 7, 1941.

In the thirties, Marlene Dietrich chose Austria, alongside France, as her European residence. Though her motivation for leaving Germany was not so much romantic as it was her abhorrence of the Third Reich.

Blue angel

Everything came together during the production of the film **der blaue engel** (1930). When Marlene Dietrich first went to Babelsberg for the screen test in the summer

of 1929, she had not seen the script and knew nothing about the role she was trying out for. Moreover, it is improbable that she had already seen a film by Josef von Sternberg who was to be her director.

Professionally, 1928 and 1929 were successful years for Marlene. She had played central figures in five films, besides performing in plays and revues. And although her films were only moderately well received and her performances on stages outside Berlin went almost unnoticed, she was no longer unknown. Nevertheless, she could not compete with the fame of an Olga Tschechowa, the beauty of a Brigitte Helm or the class of a Louise Brooks. She was first choice for second-rate films.



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Marlene as bewitching Lola Lola

With the production of **der blaue engel**, producer Erich Pommer and actor Emil Jannings were hoping to reap late glory for a strategy they had obstinately pursued. And although they had often worked together and successfully at that, they still heartily distrusted one another. Pommer had been dismissed by Ufa in 1927 because of the high production costs of Fritz Lang's **metropolis**; afterwards he worked in Hollywood for almost a year, but when his contract expired, he could not find new employment. Jannings, in contrast, who was engaged in Hollywood already in 1926 thanks to his performance in Pommer's production **varieté** (1925), enjoyed the highest esteem of American producers. He was one of the top-paid actors in the USA, but the luxury that surrounded him in Hollywood did not dispel his basic sense of being exposed to a cultural and social wasteland. To him, Hollywood was and remained an unreal place. On May 14, 1929, on his return to Germany, he exclaimed in relief to the journalists: "At long last a real tree again, a meadow, a cloud!"

While Erich Pommer was still negotiating new contracts with Hollywood

studios for continuing work in the USA, Jannings was pressing Ufa to rehire Pommer as production manager - and this was not without a certain egoistic calculation. As Pommer told his wife Gertrud in September 1927: "He is certainly not doing this out of friendship for me (...), but in the hope that if I hook something big based on my experience and proficiency over there, I might be able to increase the odds of his coming over (...)." Because of his experience, Pommer - who knew how and with whom to successfully negotiate films in the USA - expected to be offered better terms for new projects in Germany than in Hollywood.

This joint strategy corresponded well with American director Josef von Sternberg's intentions. Viennese by birth, he had gone to America with his parents in 1901, and made the highly successful film **the last command** with Emil Jannings in 1928. For his performance in the latter as well as in **the way of all flesh** (Victor Fleming), which also premiered in 1928, Jannings was honored with the very first Academy Award - the Oscar - as best actor in 1929. Sternberg's long-standing colleague Carl Winston also accompanied him to Berlin and was put in charge of the English versions at Ufa until 1933. Pommer, Sternberg, Jannings, Carl and Sam Winston as well as Karl Vollmoeller, a scriptwriter whom Sternberg had met while working with Charlie Chaplin, were the "Americans" of the production; now all they needed were the Germans.



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The artist and his artwork

There are countless stories of Marlene Dietrich's discovery. And there are just as many

of all the actresses who were allegedly to have played the role of Lola Lola. The most likely version, in other words, the one that seems closest to reality, is described by the actress Ruth Landshoff-York. She met Sternberg by way of Karl Vollmoeller and recommended her colleague Marlene with whom she had performed in Vienna at the Theater an der Josefstadt in 1927. To get an idea of her dramatic abilities, Sternberg went to the Berlin revue "Zwei Krawatten" in which Marlene Dietrich was featured. Hans Albers and Rosa Valetti were also signed on for the film from this revue. They were later joined by comedian Kurt Gerron in the role of Kiepert, the Magician, and Karl Huszar-Puffy as the innkeeper of the "Blauer Engel". Margo Lion, Marlene Dietrich's "best friend" from the revue "Es liegt in der Luft", was not even considered for the role. She was decidedly too thin. To make Marlene appear slimmer, Sternberg grouped corpulent main characters and plump supporting actors around his leading lady.



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Ufa Plakat zu „Der blaue Engel“, 1930
 Grafik: Alfred Herrmann
 Druck: August Scherl Offsetdruck
 Format: 90,7 cm x 62 cm

der blaue engel was originally planned as Ufa's first big sound film starring its most treasured and important actor Emil Jannings. Jannings had been planned as the crowd-

puller, but Marlene Dietrich stole the show. Viewers were not drawn to the fading emotionality of the philistine professor played by Jannings or to his undoing by his fantasies, but to the impertinent eroticism of Marlene which eclipsed all that was petty bourgeois. To the same extent that Professor Rath loses credibility as an authority, Lola Lola takes on dazzling dimensions. Rath assimilates his nickname Unrat, which means filth or rubbish. Their costumes outwardly reveal their parallel development: his fall and her glamorous rise. Clad in a frock coat and top hat, Unrat, a swollen-headed has-been, forgets in his sexual bewilderment first his hat in Lola Lola's dressing room. Then we see him - after a night of drink - in disheveled clothes in Lola Lola's bed, holding a "Negro doll" which Marlene Dietrich had already established as her talisman in the film **ich küsse ihre hand, madame** (1929, Robert Land) and with which Gary Cooper later shares the sofa in Amy Jolly's dressing room in **morocco** (1930, Josef von Sternberg). And then as Lola Lola's husband, and in shabby attire, Unrat hawks postcards of his wife, to ultimately - as last station of his decline - go dramatically mad on the stage of the "Blauer Engel" in a clown's costume. In contrast, Lola Lola is at first no more than a cheap chorus girl in a tacky outfit or a pin-up girl on a postcard who displays her charms to everyone who dares to puff at her ever-so-naughty skirt feathers. Yet off-stage, in her daily life at home, she prefers simple clothes, revealing herself to be a housewife who, wearing an apron, rolls up her sleeves. When the variety troupe returns to Unrat's hometown, she is wrapped in a fur coat and clearly on her way to becoming a grande dame, outgrowing the demimonde of show business. For her famous last scene, as Ruth Landshoff-York recounted, Marlene Dietrich put together her costume herself. "But she still wanted a hat. (...) A hat, which would be both a symbol of freedom and of the tradition of being on the road. And Marlene, with an enchanting smile of cryptic superiority, begs just such a hat off a traveling carpenter." (1) Amidst all the glamorous gowns in Dietrich's estate, the hat is a rather inconspicuous piece, from a shop for work clothes in Hamburg-St. Pauli. No longer an easy catch for a night, she now straddles a chair and sings her demands with determination and self-confidence: "From head to toe primed, geared for love ... and that is my world." While Jannings, the professor, ends his life in the cool grave of the classroom, clutching the desk as he dies, Lola Lola

(1) Ruth Landshoff-York: Klatsch, Ruhm und kleine Feuer. Biographische Impressionen Cologne/Berlin: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 1963, p. 46.

continues her travels. Her next stop:
Hollywood.



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Marlene at Lehrter Bahnhof in Berlin leaving for
Hollywood

Lessons

On the opening night of **der blaue engel**, Marlene Dietrich left Berlin for America. Paramount had succeeded in getting her to sign a contract with them in Berlin on February 20, 1930.

Hollywood hired German stars, among other reasons, for making German versions of American films. In the first years of sound films, many technical uncertainties still existed in what was later to become the common synchronization process. As a consequence, French, Spanish and German actors often went to Hollywood for a brief spell to film - in their mother tongues and in original settings - the scenes their American colleagues had played. Foreign actors who had five-year contracts and were to play in one such version could almost be sure that their studios did not know what to do with them afterwards. Marlene Dietrich's first job in Hollywood was to host the German version of the film **paramount on parade** (1930). This version has apparently been lost and so we can only speculate that although her part in this film directed by Josef von Sternberg was short, it must have been quite effective. A photo has survived: for the first time we see her wearing black tails; she is that elegant being between the genders whose provocative appearance was to cause a stir in conservative America in the years to come. The fact that this image is generally first associated with **morocco**, her first international hit, is certainly due to the strategy later followed by the Sternberg/Dietrich duo: small parts had never existed for Marlene Dietrich.

Immediately following her arrival in Hollywood, Sternberg took charge of his personal discovery. Though only shortly before, upon her arrival in New York, an overly

zealous member of the Paramount staff had booked a session for her at photographer Irving Chidnoff's studio. The resulting series of portraits show Marlene Dietrich in the usual poses of a film actress, from coy to dreamy. These were the first photographs made by Paramount of its new star. And in no way did they correspond to the image which Sternberg had wanted to give her. In the coming years, no picture of Dietrich was to leave the Paramount offices without Sternberg giving his okay. This was the first of many lessons which Marlene Dietrich was to learn.



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Starportrait by Irving Chidnoff,
New York 1930.

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