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American Legends: The Life of Gloria Swanson

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“Fame was thrilling only until it became grueling. Money was fun only until you ran out of things to buy.” – Gloria Swanson

It goes without saying that the most enduring image of Gloria Swanson is the famous shot of her in Sunset Boulevard (1950), head tilted backward, stating, “Alright, Mr. DeMille, I’m ready for my close up.” Indeed, for many, the very mention of “Gloria Swanson” conjures the name of “Norma Desmond,” her character in Sunset Boulevard, directed by Billy Wilder. That the shot of Desmond requesting her close-up remains indelibly imprinted in the minds of so many speaks in large part to the power of Sunset Boulevard, one of the most revered films of its times and the most famous film of Gloria Swanson’s career. By dint of her performance in the film, Swanson has become almost synonymous with Hollywood’s silent era.

In many respects, Swanson’s status as the female face of the silent era is entirely apropos. Working in the 1920s for Cecil B. DeMille in his lavish productions, Swanson commanded salaries of more than $1 million per year, sums that Paramount was only too willing to provide for the virtual guarantee of high box office receipts that her films provided. Swanson worked with a cross section of famous silent era figures, such Mack Sennett and Charlie Chaplin (although her experience with Chaplin did not fare well) during her early years with Keystone, as well as collaborations with DeMille and Erich Von Stroheim during her more mature years. Yet at the same time, the histrionics of Swanson’s character in Wilder’s film belie the sophistication that Swanson brought to the screen, as well as the salient role she played in shaping cinematic representations of women during the onset of the “new woman” in 1920s America. In other words, while one could justifiably argue that Sunset Boulevard stands as the finest film of Swanson’s career, it obfuscates the impact Swanson had during her prime, not only in the film industry but also in society more broadly.

American Legends: The Life of Gloria Swanson looks at the life and career of one of America’s most famous actresses. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about Gloria Swanson like never before, in no time at all.

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