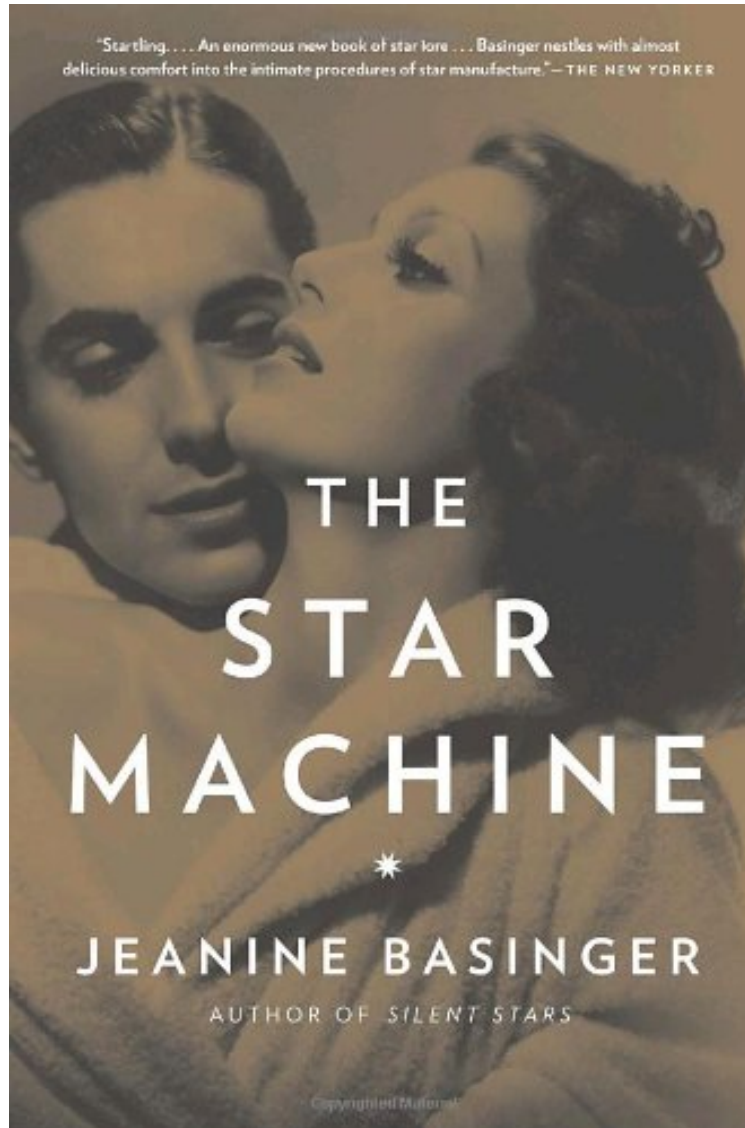


The Star Machine

Jeanine Basinger

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Jeanine Basinger : The Star Machine before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Star Machine:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. lively, fun informative By Zangikulike all Basinger books, positively stuffed with info, this one on the old Hollywood studio system and how it sucked in, chewed up and spit out the "stars" it manufactured, including Typrone Power, Errol Flynn, Deanna Durbin, Irene Dunne, Charles Boyer, William Powell and others. lots of good photos, fashion, trivia as well as serious biography and considerable attention to social

politics, audience demographics, etc. altho rigorously researched, the book is also chatty fun. too much on Lana Turner, who is sooooo much less interesting than the others but who is always heavily favored by Basinger. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. AwesomeBy Ashley J.H. OsborneOne of my more favorite film history books. I had never done much research on this subject until I got to graduate school and had to write an essay on the actual business of Hollywood in the 1930s-50s. This book is so easy to read, packed full of information, and intensely interesting. I feel like an expert on the subject even though I'm truly still only a novice. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. " It was amazing to me what individuals had to put up with ...By Anna MaeVery insightful and well researched. I learned a lot that I didn't know before about how Hollywood worked during the "Golden Years!" It was amazing to me what individuals had to put up with to become stars. They must have really wanted it and were willing to pay the price. The fact remains they left us with a legacy of wonderful movies and movie history which we'll never see the likes of again.

From one of our most distinguished film scholars, comes a rich, penetrating, amusing book about the golden age of movies and how the studios worked to manufacture stars. With revelatory insights and delightful asides, Jeanine Basinger shows us how the studio star machine worked when it worked, how it failed when it didn't, and how irrelevant it could sometimes be. She gives us case studies focusing on big stars groomed into the system: the awesomely beautiful (and disillusioned) Tyrone Power; the seductive, disobedient Lana Turner; and a dazzling cast of others. She anatomizes their careers, showing how their fame happened, and what happened to them as a result. Deeply engrossing, full of energy, wit, and wisdom, *The Star Machine* is destined to become a classic of the film canon.

Startling. . . . An enormous new book of star lore . . . Basinger nestles with almost delicious comfort into the intimate procedures of star manufacture. *The New Yorker* Luxurious, often delicious. . . . Ms. Basinger tells her story with her customary verve and sass-she's the Rosalind Russell of film historians. *The New York Observer* Entertaining and informative. . . . [Basinger], whose enthusiasm for movies is reflected on every page, has a deft way of encapsulating the kernel of an actor's attraction. *Chicago Sun-Times* Engaging. . . . Smart, deeply researched but also chatty and fast-flowing. . . . Basinger's study of the studios' relentless spin control makes an instructive prism through which to view long skeins of Hollywood film history. *Los Angeles Times* About the Author Jeanine Basinger is the chair of film studies at Wesleyan University and the curator of the cinema archives there. She has written nine other books on film, including *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930-1960*; *Silent Stars*, winner of the William K. Everson Award for Film History; *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*; and *American Cinema: 100 Years of Filmmaking*, the companion book for a ten-part PBS series. She lives with her husband in Middletown, Connecticut. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Part One: Stars and the Factory System Its a crackpot business that sets out to manufacture a product it cant even define, but that was old Hollywood. Thousands of people in the movie business made a Wizard-of-Oz living, working hidden levers to present an awe-inspiring display on theatre screens: Movie Stars! Hollywood made em and sold em daily, gamely producing a product for which its creators had no concrete explanation. Sometimes they made films that told the story of their own star-making business, and even then they couldnt say what exactly a movie star was. They just trusted that the audience wouldnt need an explanation because it would believe what it was seeing star presence could verify its own existence. Shes got that little something extra, muses James Mason in 1954s *A Star Is Born*, quoting actress Ellen Terry for credibility. Since hes talking about Judy Garland as he watches her sing *The Man That Got Away*, the point is made. (She has something! cries out Lowell Sherman when he spies waitress Constance Bennett in the earlier version of the story, *What Price Hollywood?*) Hollywood just told people that he or she or it (lets not forget Rin Tin Tin and Trigger) had that little something extra and let it go at that. As a definition, it wasnt much, but it was all anyone needed and theres no arguing with it. The truth is that nobody either then or now can define what a movie star is except by specific example, [1] but the workaday world of moviemaking never gave up trying to figure it out. As soon as the business realized that moviegoers wanted to see stars, they grappled with trying to find a useful definition for the phenomenon of movie stardom, which is really not like any other kind. Marlon Brando called all their attempts a lot of frozen monkey vomit. Adding up the monkeys offerings, its clear that over the years, Hollywood collected a sensible list of informed observations: A star has exceptional looks. Outstanding talent. A distinctive voice that can easily be recognized and imitated. A set of mannerisms. Palpable sexual appeal. Energy that comes down off the screen. Glamour. Androgyny. Glowing health and radiance. Panache. A single tiny flaw that mars their perfection, endearing them to ordinary people. Charm. The good luck to be in the right place at the right time (also known as just plain good luck). An emblematic quality that audiences believe is who they really are. The ability to make viewers know what they are thinking whenever the camera comes up close. An established type (by which is meant that they could believably play the same role over and over again). A level of comfort in front of the camera. And, of course, she has something, the bottom line of which is its something you cant define. Theres also the highly self-confident version of something you cant define that is a variation of Justice Potter Stuarths famous remark about pornography: I know it when I see it. The

last one makes sense. Seeing it is, in fact, the only reliable definition of stardom. The problem for the business was that audience members didn't all agree on what they saw. Some said that Greer Garson was a talented actress of ladylike grace and charm, but Pauline Kael called her one of the most richly syllabled queenly horrors of Hollywood. For their legions of fans (who still endure), Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald were the believable epitome of musical romance, but for Nol Coward they were an affair between a mad rocking horse and a rawhide suitcase.[2] Hollywood followed majority opinion, promoting the stars for which there was the most consistent audience agreement, while they worked hard to figure out the mystery of why one person (Clark Gable) could be loved by fans and someone who looked just like him (John Carroll) could not. It was Topic A in Hollywood, and studio bosses didn't discuss it only in isolated boardrooms. They read stars mail, quizzed fan clubs, and enlisted the help of movie magazines to create questionnaires about who the public liked and why. Answers from fans almost always boiled down to one thing: a popular movie star was perceived to have a tangible physical presence. He's so real. I almost feel I can reach out and touch him (Gable). She's adorable, very warm and real (Janet Gaynor). When she's on screen, you can't look at anyone else, and you feel you're right up there with her (Garbo). I think he's just like someone I could know right here in Ohio, and if I needed anything he'd step down and get it for me (Van Johnson). In other words, it's what Elvis Presley's character in Jailhouse Rock (1957) tells his co-star after he unexpectedly kisses her. She sputters about his cheap tactics, but he nails down the reason she'll accept him: That ain't tactics, honey. That's just the beast in me. Orson Welles told Peter Bogdanovich that this beast was best represented by Jimmy Cagney, who passed the real test of the term star quality because he could displace air . . . be a screen filler. Fans confirmed their desire for this tangible presence, telling moviemakers what they responded to in movie stars really was something that seemed physical. Great movie stars were alive inside the frame. It was their home, their owned space. They were utterly at ease up there (and, sadly enough, often nowhere else). When Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby, two consummate stars, sing Did Ya Evah? in High Society (1956), they prove the point. Did Ya Evah? was a tough assignment. Sinatra and Crosby had to sing, dance, hit their camera marks, respect the sophisticated Cole Porter lyrics, deliver scripted dialogue, stay within their characters, pretend to be slightly drunk, keep the beat of the orchestra playback, move around a specially designed library set with limited space while following a specific choreography that had to look improvised, and never forget that they were rivals for the audience's affection, Frankie and Bing. They have to watch out for each other in more ways than one. (Each was keenly aware of the other's star power.) Did you hear about poor Blanche? She got caught in an avalanche, sings Sinatra, carefully enunciating Porter's words. Game girl, mutters Crosby, riffing on the lyrics. She got up and finished fourth. Sinatra responds with his own ad lib: I think I'll dance! As he wobbles by, Crosby cautions, Well, don't hurt yourself. These men are what stars are, doing what stars do. They seem as if they're making it up right in front of you. Looking at them performing Did Ya Evah? is a lesson in star definition: two hardworking professionals are executing a complicated musical assignment in order to look like two amateurs who're reeling through an accidental musical romp. Fifty years later, after they're both dead and gone, they are still alive inside the frame still making it appear that it's happening right in front of you, in the moment. The illusion of stardom is always the illusion of ease. In the golden era of Hollywood, filmmakers knew that stardom required personalities like Crosby and Sinatra. Finding such stars was what the studios did. But how did they do it? Was there a formula? No. But there was a process. The hard part was that the process cost a great deal of money, and it was fraught with potential disasters. No matter what they did, no matter how smart they were about it, it could go wrong, because no one knew for sure what they were doing. Moviemakers asked themselves many questions to define stardom. Was it luck, an accident of fate? When Alice Faye got appendicitis and had to be quickly replaced in Down Argentine Way (1940), her desperate studio (20th Century Fox) stuck a cute blonde who'd been around town for nearly a decade into her part: Betty Grable. Given a chance by an appendix, Grable succeeded and became even more famous than Faye, lasting for an unprecedented decade at the top of popularity polls. All her life, Grable said her stardom happened because I was just lucky. The business asked itself, Was it only luck? Or did it require some special role that fit perfectly to what the actor could do? When five-time Olympic gold medal swimmer Johnny Weissmuller was cast as Tarzan, the role gave him a lifetime of fame. Since he was no actor (by his own frank admission), a movie with little dialogue and a lot of swimming fit him perfectly. No Tarzan, no Johnny? Maybe actors became big stars because they seemed to incorporate their own opposites. Shirley Temple, that adorable little tot, was also a bossy brat who faked her way forward. If you met a kid like that in real life, you'd want to smack her. Robert Walker seemed shy and innocent, but Hitchcock brought forward some disturbed quality that made him perfect as the evil Bruno in Strangers on a Train (1951). Barbara Stanwyck was tough but vulnerable. Tyrone Power was masculine yet feminine. Carole Lombard seemed like a fun pal, but she was the ultimate in sophisticated glamour. Maybe it was that a star had to find the perfect on-screen mate to supply some other half. As Katharine Hepburn famously said about Astaire and Rogers, He gives her class and she gives him sex. Was it some perfect co-starring that made magic and solidified the career? Would Flynn have made it without de Havilland? Eddy without MacDonald? Walter Pidgeon without Greer Garson? What could Abbott have been without Costello? Without Dorothy Lamour, the Hope-Crosby Road pictures wouldn't have worked as well. On-screen, Hope and Crosby were essentially disrespectful. They mocked the plot, the characters, the audience, and themselves in equal measure. They thumbed their noses at the filmmaking process itself,

breaking the fourth wall and making self-referential and topical gags, but Lamour was always present to ground them. (They called her Momma.) She was beautiful, of course, and her songs broke their tension, but she dealt with Hope and Crosby calmly, in an unflappable manner. She was a gorgeous 1940s Margaret Dumont to leaven their Marxian antics, a center of cheerful gravitas.[3] Maybe stardom wasn't about co-stars or other actors at all. Maybe it was a director's keen eye that saw possibilities in an actor that no one else saw. Josef von Sternberg claimed for his star-making skill with Marlene Dietrich? (William Holden said that without director Billy Wilder to shape his acting career, I would have been Henry Aldrich.) Maybe lighting could make a woman a star (Claudette Colbert), or a costume (Joan Crawford's famous Letty Lynton tea dress and, later on, her shoulder pads and ankle-strapped shoes), a memorable song (Rita Hayworth's Put the Blame on Mame), or an appearance in the movie version of a legendary best seller (Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind*, 1939). Or maybe stardom was linked to some totally unpredictable minor personal trait? Was it Elvis's hips or Harlow's platinum hair? Did Joan Bennett's dye job (from blond to brunette) change her from just another pretty girl into a seductive movie queen? Gary Cooper was a great kisser. He always did it right, bending his co-star back, holding on, and kissing the devil out of her.[4] He was a great-looking guy with lots of talent, but was it kissing that put him over? With Gable, was it all in the mustache? In the end, the business forgot about questions and answers, and just kept its options open, realizing there would always be an unknown, abstract, and unpredictable part to the star-making process. They would always be reconciling opposing elements and taking big chances, treading a fine line between objective business plans and subjective audience response. A star was born, not made, writes W. Robert LaVine in *In a Glamorous Fashion: The Fabulous Years of Hollywood Costume Design*. He was right, but also wrong. You don't manufacture stars, said Joan Crawford (who was in a position to know). You manufacture toys. She was wrong, but also right. Studio moguls such as Louis B. Mayer, Harry Cohn, Jack Warner, Darryl Zanuck, Sam Goldwyn et al. understood this contradiction and faced up to it daily. They succeeded because they accepted that there was no need to define stardom; anything that worked was all the definition they needed. She's got something! would do just fine. Since they were in business, they knew they'd need to control as many things about creating movie stars as possible, but they'd gamble on the rest. The intelligence of the Hollywood businessmen who came to this conclusion and their astounding nerves seldom acknowledged. And so Hollywood, with its factory-like studio system, cheerfully made a living manufacturing a product it couldn't define, confident that someone out there (the little people) would do it for them and pay them for the privilege. They busied themselves looking for a Judy Garland to put up on the screen so the audience could find her and say She's got that little something you can't define but we can recognize when we see it because it's that little something extra. They would look for actors and actresses who could project the mysterious x factor of stardom. It was a crackpot idea, all right, but against all odds, they made it work because whatever it was, the x factor was viewable. In fact, there are examples of the x factor popping off the screen all over film history. It's the infrared in the dark of the movie house.[5] Bette Davis, even in her fake-blonde days, outshines everyone around her in forgotten movies like *So Big* (1932), *Housewife* (1934), and *Ex-Lady* (1933). Jimmy Cagney's animal magnetism wipes everyone out of the frame even in small parts in *Doorway to Hell* (1930) and *Other Men's Women* (1931). A young Esther Williams jumps out in an MGM wartime short entitled *Inflation*, which she made after her initial screen test and just before her first feature assignment. She's a beginner with no acting experience; a swimmer, for heaven's sake paired with a terrific actor, Edward Arnold. Arnold plays the devil, tempting Williams to break the rules of rationing and buy herself a fur coat. He gets totally lost when Williams confidently struts around in the coat, flashing her x factor. (Pressed to explain why such an inexperienced swimming champion could be turned into a big box office movie star, Arthur Freed searched hard for reasons. Finally he came up with She's cheerful!)[6] NOTES [1] Actor Frederic March didn't much like Joan Crawford, but asked to define stardom, he mentioned her name and said: "She was a star." [2] In talking about movie stardom, it's important not to confuse the old studio system in the Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s with the one that exists today. "Star" history has to be divided into "then" and "now" because the importance of stardom has diminished over time. The stars of silent film and of the great studio system were gods and goddesses. The public revered them, but they had to earn their stardom. Today anybody's a star who can get his or her name in front of the credits by negotiating for it. The next-door neighbor in a sitcom is a star. The term is the bottom rung of show business, and to compensate for its devaluation, there is a tarted-up power system of star levels: an upping of wattage. Above "star" is "superstar" and above "superstar" is "megastar." By this standard, Bogart and Davis and Cooper and Cagney are gigastars. As Baryshnikov said about Fred Astaire, "He's dancing. The rest of us are doing something else." [3] Lamour's sense of humor can be seen in *On Our Merry Way* (1948), in which, playing a movie star who does jungle movies (i.e., herself in a spoof of herself), she sings the unforgettable "I'm the Queen of the Hollywood Isles." Lamour was on top of things. She understood how the business worked and was known as "the girl who never made an enemy." Today her sarong is in the Smithsonian. [4] One of his leading ladies, Laraine Day (*The Story of Dr. Wassell*, 1944), said, "Gary kisses the way Charles Boyer looks like he kisses... Well! It was like holding a hand grenade and not being able to get rid of it. I was left breathless." [5] The observable "glow" of potential stardom was present from the very beginning of film history. Clara Bow pops off the screen in her earliest films (such as *Down to the Sea in Ships* in 1922). She's vivid, alive; a breath of fresh air that is the very definition of "screen presence." In his first silent film, *The Winning of Barbara Worth* (1926), Gary Cooper

shoved even star Ronald Colman aside. Audiences responded to his presence and *Variety* confirmed his charisma, saying he was "a youth who will be heard of on the screen."^[6] William's good cheer was so tangible that MGM felt comfortable referring to it as a joke. "Who's the picture of health?" sneers Caroll Baker in *Easy to Love* (1953), when she first spots her fival, Williams. From the Hardcover edition.