

Morocco

By Donna Ross

Modern audiences may find it difficult to embrace the artistry of a consummate film stylist like Josef von Sternberg, but it's the director's artistic vision that earned "Morocco" its reputation as a cinema classic. Describing aspects of a film about French Foreign Legionnaires in the North African desert as "delicate" might give today's viewers insight into Sternberg's auteurist approach. In his book "The Films of Josef von Sternberg," Andrew Sarris wrote that the characters in "Morocco" express "the most delirious feelings with the most delicate gestures." Similarly, film historian Charles Silver praised the "delicately textured effects of light and shadow" that distinguish "Morocco." Yet Sternberg tempered delicacy with control.

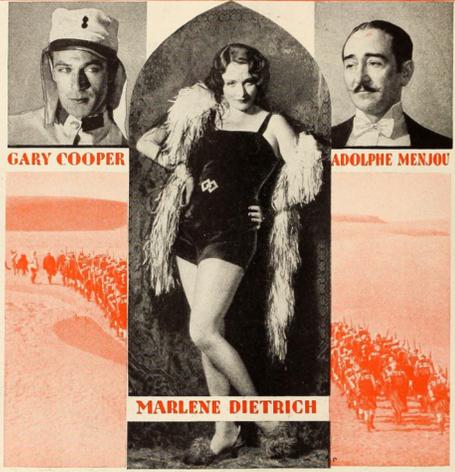
The director's stylistic control extended not merely to lighting effects, sets and cinematography, but most influentially to the film's nascent star, Marlene Dietrich, in her first American film. Here again, the director used delicate gestures to emphasize the fragility of the world-weary cabaret singer Amy Jolly: a languid gaze, a toss of a flower, an ironically coquettish display of a fan. Sternberg exercises his control by coaxing restrained performances from Dietrich and costar Gary Cooper.

The Sternberg-Dietrich partnership was the stuff of Hollywood legend. In an interview with Peter Bogdanovich in the 1970s, Sternberg proclaimed, "I am Miss Dietrich. Miss Dietrich is me." Born Jonas Sternberg in Austria-Hungary in 1894, the director spent much of his life in the U.S., finding work in a Fort Lee, New Jersey film company in 1915. By 1925, he was directing films under the name Josef von Sternberg. Chosen by popular actor Emil Jannings and producer Erich Pommer to make Germany's first major sound picture, "The Blue Angel," Sternberg gambled by casting a little-known Marlene Dietrich as night-club performer Lola Lola. The film made Dietrich an overnight sensation and further cemented Sternberg's reputation. The duo collaborated on a total of seven pictures, and many consider "Morocco" the pinnacle, including Charles Silver who called it Sternberg's warmest and best film.

The talents of Sternberg and Dietrich were instrumental to the success of "Morocco," but the lure of the film's exotic location and Foreign Legion adventure greatly contributed to its appeal upon release.

4 EXHIBITORS HERALD-WORLD December 6, 1930

A MARVELOUS MOTION PICTURE LEAPS TO A PLACE WITH SCREENDOM'S GREAT!



GARY COOPER MARLENE DIETRICH ADOLPHE MENJOU

"MOROCCO"

Josef von Sternberg's superb love drama begins 3rd record week at Rivoli, New York. Smash opening Nov. 25th at two-a-day Grauman's Chinese, Hollywood! "A new and a very great star"—Los Angeles Record echoes New York critics' rave!

PARAMOUNT

An advertisement from a December 1930 Exhibitors Herald-World touts the film's box office appeal. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

The foundation for that exotic allure was the novel "Amy Jolly, the Woman from Marrakesh" by French-German novelist and screenwriter Benno Vigny, who based the story of a soldier in the French Foreign Legion on an incident in his own life. Vigny's torrid tale of romance was capably adapted for the screen by Jules Furthman. Exotic adventures supplanted visually stunning, thought-provoking dramas like "Sunrise" (1927) and "The Crowd" (1928) that had dominated the industry a few years earlier. By 1930, escapist fare held greater appeal to American audiences swept up in the social, political and cultural disturbance wrought by the October 1929 stock market crash and the subsequent onset of the Great Depression.

In 1930, the motion picture industry was in the midst of its own upheaval. Sound had arrived three years earlier and changed everything. Initially, the addition of sound stifled the creative process as camera movement was restricted by the microphone's fixed

location in a soundproof booth. Consequently, pictures made during the first years of sound often feel stiff and stagey, flat, boring to look at, and difficult to understand clearly.

Writing in the "Journal of Film Preservation," Charles Silver singled out "Morocco" as "the first film to restore the fluidity and beauty of the late silents while simultaneously taking full advantage of the potential of sound." Sternberg understood the value of silence, Silver concluded. Minimal use of dialogue aided Dietrich by emphasizing her character's mystery while minimizing her heavy German accent. The absence of excessive dialog also benefitted Dietrich's co-star Gary Cooper as the womanizing Legionnaire Brown, and playing up the strong, silent type image he was cultivating.

The on-screen chemistry between Dietrich and Cooper (and purportedly off screen as well) adds yet another dimension to the film's classic status. Dietrich biographer Steven Bach observed that the chemistry derived from a balance of "Marlene's exoticism against the rough-hewn, down-to-earth maleness of an American type who cut her down to size and kept her ambiguity in line." Cooper was the bigger draw for U.S. audiences. He'd had 15 starring roles under his belt, including half a dozen talkies, although the studio and press were busily touting Dietrich. Paramount was building up Dietrich to be the next Garbo, but her breakout performance in the "Blue Angel" had not yet been seen in the States. Under the Svengali-like control of Sternberg, she blossomed, and on "Morocco" she learned lighting, makeup and costuming tricks that would serve her throughout her career.

There are two particular scenes in the film that seem to have guaranteed "Morocco" a place in cinema history. The first takes place in the nightclub where Amy Jolly is singing. Dietrich, dressed in top hat and tuxedo, takes a flower out of the hair of a woman in the audience and in exchange for the flower, kisses her on the lips, then tosses the flower to the admiring Legionnaire Brown. Much has been made of this display of sexual role reversal and its intended symbolism. The second memorable scene is the film's closing shot: Dietrich walks off into the dunes to join the camp followers trailing behind the Legionnaires. Charles Silver called it "one of the most supremely romantic gestures in film."

While considered a classic today, reviews at the time were mixed. Mordaunt Hall of the "New York Times" found that von Sternberg's pacing and the director's "economy of dialogue" handicapped the actors, resulting in "many an uncomfortable pause

between two performers." "Variety" panned what it called "the story's dumbness," although they praised Cooper and said, "He got the precise spirit of the role." Of the film's female lead, "Film Daily" predicted "Marlene Dietrich's introductory American vehicle has been successfully designed to provide a graceful entrance for a personality destined to capture and thrill the heroine worshippers."

In addition to its two stars, "Morocco" also featured the acting talents of Adolph Menjou, the suave third side of the film's love triangle and the purported alter ego of director Sternberg. Costumes by an uncredited Travis Banton, who designed Dietrich's wardrobe for several of her first American pictures, helped Sternberg create his vision of sexual ambiguity. The film was nominated for four Academy Awards including Best Director, Best Actress, Best Art Direction, and Best Cinematography by Lee Garmes, who also lensed the Dietrich-Sternberg collaborations "Dishonored" and "Shanghai Express." None of those nominated took home a statue.

Few have written more eloquently about the enigmatic nature of "Morocco" than Andrew Sarris. In his 1966 book "The Films of Josef von Sternberg," Sarris wrote, "Sternberg proved that consistency of style is ultimately more convincing than documentary certification. 'Morocco' is the product of a period when movies could still create their own mystique, and if Sternberg's sets look less real today, his characters ring even more true ... he never sacrifices the contemplative aspect of his compositions for easy effects of parody and pathos."

Further reading

Charles Higham, *Marlene: The Life of Marlene Dietrich* (W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1977)

Jeffrey Meyers, *Gary Cooper: American Hero* (Harper Collins Publishers, 1998)

Andrew Sarris, *The Films of Josef von Sternberg* (Museum of Modern Art, 1966)

Charles Silver, "Morocco and Morocco," *The Journal of Film Preservation* (International Federation of Film Archives, October 2001)

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Donna Ross is Boards Assistant for the National Film Preservation Board and maintains the National Film Registry website. Prior to joining the Library of Congress in 2009, she worked for the UCLA Film & Television Archive for more than a decade.