



## “Red Dust” (1932)

By Daniel Eagan

Based on the 1928 play that closed after eight performances, “Red Dust” was purchased by MGM as a vehicle for Greta Garbo and John Gilbert. When the stars’ relationship foundered, production head Irving Thalberg told Paul Bern to develop the piece as a romance for Gilbert and Jean Harlow. Born Harlean Carpenter in Missouri in 1911, Harlow was a newlywed in Los Angeles when she was offered work as an extra at the Fox Studio. Although not especially interested in acting at first, Harlow (she adopted her mother’s maiden name professionally) was soon appearing as an extra in comedy shorts and features.

She signed and broke a contract with Hal Roach, divorced her husband, signed a contract with Howard Hughes, and began receiving prominent movie roles like “Hell’s Angels” (1930) and “The Public Enemy” (1931). Harlow’s acting was rudimentary, but she was cast for her looks and personality more than her ability. Frank Capra found a way to soften her brassiness in “Platinum Blonde” (1931), but it was Paul Bern who first treated her seriously as an actress. Born Paul Levy in 1889, Bern acted, wrote screenplays, and managed movie theaters before moving to Hollywood in 1920, after his mother committed suicide. Introverted, bookish, he was, in the words of author Anita Loos, a “German psycho.”

Bern cast Harlow in “The Beast of the City” (1932), a gangster film starring Walter Huston. After her nationwide publicity tour, Loew’s president Nick Schenck bought her contract from Hughes for \$30,000. (Loew’s was the parent company of MGM). Irving Thalberg cast her in “Red-Headed Woman,” a racy drama about a stenographer who sleep her way to the top. The film was a sensation, and at twenty-one years of age, Harlow was a star.

Friends and colleagues were bewildered when Harlow married Bern in July 1932. By then the “Red Dust” project was taking shape. Screenwriter John Lee Mahin took credit for the idea of teaming Harlow with Gable instead of Gilbert. In retrospect, the switch to Gable seems intuitive, especially with Gilbert’s career in a free-fall. The two actors could not be more dissimilar. Gilbert projected a refined, even effete appearance; Gable was masculinity personified. He was born in rural Ohio in 1901, and dropped out of

high school to work a succession of labor-intensive jobs. Determined to become an actor, he joined a theater troupe led by actress Josephine Dillion. She took over his career, coaching him in acting and altering his appearance. They married in 1924, but three years later Gable left her and set out on his own.

Gable won leads in two Broadway plays before returning to California. He failed a screen test at MGM, but took a role as a villain in “The Painted Desert” (1931), a Western. By chance, he appeared in “The Secret Six” with Harlow, but it wasn’t until “A Free Soul” that same year that Gable’s screen persona took full shape. He could play touch, even brutish, but viewers could still believe he was decent. Counter to most of the leading men of the time, he was aggressively masculine, and big enough to physically overpower his costars.

The actor signed a contract with MGM in December 1930, and remained with the studio until 1954. “Red Dust” was one of the four films he made in 1932. During filming he formed a bond with director Victor Fleming. A former auto-mechanic, Fleming entered films in 1910 as a cinematographer, working under directors like Allan Dwan and D.W. Griffith and with actor Douglas Fairbanks. He was a well-like, but no-nonsense “man’s man” who didn’t mind following other people’s blueprints.

Although shot on MGM’s backlot, “Red Dust” has a gritty, feverish feel, emphasized by Fleming in extended tracking shots of a sweaty, stubbled Gable striding purposefully past extras posing as coolies. He’s the manager of a rubber plantation in an unspecified Southern Asian country (the nearest city is apparently Saigon, pronounced “Saygone” by everyone in the cast). One coworker, Donald Crisp, is a drunken lout, the other, Tully Marshall, acts as Gable’s conscience.

Harlow arrives in a filmy dress, an unapologetic prostitute sent upriver to escape moral authorities. She doggedly pursues Gable until he succumbs physically, but he refuses to consider her as a lover. When Mary Astor arrives as the new bride of scientist Gene Raymond, Gable sets out to seduce her, sending her husband to work in a swamp to get him out of the way.

Aided by playwright Donald Ogden Stewart, screenwriter Mahin just manages to squeak the film past censors by engineering a “happy” ending. But there is no mistaking the film’s primary focus: sex, illicit sex at that, photographed in a leering but still tastefully diffused manner by Hal Rosson. Many of the bedroom scenes are shot through mosquito netting, giving a warm glow to Astor’s patrician beauty. Harlow, meanwhile, is lit like an angel, overhead lanterns softening her deep-set eyes and highlighting her hair. Gable is almost always presented with his face in sheen – sweat, oil, rain, it doesn’t matter, especially with his shirt unbuttoned.

Gene Reynolds and Mary Astor later complained about the shoot, especially how the lights heated up the muddy outdoor sets. As Raymond said, “It stand to high heaven... It was not a pleasant picture; it was hard for everybody, but especially the crew.” The cast labored on, with Harlow winning the crew’s appreciation with her good spirits and lack of air. (Also for appearing nude in a bathing scene set in a rain barrel.)

Everything fell apart on Labor Day weekend. Bern, who was working on “China Seas,” a future Harlow project, killed himself sometime between Saturday and Sunday. Harlow was briefly considered a suspect, until MGM publicity head Howard Stricklin disclosed a suicide note to the police. Shooting on “Red Dust” resumed on September 7, but without Harlow, who attended Bern’s funeral two days later on September 9. The inquest revealed that Bern had been in a common-law relationship with actress Dorothy Millette, who herself had already been married. Weirdly, Millette committed suicide around this time by jumping off a steamship; her body wasn’t recovered until September 14. By that time Harlow has returned to the “Red Dust” set, the long hours there a relief from her private life.

With Bern's suicide a lead article in the newspapers across the country, Mayer and Thalberg were worried about the film's reception with moviegoers. Thalberg characteristically tinkered with the final cut, ordering considerable reshooting. (Notice how the liquor bottle label changes during the scene where Gable first gets drunk with Harlow; Gable's haircut changes as well.) Leaks about Bern's tortured private life helped sway public opinion in Harlow's favor, but it was the film itself that did the trick.

"Red Dust" is both fast-paced and entertaining. As the most polished performer in the cast, Astor is asked to do the heavy lifting, leaving Gable and Harlow free to project attitude. (Poor Donald Crisp's job is to get punished.) Gable does anger better than remorse: Harlow pushes across her lines with a swaggering sexuality. When she kneels down in a negligee and pulls off Gable's boots, the actor leering down at her, "Red Dust" is as explicit as a 1930s film can get.

Hollywood was in the midst of a periodic fixation with prostitutes. Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Tallulah Bankhead, Mae Clark, and Barbara Stanwyck all played "fallen" women. What was new and appealing in Harlow's performance was her lack of guilt or shame. Her line of work was just a job, not an opportunity to repent or reform, and she was proud doing her work well. Harlow didn't mystify or parody sex like Mae West, and she didn't moralize about it either. Audiences loved her straightforward approach, her physicality, her tough wisecracking, her confidence and optimism, and her blazing beauty.

And in the height of the Depression, Harlow was, along with Gable, the best bet MGM had going. Vehicles for the higher paid stars were floundering. "Red-Headed Woman" was a smash; "Red Dust" cost \$408,000 to make and grossed over \$1.2 million. Harlow and Gable would make four more films together, including her last, "Saratoga" (1937). In the very appealing comedy "Bombshell" (1933), Harlow spoofs her persona as a movie star and her role in "Red Dust."

Harlow died of kidney failure following a misdiagnosis by a family doctor in 1937. By that time her performances had been greatly restricted by a tightened Production Code, although she never lost the affection of her fans. Gable went on to become one of the most enduring box-office stars in movies. And, Fleming continued helming some of the most significant films from MGM, including "Treasure Island" (1934), "Captains Courageous" (1937), and in 1939, both "The Wizard of Oz" and "Gone with the Wind."

*"Red Dust" was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2006. The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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