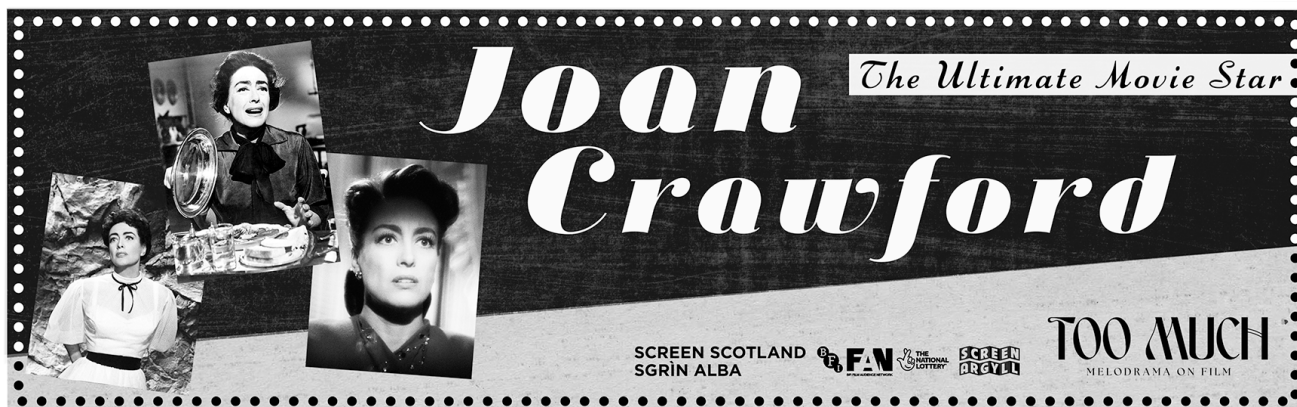




Joan Crawford has been called the ultimate movie star, the star who defined what stardom meant in ‘Studio Hollywood’ – the world of Hollywood movies from the late 1920s into the 1960s when star names on the cinema marquee could guarantee an audience. What qualifies her for this status and what does it mean for the way her stardom worked?

Stars in Hollywood date back to the early 1910s but the ‘star machinery’ wasn’t fully set up until the 1920s. Early stars were performers from the theatre or the vaudeville/variety circuits and others were simply physically beautiful or athletic. Many of these stumbled with the coming of sound when weak voices or poor delivery of dialogue caught them out. By the early 1930s it became clear that the biggest stars were those who could display two quite contradictory qualities. They had to be accessible like the boy or girl next door but at the same time be seen as more attractive and capable of creating wonder and excitement, so audiences could dream about them, desire them or want to be them.

Joan Crawford had the extra quality of mystique. Wikipedia uses a range of authoritative sources but is still unable to be sure when she was born or where. Possibly it was in San Antonio, Texas. Birth certificates don’t seem to have been mandatory until 1908. Crawford chose this as her birth year but it could have been any time between 1904 and 1907. She was born as Lucille Le Sueur of an exotic French-Huguenot, English, Dutch and Irish heritage. Her working-class father deserted the family when she was still an infant. Her new stepfather ran a vaudeville house in Oklahoma and this was an important early influence on Lucille, who didn’t get on with her mother and siblings. She went through various schools often having to work as a maid to pay her fees but seems to have emerged as a dancer. Eventually in the early 1920s she became a taxi dancer in New York and from there got into the chorus line of shows. Lucille was determined to make something of herself and signed a contract with MGM in January 1925. Studio head L. B. Mayer thought Le Sueur was too much like ‘Sewer’ and the studio organised a naming contest, resulting in the creation of ‘Joan Crawford’. This new identity helped ‘Joan’ to put the past behind her and forget her miserable childhood. Not knowing her real father was an issue for her and she developed an early distrust of men which perhaps led her into wild behaviour as a dancer at parties and many flirtations, including with a wealthy young man whose family disapproved of a ‘movie actress’.

In the late 1920s Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, formed by merging three companies in 1924, became the most prestigious studio (and perhaps the most 'conservative'). Its female stars included one of the 'originals', Lillian Gish, one of the European imports, Greta Garbo and Moira Shearer, from a middle-class Canadian family, who had developed a relationship with the young producer Irving Thalberg. There was tough competition for female leads but Joan was persistent, taking on a wide range of roles with occasional successes that spurred her on. After the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the start of the Great Depression, audience tastes began to change. Towards the end of the 1920s Joan had succeeded as the 'flapper girl' but now she would become the shopgirl or the office clerk in films that showed that women could survive in straightened circumstances. Joan was an attractive young woman with dance moves and vivacity but she was also approachable. She managed the 'contradiction of stardom' and the films of the 1930s made her a big star. In 1932 she was the third biggest box office star in America and she remained in the Top 10 for the next four years.

She became well-toned through workouts like the stars of today and she was a great clothes horse, beautifully dressed by Adrian at MGM. She gradually developed her hair and make-up to create her own unique style and she had two marriages in this period, first to Douglas Fairbanks Jr. and later to Franchot Tone. These gave her some social cachet but also wounded her because these men belonged to different worlds. Mary Pickford and Fairbanks Sr. wouldn't accept her for some time and Tone was an educated and cultured Easterner whereas Joan had adopted a Hollywood identity.

Joan learned early that the crew rather than fellow cast members were the ones to cultivate. Like some other stars of the studio era, Barbara Stanwyck and Ida Lupino, she cultivated crews and they supported her. In doing so she learned everything about her chosen trade and was viewed as a complete professional. She adopted the same approach to her fans, answering letters and meeting them. Later when her films flopped her true fans remained loyal. She rose to a point where she could be billed alongside Garbo and Shearer but there is also the suggestion that she was prepared to make enemies among her competitors and the friction with Bette Davis began when the younger woman began to get important roles at Warner Bros.

Eventually, Joan and MGM reached the end of the road in the early 1940s and Joan herself joined Warner Bros where *Mildred Pierce* would prove perhaps her best performance and one of her biggest box office successes. This second part of her career up to *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* would prove to be less intense but she rebuilt her career and for those loyal fans she remained a big star reigning supreme in a tailored project like *Johnny Guitar*.

Roy Stafford 26/10/25

TOO MUCH
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SGRìn ALBA

B&FAN
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THE NATIONAL LOTTERY

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