

Pedagogy Series: The Empty Heart of Mary Dees

Posted on December 30, 2013 by Amy Chen

This entry was posted in [Brooke Champagne](#), [Manuscript Collections](#), [Sarah Smylie](#) and tagged [Mary Dees](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

By: Sarah Smylie, first-year undergraduate at The University of Alabama

Editor's Note: This post is the third in a six-part series highlighting innovative special collections pedagogy. Read [an interview with Sarah Smylie's instructor, Brooke Champagne](#) or [view this paper's assignment prompt](#) to catch up on the first two posts of the series.



Mary Dees

The news of the tragic and sudden death of film star and Hollywood's blonde bombshell, Jean Harlow, came on June 7, 1937. The beauty who had stolen the hearts of the American public during her short-lived career died unexpectedly of uremic poisoning, a toxic condition related to kidney failure. Hollywood and the entire country were devastated. It was hard for the public to bear the shocking news of the young death of their beloved star. Luckily for Jean Harlow and her adoring fans, she would be remembered forever as the young, beautiful starlet thanks to the immortality that film allows and her "unabashed sexuality" that everyone was entranced by (Addison, 37). One girl who would mourn Harlow's death, yet hope to benefit from it, was the lesser known actress, Mary Dees. Dees, Jean Harlow's loyal double because of their similar appearance, was fond of Jean, but she wanted more than to be in Harlow's shadow: she wanted stardom.

Mary Dees was raised in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, but had her sights set on bigger and better things than simply living a small town life in the south. Mary moved from the slow, southern town

to Hollywood in 1930, when she was only nineteen years old, to pursue her dreams of becoming a famous actress ("Miss Mary Dees," 3). Throughout her career she played various background roles in movies such as *Kid Millions*, *The Man with Two Faces*, *Let's Talk It Over*, and *The Last Gangster* (Mutti-Mewse, n.pag.). These roles were small, nameless parts, but she would eventually receive her chance to be the star of the film, or so she thought.

Jean Harlow's unexpected death made news across the country and had her adoring fans laden with grief. These people had never met Jean, they had no real connection with Jean, yet they still loved her, and they would forever miss her. On June 9, 1937, there were "thousands of onlookers fighting for a glimpse of Harlow's coffin" at her funeral at Forest Lawn Memorial Park. Her death was the cause of "the first big Hollywood funeral" and the media was in a frenzy over it (Addison, 40). There were newspaper articles that specifically described her body and the funeral for those who did not attend. Everyone wanted to say their goodbyes to their favorite star, but it was not that simple. She had left them so unexpectedly. One second she was there every day, and the next second she was gone. The public had not prepared for this. They had not expected to lose Jean so soon. She was only twenty-six years old. They were expecting many more films from her. But there would be none. And there was nothing more they could do about it. Or maybe there was.

Jean's final film, *Saratoga*, was not completed at the time of her death. The film production studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, or MGM, was not planning on releasing the film with Jean Harlow as the main actress, but rather reshoot the entire film with a new actress. At the request of her fans, MGM released the film two months after her death with Harlow's original scenes intact and used footage of Mary Dees, "showing merely a shoulder here or a backside there," to complete the final scenes. The public obviously loved their dear Jean while she was alive, but people cared even more about her in death. Although the film was pieced together with scenes of both Jean and Mary, "it became her most successful film, suggesting that fans were incredibly keen for any footage of her, no matter how flawed" (Addison, 41).

Harlow's presence would continue to live on after her death. Some of her earlier films were rereleased, magazines continued to print stories about her, and biographies were published about her. The media continued to make money off of her because one thing would never change; her fans would never stop loving her, and they would never forget about her.

Search

Recent Posts

["There was joy and there was sorrow": Armistice Day, 1918](#)

[University Libraries Special Collections Announces LGBTQ Digital Exhibit and Digital Collection](#)

[Documenting Black Literary Culture, 1926-1976](#)

[WWI Poster Art](#)

[Old School Trick Photography](#)

Recent Comments

Alan Slimm on [How to Shoot an American Quilt](#)

David Steer on [The Willie Pape Scrapbooks: An Antebellum Alabama Child Prodigy](#)

Margaret S Marston on [Robert F. Kennedy's Visit to UA](#)

M on [Robert F. Kennedy's Visit to UA](#)

Warren Jones on [Roland Harper and his Photographs – A Slice of Alabama Life](#)

Archives

Select Month

Categories

Select Category

Meta

[Log in](#)

[Entries RSS](#)

[Comments RSS](#)

[WordPress.org](#)

Tags

3D 19th century 20th century 1840's 1850's 1860's 1870's 1880's 1890's 1900's 1910's 1920's 1930's 1940's 1950's 1960's 1970's 1980's Acumen automation born digital christianity Civil Rights crowdsourcing deep south delivery system digital library software family farming feature: campus rewind feature: hidden gems football Harper Lee historic figures holidays jobs labor unions long-term access love letters low cost military patriotic relationships religion veterans

Although Harlow's fans would always remember *Saratoga* as her last film, there was another actress who shared the leading role with Jean. And that was Miss Mary Dees. Dees helped MGM complete the film after Harlow's untimely death, and was chosen because of her striking similarities to the deceased star. Although Dees did look very similar to Harlow, it was still easy to spot the small facial differences between the two, but MGM found a way to combat this problem. Dees' scenes were often shot from behind, from the side, or with something such as a hat or binoculars obstructing her face in order to make the difference less obvious (Bode, 2). Unfortunately for Dees, "there's a real handicap in Hollywood in too closely resembling a famous movie star" ("Mary Dees Discusses," scrapbooks, n.pag.).



Mary Dees struggled to establish herself as a leading actress in Hollywood because "...at every turn her startling resemblance to famous Jean Harlow blocked her progress" (Hall, scrapbooks, n.pag) After Harlow's death, Mary hoped that newspapers would stop comparing her to the deceased star and take her seriously as an actress. Dees did receive more attention and publicity after Harlow's death, but not the type she was searching for. Rather than focusing on Mary Dees the actress, newspaper articles put more attention on Mary Dees, Jean Harlow's double. Mary even admitted in interviews her "desire to lose [her] identity with Harlow" and that Harlow's "death...in a way... has made room for [her]" (scrapbooks, n.pag.) In her interviews, Mary makes it apparent that she wants to "overcome the handicap involved in having been labeled 'Jean Harlow's stand-in'" (Johanesson, n.pag.). While Mary Dees certainly takes it as a compliment when compared to the beautiful starlet, she does not want to rely on her resemblance to Jean Harlow to become famous, but rather on her own abilities.

Although she wished to become famous through her own talents, MGM and Hollywood executives did not have the same visions. Mary Dees did not receive any credit or publicity directly from MGM for her role in *Saratoga* (Bode, 4). This film was going to be her first headlining role, although only out of chance, and MGM did not even put her name in the credits. It was not that the executives at MGM did not like Mary, she just had one fault. And that was "her startling resemblance" to Harlow. Everyone had loved Jean so dearly that it was difficult for them to let this newcomer into their hearts. It is even said that "her resemblance to the ill-fated star Jean was so startling that the make-up girls burst into sobs" during her first day on the *Saratoga* set after Jean's death ("Carrying on for Jean," scrapbooks, n.pag). Her resemblance to Harlow was so striking that one time, when Harlow was still healthy, Dees was mistaken for Harlow by her own director (*The Sun News*, scrapbooks).

After *Saratoga*, Mary went on a "personal appearance tour so that she [could] come out of the shadow of the dead star and into her own" (Smith, 4). This tour proved to be very lonely for Mary. She was with Monte Blue, her co-star and mentor, and other people she knew, but did not have any close friends or family around. It was especially difficult for her to be apart from her loved ones during the holidays. Before one of her appearances on Christmas Eve she sat in her dressing room, and "there were tears in her eyes, which were filled with loneliness" (Smith, 4). Mary Dees was finally getting a chance to make a name for herself, but that came at a price.

According to *The Tuscaloosa News*, Mary Dees signed a seven-year contract with MGM after helping the studio complete the filming of *Saratoga* ("Miss Mary Dees," 4). Although there are multiple reports of this contract, Mary was never credited for any of those films. Even though she sent a letter to her mother telling her the good news, she had nothing to show for it. MGM would not allow Mary to achieve stardom. They never gave her the chance. Instead, they kept her in the background. They couldn't allow a "stand-in" to win the hearts of the public—especially when that stand-in was for their beloved Jean Harlow. Mary Dees was simply in an unfortunate circumstance. She was beautiful. She was talented. But she wasn't Jean Harlow. And that was the only thing that people really cared about.

Mary had compiled many articles over the years. Pictures and playbills too. They all meant something to her. They all reminded her of her "glamorous" life in Hollywood. Glamorous compared to small town life in Tuscaloosa, anyway. Sure, it was fun to know all of the beautiful men and women that others had only read about in magazines, but the Hollywood lifestyle got old after a while, especially when she wasn't one of the actresses that the entire country was enamored with. She wasn't bitter, nor was she resentful. Everything she said in her numerous interviews was true. She was fond of Jean Harlow and thought "she was kind and considerate, generous and thoughtful" ("Mary Dees Discusses," scrapbooks, n.pag.). There was really only one thing that bothered her about all of these articles and pictures. Every time her name was mentioned, it was followed by "Jean Harlow's 'Double'" or "Jean Harlow's 'stand-in.'" ("Jean Harlow's 'Double'," 111; "Carrying on for Jean," scrapbooks, n.pag.). She had tried so hard to break away from that title, but in the end, that was what she would be known best for. She had learned to accept that, yet sometimes she let it eat at her. There was always that theoretical "what if" lingering in the back of her brain. Usually it wasn't difficult to forget about, but other times, it wasn't so easy. Especially now.

Mary began compiling a scrapbook of her achievements. She bought a large black book filled with blank pages in order to start her book of memories. She had collected many articles over the years and now that she was retired from the film industry she had time to put it all together. Mary was only in her mid-fifties, but it was like she was now living a completely new life in Florida, away from the world that she had become so accustomed to (Yee, n.pag.). It was difficult for her to go through all of those photos and newspaper clippings without thinking back to those few years after *Saratoga*. But nonetheless, it was all part of her history in Hollywood. As she went through each newspaper clipping and photo, it was impossible for her not to read the old articles. Sure, she had read them all when they were first published, but now she was reading them with a different perspective. Now she knew how it had all played out. She knew that the media and the public never let her "overcome the handicap involved in having been labeled 'Jean Harlow's stand-in'" (Johaneson, n.pag.).

It's important to know that she wasn't bitter about this though. Wistful is a more appropriate term for how she felt. So she put together her scrapbook as a way for her to remember everything that happened to her during her youthful years in Hollywood. She found out that one book was not enough space to hold all of the newspaper clippings and photographs that she had collected over the years, so she filled another. The upholstered cover of this book was a white fabric covered in green and red dots, with many large blank pages for her to fill. She was a bit happier knowing that enough information was published about her to fill two entire scrapbooks. Maybe, she thought, her presence did have an impact on Hollywood and those interested in the film industry. And then maybe in the future someone would find the scrapbooks and they would be interested in who she was and what she did during her time in Hollywood. But for now, it was just for her.

It was a hot Wednesday during the middle of summer in Lake Worth, Florida. August 4, 2004 to be exact. This was the day Mary Dees passed away at 93 years old. Dees had no family left. She had never been married nor had any children, so she did not have the opportunity to pass down any interesting stories about her life in Hollywood to any grandchildren, as grandparents often enjoy doing. She lived alone in the Medicana Nursing Center of Lake Worth and was cared for by the staff there. Although Dees had no remaining family to mourn her death, she did have one dear friend who she had known for nearly twenty years. Mary Dees was no longer an actress when she retired to Florida and she quite liked the friends she had met and the life she had made there. One of her closest friends, Patricia Blake, volunteered with Dees at a thrift shop in Palm Beach, Florida. All of the time that they spent together created a strong friendship between them. According to Blake, Mary was reminiscent of her time as an actress and all of the people she had known. She was a fun woman who enjoyed telling stories about "John Wayne, Joan Crawford, and how after every movie there would be a wrap party with everyone in costume." After Mary's death, Rod Sidway of Catholic Charities went through her belongings to determine what would be kept and what could be discarded. One thing that Sidway found was Dees' scrapbooks that she had put together nearly forty years before. These two scrapbooks were both worn and faded, stained and torn. Some pictures and newspaper clippings were falling out of the books, all of this evidence of how many people had flipped through the pages over the past forty or so years to see the remarkable accomplishments of Mary Dees. These scrapbooks that Sidway found were history, and so they were saved as a type of memorial towards Dees' career as an actress (Yee, n.pag.).

Mary Dees' life as an actress during the golden age of Hollywood was a memorable one. Everything that can be found in the countless newspaper articles and photographs is true. She was Jean Harlow's stand-in, but her life should not be defined by just that. It consisted of so much more, but only the people who personally knew her will remember her for everything that she was as an actress. Unfortunately, most others will only remember her as "Jean Harlow's double."

Works Cited

Addison, Heather. "Transcending Time: Jean Harlow and Hollywood's Narrative of Decline. (Cover Story)." *Journal of Film and Video* 57.4 (2005): 32-46. *Film & Television Literature Index with Full Text*. Web. 3 Nov. 2013.

Bode, Lisa. "'Conspicuous Absence' and 'Morbid Curiosity': The Promotion and Reception of *Saratoga*." *Screening the Past*. n.p, n.d. Web. 20 Nov. 2013.

Gehring, Wes D. "Hollywood's Dilemma About Posthumous Releases." *USA Today Magazine*. 131.2696 (2003): 64-69. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 3 Nov. 2013.

"Jean Harlow's 'Double'." *Table Talk*. 8 Dec. 1938: 111. Print

Johaneson, Blaud. "Mary Dees Shows What Makes A Stand-In." *The Daily Mirror* 23 Nov. 1937. Print.

Mary Dees' Scrapbooks. W. S. Hoole Library, The University of Alabama. 10 Oct. 2013.

"Miss Mary Dees Now Being Coached For Featured Roles, Says Letter." *The Tuscaloosa News* 25 August 1937: 3. Print.

Multi-Mewse, Austin. "Mary Dees: The Hollywood Starlet Who Doubled for Jean Harlow." *The Guardian* 21 Sept. 2005. Web. 20 Nov. 2013.

Smith, Sylvia. "Southern Actress: New Jersey Writer Tells How Lonely Mary Dees Spent Her Christmas." *The Tuscaloosa News* 10 Jan. 1938: 4. Print.

Yee, Ivette M. "Actress Mary Ella Dees, Was Body Double For Jean Harlow." *South Florida Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale, FL)* 10 Aug. 2004: *NewsBank – Archives*. Web. 7 Nov. 2013.

This entry was posted in [Brooke Champagne](#), [Manuscript Collections](#), [Sarah Smiley](#) and tagged [Mary Dees](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

[← Pedagogy Series: Featured Assignment](#)

[Pedagogy Series: Interview with Sarah Smylie →](#)

3 Responses to *Pedagogy Series: The Empty Heart of Mary Dees*



Mark says:

December 31, 2013 at 11:45 am

Great story, in this case, a shocking resemblance was too much to overcome.

[Reply](#)



Ronnie Vaughn says:

April 9, 2014 at 11:47 am

What an amazing life. I just discovered Mary Dees through my family research using Ancestry.com. It turns out she is my second cousin 2x removed. I guess she did have family after all. But how sad no one in the family knew of her.

[Reply](#)



Sherrill Bjorklund says:

July 5, 2017 at 2:38 am

She was married once to my uncle from Tuscaloosa, Al.

[Reply](#)

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment

Name *

Email *

Website

Post Comment

[UA Home](#) | [Gorgas Library](#) | [Hoole Library](#) | [Ask-A-Librarian](#) | [Staff Directory](#) | [Search Catalog](#)

O Mary, I wonder at that profound humility, which troubled thy blessed heart at the message of the Angel Gabriel, that thou hadst been chosen to be the Mother of the Son of the most high God, the while thou didst profess thyself His lowly handmaiden; ashamed at the sight of my own pride, I beg of thee the grace of a contrite. V. O Mary, mystic rose, whose lovable heart, burning with the living fire of love, adopted us as thy children at the foot of the Cross, becoming thus our most tender Mother, make me experience the sweetness of thy motherly heart and the power of thine intercession with Jesus, in all the dangers that beset me during life, and especially at the dread.