



MARLENE DIETRICH ONCE said: "I want to be buried in France, leave my heart in England, and to Germany—nothing." As it turns out, Germany is getting it all. Sixteen months after the film diva's burial here in May 1992, the city of Berlin paid Maria Riva, Dietrich's daughter, \$5 million for the so-called "Marlene Dietrich Collection": 100,000 items, from film scripts to costumes to correspondence, composing the bulk of Dietrich's private estate.

Dietrich was not only one of the cinema's legendary stars, but one of the world's great pack rats as well. Berlin now owns a collection that includes grade school notebooks, her War Department passport, dozens of film contracts, cigarette cases, a make-up kit and a note of appreciation from "the boys of the 3562nd ORD HAM Co." for a performance given at Schwandorf, Germany in 1945. The assemblage is slated to be the core of a German Film Museum planned for Potsdamer Platz. As surprising as the collection itself is the fact that it should end up in Berlin, a city that Dietrich abandoned over half a century ago. Until now, it appeared Berlin had never quite forgiven her for it.

In 1930, when Dietrich was 29, the German film director Josef von Sternberg whisked her off to Hollywood. Building on the synergy they had discovered while making 'The Blue Angel' earlier that year at the UFA studios in Babelsberg, the team quickly racked up a string of successes at Paramount including 'Morocco' (1930) and 'Shanghai Express' (1932). The legend—created and maintained in America—had begun.

In 1937, with the National Socialists firmly entrenched in Germany, Dietrich became a US citizen. Her tireless work entertaining allied troops during World War II was—and still is—considered by many Germans as, at the very least, overly enthusiastic. One biographer described it as "exceeding any expectations imposed on her by the state." When she arrived in Berlin at the end of the war wearing an American uniform, some residents resented the whiff of triumph and gloating. On her next—and last—

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Marlene Unpacks

Berlin recently acquired the largest material inheritance in movie history: over 100,000 personal possessions of the late film diva Marlene Dietrich. Does this mean the city has finally come to terms with its most famous estranged daughter? Terry Martin reports.

appearance before a German audience in 1960, she was confronted with protesters chanting “Marlene go home!”

Discussions are still heard today about whether Dietrich was a “good” or a “bad” German: good because she campaigned against Hitler, bad because she never reconciled herself with the Germany that succeeded him.

The animosity was mutual, and Dietrich’s defiant ghost can almost be heard whispering through the thousands of her mementos. “I might have been born and buried in Germany, but I chose to live my life elsewhere,” she seems to be saying.

Indeed, with the important exceptions of her violin (she originally wanted to become a musician), costumes from ‘The Blue Angel’, early photos and travel trunks, Dietrich acquired nearly all of her most cherished memorabilia abroad. Examples in the collection include an amulet from Ernest Hemingway bearing the inscription “Think of me and be safe—Papa”, as well as a bracelet from French actor Jean Gabin engraved “Ah, Merde”. Virtually every notebook, shoe, dress, earring, love letter and hotel key bears testament to Dietrich’s international odyssey.

If Dietrich’s relationship with her home town was so tenuous, how did all of her paraphernalia end up here? Dietrich apparently indicated only that she wanted her estate to go to auction. Under the supervision of Peter Riva, Dietrich’s grandson and executor, Sotheby’s of New York sorted and catalogued what it called the “colossal group of material” and prepared it for sale. Although other parties offered higher bids (including Hollywood studios and Arab oil barons, according to speculation), Berlin’s pledge to preserve the collection’s integrity and showcase it in the planned film museum on Potsdamer Platz gave it the edge. Maria Riva—whose biography ‘My Mother Marlene’ was described by the New York Review of Books as a “repulsive, embarrassing, vindictive, sanctimonious book”—approved. As to what Dietrich herself would have said to all this, Riva speculated: “A museum for a film star? They’ve all gone crazy!”

Dietrich’s noble-minded heirs chose Berlin for curatorial reasons. But what was Berlin’s motive for the purchase? Wouldn’t the \$5 million (provided by a German lottery) have been better spent preventing the closure of Berlin’s renowned Schiller Theater or subsidising film makers? Not according to Ulrich Roloff-Momin, Berlin’s senator for cultural affairs, who negotiated the purchase on Berlin’s behalf. In Roloff-Momin’s estimation the Marlene Dietrich collection is a “treasure” whose “pulling power can be compared to other outstanding Berlin cultural attractions such as the famous bust of Queen Nefertiti”.

But past attempts in Berlin to capitalise on the Marlene legend have proven to be expensive failures. Despite an imported director (Terry Hands) and the most aggressive promotional campaign this city has seen in years, Friedrich Kurz’s musical biography ‘Sag Mir, Wo die Blumen Sind’ (Where Have all the Flowers Gone)

ended in bankruptcy after 16 weeks. The performers were not paid for their final month. But Kurz was so certain of a sure-fire success he had booked the theatre for a ten year run. As for Theater des Westens’ ‘The Blue Angel’, not even a live bear on stage was able salvage Peter Zadek’s direction.



The city unpacked a few items of Marlene memorabilia in November for a sneak preview at the Deutsches Theater

The only sizable Dietrich post mortem to succeed was the no-frills lyrical tribute offered up by singers from Theater des Westens and the Deutsche Theater. ‘My Name is Marlene’ was entertaining, tasteful and sincere, and showed that while employing Dietrich as a subject won’t assure a hit, it’s not necessarily a jinx.

BUT EVEN ‘My Name is Marlene’ experienced a pre-production hitch that revealed the city’s ambivalence. Originally planned as an homage to coincide with Dietrich’s funeral, the show was postponed for several months, reportedly because of bureaucratic footdragging in the city government. “Too much honour for a moody diva who didn’t do anything for Berlin” is how one reporter phrased the administration’s feeling. But that, of course, was before anyone knew that Berlin would become the custodian of her valuable estate. When Roloff-Momin and Maria Riva later announced the transaction at a special performance of ‘My Name is Marlene’, the senator adopted a conciliatory tone, conceding that Berlin had “not made things easy” for Dietrich.

Is Berlin’s purchase of the collection an attempt to reclaim in death a legend that it rejected in life? Does this signal a reconciliation of sorts, an acceptance of Dietrich as a true “Berliner” after all? Or is this simply the commercialisation of a native daughter? Probably a bit of both. Whatever its motive—sentimental, historical or commercial—Berlin has resolved to make things easier for Dietrich this time around. The city intends to display the collection as the centerpiece of an exhibition entitled ‘100 Years of Film’ at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in 1995 before

installing it permanently in the film museum in 1998. The German Foundation for Cinematography plans a special exhibition in 2001 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Dietrich’s birth.

Still, everyone who sees the collection—detractors and fetishists alike—would do well

to recall Dietrich’s warning to filmmaker Maximilian Schell: “No one has, no one ever will, enter my private world.” ■

MARLENE—R.I.P.



“Here I Stand on the Marker of My Days”: The cryptic inscription on Marlene’s gravestone at the cemetery on Fehlerstraße in Friedenau (U-Bahn line 9 to Friedrich-Wilhelm-Platz) seems to sum up her defiance of detractors who feel she sold out on post-war Berlin.