



Trailblazers for WOMEN IN FILM

Canada's Women in Film museum pays homage to Canadian women who have forever left their mark on the film industry **by Lynn C. Bilton, Cobourg, Ont.**

Above, from left: The museum's entrance and ticket booth; a dedicated room for Marie Dressler memorabilia; museum pamphlets on these pioneers of film.

Three Canadian-born women won Best Actress at the Oscars during the first years of the Academy Awards in Hollywood: Mary Pickford (1929), Norma Shearer (1930) and Marie Dressler (1931). Now these three shining stars are being celebrated in a brand new setting.

The Canadian Women in Film Museum, located in Marie Dressler's childhood home at 212 King Street West in Cobourg, Ont., is owned and operated by the non-profit Marie Dressler Foundation. President and Chairperson Rick Miller spoke highly of these three women, stating, "Canadian actresses Marie Dressler, Mary Pickford and

Norma Shearer leveraged and subverted the gendered expectations of their era to make advancements in the early 20th century film industry that inspire contemporary efforts to achieve gender equality, in front of and behind the camera." The lives of Marie, Mary and Norma are undoubtedly worthy of a movie.

There were no bright lights when Marie Dressler (Leila Marie Koerber) was born in 1868. As a child, Marie would accompany her father to his job as a music teacher and church organist at St. Peter's Anglican Church in the small town of Cobourg. At the age of 14, she left her home and fibbed about

her age to begin an acting career. In 1927, she found tremendous success when she starred as Ma Callahan in the MGM production of *The Callahans and the Murphys*. But it was her performance in *Min and Bill* that later won her an Academy Award in 1931.

On August 7, 1933, Marie Dressler became the first Canadian to be featured on the cover of TIME magazine. She was 64 at the time. Her importance to the economy of Los Angeles is reflected in the fact that, as the highest grossing actor in Hollywood in both 1932 and 1933, the success of her films helped keep MGM profitable during the Great Depression.

Mary Pickford (Gladys Marie Smith), born in Toronto in 1892, became known as "America's Sweetheart" and was a film icon in the early 20th century. She starred in a total of 52 feature films, and received an Academy Award in 1929 for her first sound film role in *Coquette*. On screen, she often portrayed a fragile character, but in real life, she was a strong and successful businesswoman. She utilized her fame to promote sales of Liberty Bonds during World War I, and in 1919, she was one of the 36 founding members of United Artists. In 1976, Pickford would be presented with an Honourary Academy Award



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF CANADIAN WOMEN IN FILM MUSEUM

Above: Artifacts and authentic photographs showcasing several Canadian women in film.

for her profound impact on the film industry.

Born to a life of privilege in Montreal in 1902, Norma Shearer announced to her family at age nine that she wanted to be an actress. Like her industry colleagues, Shearer made a successful transition from silent movies to talkies. She would be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress on five occasions, and won in 1930 for her performance in *The Divorcee*.

HONOURING THEIR LEGACY

Over the last century, Marie Dressler's home has been a restaurant, Chamber of Commerce, tourism office and even a Service Ontario kiosk. After suffering extensive fire damage in 1989, the heritage property was rescued by the Marie Dressler Foundation. The non-profit charity launched a successful fundraising campaign to purchase and renovate the building, while also restoring

the town's fondness for Marie Dressler's legacy. In 2016, the Foundation created an interactive heritage museum based on an innovative design by students in museum studies at the University of Toronto.

Dressler would smile at the success of her hometown today. Cobourg is now the star of numerous television and film productions, including the Canadian drama series *Murdoch Mysteries*, now in its fifteenth season. The Netflix comedy-drama *Ginny & Georgia*, now into its second season, also showcases the Cobourg landscape. Hats off to Cobourg's townsfolk for keeping the memory of these remarkable role models alive. Trailblazers are always a tough act to follow, but Canadian women in film are claiming the spotlight. May their stars shine bright! ■

More at <https://www.cdnwomeninfilm.ca>