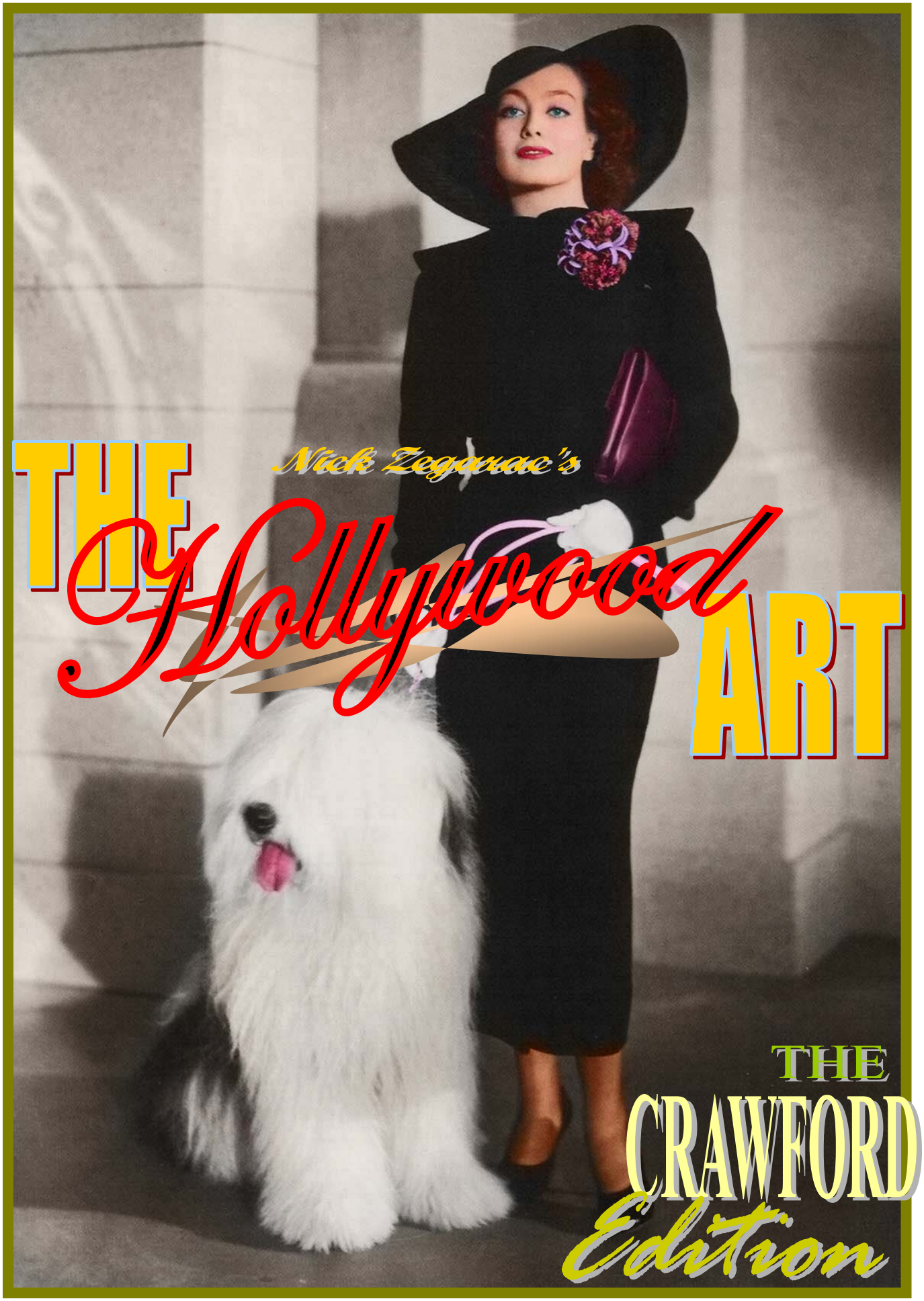

Nick Zegarac's
THE Hollywood ART
THE CRAWFORD Edition

JOAN CRAWFORD

An Appreciation

by *Nick Zegarac*

"Hollywood is like life…you face it with the sum total of your equipment."
– Joan Crawford

Joan Crawford: perhaps no other name in showbiz conjures to mind as much elegance, egotism and maternal demagoguery all in the same instance. Crawford is more than a woman – even more than a film star. She's iconographic and the name Joan Crawford appears to have no middle ground amongst popular opinion.

Child activists decry her abuse of daughter Christina as exaggerated in the memoir 'Mommie Dearest' while legions of her fans – then and now – are as fiercely loyal to the preservation of her image as the supreme star. It seems a fitting tribute. After all, she was as staunchly devoted to them, answering her own fan mail with hand written and personalized notations.

On the set, she was a force to be reckoned with; a consummate technical professional who knew virtually everything and anything about the 'picture making' business. Female co-stars respected the power she exuded both on and off camera. Male co-stars were often intimidated by her authority, and every director – so it has been suggested elsewhere in print – had his turn, though arguably not his way, with her.

Joan Crawford is the ultimate star; a creature so over the top and larger than life that she at once inspires and defies parody. True enough, Crawford's films rarely represented the very best that Hollywood had to offer. Of her many movies, only a handful are standouts. Yet what makes a Crawford movie – any Crawford movie – so memorable is Crawford herself. She's a stunningly poetic, glycerin tear and porcelain skinned mannequin; a clothes horse, beautifully backlit and forever on the prowl for the public's adoration.

When frequently asked to quantify her personal animosity toward Crawford, arch rival and grand dame, Bette Davis used to distinguish between her innate 'talent' versus Crawford's manufactured stardom. Yet, a more critical review of Crawford's flops – films in which she boldly attempted to step beyond that studio created mould of the shop girl makes good – illustrate that Crawford was ever bit the talent Davis was.

Sold differently to the public, perhaps. But Crawford's marketability at MGM often removed and isolated her from that talent in favor of concocting a radiant, elegant thing of beauty. To her own credit, throughout the years Joan Crawford maintained that image. "When I leave this apartment," she told a reporter, "I *am* Joan Crawford. If you want the girl next door – *go* next door!"

Without question, Crawford could be harsh. Perhaps more than anyone, she understood the fickle nature of the movie business; knew the ropes of finagling better contracts by heart and recalled too well what an uphill climb her career had always been – but especially prior to the gold-star treatment at MGM – and how easily if might all go away. No one was going to take anything away from Joan. Arguably, no one ever did.

If Crawford's relentless pursuit of perfection kept her youthful, then it also isolated her from any genuine and everlasting happiness. All five of Crawford's marriages were more short-lived than some of her ephemeral film plots. Though Crawford remained on amicable terms with all of her former husbands, she was also quick to recognize that there was only one great love in her life – her career.

Despite rumors, lurid tales and unsubstantiated innuendoes readily printed in gossip rags and the tabloids of her time, Crawford's own worst enemy – particularly in her later years – was herself. Her bitterness at slowly slipping from the top eventually turned inward through destructive alcoholism. Outwardly, that slippage manifested itself as almost insane jealousy and often articulate rage toward the younger actresses rising through the ranks.

(Previous page: Crawford as repentant shop girl – a colorized still from Mannequin (1939), and, in her early days as a dance hall flapper. This page, top: Crawford poses with one of the truckloads of her fan mail on the MGM back lot circa 1934. At one point, public's written adorations to Crawford surpassed even those of MGM's king – Clark Gable. Centre: Crawford posing with first husband, Douglas Fairbanks Jr. at the Santa Monica beach. Bottom: Crawford's famous face only half visible.)



Clockwise: The many faces of Joan Crawford. While 'the Crawford look' consisted of such standards as an overdrawn mouth and eyebrows, the rest of Crawford's visual flair often took on startling new and exciting characteristics that launched nationwide trends in both fashion and hairstyles. From left to right: Crawford circa 1928, 1932, 1941, 1929 and 1933.

Then what are we to make of Joan Crawford as woman; piteous or proud? Perhaps Crawford's last words, reported to have been uttered on her deathbed, suffice: *"Don't you dare ask God to help me!"* Clearly, as far as Joan was concerned there was no need for help to arrive. And there was also nothing to forgive. In life, Crawford may have done her worst, but always in service of some greater good that has often been overlooked since her passing through a calculated manipulation of some of the facts about her personal life and an endless mockery of her image overblown by drag queen impersonators.

Yet, the legend endures. Why? Because Crawford conquered. She endured. She continues to reign as few have been able to. An indomitable tower of electricity, Joan Crawford will always be a star; partly, because there is no one, then or now, to compare to her, but mostly because she digested the rigors of stardom as her daily diet. She took her breaks and her disappointments seriously. Nothing was ever left to chance. What she wanted she had. Joan didn't ask – she demanded and she took.

Yet, Crawford could be gracious too – almost to a fault. There is little to suggest that Joan would have preferred either her life or career to go the easy route. She thrived on adversity, yielding to no one and nothing; her journey from Lucille Fay Le Sueur to Billie Cassin to Joan Crawford a seamless morphing into an otherwise rough and tumble existence from cradle to grave.

In the final analysis, Joan Crawford was a die hard perfectionist rather then a slave to her art. Whatever the part required, she gave to it in spades. When asked by Louis B. Mayer, the head of MGM why she

IN THE BEGINNING

"You have to be self-reliant and strong to survive in this town. Otherwise, you will be destroyed."
– Joan Crawford

In 1925, MGM VP Harry Rapf acquired a ten week contract of an unknown hoofer who was all the rage in Hollywood nightclubs. Around town, her Charleston had already become legendary and her closet full of loving cups and trophies proved it. That girl was Lucille Fay Le Sueur and her ability to maximize her own potential through limitless drive and ambition was cause for generating much self publicity.

had campaigned so hard to play the part of Crystal Allen – a backstabbing bitch in The Women (1939), Crawford deftly replied, "I'd play Wally Beery's mother if the part were right!" And Joan was not kidding. She didn't simply want success. She sought it out.

How well Joan Crawford succeeded in her career is a matter of public record and now a question for the ages to decide. As a star, Crawford continues to resonate a mystique, a power and a prestige.

She is woman as beacon – the sad-eyed gal who isn't going to let a little thing like the Hollywood boy's club and patriarchal nepotism stand in her way. She may not pin her motto in a place where the janitors can see it, but she can play hard ball like one of the guys.

She's her own person through and through and well above par of our collective cinema firmament. She is Joan Crawford – star. If necessary, God bless and forgive her for it.

(Above: one of Crawford's greatest associations at MGM was with designer Gilbert Adrian who became the man chiefly responsible for sculpting the Crawford mystique in fashion terms – sheathing her slender toned frame in satins, furs and other decadent accoutrements. Others who contributed to the timeless allure of Crawford's sculpted beauty included photographers George Hurrell (who photographed the image at left – originally in B&W in 1928) and Lazlo Willinger (right for Love on the Run). While Hurrell's photographic style tended to be ultra dramatic, Willinger's approach to Crawford became more playful and flirtatious – as is evident from these two examples provided.)

MGM was eager to present Le Sueur as a 'new find' but Louis B. Mayer – then the undisputed monarch of MGM – thought 'Sueur' sounded too much like 'sewer.' Something had to be done. Still, the girl had spunk, and perhaps even 'star quality'; the latter exercised to wasted effect opposite Norma Shearer in Lady of the Night (1925).

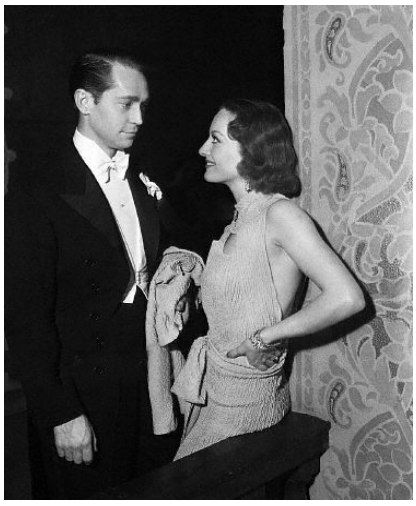
That same year, Le Sueur was given a choice role in Pretty Ladies opposite Zazu Pitts, this time as a glorified chorus girl. Through her brief appearance managed to break through to positive public response, the film was a dud and Le Sueur worried that her brief tenure at MGM would come to not.

She made a friend of then popular leading man, William Haines. He confided his homosexuality to her (a certain kiss of death for his career) and she took to his friendship with sincere loyalty. Le Sueur was also feeling her own after hours in the hot spots around town – her penchant for booze, boys and badinage was of slight consternation to the studio's publicity department.

Eventually, Le Sueur latched on to a young man from a wealthy family. Although the boy was willing, the family was not. They quickly judged Lucille as 'unsuitable' and dissolved the union behind closed doors. It was merely one snub in a long line of such indignations that the struggling young actress had endured almost from birth.

Born into poverty on March 23, 1906, Lucille Fay Le Sueur developed an innate mistrust of men almost from conception. Her father, Thomas did not stick around to see his daughter's first birthday. However, baby Lucille also despised her mother, by all accounts an aspiring Vaudevillian who moved through three fleeting relationships during Lucille's formative years and took in wash in between relationships to keep the family clothed, housed and fed. Daddy #2 was a theater manager, Billie Cassin from whom Le Sueur would borrow his name to launch her own career as a hoofer at Roseland Dance Club on Broadway.

(Crawford at play? Publicity stills of this vintage tended to fabricate a relaxed view of a star's life for the general public. Top: Crawford nurtures a relationship with a thoroughbred after being taught by her Mannequin costar, Spencer Tracy, to love life in the saddle. Left: Crawford and the first of her many pups ham it up for the cameras on a backstage patio at MGM, sold in 1939 to the public as just another casual day, poolside with the great lady.)



(Tempestuous relationships: Crawford's love affair with the camera was rarely equaled behind the scenes. Left top and bottom: with first husband Douglas Fairbanks Jr. – supremely happy until their mutual interests diverged. She wanted to be a great film star, he preferred the stage. Middle: with second husband Franchot Tone. Theirs was an open marriage punctuated by his frequent affairs with contract starlets. Top right: grinning politely for the cameras with arch rival Norma Shearer in 1939 at the premiere of The Women. Crawford assumed that after Shearer's premature retirement the more plum roles that Shearer had been getting under the Thalberg regime would naturally go to her. Instead, L.B. Mayer was plotting her hasty exit in favor of fostering a new roster of younger talent. Bottom right: with frequent costar Clark Gable – the one that got away. Described by Crawford as "pure animal magnetism," Crawford and Gable's periodic sexual liaisons did not lead to a lasting romance.

Eventually, Le Sueur's mother moved the family to Los Angeles and Le Sueur – with nothing more than a forth grade education – made her way through studio auditions as a dancer. Groomed at MGM in the deportment and styling of a lady, Le Sueur took to her accoutrements easily enough and even embraced Louis B. Mayer's idea of a name change. The studio ran a contest. Joan Arden was the first name chosen. Unfortunately, it belonged to another actress. Hence, the runner up - Joan Crawford - became the moniker by which young Lucille would forever more be known.

As Joan Crawford, she appeared in MGM's Sally, Irene and Mary (1925) – an early hit that proved to be her first big break. Oddly enough, her success in that film did not lead to more of the same until one year later when Crawford was next seen to good effect in The Taxi Driver (1927). She outshone her costars in the rather depressing material and was labeled in Variety as a 'fresh new face.'

(More tempestuous relationships: left top and bottom: with third husband Philip Terry. By all accounts he adored Crawford at the start. She ended up hating him, obliterating his memory in family photos after their divorce. Middle top: with Alfred Steele, her fourth husband. His premature death a scant three years after their wedding prevents any critical assessment of whether or not this marriage would have lasted. Middle bottom: with adopted daughter Christina in a rehearsed photo op. Top right: love to hate – arch rivals Crawford and Bette Davis smile for some publicity photos prior to getting underway on Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? Bottom right: another photo op with Christina, this one take several years later.)

That same year, Crawford had two of her best show pieces; the first, as a conniving circus performer opposite Lon Chaney in The Unknown (1927); the second as a tart aboard ship in Twelve Miles Out (1927).

Even at this early stage in her career, Crawford had a firm understanding of one essential in show biz – that it was more prudent and savvy to cultivate a roster of friends behind the camera. The grips, prop masters, costume, hair and make-up assistants, lighting crew; these were the people responsible for making a star shine at its best. They deserved special consideration and Crawford gave it to them.

As proof: when a gaffer fell from a considerable height off some rickety scaffolding, Crawford not only rushed to his aid almost immediately but readily telephoned the fallen worker while he convalesced and even went to visit him at the hospital on occasion until he recovered.



(Above: rare early publicity photos of the girl who would eventually become a glamour queen – circa 1924-1929. Top left: upon her arrival at MGM Crawford was a nondescript stock extra, her physical features mirroring the same as a thousand other young hopefuls. Middle: publicity still for Our Dancing Daughters, the film that made Crawford a star. Right: another still, this one for The Unknown in which Crawford played a circus performer who betrays an enamored knife thrower without hands played by Lon Chaney. Below left: Crawford in the finale of MGM's all-star 'The Hollywood Review' warbling a pop song that would become a standard at MGM – Singin' in the Rain. Below middle: mugging for the camera with a tennis racket. Though athletic, Crawford never developed a yen for the sport. Bottom right: another still for Our Dancing Daughters, this one depicting Crawford as a flapper – her trademark looks still elusive from the camera.)

In later years, after her stardom had set in, Crawford continued her diligence with behind-the-scenes personnel; handing out personalized and often expensive gifts to each and every one of her 'friends' at Christmas. It was good PR – not the kind readily exploited as philanthropy inside the gossip sheets, but serving a purpose nonetheless.

Ironically, Crawford was less congenial toward the higher ups at MGM; L.B. Mayer and VP in Charge of Production Irving Thalberg – the two men who could either make or break her fledgling career. Worse, Crawford made no bones about her general dislike of actress, Norma Shearer who was married to Thalberg.

"*How can I get a decent part around here,*" she would openly tell cast and crew, "*Norma sleeps with the boss!*" Thalberg was quick to 'reward' Crawford's impertinence by placing her in a B-western The Law of the Range (1928) – a film that neither damaged nor advanced her career. Crawford took the hint and her lumps in private. Crawford's opinion of Shearer would not change, but her determination to beat her rival in the business had just received a shot in the arm.



STAR RISING

"I think that the most important thing can have – next to talent – is, of course, her hairdresser."
– Joan Crawford

In retrospect, MGM was rather careless about molding Joan Crawford's early foray in the movies. They toyed with their 'new find' as they tended to with a lot of young beginners in those days, liberally experimenting to a point until something either clicked with the audience or, in the worst case scenario, it didn't and the contract player was then relegated to B-movies or discarded all together.

In Joan's case, the studio next cast her in Our Dancing Daughters (1928) – the tale of a nightclub-loving hoofer who makes good and wins the man in the final reel. It was typecasting and it worked beautifully. Left to her own devices, Crawford emerged as her own distinct filmic personality, prompting imminent writer, F. Scott Fitzgerald to comment that "*Joan Crawford is doubtless the best example of the flapper. The girl you see in smart nightclubs, down to the apex of sophistication, toying iced glasses with a remote, faintly bitter expression, dancing deliciously, laughing a great deal with wide hurt eyes; young things with a talent for living.*"

MGM elevated Crawford's salary to $500.00 a week and helped her buy her first home on Brentwood Avenue. She was suddenly their hottest commodity and the studio wasted no time in exploiting her popularity in a series of largely forgettable roles that the public ate up. Still, as popular as Joan was, her social standing within Hollywood's hoi poloi continued to lag.

The year before, Crawford met Douglas Fairbanks Jr. through an impromptu letter of congratulations she had written him following his debut on Broadway in 'Young Woodley'. A romance began in earnest, but the affair looked to have all the ear-markings of another short-lived romp when Fairbanks Sr. and his wife, Mary Pickford openly frowned on Joan appearing at their seaside home; Pickfair.

(Top: luminous in her defiant anger even, Crawford could convey an arsenal of anger with a well timed glint in her eye and pout of those marvelously oversized lips. Center: the last performance to be 'un-Crawford-esque' in her career – as Sadie Thompson in the ill-fated production of Rain. Technically, it was her best performance to date. The public did not agree. Bottom: Life Magazine captured Crawford applying stencil to her trademark eyebrows in 1951. During the 50s Crawford's look became almost a self-parody.)

Nevertheless, Douglas Jr. continued to court Joan in private, resulting in a whirlwind elopement in June of 1929 – just one month after Crawford's iconic stature in the movies had been cemented – literally – along with her hand and footprints in the forecourt of Grauman's Chinese Theater.

The press labeled their elopement 'the marriage of the century' and lavished an absurd amount of coverage on the couple. Although Fairbanks Jr. tended to shy from this sort of publicity, Crawford devoured every headline and sound byte. For her, the endless barrage of interviews and photo ops meant that she had at last arrived.

At MGM Crawford was cast opposite the studio's #1 A-list male superstar, Clark Gable for the first time in Dance Fools, Dance (1931). Gable, who was married to the much older Josephine Dillon at the time, began to take his late night suppers with Crawford – an affair that continued for several years. That same year Crawford starred with Gable in two more solid offerings; Laughing Sinners – in which she was a repentant harlot saved by Gable's Salvation Army worker – and Possessed – a scintillating crime/drama.

In 1932, Crawford officially came into her own with what would become physical trademarks throughout the rest of her career - exaggerated eyebrows, large lips and accentuated eyes. She also developed a symbiotic working relationship with MGM's leading couturier, Gilbert Adrian (known simply as Adrian). Together, Adrian and Crawford set movie fashion and style trends in her next film – Letty Lynton (1932) and, in that same year, Grand Hotel. In the latter film, Crawford was billed in the esteemed company of two Barrymores (John and Lionel), Lewis Stone, Jean Hersholt and the elusive enigma – Garbo.

Though Crawford was honored by this inclusion to MGM's top tier, her singular regret on the project stemmed from the fact that she and Garbo had no scenes together. Nevertheless, Grand Hotel was MGM's all-star Academy Award winning masterpiece of that year and Crawford's casting in it signaled the beginning of a meteoric rise as one of the studio's most bankable stars.

...to be continued...