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Frances Dee: A Film History

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Frances Marion Dee defied the Hollywood odds, essentially becoming that almost mythical figure: the extra girl plucked from a chorus line or crowd scene arbitrarily and given the Big Break that catapults her to stardom. Frances was a day player at Paramount when someone in the studio's casting department mistook her for a more accomplished actress and gave her a bit role in Ernst Lubitsch's Monte Carlo. Shortly thereafter, a chance meeting with Maurice Chevalier in the Paramount commissary won her the female lead in his next picture, Playboy of Paris, after director Ludwig Berger had rejected her as too inexperienced for the part. Then, on the basis of her good work with Chevalier, she was signed to a long-term contract. It would be easy to attribute the ongoing interest in Frances to her ageless beauty, the quality summed up by that great Norma Desmond line in Billy Wilder's Sunset Boulevard : "We had faces then." Few female stars or starlets were photographed as often or as gorgeously as Frances; you can gaze upon hundreds of her old publicity portraits and never see one in which she looks less than ravishing. But it isn't just the perfect lines and features that impress, it's the emotions she conveyed with her face. She didn't need special lighting or makeup to suggest the proper mood—it came out through her expressions, especially through her eyes. Frances was equally effective as the impeccably bred lady-in-waiting of If I Were King and the masochistic nymphomaniac in Blood Money. The many Sweet Young Things she played early in her career blinded some in Hollywood to her true range, which was considerable. This book-length study of her films is a handy reference guide, dedicated to a star unjustly forgotten—or, at the very least—unfairly neglected and definitely underrated.

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