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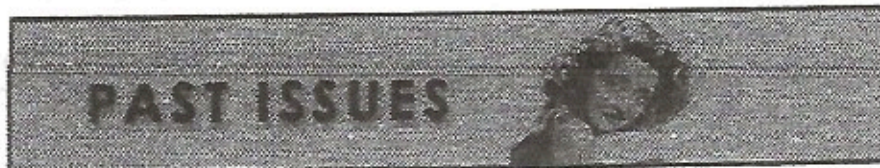




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## Eleanor Parker

When you think of versatility in films, one actress should immediately come to mind: Eleanor Parker. Audiences never knew what to expect when they saw her. To Eleanor, creating interesting characters was more important than cultivating a star image. In over 50 films, she would earn the title, "The Woman of a Thousand Faces," but unlike Lon Chaney, Eleanor is seldom recognized today for her remarkable talent.

If she had conformed, and simply used her stunning beauty to rise to stardom, she might be canonized today. Thankfully, she did not conform. Eleanor instead became a serious actress who gave her roles a depth and understanding that few stars have ever matched.

She was born Eleanor Jean Parker, June 26, 1922, in Cedarville, Ohio, the youngest of three children. Her father was a teacher of mathematics, and her family had no theatrical background. Eleanor probably surprised everyone when, at a young age, she became serious about acting and started performing in plays at school. For two summers, starting at age fifteen, she studied at The Rice Summer Theatre on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. While there, an agent from 20th Century-Fox offered her a screen test, which she wisely declined in favor of her education.

Graduation from high school was followed by The Pasadena Playhouse. Warner Bros. scouts spotted her, and she was again asked to do a screen test. Eleanor refused. She wanted to finish her first year at the Playhouse before making a decision. Finally, in June, 1941, she was ready, and called the studio.

Eleanor was awarded a Warners' contract two days after her initial screen test. Her film debut was slated as *They Died With Their Boots On* (1941), but she was cut from the final release print.

With this false start, subsequent work at the studio consisted of voice-overs, leads in short subjects, and assisting other actors' screen tests. One test she helped with was for rising actor Warren Douglas. After a modest acting career at Warners and other studios, Douglas became a noted screenwriter. Of that first screen test, Douglas remembered in 1995: "My whole life was wound up in that few feet of film. A beautiful contract player, destined soon for stardom, was chosen to assist me in that test. She was Eleanor Parker. I never forgot her helpful kindness or her wonderful talent. Working with her was a pleasure; and, with Sophie [Rosenstein] directing the miniature production, I felt safe, secure and happy."

In the midst of her short subject assignments, Eleanor finally made her feature debut in the nifty "B" *Busses Roar* (1942). Starring Richard Travis and Julie Bishop, the story involved a bomb





smuggled onto a bus by Axis agents. Billed fourth, Eleanor stood out as a truly lovely presence.

Warners' most lavish film of the season was *Mission to Moscow* (1943), and it featured Eleanor in role originally mentioned for Joyce Reynolds. Directed by Michael Curtiz, it was based on the book by American ambassador Joseph E. Davies. Walter Huston played the ambassador in the film detailing his pre-war assignment to the Soviet Union, with Ann Harding playing his wife, and Eleanor playing their daughter. It was a plodding, talky tale, but a significant one, certainly aiding Eleanor's career. On the set of *Mission to Moscow* Eleanor met Lieut. Fred L. Losse, a Navy dentist. They wed shortly thereafter on March 21, 1943. It was her first marriage, and unfortunately, a brief one. They divorced on December 5, 1944.

Meanwhile, Eleanor handled the leading fem role in the intriguing "B" *The Mysterious Doctor* (1943). The lurking image of a murderous beheaded man in a mine was just a nasty Nazi ruse in this one. Admittedly, this was pretty silly stuff, but Eleanor's presence gave the film a touch of class. For her valiant effort, Eleanor was awarded a key role in a major production.

Between *Two Worlds* (1944), based on the 1924 play and 1930 film *Outward Bound*, was an excursion into very strange territory. It involves a group of passengers on a mysterious boat who find they are dead and must now face the after-life. Paul Henreid and Eleanor are suicides, who are at first the only passengers aware they are dead. There is a haunting mood that permeates the film, even though (unlike the original) we are tipped off early that the passengers are dead. Many critics saw fault with this, but it really didn't matter. The film succeeds in being different, and it's unfairly overlooked today.

Eleanor handled her first major starring part with skill; giving a sensitive and moving portrayal of a woman who, refusing to be separated from the man she loves, joins him in suicide. We are treated to a splendid scene near the end when she realizes she might be parted from Henreid. Her frantic search for him on the ship's deck is wonderfully modulated. She starts by calling out to him, then when he doesn't answer, her panic increases until she is hysterical. If Warners needed any proof of her dramatic powers, she gave it to them in this film.

This was followed in release in 1944 by two "B" quickies, *Crime By Night* and *The Last Ride*, but they gave evidence of having been made earlier; explaining her negligible parts. Although these "B's" were good training, her talent cried out for bigger roles in bigger films.

This was just a sample of the article appearing in issue #12. To read and appreciate the full story plus photographs please order Spring 1998 back issue #12.

**Return to Spring 1998 #12 index.**