

ROUBEN MAMOULIAN, HIS WIFE, GARBO, AND DIETRICH

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Edited excerpts from "The Sewing Circle" by Axel Madsen (Carol Publishing Group, 1995)

About the time Rouben Mamoulian landed in Hollywood to direct Paramount's "Song of Songs" starring a reluctant Marlene Dietrich, the studio laid down the law, knowing full well that Dietrich could not afford to say no: report to Mamoulian for the "Song of Songs" or forfeit the \$300,000 salary and be sued for the \$185,000 it had cost the studio to turn the 1908 play into a Dietrich vehicle. Marlene consented to meet the director. He mollified her by telling her that his approach to the romantic nonsense of "Song of Songs" would be theatrical and his efforts will centre on the development of her character.

Although Mamoulian was imported from Broadway to transfer stage successes to the screen, he became one of Hollywood's leading directors by revolting against campy theatrical productions. By appreciating the use of the close-up, by dramatically fresh approach and by illuminating a scene in an original manner, he broke with his own theatrical brilliance. He was, by his third film, "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde", in full control of his new medium.

He and his wife, Azadia, were Armenian. He was the son of a Tbilisi banker and had spent part of his childhood in Paris, studied criminology at the University of Moscow, and trained for the stage at the Moscow Art Theater under Konstantin Stanislavsky.

Greta Garbo fell in love with Azadia, and although the feeling was not reciprocated, they continued to see each other long after Mamoulian and Garbo finished "Queen Christina". The thirty-four-year-old director was a forceful presence behind his horn rimmed glasses.

By telling Garbo in "Queen Christina" to underplay everything, Mamoulian brought out the queen's conflicting impulses, the inner struggle between her dauntless tomboy and her wish to be loved.

Garbo liked her director's personality and found working with him stimulating, although they disagreed over her male disguises, which she wanted less glamorous and more authentic. The studio also wouldn't let her coarsen her face with massive masculine eyebrows.

Garbo soon began to date her director. Los Angeles newspapers reported Garbo and Mamoulian were seen dining in popular Sunset Strip clubs, and gossip columnists hinted at a star-director romance. The romance didn't last long because Mamoulian discovered that Mercedes de Acosta, a former lover of Garbo, was stalking the Swedish superstar. Mamoulian was horrified when, picking up Garbo one night, watched the actress slip onto the floor of his car while he backed out of her driveway. She got back up in the passenger's seat once they were down the street. Her explanation: she didn't want a certain lady to watch her coming and going. De Costa had been stalking Garbo. When it happened a second time, Mamoulian told her that the relationship would be over unless "you behave like a human being." Garbo protested but Mamoulian had made up his mind that the affair was over.

