

Marie Dressler

Biography



Marie Dressler was born Leila von Koerber in Cobourg, Ontario on November 9, but the precise year is as flexible as the range of roles she would later come to play. Most sources agree on 1868, though some say 1869, her baptismal records cite 1863, and 1871 is given on her gravestone. The young Dressler aspired to be an entertainer, and at age 14 was accepted at a dramatic stock company. Her father, a quick-tempered and demanding professor of music and church organist, feared she'd drag the family name in the mud. Fortunately, she had inherited her father's stubbornness and assured him that if her name was the problem, she'd simply take a new one. From that point on, she became known as Marie Dressler.

Dressler began her show business career touring for three years with the Nevada Stock Company for six dollars a week, then joined another company which led to work with opera companies, stage work and appearances on Broadway.

Influential Broadway producer George Lederer once said to a director for stifling her: "Oh, let her do it her own way, she's funny!" This became an unwritten law among producers, allowing Dressler to interpret roles as she saw fit. She landed many leading roles in New York during her early 30s, beginning with Keystone Studios' *Tillie's Punctured Romance*, the first full-length feature comedy.

Dedicated to those affected by World War I, she also appeared in over 30 benefits by 1916 and was president of the Chorus Equity Association, one of the first actors' unions. This position had her secretly blacklisted by theatre production companies until Canadian film producer and co-founder of MGM, Louis B. Mayer gave her the opportunity to return to motion pictures.

Dressler received popular and critical acclaim for her role in *Anna Christie* and went on to win the Best Actress Oscar for her lead in *Min and Bill*. In 1932, MGM promoted her as the "greatest actress alive" for her role in *Emma*, which earned her an Oscar nomination, and the New York Times gushed: "It is a great pleasure to behold Marie Dressler away from her usual roles, dressed in the height of fashion and given lines that aroused gales of mirth from the first-night audience."

During her career, Dressler appeared in approximately 40 films. She was so universally admired by her peers and audiences that the New York Times ran a daily report of her health in the weeks leading up to her death on July 28, 1934.