

Norma Shearer

Biography



Norma Shearer was born on August 10, 1902, in Montreal's upper-middle class Westmount area, where she studied piano, took dance lessons, and learned horseback riding as a child. This fortune was short lived, since her father lost his construction company during the post-World War I Depression, and the Shearers were forced to leave their mansion.

Norma's mother, Edith, took her and her sister, Athole, to New York City, hoping to get them into acting. They stayed in an unheated boarding house, and Edith found work as a sales clerk. When the odd part did come along, it was small. Athole was discouraged, but Norma was motivated to work harder. A stream of failed auditions paid off when she landed a role in 1920's *The Stealers*.

Arriving in Los Angeles in 1923, she was hired by Irving G. Thalberg, a boyish 24-year-old who was production supervisor at tiny Louis B. Mayer Productions. Thalberg was already renowned for his intuitive grasp of public taste. He had spotted Shearer in her modest New York appearances and urged Mayer to sign her. When Mayer merged with two other studios to become Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, both Shearer and Thalberg were catapulted into superstardom. In five years, Shearer, fueled by a larger-than-life ambition, would be a Top Ten Hollywood star, ultimately becoming the glamorous and gracious "First Lady of M-G-M."

Shearer's private life reflected the poise and elegance of her onscreen persona. Smitten with Thalberg at their first meeting, she married him in 1927. The marriage was a happy one, producing a son and daughter. Shearer played emancipated women in such classics as *A Free Soul*, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, and *The Divorcee*, for which she won an Academy Award.TM After Thalberg's premature death in 1936, Shearer continued to work, starring in *Marie Antoinette* and *The Women*. She retired in 1942 after marrying Martin Arrouge, a real estate developer.

Norma Shearer died on June 12, 1983, and was interred beside her first husband in the Thalberg pavilion at Forest Lawn cemetery. Her work continues to be rediscovered and reappraised, not only for its dramatic power but also for her intelligent, farseeing choices.