

Book Review: Dark Victory - The Life of Bette Davis

Contributed by Teresa Watson

If there is one sentence that best sums up Bette Davis' professional and personal life, it would be one from her 1950 movie, *All About Eve*. As her character, Margo Channing, is walking up the stairs, she turns for a moment, stares at her guests and says, "Fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy night!" Scores of Davis biographies have been written over the years, but author Ed Sikov attempts to dissect the star from a different angle in his new book *Dark Victory: The Life of Bette Davis*.

Her parents married on July 1, 1907. Nine months later, on April 5, 1908, Ruth Elizabeth Davis was born in Lowell, Massachusetts. Sister Barbara (Bobby) was born October 1909. Bette's father never wanted children and he was upset with Ruthie (his wife) for getting pregnant on their honeymoon. Though they had Barbara just to keep Bette from being spoiled, it didn't work out as planned. Bette learned how to manipulate people at a very young age, and her mother always gave into her eloquent tantrums. But despite her blatant show of independence, Ruthie was still able to control her daughter to some degree. Once they moved to Hollywood years later and Bette became a star, her mother still told her what to do, even showing up during filming to make demands and give orders.

Bette's father deserted the family when Bette was seven, but the mark he left on the young girl's life would haunt her all of her days. Bette almost certainly inherited his obsessive-compulsive disorder. Her determination to make something of herself would come from a single incident when her father took her outside one night to show her the stars, telling her: "There are millions and millions of them. Remember that always and you'll know how unimportant you are."

Ruthie moved the girls around, looking for work wherever she could find it. Bette developed an interest in acting, which led her to the Anderson-Milton school. From there, she worked her way to Broadway, where she appeared in several productions before going to Hollywood in December 1930. She worked with Universal for a few months before being offered a six-month contract at Warner Brothers in November 1931. By 1935, she was an Oscar-nominated actress for her role in *Of Human Bondage*, but she did not win the coveted award until the following year for her performance in *Dangerous*. From 1939 to 1943, she was nominated every year, but only won in 1939, for her role as Julie Marsden in *Jezebel*. In the midst of her two Oscar wins, she fought the studio for better roles.

Suspended by Warner, Davis went to England, where the case eventually made its way to court. Surprisingly, she lost, but still managed to secure more fitting roles. The studio secretly admired her persistence and rewarded her accordingly.

Sikov's presentation of Davis's career is thorough, but the intricate weaving of her private life is even more fascinating. None of Bette's four marriages were successful and all were filled with a bit of scandal. Her first, to musician Harmon Nelson, suffered from the two abortions she had during their marriage. She later claimed to be grateful to him, because she didn't want to be sitting around at the age of 50, surrounded by children, wondering "what if". Bette's second marriage to Arthur Farnsworth lasted three years, ending with Farnsworth's death from a head injury after a fall. Many people felt the death was suspicious. People commented that Bette may have even "bumped him off"; no doubt blurring the line between her on-screen characters (the "black widow" type) and her real personality. Davis's third marriage to William Grant Sherry was likely doomed before it began, but did produce a child, Barbara (B.D.). Bette's mother and sister did not take kindly to Sherry and had him investigated. Bette, independent as always, ignored their warnings. Later, after they had been divorced, Sherry stated that Bette loved the violence of their marriage as much as he did. Her fourth and final marriage, to actor Gary Merrill, lasted the longest. In their 10 years together, they adopted two children: Margot (who was mentally disabled) and Michael. After non-stop fighting and financial troubles, they parted ways. Merrill never married again but was said to have been involved with Rita Hayworth for a short time.

It is often said that actors draw on their real-life experiences when developing their characters. If this is true, then Davis had plenty of material to work from. She used the emotional turmoil of her personal life, bringing to her characters the fire, drive and unrequited love that could not be fulfilled off-screen. Four marriages, three children, a sister who was mentally unstable, a mother who was spending her money and living in her house, feuds with co-stars like Joan Crawford and Miriam Hopkins, and affairs with men like director William Wyler and the eccentric millionaire Howard Hughes gave her plenty of emotional baggage to use in her performances.

Even after she suffered a stroke and a mastectomy in 1983, Bette continued to work, mostly in made-for-TV movies. She traveled the world, receiving accolades and awards for her career. Controlling and strong-willed until the end, she passed away in Neuilly, France on October 6, 1989 from metastasized breast cancer.

In his book, Sikov opens the door, exposing Davis' life to the world: the ups and downs, the disappointments, the battles with the studio, other actors and her family, and the price she paid for her victories. With his tireless research paving the way for shocks and thrills, Sikov manages to pull off a fresh look at the Bette Davis enigma. It was a bumpy ride and a bumpy life, but she left behind a wealth of movies and performances that will forever outweigh the despondency she endured.

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