

DECLINING MONROE

It's no secret that Marilyn Monroe had problems. Reckless, guilty, depressed, her troubling fall of the 1960s was the fun house reflection of a promising rush to fame ten years earlier. Monroe struggled to keep her wits about her, stumbling through three husbands and suicide flirtations. She plagued studios with the high salary and uncertain returns of a star in the eclipse. Consumed by the barbiturates that contributed to her death at age 36, Monroe's last film, *Something's Got to Give*, was abandoned by Twentieth Century-Fox. She couldn't go any further.

During these years of anxious living she starred in two remarkable films, *Some Like It Hot*, in 1959, and *The Misfits* (1961). As her private tragedies compounded, and directors struggled to remain patient with her tardiness, screaming, and cursing, all the while insulating herself with attendants and psychiatrists—even with all that, her work onscreen shone. With the tensions of life squeezing her like a vice grip, Monroe's acting in these movies demonstrates a marked improvement from her early efforts. Her study in Lee Strasberg's Actors Studio certainly contributed, as did the hidden polish of good writing and direction. Both factors deserve credit. But they are matched in importance by Monroe's apparent willingness to expose her soul rather than her body. She's doing what any good actor has to do, take risks. The reality of a talent transcending stardom emerges in these films. Electric in surprise, with hindsight foreboding, her beautiful gift, inspiring pathos and wonder, will survive like nary another; hers is one of the brightest points of light in a galaxy of Hollywood stars, years after collapse, radiant still.

Even with Monroe's profound ability, one gets the sense that in *Some Like It Hot* she is still regarded with derision. Her role is Sugar Kane, a singer in a girl band joined by Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon to escape the clutches of the Chicago mob. The role seems tailor-made for her. But at first she was offended by the script, thinking her character moronic. Sugar has a history of difficulty with man bands, constantly falling for saxophone players who love her and leave her. Monroe's trusting nature and serial sexploration are thus a part of her character, allowing her to recall past experiences to create an exceptional performance in the flavor of the Method system promoted by the Actors Studio. Any beautiful actress would be appropriate for the role. Monroe is that and much more, and the Lemmon and Curtis characters interact with her accordingly. But in three of the first scenes in which Monroe appears, her character is sandbagged by a derisive trumpet with a sexpot mute. Growling at the sight of Monroe with the equivalent effect of a wolf's whistle, this scoring undermines the character, because she is not used as a dumb blond in the script—she is thoughtful, and nurses deep wounds.

Monroe is ill-served by Adolph Deutsch's lecherous music, and in a sparkling film, this was director Wilder's one glaring misstep.

Marilyn Monroe has this great way of delivering her lines, charging through them with enthusiasm, hoping that another sad story will work out differently in the retelling. Her face matches the tenor of her words, the eyes becoming heavier with every sip of gin, sensuously and wearily narrowing before springing wide in renewed enthusiasm.

Her character wrestles with alcohol, just like Marilyn. In the beginning she's sneaking sips from a flask, but drops it all once she's fallen in love, declaring she'll never go back to it, only to plead for some once (she thinks) all hope is lost.

Such lines as "Well, if they catch me once more they're going to kick me out of the band"; "I always get the fuzzy end of the lollipop"; and "Then one morning you wake up, the guy's gone, the saxophone's gone, all that's left behind is a pair of old socks and a tube of toothpaste, all squeezed out" testify to her unique style (and her tortured final years). She has an indescribable quality that might be considered exuberant, vital or sparkling, a quality made all the more endearing in the context of life's many disappointments.

The role affords her a nice balance between her patented breathy-innocent sexiness and a refreshing shop-worn fatigue. Sugar is ebullient when relishing her new affections for Junior (Tony Curtis out of drag on a yacht), singing "I Want to be Loved by You"; then she mourns his loss, resigning from the human race with "I'm Through With Love." Monroe's acting is at its best when she performs these two songs.

What emerged on screen was magical, but tensions on the set ran high. Wilder resorted to planting the line "Where's that bourbon?" in the drawer Marilyn opens after she had blown dozens of takes for just that one reading. He had been skeptical of the benefit the Actors Studio would have on her work, fearing it would take away her natural charm. Though it was tougher directing her on *Some Like It Hot* than *The Seven Year Itch*, he was impressed with her new-found abilities. Wilder knew what was at stake, remarking, "Before she was like a tightrope walker who doesn't know there's a pit below she can fall into. Now she knows."

The Misfits proved even more difficult. The screenplay was the work of Monroe's third husband, Arthur Miller, the playwright of "Death of a Salesman." Their marriage was tormented from the beginning, and the screenplay was a major factor. Monroe suspected that her husband was developing the script to launch a Hollywood career, using his wife as the vehicle. He began the project as a means for Marilyn to show her true gift for acting. But she did not think her character, Roslyn, should be portrayed as innocent and hypnotic, as the script called for. Instead, Monroe wanted a multi-layered character with a heavy history like her own; she felt Miller, instead of loving her despite herself, ignored the parts he didn't like, particularly her sordid past. This just heightened the feelings of rejection she'd battled since childhood.

John Huston of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* directed. He alternated, like Billy Wilder, between fits of anger and awestruck admiration. Marilyn Monroe was unpredictable, and Huston made the decision to hospitalize her lest she destroy the film, die, or both. Co-star Clark Gable died soon after shooting finally finished, and Monroe was racked with guilt at having made him wait for hours on end in the hot Nevada desert.

The film, boasting an excellent cast of Gable, Monroe, Montgomery Clift, Thelma Ritter, and Eli Wallach, concerns the changing times of mustang herders in the wilds outside Reno. The dialogue is thick with talk of life and death, the difficulty of change, the nature of freedom, and the inability to trust. It's as sad a movie as *Some Like It Hot* is hilarious.

Monroe's unease translates well, for in many scenes she broods and stares, despondent. A trance-like dance her character falls into after drinking too much, stumbling around in the moonlight as her dress is about to slip off her body, is uncomfortable to watch (and greatly enhanced by Alex North's hypnotic scoring). Her character, regardless of screenwriter Miller's capacity for self-delusion, is as close to the real Monroe as we have on film. Roslyn is willing to be pulled along, making quick decisions, but leaving matters of substance to the men controlling her. She's transfixed by pain, focused on death. Her desperation to love and be loved, to be protected, is tempered by a fear of the very man she entrusts her salvation to. And she is scared, easily frightened, one minute vibrant and alive, another withdrawn and despondent...or screaming.

One aspect of Roslyn's past hits harder than anything else in the movie. The story is briefly told by Roslyn, but then amplified and interpreted with great insight by Guido, played by Eli Wallach. In her younger days, Roslyn took up dancing as a way of expressing her inner vitality and love for music. She ended up performing in a night club. But what she offered as innocent was perverted by lusting men who didn't understand beauty, even as they beheld a prime example of it.

Perhaps audiences did take Monroe the wrong way. She wanted, desperately, to be taken seriously, to escape the burden of being a sex goddess. But when she finally set up her own production company and won a sparkling contract from Twentieth Century-Fox, depression overtook her and she gave the public little opportunity to observe her gifts in those last five years. Just like *Some Like It Hot*, in *The Misfits* Monroe's character teeters between extremes. In the first film she is ebullient or mournful, in the second, luminous or numb. Listening to the people who knew her well, this is just as she was. They were drawn to one aspect of her character, frightened or repulsed by the other. But there were always men trying to use her, to the very end, men who did not care about her but wanted control and wanted to exploit, men like those referenced in both films. Hers was a difficult road that with poor choices she made impassable. But she was always the center. In both films she plays the pivotal

role as men, transfixed and bewildered and aroused, compete for her. In *The Misfits* they even take to telling her directly, from one end of the picture to the other, having known her but a few hours, how extraordinary she really is.

People can see that more readily than they did then. A reputation as the very incarnation of sexuality has abated as the belief that she was misused and underappreciated gains adherents. But their confusion found root in her behavior. In *Some Like It Hot* Sugar lies about being a high society girl to appeal to a millionaire. In *The Misfits* one discussion touches on the observation that Roslyn is the saddest girl around. She mildly protests that she has been told she is the happiest. Gay, the Clark Gable character, has an answer for that: She makes men feel happy, and they project that feeling back on to her. In real life, Marilyn did not habitually lie with her mouth, but she did put on a charade that all was well, determined to show the world that their icon (a figure she had more difficulty ignoring as her death approached) was alive and well, still sexy and ready for the next adventure. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Marilyn rehearsed herself before meeting someone important, stashing insightful questions in her purse and the like. Even if it was not a business meeting, she was always eager to please, eager to impress, determined to make of herself more than others would allow her to be. But the problem wasn't that others didn't like her; she never liked herself.

With all the trouble she had making films, cinema fans can be glad for at least we have, in these movies, two examples of Marilyn Monroe approaching perfection. But her perfection would never match our ideal, and that was her curse. She died young, preserving for all a portrait of youth, unchanging, lost in a time far gone.