WOMEN IN HOLLYWOOD / 'SHE WAS NEVER RESPECTED AS A GREAT ACTRESS'

How actress Hedy Lamarr's WWII military invention was torpedoed by the US Navy

Debuting November 24, a new film about the Hollywood bombshell reveals how, typecast as a sex symbol, her technological contributions were squandered

By RICH TENORIO | 24 November 2017, 6:31 pm

Hedy Lamarr in the 1941 film 'Ziegfeld Girl.' (Courtesy Alexandra Dean)

Pigeonholed into one-dimensional roles as a Hollywood sex object, actress Hedy Lamarr may initially come off as a squandered talent. When you hear about her never-used contribution to military technology, that becomes a sure thing.

Born Hedwig Kiesler into a Jewish family in Vienna, Lamarr not only escaped the Nazis to win silver screen stardom — she also developed a system to protect Allied torpedoes from German U-boat fire during World War II.

"Spread spectrum" technology would become the forerunner of that used in today's Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and GPS systems — but the Navy never used her patent, and after it expired, her achievements were forgotten.

Now, audiences can learn about this contribution and more through a new film, "Bombshell: The Hedy Lamarr Story," which after a successful festival run will make its nationwide debut in theaters on November 24 at the IFC Center in New York. There will also be an additional screening on December 8 at the Nuart Theatre in Los Angeles.

"If it does well, it will have a wider release," said director and co-producer Alexandra Dean. "It will reach critical mass — that's our great hope. It seems to resonate."

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The executive producer is Academy Award-winning actress Susan Sarandon. But "Bombshell" is also a family endeavor — Dean's co-producer is her brother Adam Haggiag, and they come from a filmmaking family with roots in mid-20th century Italian cinema.

The film was aided by the rediscovery of tapes from a 1990 interview with Lamarr by journalist Fleming Meeks.

Lamarr, who died in 2000, was in her mid-70s when she spoke with Meeks for an article about her invention. "I could never part with the tapes," Meeks said.

Shortly before inventing Spread Spectrum technology, actress Hedy Lamarr supports Spencer Tracy in 'I Take This Woman.' (Courtesy Alexandra Dean)

As a result, the world can now see Hedy Lamarr in a whole new light.

The film challenges the unfair stereotype of Lamarr as an actress whose accomplishments rested solely on her physical appearance.

"While Hedy Lamarr was an international star, she was never respected as a great actress in the same way as Marlene Dietrich or Greta Garbo," Haggiag wrote in an email.

"What we learned in the course of making this film was that Hedy had to battle MGM boss Louis B. Mayer at every step of her Hollywood career. He often gave her sexualized roles that frustrated her, so some of her best roles such as

[the 1938 film] 'Algiers' she managed to make by finding the scripts herself and getting loaned to other studios," he wrote.

The film also details the story of Lamarr as an inventor. "She came up with a secure communication system that was really about helping the Allies beat the Nazis in the Atlantic," Dean said. "Wireless torpedoes were being blown up by Nazi 'wolfpacks.'"

Lamarr worked to create a system called "frequency hopping" in which torpedoes would "hop" between frequencies to avoid detection.

Glamorous portrait of movie actress Hedy Lamarr wearing white fox fur short jacket,1938. (©Diltz/RDA/Everett Collection/Courtesy Alexandra Dean)

"At a dinner party, so it goes, she met composer George Antheil, and they came up with the concept," said Jan-Christopher Horak, director of the UCLA film archive, who has written about Lamarr and was interviewed for the film. "It pretty much worked out.

"They tried to interest the Navy. They did patent it, but it never went anywhere. It could have been utilized in the war effort," he said.

Today, Horak said, "all cellular communications" are based on this system.
"It was all done after the patent expired," he said. "She never made a penny."

The film explores other theories about the invention. One hypothesis is that Lamarr actually stole the idea as a spy, when she was still in Europe, married to her first husband, Fritz Mandl, a munitions manufacturer who collaborated with the Nazis.

"I heard that speculation, that at one of the meetings her husband had, she may have picked up something like that," Horak said. But "the Germans didn't have that technology. And then, I think, it's purely speculative. I'm not sure."

Lamarr converted to Catholicism to marry Mandl. "Actually, [Mandl] was also Jewish and converted to Catholicism," Horak said. "They only had a couple of years of marriage."

She was a rising film star who had appeared as a teenager in the notorious 1933 Austrian film "Ecstasy." Lamarr appears in nude scenes in the film, and also portrayed the first on-screen orgasm.

"Louis B. Mayer apparently met her at a dinner party at the Leopoldskron [palace in Salzburg] with [Austrian director] Max Reinhardt," Horak said. "Then, eventually, she kind of followed him, escaping from her husband. She got on the same boat [Mayer] was on, to the States from London. When she got to America, she had a contract in her pocket."

She also had a new last name thanks to Mayer's wife. "Lamarr" evoked both '20s actress Barbara Lamarr, who tragically died of a drug overdose; and the sea, "le mer" or "la mar."

"MGM publicity kept it a complete secret that her last name was actually Kiesler," Horak said. "No one ever knew she was actually Jewish, not in the American press."

Dean said Lamarr had "a very complicated relationship to Judaism."

She asked her mother to convert to Catholicism "possibly to protect her from the Nazis," said Dean, "or [maybe just to] help Hedy in Hollywood."

Hedy Lamarr in 'Algiers.' Portrait by Robert Coburn, 1938. (Courtesy Alexandra Dean)

Hedy Lamarr in the 1933 film 'Ecstacy,' the first film to portray a female orgasm on screen. (Courtesy Alexandra Dean)

Dean found that Lamarr had hidden her Judaism, and that her children were shocked to learn about it.

But, she said, "Her Judaism underpins the whole story. It's the backdrop that makes it all understandable."

Dean called it "a void — something she amputated about herself in order to survive. Her main invention occurred because of it, the guilt and shame. Her own people were being annihilated. She escaped."

In 1990, journalist Meeks learned of Lamarr's invention from a conversation between his father, an astrophysicist, and one of his father's friends, Robert Price, a specialist in secure communications. Price had discovered the patent in the early '80s in the name of Hedwig Kiesler Markey, Lamarr's surname at the time of her marriage to her second husband.

Meeks got the suggestion to pitch the story to Forbes. He spoke with Lamarr five times over the telephone, calling her at her Florida apartment.

"She talked about Hollywood often — Clark Gable, Claudette Colbert," Meeks said. "I just ate it up."

But, he said, she also showed signs of longtime use of methamphetamines, which she had thought were vitamin B shots. After six marriages and filing multiple lawsuits, she had become an impoverished recluse and had even been arrested for shoplifting.

Still, the interviews nearly ended after he called her at 6:30 p.m. one night.

"She was really angry at me," said Meeks. "It was because I interrupted her game shows. She hung up and said, 'don't ever call back.'"

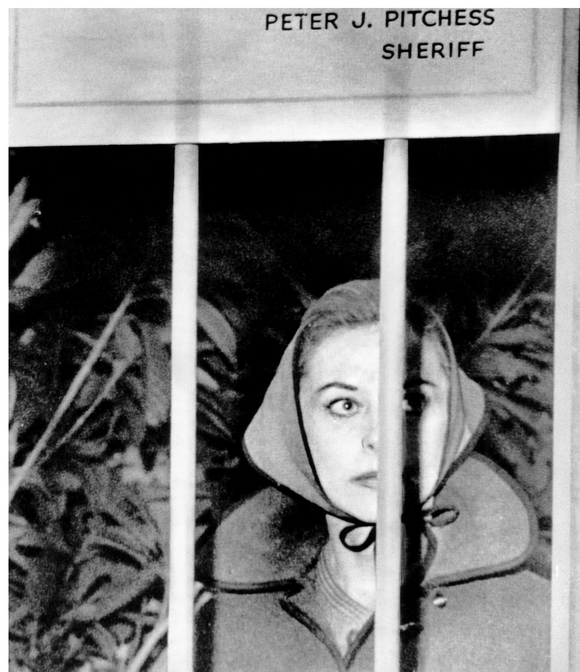
Meeks sent a dozen roses, and "the next time I called, all was forgiven," he said, adding that his article was "well received," but that he had to wait over two decades before there was outside interest in his tapes. By then, he had had a successful 30-year journalism career, including as the executive editor of Barron's.

"He quoted her seven times in the original article," said Dean. "It was the most anybody ever quoted her on the topic

of her invention." His tapes, she added, were an "unbelievable archive."

As she noted in an email, "I think it took a while for Hedy's story to come out because it was hard to find the evidence that allowed us to make the argument that Hedy had really come up with this invention and that she wasn't a spy who stole the idea from her husband, which was a pervasive rumor about her."

Dean was inspired to make the film when she received a copy of the 2011 book "Hedy's Folly: The Life and Breakthrough Inventions of Hedy Lamarr, the Most Beautiful Woman in the World" by Richard Rhodes. She interviewed experts including Rhodes and Horak, and spoke with all three of Lamarr's children.



Hedy Lamarr, leaving the Sybil Brand Insitution for Women on bail afer being arrested for shoplifting, January 28, 1966. (Courtesy Alexandra Dean)

Hedy Lamarr in 'Algiers,' 1938. (Courtesy Alexandra Dean)

Dean said they were "very distrustful at first," having shared their mother's story with others and seeing scandal-focused coverage. "I did a lot to win their trust," she said.

Sarandon provided invaluable assistance. "[She is,] in many ways, the godmother of this film," Dean said. "She gave us a space to work in and really helped guide us in a lot of respects."

The filmmakers are delighted in the reception "Bombshell" is getting — including at the Boston Jewish Film Festival last week, where all three screenings sold out.

"It's about fighting within different systems — #MeToo, Harvey Weinstein, women in STEM and technology who were

never taken seriously," she explained. "It's touching a nerve. I hope it has a really wide release, bringing it into the conversation, so Hedy can have her day in the sun, and change the world we live in."