

OLD HOLLYWOOD BOOK CLUB

The Love Goddess: Rita Hayworth's Tragic Quest

A heartbreaking 1989 biography, *If This Was Happiness*, lays out the trauma that haunted one of Hollywood's most glamorous stars.

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BY JOHN KOBAL FOUNDATION/GETTY IMAGES.

Margarita Carmen Cansino was born in Brooklyn on October 17, 1918. The world would come to worship her as the sex symbol Rita Hayworth, star of movies like *Gilda*, *You Were Never Lovelier*, and *Separate Tables*. But as **Barbara Leaming** writes in her heartbreaking 1989 biography *If This Was Happiness*, what happened to her as the child Margarita would scar Hayworth forever.

A magnificent dancer and entertainer, Hayworth lit up when performing. “She learned steps faster than anyone I’d ever known,” her costar Fred Astaire said, according to Leaming. “I’d show her a routine before lunch. She’d be back right after lunch and have it down to perfection. She apparently figured it out in her mind while she was eating.” Yet once the work was done, costar James Cagney remembered, she’d simply “go back to her chair and sit there and not communicate”—a possible indication of the trauma that lay beneath her glitzy persona.

Married five times, Hayworth would have affairs with Howard Hughes, Victor Mature, David Niven and Kirk Douglas. Yet she found little solace in her relationships: “Men go to bed with Gilda, but awaken with me,” Hayworth famously said once. “I felt something deep within her I couldn’t help—loneliness, sadness—something that would pull me down,” Douglas would recall after their tryst, according to Leaming. “I had to get away.”

But Hayworth could not escape her past or problems, run though she did. “You see what she was,” second husband Orson Welles told Leaming. “All her life was pain.”

Little Girl Lost

Eduardo Cansino, Hayworth’s Spanish-born father, had once been a smash on the vaudeville circuit, performing with his sister as the “Dancing Cansinos.” His daughter, according to her school principal, was “one of the kindest, most motherly

girls I ever knew,” but a poor student. “She did the best she could, which wasn’t too good.”

But 12-year-old Hayworth could dance. According to Leaming, in 1931, a cash-strapped Cansino decided to revive the Dancing Cansinos, taking his daughter as his partner. Hayworth’s dark brown hair was dyed black to make her appear older and more “Latin.” They began to perform on the raucous floating casinos off the coast of Southern California.

Leaming writes:

After Eduardo had drunk and gambled away their earnings, he would send her out to catch fish for dinner. If...she returned empty-handed, he punished her with his fists—always scrupulously careful, however, not to leave any marks for the audience to see.

Rita Hayworth with her mother, father and brother and as a teen-age dancer under the watchful eyes of her father, Vernon Cansino. BOTH FROM

BETTMANN/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES.

That was not the end of the child's torment. According to Leaming, Hayworth would later tell Orson Welles that during this period her father sexually abused her.

The family soon moved to Chula Vista, near the Mexican border, so that Hayworth and her father could dance for Hollywood big shots like Carl Laemmle Jr. and Joseph Schenck in the swank nightclubs of Tijuana. While her brothers played with the neighborhood kids, Leaming writes, Hayworth "never joined their games, although she often sat on the front porch staring silently ahead or seeming to watch as they played."

Neighbor Loretta Parkin told Leaming that she and other kids would often peek into the Cansinos' living room window to catch a glimpse of the mysterious Margarita practicing with her father. "He'd scream and holler at her 'Don't do that! Don't be so stupid!'" Parkin recalled. "He was kind of a small man, like a little banty rooster...I never heard her answer back at him, not ever. She would simply do the routine again, until he was satisfied."

Parkin felt awful for the shy little girl. "For Rita, there was no life, no school, no friends, no girlfriends," she said. "Just sitting, sitting, sitting. Till it was time to go to Tijuana."

The Most Cooperative Girl

In 1937, Hayworth married her first husband, Eddie Judson, a shady former car salesman who was twice her age. "I

married him for love, but he married me for an investment,” she later said, according to Leaming. “For five years he treated me as if I had no mind or soul of my own.”

Intent on making Hayworth a star, Judson forced his painfully shy wife to participate in endless rounds of publicity-generating promotions, which eventually inspired a nickname: “the most cooperative girl in Hollywood.” To make his wife look less “Latin,” Judson demanded that she go through painful electrolysis treatments to move back her hairline, and dyed her long locks auburn.

According to Leaming, Judson also encouraged Hayworth to sleep with influential men. “Her first husband was a pimp. Literally a pimp,” Welles told Leaming in disgust. One day, Judson planned for his wife to go on a yacht and sleep with crude Columbia studio boss Harry Cohn, who had just signed her. Hayworth refused to have sex with Cohn, setting up a feud that would consume the movie mogul and his biggest star for the next two decades.

Hayworth with her first husband, Edward C. Judson, in 1941. Showcasing a perfume and posing for many portraits circa 1940. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BY KEYSTONE-FRANCE/GAMMA-RAPHO/GETTY IMAGES, FROM BETTMANN/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES, BY EARL THEISEN/GETTY IMAGES.

To get revenge, Cohn would treat Hayworth with shocking disrespect, using the bathroom in front of her and belittling her constantly—at least, according to *If This Was Happiness*. “All Harry Cohn wanted to do was get even, because he’d never had any sexual encounter of any kind with Rita, which annoyed the hell out of him,” her friend Bob Schiffer told Leaming. The author describes how the mogul attempted to exact his revenge on the set of 1948’s *The Lives of Carmen*:

A maid outside Rita’s dressing room reported on exactly who went in and out; and a bug inside picked up Rita’s private conversations. Rita had known about the bug for some time, but she also knew that if she tore it out, another would soon

take its place. Accordingly, she whispered...intimate details that she would not want Cohn to know. But one thing Rita made no attempt to conceal from Harry Cohn was her contempt for him and his toadies. "She hated them all," said Bob Schiffer. "She didn't pull many punches with Cohn as to what she thought of him."

Cohn represented all the tyrannical men in Hayworth's life—but he was much more than a mere symbol. The two would battle over contracts, script approval, and Hayworth's love life until *Pal Joey*, her final film for Columbia, in 1957. "As she got older, she got a little more guts," her friend Roz Rogers told Leaming. "Underneath she grew. She got stronger and stronger and was able to survive."

Hope for the Future

In 1942, Hayworth met the man she would call "the great love of my life."

Wunderkind director Orson Welles had been shooting in Brazil when he came across Hayworth's iconic pinup spread in the August 11 edition of *Life* magazine. "I saw that fabulous still in *Life* magazine," he told Leaming. "Where she's on her knees in bed. And that's when I decided: When I come back, that's what I'm going to do!"

Once back in Hollywood, Welles found that the real Hayworth was miles away from her femme fatale, "love goddess" image. "The whole wicked Gilda figure was absolutely false. It was a total impersonation—like Lon Chaney or something," he said. To draw the sweet, timid Hayworth out, Welles would pretend to read her mind, so she had to correct him. Hayworth relished having fun with Welles's friends from the Mercury Theater, as she was finally able to connect with people her own age.

The exuberant couple married on September 7, 1943 in Santa Monica, during Hayworth's lunch break from shooting the film *Cover Girl*, with Joseph Cotton serving as best man. "I never saw a happier, more tickled, more delighted, adorable couple in the world," secretary Shifra Haran told Leaming. Still, duty called; when asked by a reporter whether they were going on a honeymoon, Hayworth replied, per Leaming, "I gotta get back to the studio."

The newlyweds settled in a Brentwood mansion, where Welles built a roofless solarium so Hayworth could sunbathe naked. Together they plotted their escape from Hollywood, attempting to launch Welles's political career, which, according to Leaming, was urged on by none other than President Roosevelt. "She hated being a movie star!" Welles lamented. "She never got a moment's pleasure out of being a famous movie star. It gave her nothing."

Errol Flynn, Nora Flynn, Rita Hayworth and her husband Orson Welles on vacation in Acapulco, Mexico with a big cake for Rita. Pictured with her daughter Rebecca Welles. Hayworth and Welles in 1944. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: FROM POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES, BY ROBERT COBURN SR./JOHN KOBAL FOUNDATION/GETTY IMAGES, AND BY CBS VIA GETTY IMAGES.

Everything He Wanted

Hayworth worked hard to please the brilliant Welles, reading the books he read, and supporting the progressive causes he supported. “I really wanted to be everything Orson wanted of me,” she later told movie star June Allyson, per Leaming. “She reflected what the men wanted,” Bob Schiffer concurred. “Unfortunately, that’s the way she thought it should be.”

But the self-destructive, egocentric Welles soon began to leave Hayworth—then pregnant with their daughter Rebecca—to canoodle with heiress Gloria Vanderbilt in a corridor at “21” in New York City. “Something happened when our eyes met,” Gloria Vanderbilt, who was there with her own husband at the time, later recalled. “Under the table he kept touching my knee, and soon we were holding hands.”

According to Leaming, Welles began to frequent sex workers, and launched into a passionate affair with Judy Garland. He also became increasingly disturbed by Hayworth’s neediness, drinking, and explosive temper. Welles told Leaming how Hayworth flew into a rage after discovering that her picture had been affixed to the nuclear test bomb (named “Gilda”) detonated at Bikini Atoll. “Rita almost went insane, she was so angry,” he said. “She was so shocked by it...She wanted to go to Washington to hold a press conference, but Harry Cohn wouldn’t let her because it would be unpatriotic.”

It was Hayworth who would file for divorce. Shortly after, actress Shelley Winters remembered going to a Christmas party with Hayworth, which Leaming describes:

At the crowded party Winters lost track of Rita. Later when she asked actress Ava Gardner if she had seen her, Ava pointed to a bed where Rita lay fast asleep beneath a pile of fur coats. She had been “so lonely and bored” that she dozed off, and Ava Gardner had draped the fur coats over her. When Shelley Winters came close to Rita to make sure she was all right, she could see that “her hair and face were a mess. She’d been weeping.”

Although they would briefly reconcile during the filming of *The Lady From Shanghai* (where Welles would cut off his wife’s trademark hair and dye it blonde), the marriage was over by 1948. Welles claimed he loved Hayworth up until the night he died. Leaming writes:

Rita told him, "You know the only happiness I've ever had in my life has been with you." Welles was overwhelmed with guilt about how badly he had treated her and with sadness at the perspective this gave him on her life. "If this was happiness," he would later say of their marriage... "imagine what the rest of her life had been."

From Pinup to Princess

In 1948, Hayworth went on a European vacation. Dressed in a Pierre Balmain dress inspired by a costume worn by Françoise de Montespan, mistress of King Louis XIV, she appeared at a charity ball at the Eiffel Tower. There she nervously gave an endearing speech (in French) on behalf of poor children, enthraling a royal in the audience: the legendary lothario Prince Aly Khan.

Prince Aly Khan, whom Leaming describes as a "Casanova, sybarite, gentleman jockey, auto racer, hunter, pilot, horse breeder, soldier and Muslim religious leader," was the son of the Aga Khan, the imam of millions of Asian and African Ismaili Muslims. Although he was married, Khan soon convinced famous hostess Elsa Maxwell to introduce him to Hayworth. He pursued the reluctant star across the French Riviera, filling her suites with flowers, and buzzing her hotels in his private plane. According to Leaming, he even allegedly sent a fortune teller to the superstitious Hayworth, to tell her to be with him.

Eventually, Hayworth was persuaded. The charming prince was a way out of Hollywood, and he also happened to be excellent in bed. According to Leaming, "Aly practiced an Eastern art of love... which allowed him to exercise indefinite control in the bedroom."

Prince Aly Khan and Hayworth's wedding reception was held at the Chateau De L'Horizon in 1949 and a portrait of them in Italy that same year. LEFT, FROM CBS/BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT, BY DMITRI KESSEL/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES.

Their affair would scandalize the staid post-war West, leading to Hayworth's condemnation by everyone from the American Federation of Women's Clubs to the Vatican. After both had obtained divorces, a wedding was planned for May 27, 1949. Since French law demanded marriages take place in public, their wedding party, in the Vallauris town hall, consisted of "seven princes, four princesses, a maharajah, a gaekwar and emire," along with 30 journalists, Leaming writes. Thousands of French citizens lined the streets, eager to catch a glimpse of the new princess.

At the elaborate reception that followed at the prince's magnificent chateau overlooking the Mediterranean, Hayworth,

secretly pregnant with their daughter Yasmin, “didn’t seem happy,” in the words of gossip columnist Louella Parsons. Per Leaming, she found a similarly glum Aga Khan, whose overindulgence had resulted in an upset stomach. “Too much caviar, Rita,” he said.

“Too much caviar.”

No Fairy Tale

Once again, Hayworth attempted to mold herself to suit her man. She was tutored in French, etiquette, royal protocol and, per Leaming, the “mysteries of being a princess.”

But the sociable and womanizing prince—before he was officially divorced from Hayworth, he would woo Joan Fontaine, Yvonne de Carlo, *and* Gene Tierney—had not changed at all. Hayworth was soon his arm candy at an exhausting round of society events. During one at the Tuileries Gardens, Hayworth fainted when autograph seekers crushed around her. “She collapsed near Maurice Chevalier, whose tuxedo was splashed by an overturned bottle of champagne,” Leaming writes. “‘My new suit is ruined!’ Chevalier was heard to cry out, as others—more gallant than he—rushed to revive the actress with a bit of brandy.”

Targeted by jewel thieves, would-be kidnappers, and paparazzi, Hayworth began to lock herself in her room during Khan’s endless high-society house parties, drinking and dancing alone to her Spanish record collection. She also became erratic and irrational during the couple’s frequent fights. Leaming writes:

When she declared that she was sick of life with Aly and wanted to go back to America, the prince calmly accused her of having been drinking. Infuriated...Rita began throwing things at Aly, picture frames, books—and then having dramatically summoned one of the household staff to fetch her a glass of orange juice, she flung the contents in Aly’s face.

Terrified the prince would take custody of Princess Yasmin, in March 1951, Hayworth spirited her daughters from Europe

back to New York. When asked by a journalist what she was going to do in America, Hayworth replied, “The first thing I’m going to do is have a hot dog.”

Fade to Black

“After Aly, Rita was on a downward path, a steep, steep, toboggan slide,” Welles told Leaming. A disastrous marriage to big band singer Dick Haymes, whose Hollywood nickname was “Mr. Evil,” led to a brutal custody battle with the prince, lawsuits with Columbia, and temporarily losing custody of her daughters to the state. Hayworth finally got the courage to leave Haymes after he hit her at the Cocoanut Grove during a night of drinking, leaving her with a black eye. “I could hardly believe I could be a princess one minute and be treated like that the next,” she told June Allyson, per Leaming.

Hayworth marries her fourth husband Singer Dick Haymes at the Sands Hotel in 1953. Their marriage took a turn and in 1954 battled in court over custody hearings of their children amidst a divorce. Haymes and Rita Hayworth walk out of courthouse after hearings for custody of her children. LEFT, BY POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES; BY AL PUCCI/NY DAILY NEWS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES.

By the early 1960s, Hayworth began to display symptoms of early onset Alzheimer's. Unfortunately, her confusion and fading memory were misdiagnosed by her friends and family as severe alcoholism. On the set of *The Wrath of God* in 1972, her ability to memorize lines had completely evaporated. "I'd take her into her room and I'd teach her one line," makeup artist Lynn del Kail told Leaming. "Then she'd go out and they'd shoot the one line. And then we'd go back into the room and do another line."

Her children grown, a lonely Hayworth would let her dogs out in the middle of the night in Beverly Hills, hoping to talk to

neighbors. Often, neighbor Glenn Ford, her costar in *Gilda*, would come at night to keep a confused Hayworth company. She often became violent, once throwing a drink in dancer Adele Astaire's face in front of Adele's brother, Fred. Another night, she invited fellow movie star Ann Miller and a friend to dinner, only to chase them away with a butcher knife, screaming, "How dare you invade my private property! I don't see autograph seekers."

"The next day she called me," Miller told Leaming, "and said, 'Why didn't you come for dinner?'"

Hayworth was finally diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 1980. Until her death in 1987, she found comfort and acceptance not in a man, but in her daughter Princess Yasmin, who moved her to an adjoining apartment in New York. There Hayworth sat in an armchair, mutely staring into space, lovingly cared for by her daughter. A few years previously, Hayworth had been in Brazil for an appearance when she disappeared, leaving her handlers frantic.

"All of a sudden we got a call," her agent Budd Moss recalled to Leaming. "About a mile up the road, on the beach, there was a group of kids...flying these beautiful kites. And there was Rita, just sitting there on the beach with these little kids, flying kites with them."

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