

Unsung Hero: Marie Dressler

Project: Marie Dressler: The Fighter For Broadway's Workers

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Process Paper

I found Marie Dressler through my own pursuit of a career in musical theater. Every performer in the industry knows what an Actors' Equity card means: guaranteed audition access, payment protections, and working rights that non-union performers do not have. As a singer who has spent years working toward that card through regional productions and training, I wanted to understand where those protections came from. When I started researching the history of Actors' Equity, Dressler's name appeared at a pivotal moment: the 1919 strike that forced producers to recognize the union for the first time. Most accounts of her life focused on her Oscar-winning film career. Almost none mentioned that before Hollywood, she had been a chorus girl who organized some of the most powerless workers in the industry. That gap between how she is remembered and what she actually did is what pulled me toward her story.

I began my research with general encyclopedia entries to build a basic timeline of her life and the 1919 strike. From there, I narrowed in on more specialized sources. The Actors' Equity Association's own history page gave me the union's account of its 1913 founding and the 1919 strike, written from the perspective of the organization Dressler helped build. The NYU Tamiment Library's finding aid for the Actors' Equity Association Records pointed me to primary materials from that era, including strike resolutions and membership records. I also located a 1919 New-York Tribune article reporting on the chorus union's formation, which let me read how the press described the strike as it was happening, rather than how later histories have summarized it. Because Dressler died in 1934, my research relied entirely on archival and written sources rather than interviews.

I chose the website format because it let me organize a story with a clear chronological arc into sections a reader can move through deliberately: the conditions Dressler fought, the strike itself, the personal cost she paid, and the institution she left behind. I split the site into pages following that structure, from "Historical Background" through "The Strike" and "The Price She Paid" to "Legacy," so each page builds on the last. A website also let me add a "Current Events" page connecting her fight to ongoing Broadway labor negotiations, showing that the issues she addressed are not fully resolved.

Marie Dressler fits the theme of Unsung Hero because she sacrificed a thriving career for workers she had no obligation to defend. By 1919, she was already a Broadway star with nothing to gain from organizing the chorus girls beneath her. She did it anyway, was blacklisted for it, and spent years in near poverty before her unlikely comeback. The protections she helped win, such as contracts, rehearsal pay, and an

eight-show workweek, are ones performers like myself still work toward today through every regional production and every audition. Her story is a reminder that the card every actor wants did not always exist, and that the most important changes are often made by the people history forgets first.