Judy Garland

The Voice of MGM

Scott Brogan



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This book is dedicated to my late best friend, Andy England. His Judy Garland collection mixed with his Grateful Dead collection prompted us to joke, "Judy goes with everything!"

And to my husband, Doug, who has put up with me through thick and thin and whom I love so very much. And it was he who came up with the title. Thank you!

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Judy Garland, "The Voice of MGM," 1943 promotional photo. From the author's collection.

CHAPTER 3

MGM Magic

The Wizard of Oz and *Babes in Arms*

The making of *The Wizard of Oz* has been the subject of many books that range in quality from poor to excellent. It would be futile to try to encapsulate the now legendary production of the film here in one chapter. Instead, the following is an overview of the production followed by the quick production of *Babes in Arms*, Garland and Rooney's tour of the East Coast leading up to the New York premiere of *The Wizard of Oz*, and the rest of Garland's activities in that golden year of 1939.

In late February 1938, the news broke that MGM was producing a film version of L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* with Mervyn LeRoy as producer and Garland as Dorothy. Producer/director Mervyn LeRoy had been lured away from Warner Bros. by MGM boss Louis B. Mayer to replace the recently deceased "Boy Wonder" chief of production Irving Thalberg. LeRoy immediately said he wanted to make a film of Baum's classic children's book. At the same time, MGM studio songwriter Arthur Freed was aspiring to become a producer. Allegedly (there is some debate), Freed also wanted to adapt the Baum book for the screen as a musical. Mayer told Freed to apprentice as an associate producer for LeRoy, telling him the project was too big and expensive for a first-time producer. This decision turned out to be a blessing for the production. Freed, along with Roger Edens, took charge of the musical aspect of the production. One thing was clear from the beginning: everyone wanted Judy Garland as Dorothy.

MGM's version of *The Wizard of Oz* might not have happened at all were it not for the blockbuster success of Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in late 1937. That masterpiece of animation showed Hollywood that musical fantasies, when executed correctly, could

be successful both critically and financially. We have Disney to thank for putting the wheels in motion that resulted in MGM's production of *The Wizard of Oz*. Most studios were looking for fantasy properties, and Baum's classic was at the top of everyone's list. Independent producer Sam Goldwyn owned the film rights to the book. MGM purchased the rights from Goldwyn on February 18, 1938, a few weeks after Freed's early character outline, which shows how confident Freed was even though the studio didn't yet own the rights.

As early as April 29, 1938, Garland had her first work on the film, posing for some Max Factor hair and makeup tests. From this point until the first day of filming, six months later, on October 13, 1938, a myriad of activities occurred. Several screenwriters were engaged to develop a viable adaptation, which resulted in some amusing and fortunately unused ideas. For example, there were ideas for characters such as a prince and a princess of Oz, both of whom sang opera (Garland would sing jazz). Miss Gulch had a nasty nephew at one point and was "Mrs." Gulch. Casting the roles wasn't easy, either. W. C. Fields wanted to play the wizard but asked for too much money. Oscar winner Gale Sondergaard was tasked with playing a glamorous wicked witch (similar to the evil queen in *Snow White*) and posed for several costume tests. After enduring "ugly" makeup, hair, and costume tests, she left the project. Margaret Hamilton was brought in at the eleventh hour to play the redesigned, hag-looking Wicked Witch of the West. They toyed with the idea of having a real lion play the Cowardly Lion. Enough little people had to be found to play the Munchkins. Costumes had to be designed, produced, and fitted for everyone from Dorothy down to each Munchkin, each extra who played the citizens of the Emerald City, the Flying Monkeys, and the Witch's Winkie Guards. Creating an entire fantasy world from scratch took a lot of time and a lot of trial and error. This difficulty was compounded by the relatively new Technicolor process and its cumbersome cameras, which were in limited supply and available only as rentals to the studios. But if any studio was poised to undertake the task of creating a live-action musical fantasy film in Technicolor, it was MGM. The studio rightfully boasted of having the best of the best under contract in all areas of production, not just in front of the camera. For *The Wizard of Oz*, everyone provided career-defining work. The phrase "the stars were aligned" is more than appropriate here.

Then there was the music. Freed and Edens decided that Harold Arlen and E. Y. "Yip" Harburg were the right songwriting duo to handle composing the score. This choice turned out to be fortuitous. Arlen and Harburg were instrumental in creating not just the songs but also the Munchkinland musical sequence in which almost everything is rhymed and set to music, and Harburg helped with parts of the script. The brilliance of that decision cannot be overstated. Munchkinland is our first glimpse of Oz, and if the sequence didn't work, it would ruin the rest of the film. Herbert Stothart composed the underscore, leaning heavily on the Arlen melodies. His score is so perfect that it won the Oscar for Best Original Score over Max Steiner's seminal score for *Gone with the Wind*.

Once the screenplay was completed, more or less (thankfully sans the extra characters and



Garland posed for portraits for *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), February 25, 1939. From the author's collection.

plot points), and once the songs were written and (most of) the cast was in place (having endured many costume, hair, and makeup tests), it was time for the first prerecording session on September 30, 1938. According to the surviving *Daily Music Report,* Garland, Ray Bolger (the Scarecrow), Buddy Ebsen (the Tin Man), and Bert Lahr (the Cowardly Lion) prerecorded "If I Only Had a Brain," "If I Only Had a Heart," "If I Only Had the Nerve," and "Wonderful Wizard of Oz" ("We're Off to See the Wizard") (the duo, trio, and quartet versions). Garland prerecorded "Over the Rainbow" on October 7, 1938. Six takes were printed (that is, kept for audio mixing), takes 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, and 8. The version heard in the film was edited together by taking the first verse of Take 5 and joining it to the bulk of Take 6.

Filming was originally scheduled to begin on September 15, 1938, under the direction of Richard Thorpe, but it was delayed to October 13, 1938. After twelve days, the production was halted. No one liked what was being seen in the rushes. Worst of all, the original Tin Man, Buddy Ebsen, had been unknowingly poisoned by the "silver" makeup and had to be taken off the

film to recuperate from his near-death experience. Thorpe was fired, not because of Ebsen but because his direction was wrong for a musical fantasy. None of the Thorpe footage has survived, so it's impossible to know how wrong he was. It must have been *very* wrong for the studio to stop and scrap everything and start anew.

Director George Cukor came to the production for a week without the intention of directing the entire film. His contributions turned out to be genius and more than helped the resulting success of the film. Cukor changed the look of all of the main characters, most famously changing Dorothy from honey blonde to brunette and using makeup for Garland that was more natural. The acting advice he gave her was also to act naturally. She was an innocent farm girl from Kansas. The assumption is that Thorpe had her acting affectedly. At the time, Garland was quoted as saying, "I learned more in the two days [Cukor] was on 'The Wizard of Oz' than I ever learned at any one time before. It isn't that the other directors aren't wonderful, but they don't know how to handle people my age. It takes a very special kind of understanding to cope with in-betweeners."[1] Cukor also pulled Margaret Hamilton's hair back into a bun to make the Witch look more severe, as well as giving her a protruding chin and nose. Even the Yellow Brick Road was changed from oval bricks to standard rectangular bricks and given a curb.

Production began again on the updated Cornfield set on November 4, 1938, with veteran MGM director Victor Fleming at the helm. For a while, filming went smoothly without any major issues, with scenes shot in the following order:

- Cornfield (November 4 to the week of November 7)
- Tin Man's Forest (week of November 7 to November 19)
- Lion's Forest (November 21 to November 26)
- Poppy Field (week of November 28)
- Witch's Castle (including the melting of the Witch) (December 1 to approximately December 14)
- Munchkinland (December 17 to December 30)

A notable event occurred on November 25, 1938, during filming on the Lion's Forest set: MGM officially promoted Garland from "featured player" to "star." She was presented with her very own dressing room trailer, and the cast and crew were assembled for the event. It was just a little over three years since her 1935 audition.

On December 28, 1938, the good fortune of the relatively smooth previous weeks of filming ended. Things went wrong in the scene in which Margaret Hamilton's Wicked Witch of the West exits Munchkinland in a blast of flames and smoke. Everything was fine until after lunch when the scene was filmed again. The trap door on the floor of the stage that contained an elevator rigging to lower Hamilton didn't work properly, and she was severely burned. The green makeup had copper in it, resulting in her being so badly burned that she was immediately rushed to the hospital and out of the film until mid-February. She suffered first-degree burns on her face

and second-degree burns on her hands. Thankfully, she recovered and understandably refused to do any more special effects shots. The shot you see in the film is the single good shot they were able to get that day before lunch and the accident.

After the new year, production resumed with the cast on the Haunted Forest set and proceeded as follows.

- Haunted Forest (January 3)
- "I'd Turn Back If I Were You" scene (January 6)
- "The Jitterbug" (January 9, 11, and 13)
- The scene on the Yellow Brick Road after waking up from the poppies (January 12)
- Emerald City Sequence (January 14 through mid-February)
- "The Merry Old Land of Oz" (January 17, 19, and 20)
- Wizard's Balloon Sequence (including the tearful goodbyes) (last week of January)
- "If I Were King of the Forest" plus Wizard's hallway and Throne Room (late January through mid-February)
- Wizard's Throne Room (February 3)
- Toto's Escape from the Witch's Castle (February 7)
- Wizard's Presentations (February 12)—this was director Victor Fleming's last work on the film before leaving to rescue the troubled production of *Gone with the Wind*. They were also the last Oz sequences to be filmed. King Vidor came in to take over beginning with the Kansas sequences, which were the last sequences filmed.
- Kansas Sequences (February 19 through mid-March)
- "Over the Rainbow" (February 23, possibly also 24)
- Miss Gulch scenes, Professor Marvel scenes, Cornfield retakes (late February into mid-March)
- Retakes/pickup shots with Glinda (Billie Burke) (May 1 and/or 2)
- More retakes (according to the assistant director's report for *Babes in Arms*, Garland was "on Wizard of Oz retakes" on June 30). This was Garland's last work on *Oz*.

Once principal filming was completed, *The Wizard of Oz* went into the postproduction phase, including recording the Oscar-winning background score, creating the groundbreaking special effects, and the final editing. In mid-July 1939, the first previews of the film were held unannounced at theatres outside of the greater Los Angeles area. The elaborate production number "The Jitterbug" was removed after the first preview, and "Over the Rainbow" was removed for at least one preview. There was a debate by studio executives about the song's merits and whether it slowed down the film, plus concern that the sheet music (still a very lucrative market at the time) wouldn't sell. Mayer held a meeting during which Freed exclaimed, "The song stays—or I go! It's as simple as that."[2] The song stayed in the film, and Freed stayed at MGM.

The rest, as they say, is history. Unlike reports given decades later, *The Wizard of Oz* was

a big hit. It was also recognized as an instant classic. The reviews were almost unanimous in their praise. However, *The Wizard of Oz* did not immediately turn a profit due to the high cost of the long production and the extensive publicity campaign. It was MGM's most expensive production and most expensive and biggest ad campaign to date. Added to that was the fact that a majority of the ticket sales were at children's prices. To further compound things, most of the European market closed a month after the premiere when World War II began. Because the film didn't turn a profit until the 1949 rerelease, later authors dubbed it unsuccessful, and to this day, that misconception is wrongly reported as fact. Some of that flop scenario is tied to the film becoming an annual tradition on American television in the late 1950s. That makes for more dynamic copy for articles and books that incorrectly claim the film was a flop until it was rescued by TV.

The Wizard of Oz was nominated for five Academy Awards (* winner):

- Best Picture (winner: *Gone with the Wind*)
- *Music (Song)—"Over the Rainbow," Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg
- *Music (Original Score)—Herbert Stothart
- Best Art Direction (winner: *Gone with the Wind*)
- Best Special Effects (winner: *The Rains Came*)—this one is especially puzzling considering what they achieved on *The Wizard of Oz*, including the realistic tornado

Garland received a special Juvenile Oscar for her performances on film in 1939 (both *The Wizard of Oz* and *Babes in Arms*). Newsreel footage shows Mickey Rooney presenting the award to Garland at the February 29, 1940, ceremony at the Cocoanut Grove in the Ambassador Hotel.

Director Victor Fleming won the Best Director Oscar for *Gone with the Wind*. If he hadn't been nominated for that film, he might have been nominated for *The Wizard of Oz*. The year 1939 was incredible for the movies, considered by most the best year for classic films, topped off by the mega-hit *Gone with the*



MGM trade ad as published in the *Film Daily* trade magazine on August 2, 1939. From the author's collection.