

50 YEARS AGO: HOW CHICAGO

The Wonderful

BY MARK DERENG

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's classic film musical, "The Wizard of Oz," has been universally granted the status of whimsical cinematic genius and ultimately has become a prime example of America's uncanniest, and yet sincerest, form of twentieth-century pop culture.

Several previously-published works have dealt at great length with the (then seemingly) insurmountable problems and challenges encountered when the notion of turning L. Frank Baum's "modernized" children's fantasy from book into film actually advanced toward the initial shooting stages.

The studies referred to above may prove advantageous for one wishing to become better enlightened as to the "Wizard's" specific production intricacies. Among other books, I particularly recommend *The Making of THE WIZARD OF OZ* by Aljean Harmetz (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), the definitive account of the film's gestation, physical production, release, and subsequent history. Also extremely informative is the book by Hugh Fordin entitled, *The World of Entertainment* (New York: Avon Books, 1975), a summary of the musicals produced by the Arthur Freed "unit" at MGM; of which "Wizard" was one of the late producer and songwriter's first efforts, but as an unbilled "associate producer."

This article's purpose, instead of re-trodding upon ground previously (and well-) covered, is to present one isolated aspect of the film's exposure; in other words, its critical and box-office receptions after the film's release here in the heart of the Midwest. Let's take a backward glance.

Chicago, August, 1939. The city, at this time, had at least two very important, and yet, somewhat distant, commonalities with the popular saga of a young Kansas farm girl, who is literally "lifted" out of her drab, rural surroundings by a regional wind storm. Deposited in the wonderland of Oz, she befriends a scarecrow, tin woodman, and cowardly lion; with the aid of whom she conquers a wicked witch and experiences a litany of other alternately frightening and comic adventures, prior to her being granted her heart's desire to be sent back home to her loved ones.

The first local "connection" is the fact that the original book, distributed to the trade in mid-September, 1900, was both written and published in Chicago. At the time of its composition, Mr. Baum was living in a house at Number 68 (now 1667) Humboldt Boulevard, on the city's west side. The book was published by the George M. Hill Company at 166 South Clinton Street, west of the Loop.

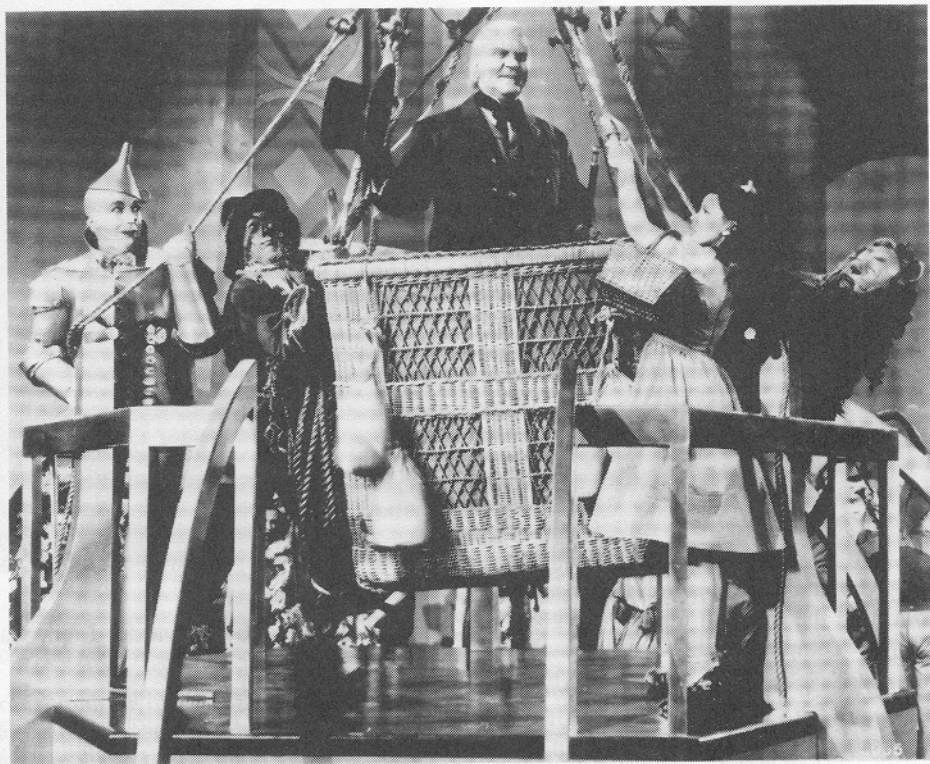
The second reason for local rapport with "Oz" is that on June 16, 1902, the musical extravaganza based on the book opened in Chicago at the Grand Opera House on Clark Street (long-demolished) and was — in every aspect — a "smash hit," later moving on to an extensive New York run and several touring versions.

By 1939, the minds of many Chicagoans at the very mention of the "Wizard" film would have certainly connected it with the book; and "old timers," perhaps fondly and warmly, might have recalled the stage play. From this, one might surmise that the "moving picture" version would have amassed a sizeable, tailor-made, prospective audience.

First, however, some facts. The film opened at the United Artists Theatre, on

VIEWED AND WELCOMED

'Wizard of Oz'



"WIZARD OF OZ" CAST — Jack Haley, Ray Bolger, Frank Morgan, Judy Garland, and Bert Lahr.

Randolph at Dearborn Streets, on Friday, August 25, 1939. The United Artists, then under the Balaban & Katz ownership/management, had a somewhat "unique" agreement with Loew's, Inc., the theatre-owning parent company of MGM, to exhibit the latter's films there. Apparently, there was no Loew's "first-run" theatre in the Loop per se, as the Apollo, Chicago, Garrick, Roosevelt, and State-Lake, along with the aforementioned United Artists, were all B&K property. The Oriental belonged to Jones and the Palace was under the RKO banner.

The film received a tremendous amount of ballyhoo prior to its Chicago premiere. The August 30, 1939 issue of *Variety* reported:

'Wizard of Oz' getting the heaviest exploitation of the crop, expects the heaviest play. In addition to regular publicity, practically every local columnist has a paragraph or two to say about it. Lots of kids taking up seats, but adults going for it, too.

The first showing of the film was at 8:45 a.m. and admission prices ranged

WIZARD OF OZ

from 35 to 75 cents; prices changed for the 1:00, 5:00, and 6:30 p.m. shows on various days. There was a "late show" at 11:00 p.m. on Saturday and a "Donald Duck" cartoon was presented as an extra attraction.

The reviews for what was being billed as "Chicago's most exciting adventure in years" were, happily for both Metro and the United Artists Theatre, what are referred to in show business as "money reviews". The Tribune's theatre critic, Mae Tinee, put in some overtime and wrote about the film. Referring to it as both a "nursery extravaganza" and an "old friend in modern dress," she went on to say:

It is gorgeous, fantastic, radiant with Technicolor. It teems with midgets. It is alive with trick photography, is jeweled with hummable tunes, and features a Kansas tornado that makes you want to live anywhere but in Kansas, I'm telling you.

Ms. Tinee had nothing but plaudits for Judy Garland's now-legendary portrayal of Dorothy, the role that might have gone to Shirley Temple.

She was a perfect choice for Dorothy. She portrays, without a false move, an honest to goodness little girl, genuinely flabbergasted, curious, terrified, game, lonely, ecstatic, as the case may call for. She sings charmingly — and you're just going to love her."

Curiously, in her review, Ms. Tinee referred to no other cast members by name, except for noting the "effective" contributions of the Singer Midgets as the Munchkins.

She wound up her critical summary by stating:

The picture IS too long — no getting away from that — there's padding in the last reels that could easily have been dispensed with.

At the time of the film's opening in

Chicago, Tribune Charities, Inc. sponsored the activities of the Sally Joy Brown department. Sally Joy, it seemed, in tandem with the newspaper was conducting a theatre party contest:

We had a great number of interesting and enthusiastic letters from boys and girls who want to see "The Wizard of Oz" next week. The names of the hundred winners will be printed in the Sunday TRIBUNE, so the youngsters who will come with me to the United Artists theater on Thursday, August 31, will know of their good fortune without further delay.

Without further delay, back to the "good fortune." Calling it "a Thrill for Old and Young," Dorothy Day in the *Chicago Sunday Herald Examiner* also had very kind words for Garland:

. . . I cannot think of anybody who could have done as well with the part. Judy is a sincere actress, a fine singer, and she can twinkle a toe in a graceful manner. Her forthright personality and complete lack of affectation knock the eyelashes off all the glamour girls when it comes to appeal."

Bert Lahr, as the Cowardly Lion, was the next in line for kudos:

Let Mickey Mouse look to his laurels, for he has a competitor in the cowardly lion played by Bert Lahr. Mr. Lahr's makeup is a masterful achievement, and you'd think he'd been playing lion parts all his life. He's just the type! There is humor and pathos in his performance and the vocal accompaniment he supplies is as leonine as anything you'll hear in the zoo."

When one reflects upon praise of this type that Lahr probably received nationally for his fine work in this plum role, regret that the remainder of his film career was so spotty is inevitable.

Under the sub-head "Catchy Tunes Add to Fun," Ms. Day noted:

The music is excellent; it won't be long before you're singing "We're Off to See the Wizard, the Wonderful Wizard of Oz,"



JACK HALEY, JUDY GARLAND AND RAY BOLGER

as well as a number of other catchy tunes.

Ironically, neither she, nor any of the other three critics cited, singled out "Over the Rainbow" as being the song hit of the film. The plaintive ballad, soon to become a staple on the "Hit Parade," is not mentioned at all in any of the critiques.

Day, however, was particularly awed by the set designs:

The sets, fantastic and wonderful, with the long winding yellow road which Dorothy is to follow in order to find the Wizard and ask him if she may go home, are dreams or nightmares depending on whether the influence of the good fairy or the bad witch is at work. Sometimes you think Dorothy must have been dining on lobster and ice cream so horrific are the things she sees."

With an amazing degree of prophetic accuracy, Day summed up her review by

predicting that "The Wizard of Oz" would be "a picture that will live a long, long time."

Doris Arden, in her "Doris Arden Says" film review column in *The Chicago Daily Times*, seemed to be somewhat concerned about the picture's then-record cost:

The film is elaborate and expensive (it's said to have cost \$3,000,000) but you are happily allowed to forget it at time, and whenever Miss Garland, Mr. (Ray) Bolger, Mr. (Jack) Haley and Mr. Lahr are concerned in it. It has the air of simplicity and make-believe that it tries for.

However, she also was forced to admit that whatever the sum had been spent, wise usage of it was the result:

Most spectacular scenes are those in which the four of them at last arrive at Emerald City, the dazzling town where the

WIZARD OF OZ

mysterious Wizard lives, and the welcome that the Munchkins stage in Judy's honor, a gala and comic affair. The sets are lavish and the color is brilliant, and the whole effect is pretty breath-taking.

Ms. Arden's review is unique in one very special way. She, for the first time in print (as far as I know), brings up the subject of Dorothy's partiality toward the Scarecrow, which supersedes whatever feelings she possesses in relation to her other friends:

Judy, when she says good-bye, tells the Scarecrow, "I think I'll miss you most of all," but, personally, we were a little the fondest of the Cowardly Lion. He weeps and weeps, because he's so ashamed, and he shivers and shakes because he's so scared, and he wishes he were really as brave as he's reputed to be.

Writing in *The Chicago Daily News*, Clark Rodenbach (perhaps the token male in a then-predominantly female profession?) under the heading "A Trip to Fairyland and Back Home Again," alluded to another totally different, but sincere, attempt at bringing fantasy to the screen:

Comparisons between this one and Walt Disney's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" is obvious, and many a stormy argument we betcha will arise. We will sneak up an alley when the arguments start. We liked both of 'em very much. Here, living folks are substituted for hand-drawn ones.

Rodenbach also pinpoints a matter that has had devotees of the book experiencing frustration literally for decades:

Well, the movie version differs in some respects with the original. In the book, Dorothy actually goes through these weird experiences. The film makes Dorothy fall into feverish sleep, and dream them. The studio perhaps opined that the small readers of today are too sophisticated to accept such goings on as real, but might

go for 'em if presented with this nightmarish explanation.

Once again, Lahr proved to be the monarch, not only of the forest, but of the film:

If there is a standout figure in this delightful fantasy, let's give the call to Bert Lahr as the king of beasts who wipes away tears with the brush at the end of his tail.

He concluded:

Costumes are as remarkable as the color photography and the sets. We believe the performance of the Munchkins (Singer's Midgets) to be a bit too long, but that's all we can think of, offhand, to crab about this expedition to fairyland.

The critical consensus was in all, a hugely favorable one, and the picture was off, running, and now subject to the reaction of the general public.

For its initial run at the United Artists, *Variety* reported the following, including box office grosses:

8/29/39 — "Standout \$23,000"

9/5/39 — "'Oz' is terrific again in its second week . . . set for real run and going into its second week as a cinch for powerful \$17,000 after garnering a mighty \$23,000 on its initial sesh here last week."

9/12/39 — "'Wizard of Oz' continuing at a fine pace in its third week at the United Artists . . . pounding along to steady profits and following up early youngster play with good adult business that's bringing in nice \$11,000 after fine \$16,300 last week."

9/19/39 — "Last week 'Oz' wound up a solid three-week gallop to oke \$9,800."

"The Blizzard of Ah's," as one newspaper advertisement nicknamed the film, had subsided after a three week run. Even though its final week of business had been confirmed by *Variety* as "oke," I personally wonder if the overall financial performance of the motion picture ultimately proved disappointing to the powers-that-be; causing them to rue the fact that



JUDY GARLAND AND THE MUNCHKINS IN THE LAND OF OZ

Labor Day, with the commencement of school, severely limited the movie-going pastimes of literally scads of children — the film's custom-tailored audience — to evenings and weekends. Children, as it has already been noted, apparently were the film's staunchest supporters.

There has been some speculation as to whether a "live" stage show accompanied the film during its first-run at the United Artists. At the time, the Chicago Theatre was presenting "The Star Maker" with Bing Crosby, while Veloz and Yolanda appeared on-stage. A double-bill, "Unexpected Father" and "Clouds Over Europe" filled the Oriental's screen, while the Stround Twins entertained "live." The Palace featured a "stage bill" and the State-Lake boasted both "vaude" and the "Armstrong-Ambers" fight film, along with their featured motion pictures. "The Wizard," however, had to stand on its own

two feet; even though in its simultaneous booking at the Capitol Theatre in New York City, Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney (the latter to be replaced later on in the film's run by Ray Bolger and Bert Lahr) appeared doing various "specialties."

If there ever was a "live" stage show in conjunction with the movie's run in Chicago, it would have to had been attached to a later, subsequent booking.

The film, ultimately, was a financial failure in its national release; it took a couple of reissues within the following fifteen years to inch it closer into the black. However, it is the exposure that "Oz" has enjoyed on television that has made MGM's ledgers really show a profit. It is rather ironic that it would take the "union" of two rival mediums, film and TV, to turn this 101 minutes of utter delight into the glorious institution it became, and has remained, for so many years.