

Hollywood on the Air

MOVIES without PICTURES

BY BILL OATES

Announcer: "Lux Presents Hollywood

Music cue: "Lux Radio Theme"

Whether the pronouncement was made by Melville Ruick, John Milton Kennedy, or Ken Carpenter, when radio listeners heard this opening many stayed tuned to the *Lux Radio Theatre*. This Monday night fixture on CBS was the most popular and best scripted of the films-over-the-radio programs that played on the networks from the mid 1930's through the early 1950's. Although sound, color, and widescreen augmented the photoplay through its development, the pictureless reprises on radio often provided memorable second chances in the mind's eye for popular Hollywood productions.

When the golden age of radio was gaining momentum during the darkest days of the Great Depression, neophyte producers sought Broadway and Hollywood talent to guest and host on the growing CBS and NBC networks. Throughout the 1930's a variety of movie talent was prevalent over the airways; Al Jolson starred in his *Shell Chateau* in 1935, Bing Crosby began *The Kraft Music Hall* during the same year and continued through the 1946 season, while W.C. Fields found his way to American audiences when he was physically impaired from making movies via *The Chase and Sanborn Hour* with Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy.

Ultimately, NBC began presenting Broadway plays and movies from its New York studios on October 14, 1934, for Lever Brothers products. This first year of *The Lux Radio Theatre* suffered from a shortage of adaptable plays, and when the

ratings began to sag, changes were needed to keep the program afloat.

To increase its share of listeners, "Lux" first moved to its long-running Monday night, 9:00 p.m. eastern, time slot on CBS in 1935. By June 1, 1936, popular movie stars and their films became the mainstay when the program itself moved to Los Angeles. To validate the tight package of movie and stars for radio, the J. Walter Thompson ad agency hired Cecil B. De Mille to host the program at \$1500 (later \$2000) per week. The famed producer-director added a seemingly official and certainly a valuable Hollywood stamp of approval to the production. The new formula worked as the show climbed to the top ten of radio's most listened to shows and remained in that category through radio's golden years. The results also included more Lux soap products sold than ever before.

Generally, the show operated with a carefully adapted movie script and at least two stars from the film. With each star receiving the established fee of \$5000 (Clark Gable once sought and was paid \$5001 to claim he was the highest paid guest), productions often ran over \$20,000 per show. Louis Silver's orchestra provided the music, while stalwart radio personalities, such as Verna Felton, Sheldon Leonard, and Mel Blanc provided the supporting voices for the broadcasts.

Although the *Lux Radio Theatre* began rather weakly, the Hollywood version with De Mille typified radio drama at its best. The first California show was *The Legionaire and the Lady* with Clark Gable and Marlene Dietrich, on June 1, 1936. The next week Myrna Loy and William



LUX PRESENTS HOLLYWOOD: Cecil B. DeMille with Marlene Dietrich and Clark Gable at the first California broadcast of the show in 1936.

Powell brought *The Thin Man* to radio. De Mille guided the audience into the story by introducing the cast and offering a few expository notes on the story. He sold a little "soap" along the way and after he small-talked the actors at the end of the show announced the next week's production. This format remained little changed throughout its stay on CBS.

Cecil B. De Mille, who by 1936 had written a major chapter in the book of Hollywood spectacle, gave a certain credence to the proceedings. Even though he seemed to be "directing" the Lux show, he had little to do with the actual production of the program. Actually, because of his tight movie shooting schedule, he barely made it for the final rehearsal and sometimes just made it on time for the Monday night performance. His real role was to bridge the acts of the show together, filling in what had been

omitted from the feature film, and to lead the testimonials for the soap that kept hands and faces soft (as it had for many of the show's guest stars — or so they claimed).

The only thing that kept the great director off the air was his refusal to pay a mandated \$1 assessment by the American Federation of Radio Artists. He would not pay any sum, even if it were required by the union so that he might stay on the air, and left the show at its and C.B.'s height of popularity in January of 1945. His famous speech to Congress did not strike at unionism, but rather at the "individual rights and freedoms" that closed shop policies took from workers. He quoted Lincoln in saying that America would be defeated only from within by such underhanded actions, while he reminded his audience of a small group with actions like these that had taken over Germany and caused a very recent war. Lever Brothers,

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of course, would have gladly paid the meager amount, but De Mille refused and lost his \$98,000 a year position, banning him not only from radio, but also the new medium, television, which would grow in popularity in only a few years.

Several guest "hosts," Lionel Barrymore, Walter Huston, and Brian Ahern, to name a few, were brought in to substitute after De Mille's last show on January 22, 1945, and by November renowned director William Keighley was announced as the new host. Keighley, who directed films like "*The Green Pastures*," "*Each Dawn I Die*," and "*The Man Who Came to Dinner*," remained at the helm through 1951. It is interesting, albeit movie trivia, that Keighley died June 24, 1984, the day after the death of De Mille's daughter Cecilia. No other permanent host the stature of De Mille nor Keighley followed through the show's end on June 7, 1955, nor in its television version from 1950 through 1957. One announcer, Ken Carpenter, was the most notable third host, working on both the "*Lux*" radio and television programs.

The majority of *The Lux Radio Theatre* shows would fall into three categories: 1) the films which were transplanted basically intact from screen to radio with the main stars accompanying, 2) those which starred the majority of the key stars with worthy replacements, and 3) movies which had severe changes in the main roles. Since each film star received a sizeable paycheck for appearing, usually two, but upwards to four major actors appeared. Regardless of the casting, quality was the watchword on the show.

Of those movies-on-radio that were most like the film story, numerous examples are available for the hearer today on record or cassette tape or on "old time" radio shows nationwide. Humphrey Bogart, Walter Huston and Tim Holt performed "*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*" on April 18, 1949. Mickey Rooney and Judy



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Garland appeared in "*Strike Up the Band*" on October 28, 1940 (John Scott Trotter lead the band). James Stewart and Donna Reed shared "*It's a Wonderful Life*" with Victor Moore in 1947. Gary Cooper was Lou Gehrig and Mr. Deeds (the latter with Jean Arthur), Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy sang "*Naughty Marietta*," Ginger Rogers and Dennis Morgan reprised "*Kitty Foyle*," Abbott and Costello were "*Buck Privates*," and Ronald Reagan and Pat O'Brien won one more for the Gipper in "*The Life of Knute Rockne*." Many of the key stars found themselves in familiar places on the radio show.

There were those shows which had one main character from the movie, but another familiar voice was missing. W.C. Fields played "*Poppy*" on March 7, 1938 with Ann Shirley and John Payne in support. Al Jolson became "*The Jazz Singer*" twice during *Lux's* run, first in 1936 with Karen Morley and again in 1947

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when *The Jolson Story* was successful (two stars Tamara Shane and Ludwig Donath from the Larry Parks movie supported Jolie on radio). Janet Gaynor played "A Star is Born" with Robert Montgomery in 1939 (interestingly enough, the story was presented again with Judy Garland and Walter Pidgeon in 1942, twelve years before she starred on the remake of the film). Leslie Howard worked with Olivia De Havilland (in Merle Oberon's role) in "The Scarlet Pimpernel" on December 12, 1938, a month and a day before they were to be formally cast as Ashley and Melanie Wilkes and share something else "Scarlet" (O'Hara) in *Gone With the Wind*.

The third group of "Lux" programs includes those which had major cast changes, wherein very different actors played the radio roles of movie actors with whom we more closely associate the part. Perhaps the best example would be that of "Casablanca" wherein Rick was played, not by Humphrey Bogart, but Alan Ladd, and Ilsa was not Ingrid Bergman, but Hedy Lamarr. There is a simple explanation: Bogey was in North Africa entertaining the troops on January 24, 1944. "You Can't Take It With You" did not have James Stewart, nor any other key players except Edward Arnold. "The Petrified Forest" starred Herbert Marshall, Laird Cregar and Margaret Sullivan in 1937 (it was done again in 1945 with Ronald Colman, Susan Hayward and Lawrence Tierney), while "Alice Adams" had Claudette Colbert in Katherine Hepburn's title role. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. and Joan Bennett (Carole Lombard was still alive) fought it out in "Nothing Sacred," and a stellar, but different from the movie, lead, Cary Grant, played "Here Comes Mr. Jordan" in 1942. Often the reason for unlikely stars in these portrayals was due to shooting schedules. On occasion, some movie actors refused to be "live" before a radio audience. The former is probably true when Gene Autry substituted for Gary Cooper in "The Cowboy and the Lady"



AL JOLSON

in 1941 and when the "younger" Republic cowboy Roy Rogers substituted for John Wayne in the 1944 radio version of "In Old Oklahoma." This author has not yet found John Wayne's appearance on a "Lux" program, and another of the Duke's classic films "Stagecoach" was presented on Academy Award (a show mentioned later) with Randolph Scott as Wayne's Ringo.

Among the very unusual listings are movies that must have been a challenge to present on radio. Disney films come to mind, since "Lux" was heard during the years that this studio was most creative. Walt Disney is listed as the guest for "Snow White" in 1939 (the show was also presented on Screen Guild Players in 1948 with Jimmy Durante telling the story to Margaret O'Brien) and John Garfield is the guest for "Pinocchio" the next season. The Yellow Brick Road came late on "Lux" with Judy Garland starring in "The Wizard of Oz" on Christmas Day 1950.

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Frequently, there was a special Christmas radio play for children, hence the "unusual" films on radio.

By 1941, a smooth-running production format had been established. First, the radio rights (and book and/or magazine rights) had to be obtained. Next came the casting of major stars: the male and female leads were often double cast to avoid problems with unexpected absences. It was George Wells who had the job of adapting the story into what would become a 43 minute radio play. He had to keep the flavor of the movie, yet he was limited in what kind of visuals he could translate to another medium. Sometimes, a war-era flavor was added to a pre-war movie (for example, rationing and Rommel were referred to in the radio "*Road to Morocco*"). The script was then passed on to the network, De Mille, and the ad agency for approval. Once accepted, the director, Sanford Barnett, claimed his copy and cast the minor roles. At this point the musical and effects requirements were ordered. Rehearsals went as follows: 1) Thursday there was an informal reading of act one. 2) Friday saw act two as accents and more seriousness evolved, 3) Saturday welcomed act three (sound effects and musical cues were now introduced), 4) C.B. met the cast on Sunday when a transcription disc was cut, so that actors and technicians could listen for problems, 5) a second "dress" was held on Monday, and 6) an hour later, at 6:00 p.m. Pacific Time (9:00 Eastern) the "largest audience in the history of drama" (estimated 30-40 million in 1941) would listen to upwards of 76 radio performers on the Lux Radio Theatre.

Since the program was performed live, problems did occur. The flu sidelined Gary Cooper and Jean Arthur the day before the performance of "*The Plainsman*" and Frederick March had to rehearse the lead part through the night so that he would be authentically "western." During "*The*



HELEN HAYES

Road to Morocco" there seemed to be more "fluffs" and ad libs for the audience that give us an insight into what a Hope and Crosby movie rehearsal might have been like. In true Lux fashion Ginny Simms (Dorothy Lamour's substitute) proclaims the merits of the soap, while Bob Hope likewise attempts to endorse the soap, and his own Pepsident toothpaste as well. Another unintentional humorous endorsement of the product came when Verna Felton mentioned Lux "soup" after "*The Pride of the Yankees*" and broke up the cast. Jack Benny appeared several times on the show and was able to sell a little Jello, promote his upcoming movie *The Horn Blows at Midnight*, and refer to an ongoing gag "I can't stand Jack Benny because . . ." in his patter with C.B.

If *The Lux Radio Theatre* were the best of its genre, many other programs attempted to copy its success, and some of them did a nice job. *The Screen Guild Theatre* began on CBS on January 8, 1939, as a "charity show" for the Motion Picture Relief Fund and was the closest in its quality and longevity to Lux. *Academy Award* ran for ten months (March 30 through December 18, 1946) and was a series of half hour programs of stories or performers who had been nominated for or had won an Oscar. Warner Brothers had presented its own radio show for Academy



CECIL B. DE MILLE and JEANETTE MAC DONALD on the Lux presentation of "Tonight or Never."

Award honorees in a little remembered 1938 program for Gruen watches. One of Warners' shows had frequent radio visitor Ronald Reagan with Gale Gordon in "One Way Passage." A late comer to the films-on-radio genre was *Screen Directors' Playhouse*, an NBC show that ran from January 19, 1949 through August 30, 1951.

One common problem for these shows was that most were only a half hour long. *Screen Directors' Playhouse* started with thirty minutes, but on November 9, 1950 changed to a hour when it moved to the youngest network ABC. Its main problem was that television would shorten its life. Another problem was limited supply of films available for adaptation.

The best non-Lux shows were *The Screen Guild Theatre* and *The Screen Directors' Playhouse*. The former attracted the finest names to its show for twelve and a half years. Stars actively volunteered

their services to aid the actors' retirement home. Gulf Oil began as the show's sponsor, contributing \$80,000 to the home during the program's first year. The oil company stepped aside as sponsor when war-time rationing curtailed business in deference to Lady Esther cosmetics, perhaps a more Lux-like product for guests to sell (the last sponsor with Camel cigarettes). Through most of its run, the show had to contend with a 22 minute version of a film. At first, the stars outshone the scripts, but after the format was mastered, *The Screen Guild Theatre* was in the top fifteen radio shows for several years. Its one-two CBS punch, back to back with Lux, kept William Paley's network strong on Monday nights. *The Screen Directors' Playhouse*, as has been noted, suffered more from the late date it entered radio, rather than poor quality. Its specialty was to allow the director of a famous film to participate in the radio version.

Variety was common for these shows that had to follow in the footsteps of *The Lux Radio Theatre*. *Screen Guild* welcomed many prestigious names to its shows: Jack Benny and Paulette Goddard ("Parent by Proxy"); Rosalind Russell and Spencer Tracy ("Ninotchka"); Bing Crosby and Dinah Shore ("Holiday Inn"); Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman ("Casablanca"); Errol Flynn, Ward Bond, and Alexis Smith ("Gentlemen Jim"); and Joseph Cotten ("Shadow of a Doubt"). "Snow White" was presented twice, once with Durante narrating to Margaret O'Brien (Mel Blanc is Sneezy), and again with Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy telling the story. *Screen Directors'* includes an outstanding collection of movies: "The Prisoner of Zenda" with Ronald Colman and Benita Hume; "Miracle on 34th Street" starring Edmund Gwenn; "Magic Town" with Jimmy Stewart; "Mr. Lucky," "My Favorite Wife," and "Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House" showcasing Cary Grant; "The Best Years of Our

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Lives"; "*Lifeboat*"; "*Spellbound*"; and "*The Sea Wolf*." There was friendly competition with Lux, and it seems that both shows filled in where *The Lux Radio Theatre* omitted an important drama.

There were several lesser movies-to-radio programs. *Academy Award* was the most noteworthy. Because a percentage of the budget went to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, stars like Bogart, Henry Fonda, and Olivia De Havilland were counted among those who frequented the show between March 30 and December 18 of 1946. Although the half hour shows were quality productions, there are only so many Oscars that can be represented. The first show was Bette Davis in "*Jezebel*" and the last was "*Lost Angel*" with Margaret O'Brien (she had won a special Oscar as a child performer) and Ira Gessel (budding radio actor who would later be called Jeff Chandler.) Hallmark cards hosted its *Playhouse* in the late 1940's and early 1950's with shows such as: "*My Friend Flicka*" with Claude Jarman, Jr., "*Goodbye, Mr. Chips*" with Ronald Colman, and "*The Egg and I*" with Claudette Colbert. *Frigidaire's Hollywood Startime* ran on CBS during the 1946 season and had shows like "*Riders of the Purple Stage*" (George Montgomery) and "*The Lodger*" (Vincent Price). Colgate sponsored *Theatre of Romance* between 1944 and 1946 with offering such as Robert Alda and Janice Paige in "*42nd Street*." *The Ford Theatre* offered more classic stories than recent movies, but one, "*The Horn Blows at Midnight*," was a very fine film (with Jack Benny and Claude Raines) adapted for radio before the short-lived program left the air.

Whether the program was as strong as *The Lux Radio Theatre* or a one time presentation of a recent movie over the airways, these new versions of familiar films, without the pictures, allow the



CHARLES FARRELL and JANET GAYNOR

listener to recall the film from its outstanding visual remembrances. If one program could be used to typify the effect of the genre on today's audience, this author would choose the September 17, 1951, performance of "*Sunset Boulevard*" for examination. This incredible movie showed the old and the new in Hollywood, and the *Lux* show echoed the smallness of an upstart medium television, which would soon bury "vintage" radio as we know it. It wasn't radio that was no longer "big" (to paraphrase Norma Desmond), but that all else (the pictures) were so small. The problem is that, when America was watching the flickering black and white images of wrestling from Columbia Park on Dumont (or "*Lucy*" on CBS), they were missing a Gloria Swanson and William Holden in the theatre of the mind.

Thank goodness we can still enjoy many of these programs, like *The Lux Radio Theatre*, that let us listen to and create on our own, images that we enjoyed in the movie palaces years previous.