

Love Finds Andy Hardy

By Charlie Achuff

"Love Finds Andy Hardy" represented something completely new for its home studio and its young stars. The fourth in a series of family-friendly B pictures, it surpassed all expectations of success and provided a cultural touchstone of small-town innocence. As author Scott Eyman notes, it captured the way America viewed itself just before the world would enter one of its darkest periods and the quaint life Andy represented would seem lost forever.

The MGM that created the wholesome Hardy universe was not the studio of "Ben-Hur" (1925), "Grand Hotel" (1932) or "Camille" (1936). Irving Thalberg, boy wonder producer at the studio, died in September 1936. A dedicated executive with an eye for glamour and prestige, Thalberg had been a major force in the industry, taking risks for the sake of art, valuing quality as much as profit, and establishing a stable of some of the most talented and well-loved stars in Hollywood. But with his death came a change in regime at MGM and a change in direction for the studio's films. Louis B. Mayer, who had a volatile relationship with the young man he once considered as a son, was much more pragmatic about film-making than Thalberg. Preferring sensible, formulaic films to the sophisticated fare offered by a Crawford, Shearer or Garbo drama, Mayer did not take risks. An executive committee was formed, comprising nine producers who oversaw all productions on the lot. This was in direct contrast to the central-producer system that was in place under Thalberg in the 1920s, and it would establish a detailed shooting schedule across the lot, with an average release of one picture per week.

Although Mayer forbade use of the phrase, B pictures – shot in a short period using second-rate talent – would make up a larger share of the studio's output than it had previously. The Hardy Family films are a prime example of this new regime. But as they would come to prove, "second-rate" films could be equally as profitable and popular as their more prestigious cousins.



This photo spread featuring scenes from the film appeared in the September 1938 edition of Hollywood magazine. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

Mickey Rooney had starred in the prior three films as Andy, but it wasn't until "Love" that producers began to see megastar potential in the youngster. Born into a vaudeville family in 1920, he had been working regularly since age 3. He made several Mickey McGuire comedy shorts before signing to MGM in 1934, one of several new adolescent talents who would come to be something of a trademark for the studio in the coming years. Slowly making a name for himself in the films of Clark Gable, William Powell and Jean Harlow in his first two years under contract, Rooney really caught producers' attention with his performance opposite fellow teens Freddie Bartholomew and Jackie Cooper in "The Devil is a Sissy." But true star status would come with the

Hardy Family films, starting with 1937's "A Family Affair," where the character of young Andy was built up to showcase Rooney. The films would come to define the actor's career and represent an idyllic small-town America that still resonates many decades later.

The young females in Andy's life, loyal girlfriend Polly (Ann Rutherford); haughty sexpot Cynthia (Lana Turner) and sweet Betsey (Judy Garland), form the love triangle at the center of the film's plot. With his best girl, Polly, out of town for the town's Christmas ball, he is forced to seek another date. She happens to take the form of Cynthia – Andy's best friend's girl, whom Andy is tasked with "looking after" while the friend is staying with his grandparents for the holidays. Sure of herself, sophisticated and eager for attention, she is the opposite of Polly. Unlike the staid and respectable Polly, she jumps at the chance to "take the long way home" with Andy (read: neck in the woods).

For as emphasized as Turner's sexiness is, Garland's is completely ignored. Playing a twelve year old at age sixteen, she is dressed as a little girl and not considered as any sort of love interest for Andy. In the one song written by mentor Roger Edens, "In Between," she sings of longing to wear gowns and makeup and attend grown-up movies starring Clark Gable, not Mickey Mouse. It exposes the real-life tensions and insecurities Garland felt about her looks: compared to glamour queens like Turner, she was relegated to playing innocent girls well into her twenties. Louis B. Mayer called her his "little hunchback" – sometimes to her face. Writing in his autobiography many decades later, Rooney would express regret that he didn't stand up for his friend Garland, too enmeshed in the warped adulation of physical beauty perpetuated by the film business as he was when young.

Garland and Rooney proved to have an enduring and endearing chemistry on this film, and it would be replicated on several films over the course of the 1940s, notably the Busby Berkeley musicals. Critics noted that with "Love," Rooney had come into "full blossom" as the studio's top adolescent star and that Garland's popularity would continue to grow with her assured performance. He would top the "Motion

Picture Herald" exhibitors' poll in 1939, up from fourth place in 1938; Garland would leap from "Group II" in 1939, past "Group I" and all the way to the top ten the following year.

All the young actors in "Love" went on to long, fulfilling careers after this film. Rooney far outlasted other actors of his era, boasting screen credits across nine decades. This film, being one in a series of quickly and cheaply made B pictures, was not necessarily anything spectacular in its own right. Still, it holds a prominent place in film history for several reasons. It made a great deal of money, its focus on young stars in a family-friendly musical represented a new style of film for MGM to exploit, and, perhaps most importantly, it was a slice of small-town America as the country wished it could have been. "Love" was, per Scott Eyman, a vindication of Mayer's own belief in pure, wholesome entertainment – something which was only beginning to take hold with this film – but it also offers insight into how the country viewed itself at this time.

Indeed, moviegoers' interest in the film had to lie in something more meaningful than sheer entertainment value. The world Andy Hardy inhabits is impossibly naïve and isolated from the problems of the era. There are no unemployment issues, race tensions, or looming war for the Hardy family; their biggest concern as a unit is the illness of the grandmother, and that is a tertiary storyline. There is an insular, protected world which could not have existed, even onscreen, just a few years later.

For filmdom and for America, "Love Finds Andy Hardy" represents a lost innocence and an uncomplicated way of life which would never be regained.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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