

Meet Me in St. Louis

By Andrea Alsberg

There are times the stars align, the perfect storm hits, and the going gets good. These idioms apply to the making of “Meet Me in St. Louis,” a nearly perfect movie. The tetrad responsible for this delicacy of a film: Arthur Freed, producer at MGM; Vincente Minnelli, director; Judy Garland, actress; and, World War II.

Arthur Freed, born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1894, had a happy childhood. The eldest of eight children, his family was privileged and middle class. After attending Phillips Exeter Academy, he worked on the vaudeville circuit, and eventually landed at MGM as a lyricist. Ten years later, in 1938, Freed convinced Louis B. Mayer to let him produce films.

Judy Garland signed with MGM at age 13. Garland’s life has been dissected in countless journals and most folks are knowledgeable about her horrendous upbringing and tragic life. Needless to say, at 13 she was already a professional having performed since age two with her siblings as The Gumm Sisters. Although Mayer and the studio have deservedly taken the blame for her induction to chemicals, as a child her mother had already introduced her to “pep” pills for late-night shows and alcohol to calm her nerves. Once signed by MGM, Garland and fellow adolescent crooners Mickey Rooney and Deanna Durbin bided their time at the studio by doing bit parts until their “big break.” Judy’s, of course, was “The Wizard of Oz” (1939) in which she was cast at age 16. It was Arthur Freed who pushed Mayer to cast Garland; Mayer had wanted Shirley Temple.

Freed’s ambition helped and hindered Garland. He was known as having a superb eye for talent and given this fine curatorial ability he developed what came to be known as the “Freed Unit” at MGM. This unit would eventually comprise the most talented group of writers, composers, designers, and choreographers working in Hollywood, many of whom Freed gathered in hopes of boosting Garland to superstardom. He worked her non-stop, simultaneously developing his own incredible career.

Vincente Minnelli (né Lester Anthony Minnelli) was born in Chicago and grew up in the Midwest, traveling with his parents who were tent show musicians and performers. As a young man, Minnelli decorated windows at Marshall Fields in Chicago, and then moved to the Balaban theaters where he designed



The original release poster featuring Judy Garland and Margaret O'Brien. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Catalog.

and directed musicals. This led to work at Radio City Music Hall and eventually, Broadway. It was Freed who brought Minnelli to Hollywood and to MGM. Minnelli’s first films were “I Dood It” (1942), starring Red Skelton and the more successful, and interesting, “Cabin in the Sky” (1943), starring Ethel Waters and Lena Horne. Yet by 1943, Minnelli hadn’t solidified his position with the most powerful studio in Hollywood, and like Freed, was hungry to advance.

In 1942, Freed came across a charming set of stories in *The New Yorker* written by Sally Benson. Entitled “5135 Kensington,” the stories were based on Benson’s childhood in turn-of-the-century St. Louis. Freed thought these stories would make a fine musical. Initially, Freed thought of George Cukor to direct, but he was called to service, so Freed turned to Minnelli.

Judy Garland was made to do “Meet Me in St. Louis,” and she was not initially in love her role. At 21 she wanted to play an adult, and told Mayer so. For once, Mayer agreed with her, and sent her to Freed to handle it. Freed, in turn, set up a meeting with Minnelli. Regarding the role of Esther and the plot in general, Minnelli wrote that Garland stated, “It’s not very good is it?” to which Minnelli answered, “I think it’s fine. I see a lot of great things in it. In fact, it’s magical.” Still doubtful, Garland agreed to start rehearsals on November 11, 1943.

In 1944, when Minnelli and Freed began filming “Meet Me in St. Louis,” America had been at war for two years. During that year the U.S. Military personnel consisted of a staggering 11,623,468 troops, triple the amount of enlisted personnel in 1942. In 1944, American forces would suffer unprecedented casualties. Families would lose fathers, sons, and brothers. Women would enter the work force, en masse. Daily life across the country was dramatically altered. Food, gas and clothing were rationed. Popular entertainment often demonized the enemy, but just as often it served as escapism from the war’s worries. This was MGM’s cultural backdrop in 1944.

The film opens with the introduction of the Smith family, one lovely summer day in 1903. Eldest son, Lon, arrives home by bicycle. Mom, Anna, and maid, Katie, are in the kitchen making ketchup. Daughter Agnes arrives from the swimming hole trilling the soon to be oft-heard ditty “Meet Me in St. Louis,” as she bumps into Grandpa coming out of the bathroom. Esther (Garland) arrives home by buggy, glowing from her tennis game. Soon beautiful eldest sister Rose and father, Alonzo, arrive. Within the first ten minutes of the film, Minnelli, with his fluid camera and perfect choreography, established the Smith home and the milieu for the entire film.

St. Louis is preparing for the 1904 World’s Fair. Yet, this isn’t really what the film is about. The film is about family and home and what happens if either is potentially disrupted. We see few other locations besides the beautiful Smith house, as nothing else is as important. All the action takes place in the hearth, or close to it. Esther falls in love with the boy next door, a good, safe thing to do. The family celebrates the holidays in the house, and food is plentiful. The real

drama occurs when Alonzo announces he has taken a job in New York, setting the scene for the most memorable song of the film, “Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas,” which Esther sings to young sister Tootie (played by the remarkable Margaret O’Brien). After the song, Tootie has a violent outburst, leading Alonzo to thoughtfully cancel the family’s move and create harmony once again.

Women were the primary audience of the film, and the film centers around six strong women; the male characters’ absence mirroring life in 1944. Equally, if not more important, however, is the trope that men will return and it’s made clear that female education is secondary to marriage, and that a woman’s place is to make the home comfortable.

“Meet Me in St. Louis” opened five months after D-Day. The unspoken purpose of World War II wafts throughout the film: where we have come from in our American history, who we are now, and what we will be in the future are all worth the fight.

However, the incredible talent of those responsible for the film will be its enduring legacy: producer Arthur Freed, who created the modern musical as we know it, i.e. that songs are utilized to move the narrative forward, rather than merely interrupt it; Vincente Minnelli for his artistic perfectionism and iconic use of color, costume, design and harmonious movement; and of course, Judy Garland, who never looked so beautiful or so stable, and whose delivery of song resonated with unparalleled sentimental immersion.

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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