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# Managing the Munchkins

The Making of *The Wizard of Oz* by Aljean Harmetz (Knopf, \$12.95)

**T**HE secret of making good movies, of turning out enduring, entertaining, touching, and/or profitable works in Hollywood, or anywhere else for that matter, is a secret. No one need worry, or hope, that any book will give it away. Aljean Harmetz, in *The Making of The Wizard of Oz*, speculates gingerly on possible reasons for the film's continuing, growing popularity, but she is properly respectful before the mystery of creative success, which is no less a mystery in a new, commercial, popular medium than it is in the fine, old arts.

When Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer produced *The Wizard of Oz*, it was at the head of the studio system, and the most systematic studio in town. Harmetz is most successful in her portrait of this huge, paternal factory, staffed by craftsmen who would spend their whole working lives there, and guided by clever and strong-armed bureaucrats. She is, however, gravely misguided in her praise of Irving Thalberg at the expense of Leo B. Mayer, who ran the studio after Thalberg's death in 1936.

Thalberg invented the role of the creative, sensitive producer (now

being played by Robert Evans) who knew just how to get marketable, tasteful product out of writers, directors, actors, and crew, using them in no particular order and replacing them if they didn't produce. Mayer was more honestly crass, and Harry Chon more candidly venal, and I find them more sympathetic figures. At least writers and directors could tell who the enemy was.

In defense of Thalberg, she quotes Mervyn Leroy: "I only met two geniuses in all my years in the business: Irving Thalberg and Walt Disney." Leroy's credits as director include *Little Caesar*, *I Am a Fugitive From A Chain Gang*, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, and, in the three decades that followed, scores of movies that aren't even on UHF

(As it happened, Miss Temple's career pretty much ended with the decade.) Judy Garland, whom the studio was grooming as a star (fixing her nose and teeth, training her voice, watching her diet and giving her girdles), got the part instead. Buddy Ebsen, floored by an allergy to his aluminum make-up, was re-



*Wicked Witch of the West* (Margaret Hamilton) "melts" (is lowered on a hydraulic elevator while her costume smolders in dry-ice vapors).

past midnight. He happened to be producing at MGM in 1938, so his name is on *Oz*, but his assistant, Arthur Freed, who went on to produce the great postwar Metro musicals, surely deserves more of the credit, if only for having chosen Yip Harburg and Harold Arlen to write the movie's songs.

Perhaps because so many writers had been wrestling with the script, Harburg and Arlen were able to weave their words and music into the fabric of the movie in a way that wasn't common then (when musicals just stopped for singing interludes) and wouldn't become so until Freed's later productions. The author tries to sort out who wrote what, and who made which decisions, but some of those involved are dead, and those remaining are predictably eager to remember that they backed winners and solved problems.

After the ten writers came four directors. At Metro, this was not uncommon, but the choice of Victor Fleming as the man who directed most of the movie (after Richard Thorpe and George Cukor, before King Vidor) was less to be expected. Fleming, known as a man's director, had handled Gable and Spencer Tracy in big actioners, and wasn't anxious to take over this messy, prestigious children's film. But it was probably all for the best; he gave the picture more narrative thrust, a leaner, less sentimental feel, than a director with a gentler sensibility might have done. And anyway, what with the costumes and make-up, which often took more than an hour to put on, and the special effects, crowd scenes, and blazing arc lights (for early color film), there wasn't much room, or time, for deeply felt performances.

The casting, as always, was as much a matter of luck as of skill or instinct. Nick Schenck, and maybe Mayer too, wanted Shirley Temple (absolutely bankable, guaranteed box office) to star, but Twentieth Century Fox wouldn't loan her out.

placed by Jack Haley in the role of the Tin Man, and this seems a less felicitous choice. But we get a sense not of camaraderie or emotional chemistry, but of hard work under trying conditions. From all reports, it was not a movie that "wrapped" (finished shooting) in a warm glow of inspiration and pride. Most everyone saw it just as a job, and a tough one, and they were relieved that it was over.

There are, of course, tales of scandals and accidents off and on the set, and the author has culled some good ones, though I feel sure there are others, about who went home with whom, that she didn't want to risk using. She does reveal the truth, which is not so very torrid, about the sexual habits of the Munchkins in their hotel in Culver City, and tells about the ingenious device that gave Margaret Hamilton some nasty burns. The actress, who couldn't work for six weeks, did not dare sue, or even threaten to sue, the studio; Hollywood was a company town and workers watched their steps.

When the film at last opened, no one greeted it as a masterwork, and since most of the audience paid half price, it took a decade to break even. Only after it was sold, and re-sold, to network TV — a sale that was mostly a matter of luck and which assured the film's immortality — did it really pay off, though to a corporate entity far different from the proud, sleek studio that manufactured it in 1939.

Its appeal today may be deeper than the combined allure of its memorable score, lavish sets and costumes, and fine character acting, but I suspect that most of its charm is that of a huge, elaborate, antique toy that would be too expensive, and too innocent, for anyone to make today.

*The Wizard of Oz* will be showing, along with the quite perfectly sweet *Meet Me in St. Louis*, Arthur Freed's first big hit, next Wednesday through Saturday at the California, as part of that theatre's series of MGM classics.