

The Making of
THE WIZARD
OF
OZ

ALJEAN HARMETZ
FOREWORD BY MARGARET HAMILTON

75th
Anniversary
EDITION

"A richly detailed,
thoroughly researched
work filled with illuminating
and fascinating information."
—Rex Reed



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OZ



ALJEAN HARMETZ



An A Cappella Book

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To
Richard S Harnetz

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Production #1060	

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—*Aljean Harmetz*
Los Angeles, 1977

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Some movies never die.

It has been 73 years since *The Wizard of Oz* reached theaters and more than thirty years since I took my first steps down the Yellow Brick Road. What engages my imagination, even now, is how unaware they all were—the actors running up and down the stairs of a witch’s castle under the hot arc lights, the craftsmen who wired an acre of artificial poppies to the floor of stage twenty-nine, the ladies in Mrs. Cluett’s beading department sewing sequins on six pairs of red shoes, and even the movie’s directors and producer.

Almost all of the men and women who worked on MGM’s production #1060 between October 1938 and March 1939 saw the movie as just another job. That in 1998 the American Film Institute and its panel of fifteen hundred film historians, critics, directors, actors, cinematographers, and other film industry leaders would declare *The Wizard of Oz* to be the sixth best film made during the first hundred years of American movies would have puzzled them. That one pair of Dorothy’s ruby slippers would have been auctioned in the twenty-first century for \$666,000 would have astounded them. And that the Library of Congress would designate the movie “the most watched film ever” would have left them thunderstruck.

Wicked, the Broadway musical that tells the story of Oz’s witches, has grossed well over half a billion dollars and is still playing more than nine years after it opened. *Oz the Great and Powerful*, a movie about the wizard, made almost \$200 million in its first month in theaters, and a sequel has already been planned. *The Wizard of Oz* is so much a part of American culture that many of the little people who played Munchkins in 1939 were idolized at conventions sixty years later. Time decimates everything, and only three of them are left now, including the Lollipop Kid.

Time did its worst much earlier. The Yellow Brick Road on which I walked in the 1970s was already a jumble of broken and missing bricks. Bert Lahr and Judy Garland were dead. So were director Victor Fleming and cocky Arthur Freed, who had made *Oz* the forerunner of a new kind of movie musical. Songwriter Harold Arlen was a recluse, penned by his own will in his New York apartment. And most of the written records had been burned or casually thrown away. I came eventually

to see my task as archaeology. But what I was exploring was not just the rubble that remained of the world that had been created at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1938 and 1939. I was digging, also, into my own past. I had grown up just outside the walls of MGM. David O. Selznick was my mother's first cousin. And my mother worked in the studio's wardrobe department for twenty years.

To Judy Garland, MGM was home. To me, the studio was the unattainable. My definition of myself came from working in the fan mail department the summer I was twelve years old, sending wallet-sized pictures of June Allyson, Lana Turner, and Elizabeth Taylor to ten thousand strangers who adored them and measuring myself against movie stars. Fatherless, fat, and lonely, I saw salvation in being part of MGM.

Grown up, the mother of three children, my yearning to be a movie star stifled by time, I began to excavate *Oz* when my daughter was three years old.

During my search, I made one friend—Margaret Hamilton, the kindest of witches. I would pick her up at the Schubert Theatre a few blocks away from my house at midnight, after her performance in *A Little Night Music*. We would sit and drink coffee until 3 AM, the tape recorder on the table between us recording her astonishment that this small part in what she called “a picture for children, an interesting picture and sort of an innovation and somewhat overdone in some tiny places, but very pleasant” should have made her famous. Then, and in the years that followed, she reminded me of a fractured fairy tale, her clauses bumping up against each other, her sentences spinning from present to past to farther past as though her mind were a chest full of fascinating oddments kept in no particular order. In 1939 she was on the fringes of *Oz*. By 1980, she had been made the center of that mythical country by adults whom she had frightened when they were children watching the movie on television year after year. At public appearances and solemn forums about *Oz*, she whispered to me to sit between her and Ray Bolger. She felt that “The Boys,” as she called Bolger, Lahr, and Jack Haley, had elbowed her out of their way during the making of the movie and that she never got a chance to speak when they were on the same panels. I was to keep Bolger, in particular, from answering all the questions addressed to her as well as answering his own.

Margaret Hamilton had been raised to be modest—unpretentious, unassuming, decorous—as befitted a Midwestern lady born in 1902. Ray

Bolger pulled the spotlight toward him like a moon he had lassoed and permanently attached to his right shoulder. Bolger loved applause and would do his Scarecrow dance in the middle of the living room of his big house in Beverly Hills and wait eagerly for approval. He was sentimental about *Oz*, while Jack Haley saw the Tin Woodman as just another role, and Margaret Hamilton puzzled over the celebrity the movie had brought her. Bolger's sentimentality made some of his memories suspect.

Over and over again, one person's memories would collide with someone else's contradictory recollections. Who brought Judy Garland to the studio to audition? Was she discovered accidentally by L. B. Mayer at a Hollywood nightclub? When two versions of a story seemed equally probable, I used both. But some people's memories were sturdier and their accounts verified by written evidence or the memories of others.

I had expected that the people who had the most important jobs on *The Wizard of Oz* would be the keys to fitting together the pieces of this jigsaw puzzle. One of my earliest interviews, with the movie's producer, Mervyn LeRoy, made me realize that things would be considerably more complicated. A vague little man smoking a long brown cigar, he had kept no records—on paper or in his head. He spoke of working on *The Wizard of Oz* with men who didn't arrive at MGM until a decade later and insisted, for example, that Buddy Ebsen, the first Tin Man, had never worked on the movie at all.

It was from the unimportant people, men and women for whom *Oz* was not just another movie in a career crowded with movies, that the revelations came. When Margaret Hamilton's stunt double Betty Danko came home from the hospital after suffering a nearly fatal accident on the film, she wrote an eight-page account of everything that had happened. Thirty-six years later, I picked up the torn and yellowed papers and took them to a Xerox machine down the street from the Hollywood bungalow Betty Danko's father had bought in 1927 and in which she still lived.

Two men over eighty years old—King Vidor, who directed the Kansas sequences, and Carl Spitz, the German immigrant who had become a Hollywood dog trainer—had almost total recall and clear insights into how things had worked on the set of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Though much had been lost or thrown away, MGM had kept its script files. I sat on a high iron stool in the basement of the Thalberg Building for weeks, my face and fingers coated with dust as I read

through a shelf of false beginnings, alternate endings, half-finished treatments, and full scripts from ten screenwriters. More than one of the scripts held the hidden treasure of notes from Arthur Freed that had been tucked between its pages decades earlier.

Occasionally things were rescued from the carelessness with which Hollywood treated its history through much of the twentieth century. When a warehouse at MGM was demolished, a young technician saw a stack of matte paintings thrown into the middle of a studio street to wait for the junkman. He filled his station wagon with the black cardboard drawings and took them to the University of Southern California. Among the three dozen crayon pastel drawings he saved were the witch's castle and the Emerald City. A Technicolor consultant, Tom Tarr, saved color test strips from all of the early color movies, including *The Wizard of Oz*, when Technicolor threw them away. And when I was nearly finished writing this book, someone searching for Christmas decorations in a closet in an MGM prop building found a box of set stills from *The Wizard of Oz*, photographs taken of the finished sets before the actors set foot on them.

As I write this, the three-year-old daughter who started the journey to *Oz* with me has a five-year-old daughter of her own. The most astonishing discovery I made about *Oz* was personal. My daughter was born on L. Frank Baum's birthday, May 15. One of my sons was born on the anniversary of the start of production on *The Wizard of Oz*, October 12. My other son was born on the date production ended, March 16. If those three birthdays are coincidence, what long odds there are against it.

Things change. MGM has been gutted, its library of old pictures in the hands of Warner Bros. The studio lot where *The Wizard of Oz* was made belongs to Sony, and most movies produced there carry the name *Columbia*. But Dorothy is still safe inside her red shoes, and there's still no place like home.

—ALJEAN HARMETZ
Los Angeles, 2013

Introduction	
Production #1060	

by
MARGARET HAMILTON
(*the Wicked Witch of the West*)

I opened the package with keen anticipation and there it was, page upon page, the book I had been waiting and longing for—*The Making of THE WIZARD OF OZ*.

About two years before, during three midnight question-and-answer sessions in Aljean Harmetz's kitchen, I had looked forward to it for my own selfish reasons. The questions she had asked me about my experience as The Wicked Witch of the West made me feel that the book would answer all of the myriad questions I am constantly asked about *Oz*. Here was a source to guarantee "the answer," an accurate, clear, and concise description to draw upon.

A great deal of my mail comes from fans of the *Oz* picture—fans of all ages. The scholarly, the curious, the disbelievers write and ask how? why? when? what for? did you fly? melt? scream? cackle? appear? disappear? produce? sky-write? deal with monkeys? etc., etc., etc. "I can't tell you—I don't know—it's too difficult to write—I haven't the time," were not satisfactory. Back came the demands, "You do too know, you did it—you were in it, you must know—just tell me exactly how it was because I need it, for a paper—a theme—a degree. . . . And if you can't write it; maybe you could come to my school and tell it. You could stay with us. My mother would like that. Or maybe I could come to New York for a day and you could tell it to me," and so on.

As for my awareness of what was going on and where during the making of the film, I was familiar with the hair-styling and makeup room, and the costume-fitting room; I knew the sound stage—dark and shadowy and cavernous, until the cameras took over. But of the astonishing organization that controlled the present and the future of the picture, the constant adjustments of all parts and functions that interplayed like some superb piece of machinery pulling

it all together and keeping it progressing in the chosen directions, of all this I knew nothing. But I do now, thanks to Aljean Harmetz. I have read the manuscript, and now at last I know how I flew, how I melted, how I wrote in the sky "SURRENDER DOROTHY OR DIE." *The Making of THE WIZARD OF OZ* is written with great understanding, and the author has tied together the many elements that somehow merged at the right time and place. The research alone is a staggering accomplishment—the challenging and comparing of each and every fact by the author, the weaving in and out of all the people who were involved, and finally the distilling of all the elements into an accurate picture of the times that made *Oz* possible. For me it is a well of information. And one of the most fascinating things about it is how differently particular events, especially what happened while certain scenes were being filmed, were interpreted by various people who were involved. Of course, it is a thirty-eight-year-old memory, and in telling my version to the author, I used the qualifying phrase, "at least that is my memory of it."

Reading the book, I have inevitably been moved to probe and recall clearly some experiences of mine which had gradually become clouded. Among them is a clear memory of the first day of actual shooting and, before that, the weeks of working out the necessary details of the movie: contract details, interviews with the press, and discussions with four possible directors.

It was in October of 1938 that we started the preliminary "tests" (they continued into November), and I had been living in La Jolla since my own house in Beverly Hills was rented out. Every day during that time I drove back and forth from La Jolla to Culver City, starting three hours before I was due at the studio and stopping for the day around five or six p.m. to begin the drive back down to La Jolla; I was never quite sure what time I would be home.

It was during those early weeks, as I recall, that we met three directors. Each of us—Ray Bolger, Bert Lahr, and Jack Haley—worried that we would lose the part after the arrival of each new director, but the interviews, as I recall, were quite pleasant and, for me, astonishingly brief. First came Richard Thorpe, whom I had worked for before and liked. About a week later Mr. Thorpe was gone, and we were introduced to George Cukor, whom

I had not met before. He interviewed each of us and we continued to work. After a certain period Mr. Cukor departed, and we met, finally, Mr. Victor Fleming, for whom I had worked in the movie version of *The Farmer Takes a Wife* at Fox Studio, before it became 20th Century-Fox. (I had had the pleasure of playing this part in a company headed by Henry Fonda in his first Broadway hit and eventually his first part in a film.) After Mr. Fleming left to direct *Gone With the Wind*, King Vidor finished directing *Oz*. I cannot remember doing camera work for any of them except Mr. Fleming. I recall my sense of uneasiness and the feeling each time of "Here goes nothing!" But during the previous six years in New York and California in the business, I had "cut my teeth" on the gold ring of the merry-go-round that is theater, and I had learned to trust in a higher power and relax.

There were preliminary decisions to be made about what the Witch would look like: tests in color and in black and white for design, as well as for the degree of black (black tones could be a problem and cameramen could lose their equanimity). Black next to your skin seemed to give rise to a thin line of white on the edge of the black, which did not look like edging but rather like a separation. But with *Oz* the problem was solved—perhaps that was why they chose green makeup for my face, neck, and hands. The problem of the thin white line was only apparent when black was the basic color. However, I never asked about it then. In fact, I was not really aware of the problem until after several attempts, when they told me what they were doing.

I also had to try on various experimental versions of my chin and nose until we found the best fit and shape and shade of green. This was followed by many, many costume fittings and tests with and without costume. Was the Witch's sleeve to have a medieval look? How long should the sleeves be—over the wrist or hand? How long a train on the dress and cape? Once or twice someone said, "Tell us how you feel about it." But during most of these discussions my opinion was not sought. I did say I wanted the dress length to clear the floor by an inch so I would not have to pick up the skirt, or trip coming downstairs; the cape could brush the floor in the back if they wished. There was a question regarding a huge watch that was supposed to hang on my left side, as old-fashioned glasses did. But

that was decided against. Other details were considered, and accepted or turned down on the basis of the whole effect. Then there was the Witch's hair—was it to hang down around my neck or be in an enormous knot or a sort of braid? The stills I have of makeup tests show several styles, but the large knot to which the hat could be pinned looked best, as well as affording some balance to the very tall hat. The final decision was to go with the large knot. The shoes were to be high-laced, as I remember, so they would stay on when the Witch went up and down the stairs.

Then came tests of the Witch, in makeup, wearing dress and hat, against the various backgrounds that were to be used in the film. And finally there were the tests—painstaking, time-consuming—with Dorothy, the Scarecrow, and one monkey. I used the test periods to practice moving in the long skirt and cape, using wide, high gestures that would give an added sweep and excitement to the Witch's movements. I learned how to balance the huge hat to keep it from tilting back in the rush of movement. I also got used to the feel of the green makeup as it dried on my face. It never cracked or really felt uncomfortable. The long fingernails were glued to my own. (Once, as I rushed to grab the great iron rings and shut the huge doors to prevent Dorothy from "leaving so soon," they had left no space between the rings and the actual doors, and all ten fingernails popped off in a shower of green. That gave everyone a great laugh.)

The first day of shooting began at 4:45 a.m. I woke full of anticipation and excitement. It was late fall and cool in the early morning light. The house was dark and quiet. I tiptoed about, not wanting to wake my young son or his nurse. After a proper breakfast, I picked up my small lunch box and went stealthily out to the car. The streets were empty as I headed for Culver City and MGM. I was aware of the quickening light, the early morning fog (quite without smog in those days).

At the MGM gate, I was directed to what would be my parking place for the next six months. I walked to the makeup department, reporting at 6:45. We had our own particular chairs and makeup men. (It was Jack Dawn who designed the makeup for each of us.) I climbed into my dentist-like chair and was greeted by my own remarkable makeup man, Jack Young, who was responsible for my

daily transformation for the entire picture. From the other chairs came greetings from my fellow actors, who would become such an integral part of my life for the next twenty-three weeks. Because of the fantasy-like nature of the work, the sense of being on a ship and separated from the mainstream of life would become even greater than usual.

Since we arrived at the studio earlier than most actors, we felt that each day we were opening the studio. Makeup took two hours; after that, we were usually driven to the stage far away at the back of the main lot. Unless an actor was working or was going to work, he did not report at 6:45 a.m. Most people think that when the studios made movies the principal actors worked together a great deal of the time. But most of my scenes were with Judy or the monkeys or just myself, and except for the early morning encounters in makeup, I saw almost nothing of the Lion, the Tin Woodman, or Ray Bolger, who, as the Scarecrow, had two scenes with me. In the first, he and Dorothy were coming down the yellow brick road. The Witch suddenly appeared on the roof of a small cottage. There followed the scene in which the Witch asked the Scarecrow if he would like to play ball, whereupon she conjured up a ball of fire and quickly tossed it at him. Another scene, inside the Witch's castle, actually involved no contact, but we were together, all of us, with the Witch at the top of the great, long stairs, screaming at the four below and lowering the chandelier on what she hoped would be Bolger, Lahr, and Haley, but instead turned out to be her soldiers. The final scene—the melting scene—was again with Judy. I remember being very concerned that I had to grab a torch and set fire to Ray. (After an earlier experience when my broom caught fire, it was almost too much for me, but I was assured Bolger's suit was asbestos and there was little danger of its catching fire.) Dorothy would then throw a bucket of water at Bolger that would by chance land on me and I would begin to melt. This was to be the end of the Witch.

At the time the actual shooting finally began, my son, Hamilton, was almost two and a half years old. I had decided I would be very careful in my choice of what he would be exposed to. That decision was based on his sensitivity and an occasional nightmare. At that

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