

# Cutting Room Blues



A *Star Is Born* in Cinemascope: Miss Vicki Lester

## Interview with Ronald Haver

by Gerard Raymond

**"I**'m not a movie buff. I hate that term almost as much as I hate *tinsel town*," says Ronald Haver, head of the Film Department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, author of *David O. Selznick's Hollywood* and the recently published, *A Star Is Born: The Making of the 1954 Movie and Its 1983 Restoration*. "I'm a film historian," he explains. "A movie buff, to me, is a non-professional person who has another occupation. Movies are not my hobby, they are my life. What a life, as Barbara Stanwyck says!"

"I think I first fell in love with the movies when I was six. *Leave Her to Heaven*, a 1945 Gene Tierney film (with Cornell Wilde), was probably the film that affected me most. It is one of the most beautifully technicolored films you have ever seen in your life. There's a scene early on in the movie in New Mexico where she rides this horse across a plateau, scattering her father's ashes to the winds, and it just resonated in my mind for years and years."

"I wanted to make movies ever since I knew that movies didn't just come out of that beam from the projection booth and that people actually went somewhere

and made them. I got sidetracked for a long time with other things because it seemed like an impossible thing to do and I wasn't single-minded about it. The thing I was single-minded about was *Gone With the Wind* and David O. Selznick." The result of Haver's obsession was a most elaborately produced, most expensive, and glamorous coffee table book entitled *David O. Selznick's Hollywood* which Knopf published in 1980. After that publication Haver says he was asked what his next dream project was, and he replied, "I would really like to restore *A Star Is Born*." In 1983, the restored version of the George Cukor classic premiered at Radio City Music Hall, produced by Haver for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and Warner Brothers.

In the book that Haver subsequently wrote about the making of the 1953 film, he describes his seeing *A Star Is Born* for the first time, at age 16, as "one of my primal moviegoing experiences, the kind of epiphanic film that burrowed itself into my subconscious and reverberated there." He explains a "primal moviegoing experience" as that film which "puts you over the edge. It was like discovering orgasms!" he says. Haver has had five such orgasms in his formative years: *Gone With the Wind*, *Duel in*

*the Sun*, *A Star Is Born*, *King Kong*, and *Singing In the Rain*. "They really knocked me out. I never have really recovered from those particular experiences and I keep wanting to have those experiences with new movies, but you can't. My dream is to be lobotomized so I can experience all this again."

According to Haver, "the more stories I heard about the making of *A Star Is Born*, the more I was convinced that it was a fascinating slice of Hollywood of the time. In late 1953, early 1954, the great studios were about to fall apart, and *A Star Is Born* really is a very good example of what was about to happen in terms of production. It was an independent production made by a company formed by Garland and Sid Luft. It was a remake of a very famous earlier film, which was a trend that was going to happen in a few years. The days when the studios had all this talent under contract and they could just make movies at a set cost were drawing to an end. Everybody in *A Star Is Born* was contracted from outside.

"*A Star Is Born* was also one of the last of the great studio productions." Haver explains that *Ben-Hur* (1959) would have been the next, but it was made in Italy just as the megaproduction *Cleopatra* was in 1963. "The period had never

really been covered in detail. Certainly not in terms of the impact of the wide-screen revolution on production as well as exhibition. So you had all these various themes, and Hollywood history has always fascinated me, not just the gossip, but especially how films are made. I think the way films are made is an amazing example of human behavior at its best and its worst. I don't think there is any other industry or creative art in the world that has so much tension, so much drama and so much that is written about it."

Working on the book "was an awful lot of research," says Haver, "mainly because a lot of people were dead, a lot of the people could not specifically remember things. There seemed to be a lot of confusion in trying to remember exactly who did what, when, and why. Warner Brothers was a studio that did not keep a lot of records. There was material, but I was used to Selznick who kept everything, including pawn tickets. The biggest help in determining what happened during the making of the film was the daily production log, which is a minute by minute accounting of what goes on on the soundstage. If there is anything out of the ordinary, the assistant director has to write a little report about it on the bottom. I did a lot of background, talking to

Continued on next page  
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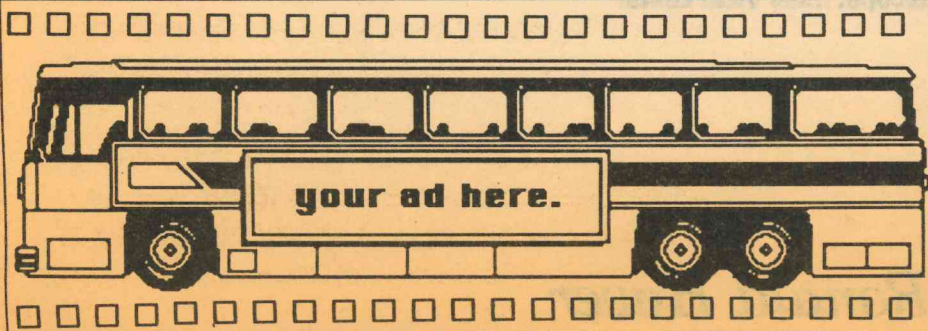
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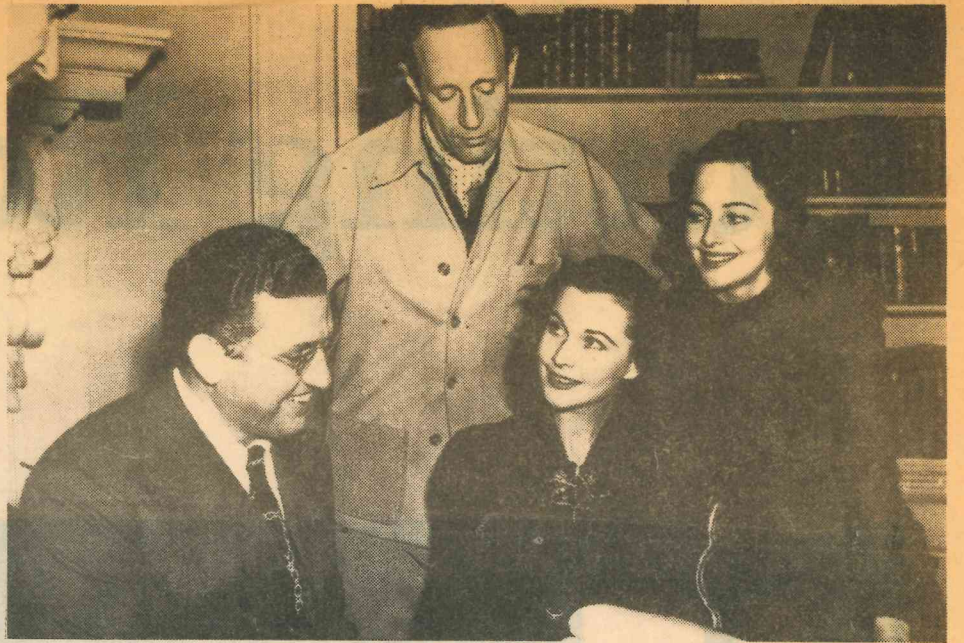
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David O. Selznick (l) goes over the script of *Gone With the Wind* with stars Leslie Howard, Vivien Leigh and Olivia de Havilland

Continued from page 31

people who weren't directly connected with the production but who were working at the studio at the time and would tell me all about Jack Warner's attitude, the problems with Judy Garland, Sid Luft, and George Cukor. Some of them obviously had axes to grind so I had to go back and double check."

The only angry reaction to Haver's book has come from Leonard Gersh who is credited in the film with writing the song "Born In a Trunk." Gersh was furious because Haver had quoted Sid Luft as saying that the song was actually written by Roger Edens and that Gersh, who was his assistant, had taken the credit because Edens was under contract with MGM. Gersh claimed Sid Luft knew well that he was the author of the song, but was always trying to discredit him for some reason or another. Haver says, "Sid gave me one long interview and he has an erratic memory. He just couldn't remember a lot of things."

Luft also made the controversial statement that George Cukor approved of the notorious cuts slicing twenty minutes off the picture shortly after its release. Haver acknowledges that "Cukor wanted some of the cuts. I do know he didn't like the idea of 'Lose That Long Face' and he did think that the proposal scene on the soundstage could come out, which is true, it could have. What Cukor was outraged at, and Luft evidently forgets, are the earlier dramatic scenes that were removed. Cukor would never have agreed to that. Nobody seems to know who suggested those cuts. Everybody except Jack Warner was outraged by them. Even the public, when the word got out that the picture was being cut after all the ballyhoo, didn't go to see the movie. I remember by the time it came to my neighborhood theater in Oakland, it wasn't the same movie I had heard about."

The question remains, if Cukor and screenwriter Moss Hart—who also felt the movie was too long—had been given the chance, could they have improved the film at the same time it was cut to a length acceptable to the studio marketing people? "You can't second-guess a director. In looking at the film over and over again, I saw places where they could have trimmed. In the second half, there's a lot of mood and nuance in setting up shots that could easily be gone. When they bail Norman Maine out of jail, there is a long shot of him coming up in the elevator. You know there is no reason for that shot. By the time you get rid of a lot of those things, which don't really affect the narrative, you could have saved fifteen, twenty minutes all the way through the film. But that's my interpretation. All we could do is put it back to the way Cukor had approved it."

"There were people who said, why don't we cut out 'Born In a Trunk,'" Haver continues. "I said sure, that's some reconstruction!" He admits that "Born In a Trunk" is a big production number that seems to stand outside the movie which, like many of the musical sequences, is too long. Cukor himself was least interested in these sequences and, in the case of "Lose That Long Face," didn't even direct it. Like many of the musicals of the decade, the production numbers were directed by dance directors while the director himself concentrated on the dramatic episodes. Haver points out that the musical numbers were not particularly great: they were typical of the run-of-the-mill musicals that Warners was producing at the time; it was only the presence of Garland that made them unique.

"If you look at *April in Paris* or *Lucky Me* which were made the same year as *A Star Is Born*," advises Haver, "you see how really terrible Warner Brothers musicals could be. *A Star Is Born* was a beacon of light as far as musicals go, in terms of intelligence, and especially in terms of the adult content of the story. The performances, the look of it—it is a very sophisticated movie. It's almost an MGM movie at Warner Brothers, if you look at it that way, except that it took MGM two years before they attempted that kind of story with *Love Me or Leave Me*. I think *A Star Is Born* really set a trend for realistic adult drama in musicals." Haver also says that he came to realize that the songs in the film were so well structured into the script (except for "Born In a Trunk," the only song not written by Harold Arlen and Ira Gershwin) that they actually have a subliminal bearing on the characterizations and the story. Even their seemingly innocuous titles have deeper meanings and cross-references in the script.

"At the time we were doing the reconstruction," Haver says, "some people in the Academy didn't like the idea of stills sequences." They were happy with the addition of the missing musical numbers. "The main reason I wanted to restore the film is because of those missing dramatic sequences," explains Haver. Where the sequences were missing, Haver and his team used still frames to approximate the original visuals and synchronized them with the restored dialogue. George Cukor died the very day before he was to have seen the first efforts of the reconstruction team. Until then, he had been so upset by the cuts made by Warner Brothers that he refused to sit through the mangled version. "If Cukor had been able to work with us on the film, then he might have suggested cuts, but he was very proud of that movie in its original form," says Haver.

Haver did however get Cukor's approval



to actually reshoot a sequence for the film's restoration. In the scene where Norman Maine goes looking for Esther, he arrives at the "Oleander Arms" only to be told by an irate landlady that Esther had left. Maine departs furiously telling the landlady that "Oleander Arms" was a singularly inappropriate name for a lodging house, and he bet she didn't even know what Oleander meant. "We had to have something," explains Haver. "The scene was too important to Norman's character to leave out, and we had the soundtrack for it." So they shot a still outside the location of the original lodging house with an actress standing in for the landlady. Haver's only regret is that the actress they got did not seem to look like the owner of the voice on the track.

The original Moss Hart outline for the musical remake of *A Star Is Born* was an intimate movie that would have run about two hours. Haver says he was always fascinated as to why such a movie would cost \$5 million and run for three hours. "It was because of indecision—Luft's inexperience as a producer. He really did not have a concept other than this idea that he wanted to do the musical. He couldn't see that it was getting out of hand; he just kept wanting to add more and more production value.

"But it kept growing, and with Cukor's meticulous direction and his notorious lengthy takes, you ended up with this three hour behemoth. Jack Warner, of course, wanted to outdo everybody else and they all lost sight of their objective, which was to make this terrific little musical. Nevertheless, I think the film as it is now," Haver adds, "even with all its flaws and imperfections, is one of the best things that anyone associated with it has done."

Haver differs with his colleagues on the subject of film preservation. For many of them it is regarded principally as an academic pursuit. "My colleagues are of the mind that film is film: you preserve it and you put it away." Many of the organizations that spend large amounts of time and money on preserving and restoring film are extremely protective of their work, often fighting competitive turf battles with other similarly concerned organizations. The net result of this is that the painstakingly restored film is rarely accessible to the public. "I've always wondered exactly who we are preserving all this material for and why we are going to all this trouble," remarks Haver. "And the other thing that has always puzzled me is why it is necessary

to spend public funds to preserve private property."

He explains that many studios will allow organizations to preserve their films and then refuse to let those films be shown anywhere. "The one person, the one studio, ironically that has done more for film preservation than any other, is Ted Turner. He has taken all the flak for colorizing films. I point out to people over and over again, he doesn't colorize films, he colorizes video tapes, and who cares. Before he can make these video tapes, he has to strike a new negative and new print. His organization spent many thousands of dollars trying to find a full length *Sea Hawk*, which Warners had cut by twenty minutes. They located a print at the British Film Institute and made a new negative and print. Now that print is available to museums, colleges and universities to show. This has never been the case before. Colorization is a minor irritant as far as I am concerned. It's a commercial undertaking, it does not damage the original prints."

"It's far more of a cultural crime to pan and scan cinemascope films for video," he continues. "That gives you no choice whatsoever, destroys the intent of the director, and destroys the dramatic content of the movie." Yet this was exactly what Haver found himself doing when Warner Home Video refused to use the letter-box format for the video release of the restored *A Star Is Born*. "I was forced to do that, and I thought how awful, how ironic. We spent all this time and money to put this picture back together and here I am cutting the picture in half."

Having fulfilled two of his dream projects over the past fifteen years. Haver now has a new one. "I had wanted to restore *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which is a favorite of mine even at 80 minutes. I went to Paramount and RKO, where the footage had been thrown in the late '50s, but they had dumped it in the Pacific Ocean because it was all on nitrate stock. Then I read the original two-and-a-half hour Welles screenplay and thought to myself, this could be filmed right now without any changes. I came up with the concept of buying the screenplay from RKO, recasting it with contemporary actors using Welles's original as a guide. It meant getting a director who was simpatico with Welles and having him redirect in Welles's style using the same camera moves, the same blocking, same sets, same music, everything. To just reconstruct the movie that way—that's my dream project." ■



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