

Summer Stock

by Emily Soares | July 29, 2008



This undeniably classic "Let's paint the barn and put on a show" collaboration between Judy Garland and Gene Kelly delighted theater audiences, who could never have imagined what went on behind the scenes of the upbeat musical. In reality, **Summer Stock** (1950) was a film that almost wasn't, and the fact that it was completed and successful to boot is testimony to Garland's Hollywood cache, the determination of friends and MGM colleagues to put her back to work and the devotion of her many fans.

As producer, Joe Pasternak was considered a bit formulaic and predictable in his day and actually had intended to do another Garland/Rooney picture, only Mickey wasn't drawing moviegoers as he once did, so Kelly was chosen instead. The musical star had just finished the innovative and much acclaimed *On the Town* (1949) and was less than interested in joining a Pasternak project, having already turned down one of the producer's earlier ideas as being passe. But he agreed to do the film as a favor to Garland, about whom Kelly says in Pasternak's book *Easy the Hard Way*, "We loved her and we understood what she was going through, and I had every reason to be grateful for all the help she had given me."

What Garland was going through at this time was her well-known battle with various psychiatric medications - a spiraling condition that began as a teen when she was prescribed psychotropics to control her weight. Fresh out of rehab, MGM offered the star **Summer Stock** to get her back to work and, the hope was, on the road to full recovery. Also enlisted as Garland supporter and the film's director was Charles Walters. In Clive Hirschhorn's biography of Gene Kelly, Walters recalls the rigors of the picture and how it soon became clear that the actress was in no condition to work: "Gene took her left arm," he said, "and I took her right one, and between us, we literally tried to keep her on her feet. But it wasn't easy. Emotionally she was at her lowest ebb. Physically she was pretty unsure of herself as well. There were even times when we had to nail the scenery down and provide her with supports so she wouldn't fall over. Once, I remember, she had to walk up a few steps, and she couldn't do it. So I had to cheat the shot, and shoot the scene from a different angle. The whole experience was a ghastly, hideous nightmare which, happily, is a blur in my memory."

Garland, who was overweight when the picture began, was extremely insecure about her appearance in the film. Walter Plunkett, who designed the costumes for **Summer Stock** and was Garland's confidante during production, recalled in Hirschhorn's book that it wasn't easy to disguise the change in her figure. "We tried to make her look as thin as possible, but we weren't miracle workers, and we didn't succeed," he said. Plunkett was privy to Garland's most depressed moments on the musical. "She was paranoid about her inability to work," he said, "and felt she was letting Gene and Chuck Walters down terribly. And the more she tried to pull herself together, the more hysterical she became. It was heart-breaking to see."

The film's shooting schedule had been set from 1 p.m. to 7 p.m. to accommodate Garland's best hours, but as the production progressed, her behavior became more erratic until it was uncertain whether she would show on any given day. Pasternak began to pull his hair out after a few weeks and was soon ready to pull the plug as well. In Hirschhorn's book, he explains: "I'd had just as much as I could take," he said. The picture was costing the studio thousands of dollars in delays, and there was no point in carrying on. Naturally we all tried our best to help Judy, but it was no use. I told Mayer to cut his losses and forget about *Summer Stock*. I thought he'd welcome the idea. But surprisingly, he said no. "Judy Garland," he said, "has made this studio a fortune in the good days, and the least we can do," he went on, "is to give her one more chance. If you stop production now, it'll finish her." So we all sighed heavily and went back to work."

Several months after a marathon six months of shooting wrapped on **Summer Stock**, the filmmakers discovered they needed a final number for the film's grand finale. Garland had lost fifteen to twenty pounds by then and when she chose to perform "Get Happy" in the costume designed for a number in *Easter Parade* (1948) – fedora, black tights and jacket - she looked so slim compared to the rest of her scenes in **Summer Stock**, that many thought the footage was taken from the archives.

For all the drama behind the camera, **Summer Stock** was successfully completed and made it to theaters. In true Pasternak style, the premise was rather prosaic for 1950, but audiences still found it charming. Garland plays New England farm owner Jane Falbury, whose dilettante sister, Abigail (Gloria DeHaven), shows up unannounced with an entire summer stock troupe, who take over the barn for rehearsals. Jane and housekeeper Esme (Marjorie Main) are at first outraged, but once the city kids are roped into barnyard chores to earn their keep, all goes well. For a while. Then, Abigail has a temper tantrum and leaves troupe leader and boyfriend Joe D. Ross (Gene Kelly) in the unfortunate position of finding a new leading lady and, as it turns out, a new girlfriend. Jane ends up fitting the bill on both counts and her nerdy fiance, Orville (Eddie Bracken), who is mortified by the mere notion of theater, ends up with Abigail in a perfect ending, one that belies both the reality of the film's production, and the future of its leading lady.

Producer: Joe Pasternak

Director: Charles Walters

Screenplay: Sy Gomberg, George Wells

Art Direction: Cedric Gibbons, Jack Martin Smith

Cinematography: Robert Planck

Editing: Albert Akst

Music: Harold Arlen, Jack Brooks, Saul Chaplin, Mack Gordon, Ted Koehler Cast: Judy Garland (Jane Falbury), Gene Kelly (Joe D. Ross), Eddie Bracken (Orville Wingait), Gloria DeHaven (Abigail Falbury), Marjorie Main (Esme), Phil Silvers (Herb Blake), Ray Collins (Jasper G. Wingait), Hans Conried (Harrison I. Keath), Carleton Carpenter (Artie). C-110m. Closed captioning.

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