

Full-length 'A Star is Born' thrills movie buffs

By JEFF GROVE
Arts Editor

This is the year of old movies. Four films by Alfred Hitchcock — which had long been out of circulation — have been screened to crowds of ecstatic movie buffs. But an even bigger event for film fans comes with the release of George Cukor's 1954 classic *A Star Is Born*. This is not the same *A Star Is Born*, however, that makes the rounds on late-night television and in revival houses. The picture as Cukor made it ran 181 minutes, and the film received glowing reviews. But theater managers complained to the Warner Bros. studio that they were losing money because they could only run the film twice a day. So the studio cut the picture — over Cukor's protests — to 154 minutes. This truncated version, which Cukor could never bear to watch, is what audiences have seen for 29 years.

Review

Thanks to the diligent work of film preservationist Ron Haver (see related story this page), almost all of the film has been recovered and pieced together. Film fans who always loved the film will love it even more now, and cynical detractors will discover that the plot and character motivations they've always missed are now there. The film finally can be judged in its entirety for what it is — a thrilling but somewhat flawed backstage musical.

The story, originally filmed in 1937 and remade in 1954, is, of course, trite: a star, on the way down in his

career, meets and molds a star on her way to the top, and their meeting leads to a marriage doomed by his self-destructive urges. The telling of the story, not its content, makes it interesting. This time out, the lead roles of Norman Maine and Esther Blodgett were taken by James Mason and Judy Garland.

A Star Is Born was Garland's first film in four years. MGM had fired her for unreliability that resulted from her real and imagined nervous conditions. After a divorce and a suicide attempt, she married impresario Sid Luft, who produced the film and nursed Garland through its production. It is fortunate that he did, for this is Garland's best screen work aside from *Judgment at Nuremberg*. Her emotional scenes are admirably restrained and lack the hysterics to which she resorted so often in her early films.

Mason is every bit her equal. Though he does not have as much dialogue to contend with as Garland, Mason is called on to provide much more in the way of facial expressions. A master of movement, he changes the whole mood of some scenes with the tiniest gesture. His ordeal in a night court sequence is absolutely harrowing.

There are fine supporting performances, too, from Charles Bickford as studio exec Oliver Niles, Jack Carson as Libby, the nasty studio P.R. man, and Tom Noonan as Esther's old pal Danny McGuire.

If Moss Hart's script for this adaptation of the story is not as caustic in its observation of the Hollywood scene as the 1937 original, which included the acid contributions of Dorothy Parker, it gains in having more in-depth characterizations. Oliver is no longer a stereotypical

but a human with many faults. Making Libby openly hostile to Norman adds sorely needed conflict to the film. And Esther's longing for stardom is brilliantly outlined in a scene with Danny which, inexplicably was among the footage deleted in 1954.

The musical score, too, is a joy. Ira Gershwin's talents as a lyricist are well-known. Composer Harold Arlen is perhaps a lesser-known name, but his songs are widely popular. He contributed songs to the film version of *Cabin in the Sky* and wrote scores for many Broadway musicals. But writing for Judy Garland was nothing new to him; 15 years before *A Star Is Born* he composed the Oscar-winning score for *The Wizard of Oz*. The songs for *A Star Is Born* glitter with his characteristic beauty of melody, with the rousing "Lose That Long Face" and the haunting torch song "The Man That Got Away" — both brilliantly sung by Garland — leading the way, despite the fact that the studio found them "expensive."

The CinemaScope photography adds much to the film's composition, and Cukor's direction is among his finest work. The story is carefully, intricately worked out — a feeling that the cut version of the film robbed.

Film buffs owe a great deal of gratitude to all the forces who made the film's restoration possible. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, The American Film Institute, Warner Bros. and Eastman Kodak have done a service in restoring the greatness of one of America's film treasures.

Projectionist restored 1954 Cukor classic

By JEFF GROVE
Arts Editor

It was a classic case of a Hollywood studio's greed. Simply for reasons of profit, Warner Bros. in 1954 unceremoniously excised 27 minutes of George Cukor's remake of the 1937 classic *A Star Is Born*. Cukor and star Judy Garland refused to view the cut version, claiming that it destroyed the artistic heart of the film.

Matters might have rested there — with those 27 minutes lost forever — if Ron Haver, a projectionist at the American Film Institute, had not been screening all of Cukor's films in 1971 to help in the writing of a biography of the director. Haver had seen the film in its early release, and although the film enchanted him, he was disappointed by the deletion of crucial dramatic and musical scenes he had read about. He thought the time was right to dig up the complete film, but neither Cukor nor Warner had a com-

plete print.

Two years later, while in charge of a Cukor retrospective, Haver compiled a brochure to accompany *A Star Is Born*, explaining through printed dialogue and still photographs exactly what had been cut from the film. A detective story began there, for the brochure interested Warners in finding and restoring the missing segments. Haver played Sherlock Holmes in the story. He chronicled his search for the missing footage in a recent article in *American Film*.

"In late spring 1982, I began my search on the East Coast at the old, meticulously maintained Vitaphone storage facilities in Brooklyn, owned by Warners since the late '20s," Haver wrote. Finding nothing useful, he headed for Hollywood, where a friend had turned up the complete 181-minute soundtrack but no footage.

Left in the hands of an old studio editor, Haver asked what would have been done with the deleted portions of

the film. "In those days," he (the editor) said, "we'd keep it for six months, then junk it." Was it possible that some of it might not have been junked? "Possible, but not likely."

But the editor let Haver pick through old cans of *A Star Is Born* material anyway. "I wound through the film," Haver wrote, "squinting at the 35mm images, looking for something that was familiar to me from the stills of the missing sequences." Suddenly, Haver realized he was staring at a scene of Judy Garland singing "Here's What I'm Here For," followed by a scene of James Mason proposing marriage to her. Both were supposed to have been deleted from the film.

"I must have let out a loud yelp," Haver wrote, "because (the editor) came running back into the office to see if something had happened to me." From the editing vaults the trail led to the studio's stock footage library, where im-

portant scenes from early in the film were recovered in whole or in part. Among the studio's negatives in storage he recovered a sequence featuring the large production number "Lose That Long Face."

In all, Haver recovered 20 minutes of usable film. Sepia-tinted stills were carefully blended in for the remaining seven minutes, for which there existed sound but no pictures.

The only disappointment came when Cukor died the day before he was to view test footage involving the inserted stills.

But Haver pressed on, seeing his work as a tribute to Cukor. The film premiered in New York in its full-length version on July 7, and Haver said he was proud of himself and his colleagues for helping to restore the film to what he called "the overwhelming theatrical experience that it will once again prove to be."


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THE Daily Crossword by Nancy Mc Carthy

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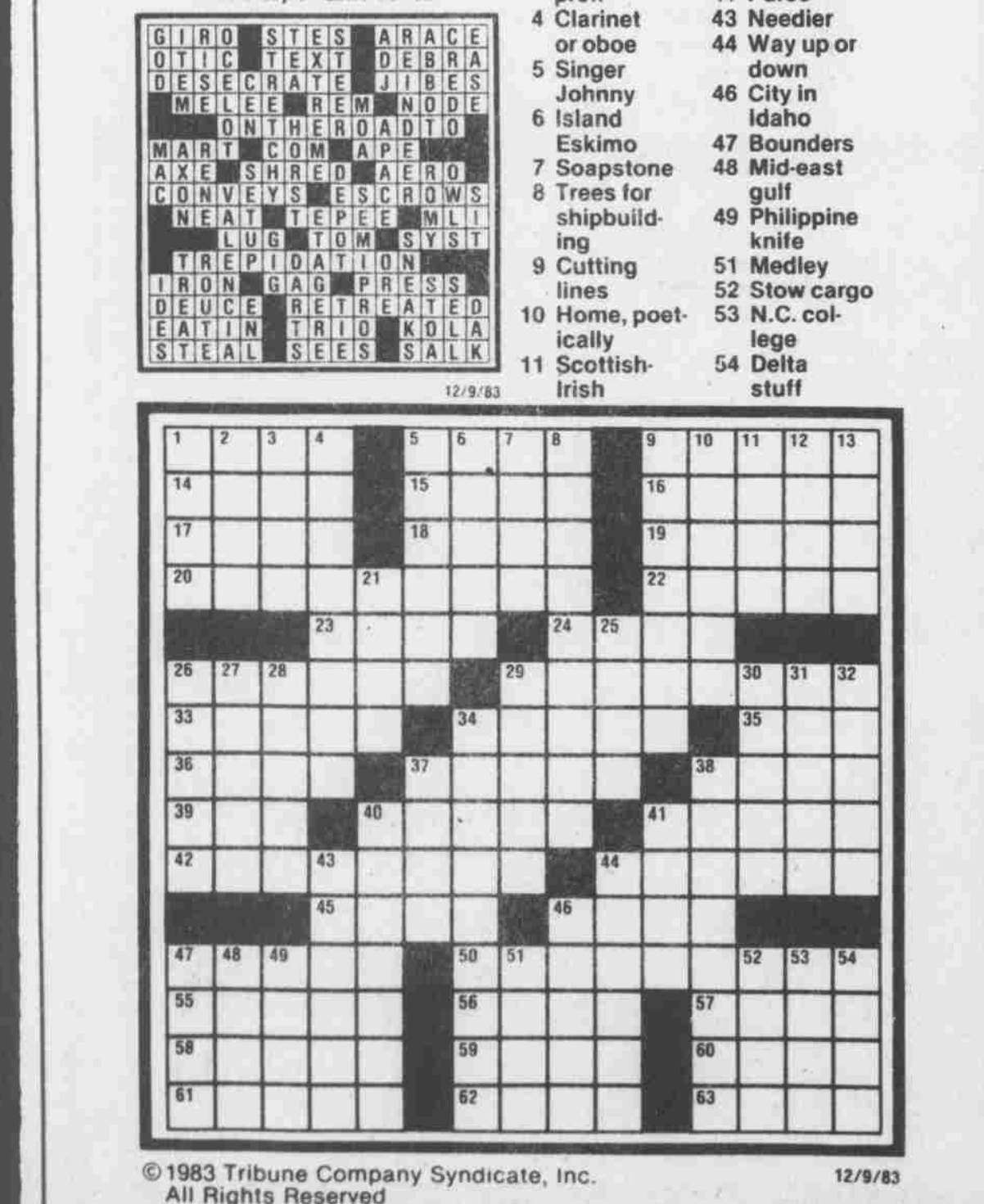
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Yesterday's Puzzle Solved:

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Wednesday (Dec. 21) 8 a.m. - 5 p.m.

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