



CHRISTMAS FILMS

Meet Me in St. Louis

The closer you look at most famous Hollywood productions, the harder it is to see how they turned out all right – let alone to believe that anyone was in charge. Just as on any set the crew trusts that the film will go through the camera without jamming, so you come to credit a kind of providence ensuring that the big mess will get finished. Once it's done, you've only the public, and they're so daft you never know whether they'll call the picture un-ironed (or unwashed) laundry or smooth as silk. But with *Meet Me in St. Louis* just about everyone involved reckoned it was an unlikely project from the start. The only way you could have faith in it was to tell yourself that Arthur Freed was a man of immense taste and refinement. End of joke. Arthur Freed might have been the production chief on Metro musicals, with more talent at his disposal than any executive had ever seen. But he was the proverbial slob and arse-kisser. So trust Arthur! Except that Arthur was always asking Mr Mayer, 'Whaddya you think, boss?' And LB didn't think this one would fly.

Look at it cold on paper, and he had his reasons. Sally Benson's charming sketches of family life in turn-of-the-century St. Louis had played very well in the *New Yorker* as nostalgia. And in 1943 there were obvious advantages to cultivating fondness for Americana and the good old days. To be charitable, the material had something of Louisa May Alcott strained through a Midwestern catsup that would have erred, heavily, on the side of sweetness. But all that really happened in those pieces was that the family did eventually leave St. Louis for New York. It wasn't enough. There wasn't a story. And Louis B. Mayer had some notion in his head that even a musical needed a story. So he backed Judy Garland when she said it was high time for her to stop playing teenagers and be grown up. (And anyway Judy could see as well as anyone that the whole Halloween sequence was just a vehicle for that scene-stealing little Margaret O'Brien, one of her onscreen sisters, while everyone knew that Mr Freed favoured Lucille Bremer, who would be the other sister Rose, so how would you like to be Judy squeezed between the two?) But then something changed Mr Mayer's mind. And since no one dared contemplate the inner mind of Mr Mayer, it wasn't easy to guess what it had been. But it was wartime and people have a habit of saying that everything goes crazy then – and maybe it does, or maybe it's just the excuse we grab at.

There was always enough dementedness looking for excuses. For instance, late in 1943 Judy was 21. She was married still, to musical arranger David Rose, but she wasn't involved with him. In fact, she was about to be as gracefully dropped as Joe Mankiewicz could manage from the affair he and Judy had been having. This was to coincide with Joe's wife Rosa getting home from the psychiatric clinic. And it was in a spirit of therapeutic optimism that Joe sought to arrange for Judy to have some sessions with a good shrink. (The doctor grew bored with her because she didn't always turn up, and when she did she told him streams of lies about herself.) Well, you're going to say, artists are like that. But Joe hadn't actually directed a picture yet. He was merely a writer and a producer, a brother and very ambitious and horny. You see, it's *people* who are like that. So he was urging Judy to be

more mature so that he might move on with a clear conscience from screwing a disturbed kid. Mr Mayer was like that too, and here we come to his mind.

Mr Mayer had been married to his Margaret since 1904. This had been in Boston, though Mayer then was not long out of Canada and St. Johns, New Brunswick. Before that he was from somewhere in the Ukraine. Ahead of Boston, he faced Los Angeles. He shared the basic life of the Smith family in St. Louis in that he had kept moving on, even if the last big city he had in mind would depend for its size on his success. By then he had become a titan in the new picture business, a man who knew presidents and movie stars, who presided over the dreams sold to the public and the niceties of 'good-looking' that got some people on the screen and kept others off.

But as he got larger, in the public's imagination and his own mind, Margaret stayed the same – except that she broke down gradually, having to see her Louis reconcile his power, his need and his opportunity to be an emperor with his wish to preserve domestic propriety and familial white lies in front of her and their two daughters. Some people asked why LB was always either angry or in tears. Some said he was made that way. Others said it was the battle going on in him: a way for him to manipulate and destroy the feeble beautiful creatures he owned, while thinking well of himself. And if you haven't picked up yet on that seething dynamic behind the American movie... well, you could start now.

LB owned the stars. He pawed them, he sat them on his knee and lectured them, he scolded and punished, he touched them in intimate places. He was their father figure. He had, in his time, felt Judy's breasts – after all, as her proprietor, he needed to estimate the difficulty the studio would have in keeping her young. There had been several foolishly sly but prudish affairs with starlets – where the girl's mother came along too, to keep it 'decent'. But by 1943, and this is crucial, I think, LB was ready to divorce Margaret and pick up with the best young flesh he could find. I know, it's not exactly nice; and certainly not as nice as *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Indeed, it's rather as if Esther (Judy) in that Smith family took up not with the boy next door but with a salesman from out-of-town, older than her parents, a divorced man, but a spellbinder. (That's for the remake.)

To be precise, in 1943 and 1944, Mr Mayer began going out with 20-year-old dancer Ann Miller, and he moved out of the family house he shared with Margaret into a new home for himself. That was a startling and extraordinary break, and if you feel that the general slippery state of war is hardly reason enough, I'd agree. But by late 1943 Mr Mayer knew that David O. Selznick was deeply enough involved with Jennifer Jones to break up her marriage to Robert Walker. Which meant that LB's daughter Irene (Mrs Selznick) – the one person on earth he was afraid of – faced her own divorce and humiliation. So LB was a little freer in her eyes. Such are the family lives that fertilise the exquisite happiness of *Meet Me in St. Louis*. (Should the remake also have the father – Leon Ames – keeping a mistress, a waitress, in the poorer part of town? And the waitress knows Esther's beau?)

Anyway, some time in the last quarter of 1943 Mr Mayer gave the go-ahead to *Meet Me in St. Louis*. George Cukor was to have directed, but he was called up. So LB told Arthur Freed and Vincente Minnelli that they could do their picture. They had been its believers all along, though it's hard to think that Freed and Minnelli ever knew or believed in the same things. Minnelli was already as famous for being halting verbally as he was for the coherence of his

Broadway shows. He told Garland that the picture could be 'magic', but as they started to shoot (in December 1943) he had to order Judy not to be so smart-ass. She was mocking her own lines and the sweet sisterly relationship she was meant to have with Lucille Bremer. Judy wasn't playing it straight. And Judy groaned because the material was juvenile, after all, and she knew she had to grow up. But she did her best because she was smart enough to see that Vincente and a new make-up person Dottie Ponedel were making her look... well, beautiful. Was it the amber wig? Was it the way her mouth had been made fuller? Or was it a matter of being photographed with love? Whatever that means.

The three films Judy made before this were *Presenting Lily Mars*, *Thousands Cheer* and *Girl Crazy* – and there's no doubt that she looks better in *St. Louis*. She looks older, older than Esther ought to be. But the real secret to that, I think, or the magic, is that the story gives her the chance to be an older sister to Tootie. There's no hint that Garland and Margaret O'Brien got on personally – O'Brien only turned seven during the shoot, and she was fiercely guarded by her mother. But the sentiment of the film turns on Tootie. Garland's suspicion that the kid was the heart of the mood was correct. What she didn't see or guess was how kind that could be for her.

You could say that *Meet Me in St. Louis* is all about the older Smith girls finding their beaux – as if the traps and travails of St. Louis in 1904 could be solved by marriage at 19 to the first guy who came along, even if he was Tom Drake, Esther's boy next door. (In real life Judy tried to fall for Drake – as if on Joe's advice. But when Judy and Tom went to bed it emerged that Drake was gay.) But the burning core of the film, its intensity, is Tootie's simple wish to be older, to be the centre of attention, to be everything. And it's the wisdom of the script (by Fred Finklehoffe and Irving Brecher) that the film follows Tootie's progress: from the little girl who comes downstairs to join Esther in 'Under the Bamboo Tree', to the ecstatic 'most horrible' at Halloween, to the pent-up Bette Davis who listens to Esther sing 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' and then slaughters the snowmen in the garden at 5135 Kensington Avenue.

Suppose that Minnelli saw or felt that line, and then suppose that he held to it against every problem. This was far from a happy set. Sixteen days were lost completely due to illness. Mary Astor (the girls' mother) had troubles, Margaret O'Brien was whisked back East. Judy fretted over this and that – not just Drake, but minor illnesses, sleeping late, the simple urge to be difficult and the confused reaction of her mind and body to the recipe of uppers and downers her mother and the studio had instituted. She even began to soften in her feelings towards Minnelli.

You can almost hear her laughing at herself, because of course she knew the talk that he was gay. But he liked her. He had made her look like a lovely woman. And he had put her up there on screen caring for someone else. Years later, in her other great performance, she would have Norman Maine to care for. Now don't get sentimental here. No one ever said that Judy Garland was anyone you'd want to have taking care of you in life. But on the screen... Watching over Tootie (and ignoring Margaret O'Brien) and singing 'Merry Little Christmas' like a mother, and in a way that releases the yearning in Tootie (the little conservative tyrant) so that the father hears her grief and smothers his own ambition and says why, surely, the Smiths must stay home in St. Louis 'till we rot'. This was a picture that played in the last winter of the

war, when in their dreams at least, so many people only wanted to get home and find that it was the same, and hadn't betrayed them.

So *Meet Me in St. Louis* got done, and Judy and Vincente somehow persuaded themselves that the screen's light could be theirs too. So they got married, in June 1945. As for the picture, which has lasted so much longer, it cost \$1.7 million (a lot – Metro built a whole block of St. Louis) and made \$7.5 million on its first run, a studio record after *Gone with the Wind*. So LB was right again. But he was always right in those days, or lucky enough to have that reputation.

David Thomson, *Sight and Sound*, December 2001

MEET ME IN ST. LOUIS

Director: Vincente Minnelli

Production Companies: Loew's Incorporated, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Producer: Arthur Freed

Screenplay: Irving Brecher, Fred F. Finklehoffe

Based on the novel by: Sally Benson

Director of Photography: George Folsey

Technicolor Colour Director: Natalie Kalmus

Film Editor: Albert Akst

Art Directors: Cedric Gibbons, Lemuel Ayers, Jack Martin Smith

Set Decorator: Edwin B. Willis

Associate: Paul Huldschinsky

Costume Designer: Sharaff

Costume Supervisor: Irene

Make-up Created by: Jack Dawn

Music Director: Georgie Stoll

Orchestrations: Conrad Salinger

Dance Director: Charles Walters

Recording Director: Douglas Shearer

uncredited

Unit Manager: Dave Friedman

Assistant Directors: J.E. Jennings, Wallace Worsley

Associate Technicolor Colour Director: Henri Jaffa

2nd Camera: Robert Bronner

Matte Paintings Camera: Mark H. Davis

Miniature/Transparency Projection Shots: A. Arnold Gillespie

Matte Paintings: Warren Newcombe

Miniatures Assistant: Donald Jahraus

Music Adaptation: Roger Edens

Music Mixers: Mike McLaughlin, Herbert Stahlberg

Unit Mixer: Joe Edmondson

Re-recording/Effects Mixers: Standish J. Lambert, Frank Mackenzie,

Robert Shirley, Newell Sparks, William Steinkamp, Michael Steinore,

John A. Williams

Voice Doubles for Mary Astor: Rose Paidar, Eileen Wilson

Cast

Judy Garland (*Esther Smith*)

Margaret O'Brien (*'Tootie' Smith*)

Mary Astor (*Mrs Anna Smith*)

Lucille Bremer (*Rose Smith*)

Leon Ames (*Mr Alzonzo 'Lon' Smith*)

Tom Drake (*John Truett*)

Marjorie Main (*Katie, the maid*)

Harry Davenport (*Grandpa Prophater*)

June Lockhart (*Lucille Ballard*)

Henry Daniels Jr (*Lon Smith Jr*)

Joan Carroll (*Agnes Smith*)

Hugh Marlowe (*Colonel Daryl*)

Robert Sully (*Warren Sheffield*)

Chill Wills (*Mr Neely*)

uncredited

Donald Curtis (*Dr Girard*)

Mary Jo Ellis (*Ida Boothby*)

Ken Wilson (*Quentin*)

Robert Emmett O'Connor (*motorman*)

Darryl Hickman (*Johnny Tevis*)

Dr Leonard Walker (*conductor*)

Victor Kilian (*baggage man*)

John Phipps (*mailman*)

Sam Harris (*Mr March*)

Mayo Newhall (*Mr Braukoff*)

Belle Mitchell (*Mrs Braukoff*)

Sidney Barnes (*Hugo Borvis*)

Myron Tobias (*George*)

Victor Cox (*driver*)

Kenneth Donner, Buddy Gorman, Joe Cobb (*Clinton Badgers*)

Helen Gilbert (*girl on trolley*)

Music Maids

Seckler Group

USA 1944©

113 mins

CHRISTMAS FILMS

The Bishop's Wife Sat 17 Dec 11:50; Mon 19 Dec 18:10; Wed 21 Dec 18:05

The Apartment Wed 21 Dec 17:55; Fri 23 Dec 14:30; Tue 27 Dec 12:00

It's a Wonderful Life Sun 18 Dec 18:10; Tue 20 Dec 18:10; Thu 22 Dec 14:30 Fri 23 Dec 18:10

Tangerine Tue 20 Dec 18:20

Scrooge Wed 21 Dec 14:30

Scrooged Thu 22 Dec 20:30

Carol Sat 17 Dec 20:45; Tue 20 Dec 20:40

Tokyo Godfathers (Tokyo goddofazazu)

Sat 17 Dec 20:50; Fri 23 Dec 21:00

Meet Me in St. Louis Sun 18 Dec 12:15; Mon 19 Dec 14:30; Tue 20 Dec 14:30; Thu 22 Dec 18:05

Gremlins Tue 20 Dec 20:30; Thu 22 Dec 18:10

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