

Shirley Temple & Hollywood's Season of Fantasy



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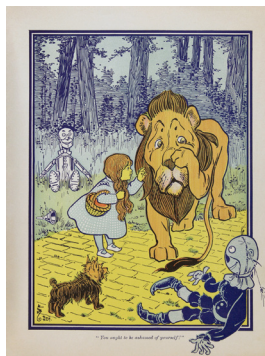
By Woolsey Ackerman

1939 is considered Hollywood's golden year. Between 1938 and 1940, America experienced a period of newfound hope and prosperity. The Great Depression was ending, and the world came together for the World's Fair in New York. With the staggering success of Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in late 1937, major studios set about finding classic fantasy stories they could produce.

During these years, Santa Monica-born Shirley Temple reigned as the number one box office star. Her film *The Little Princess*, released in 1939,

was a huge success. While not an overall fantasy, it was based on a classic children's book and contained a memorable musical dream sequence.

In production at the time were several true fantasies. At MGM, production began on what would become the ultimate fantasy film classic, *The Wizard of Oz*. Though Temple was briefly considered for *Oz* because of her box office power, the script was being written for Judy Garland from the start. 20th Century Fox had no intention of ever loaning out Shirley Temple and the creative staff at MGM was set on Garland.



As word of Oz spread, 20th Century Fox's Darryl F. Zanuck took an interest in the new fantasy trend. He selected the 1908 play *The Blue Bird* by Belgian playwright and



poet Maurice Maeterlinck as the next vehicle for Shirley Temple. An allegorical tale of a child's search for happiness, *The Blue Bird* was filmed



in Technicolor, and though Zanuck argued against them, the similarities to Oz were striking.



The Blue Bird stills courtesy the Collection of Dave DeCaro

The Wizard of Oz was released in August 1939, playing to packed houses during the summer months of the World's Fair. Though *The Blue Bird* was ready for previews a short time later, Zanuck postponed the film's Christmas release. A large-scale advertising campaign was put in place, and the film premiered in 1940. Despite these efforts and favorable reviews, *The Blue Bird* failed to make money and was considered a failure. Soon after the film's release, the studio ended Temple's contract.

Also ending was the reign of Ideal's Shirley Temple doll as the country's best-selling toy. By the time *The Blue Bird* went in production, sales



The Blue Bird doll, Courtesy Woolsey Ackerman

from Shirley dolls were down considerably. Today only a few *Blue Bird* dolls exist. These, dressed in two or three variations on Temple's

film costume, were likely samples or store exclusives.

Temple wrote of the film in her 1988 autobiography, "Thirty years later our *Blue Bird* would receive critical acclaim as a film classic, but in the increasingly realistic time of 1940, it had to wait." With the advent of World War II, Hollywood's brief dalliance with the fantasy genre ended. The world was grounded in a harsh new reality, and films followed suit. There would be no fantasy films for many years to come.



Thank you to Terri Decker, Woolsey Ackerman, Dave DeCaro, Melissa Tonnessen, and Shirley's Army!
