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**Edna Mae and the Child Star:
The Career of Deanna Durbin**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts
in Film Studies

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Abstract

One of the most popular female child stars of the 1930s, Durbin's 12-year career offers an interesting case study in the ways star personas are constructed, and ultimately how the persona affects career longevity. The objective of this thesis is to examine the career of Deanna Durbin in order to identify the possible reasons for her unsuccessful transition from child star to adult star, moreover to identify reasons why she not only ended her career when she did but also why she ended it without a complete explanation. This study will involve an examination of the historical aspects of her star persona in the context of the relationship between the star phenomenon and the film industry. In turn, this study will involve answering questions related to Durbin's persona and her career. For example, what were the methods used by the film industry during the 1930s to the mid 1940s to construct screen personas? A brief examination of the star personas will provide useful generalizations about the workings of the industry as a whole. The study will focus on the strategies of Universal studios in casting her in the roles they did and how these early roles construct a distinctive image or persona for Deanna Durbin. What were the plot configurations of the films that developed the "formula" for her success? What were the features of that formula and how does the formula change or is abandoned across time and in what films? What were the features of the Deanna Durbin persona and what was the relationship between that persona and the "formula" of her films? How was the construction of the Durbin persona consolidated through a conjunction of publicity and the reception of her early films? Finally, what was the relationship between her public life and her private life, and how did events in her personal life affect her star persona?

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For Mom, Dad, Trisha
and Casey – the
most important people
in my life.

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Introduction

The star challenges analysis in the way it crosses disciplinary boundaries: a product of mass culture, but retaining theatrical concerns with acting, performance and art; an industrial marketing device, but a signifying element in films; a social sign, carrying cultural meanings and ideological values, which expresses the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification; an emblem of national celebrity, founded on the body, fashion and personal style; a product of capitalism and the ideology of individualism, yet a site of contest by marginalized groups; a figure consumed for his or her personal life, who competes for allegiance with statesmen and politicians.¹

Christine Gledhill's multi-faceted view of the star offers a beginning point for both an examination of the nature of stardom and a historical study of the career of individual stars. She locates the star between the seemingly contradictory demands of the star as product of an industry and the star as an individual. The star is a product of mass culture, an industrial marketing device, a social sign carrying cultural meanings and ideological values, an emblem of national celebrity, a product of capitalism and the ideology of individualism. Yet at the same time the star is founded on performance, on body, fashion and personal style — a figure which expresses the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification of the audience, a figure consumed for his or her personal life.

The film star, then, is an imaginary personality or star persona bound into aspects of nation, culture and ideology, an imaginary personality caught between the demands of the industry, the desires of individual personality, and the reception of the star's films by

¹ Christine Gledhill, ed., *Stardom: The Industry of desire* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. xiii.

both the media and the star's fans. To explain how these various demands and forces shape and even ultimately determine the life of a star, the star's persona, and the career of the star is both a historical undertaking and a matter of speculation based on the available evidence, particularly when a star chooses to end a successful career prematurely and without a full explanation. At one time Deanna Durbin was one of the most successful female stars in Hollywood only to retire after just 21 feature films.² In 1950 she quit films and left Hollywood without giving a complete reason for her decision and went to live in France. Though for many she remains a star, striving for a normal life after retirement, Durbin has given few reasons for her departure or reveal her motivations despite only one interview since that time.

Undoubtedly, Deanna Durbin was a star. She was one of the most celebrated film stars of the thirties and forties, but aspects of her star persona began to interfere with her career as an adult and also with her inner self. In terms of her adult career she was unable to make the transition from the comedy-musicals of her adolescence to adult melodramas. One reason for this could be found within the popular media. Apart from various attempts to continue the Durbin formula of her early films, magazine and newspaper articles worked to sustain the youthful and innocent persona found in these films. The persona developed through her films and by the Universal publicity department was no different from the person the public perceived her to be. The attempts to make the transition to more adult roles in her later films were frustrating for her fans and also for Deanna when these films did not enjoy popular success.

² These 21 films were made over a twelve-year span.

The objective of this thesis, then, is to examine the career of Deanna Durbin in order to identify the possible reasons why she not only ended her career when she did but also why she ended it without a complete explanation. This study will involve an examination of the historical aspects of her star persona in the context of the relationship between the star phenomenon and the film industry. What were the methods used by the film industry during the 1930s to the mid 1940s to construct screen personas? A brief examination of the star personas will provide useful generalizations about the workings of the industry as a whole. This will lead, in turn, to an examination of the role of Universal Pictures, Deanna's studio, thus providing a framework for understanding and categorizing Deanna's films. What were the strategies of the studio in casting her in the roles they did? How did these early roles construct a distinctive image or persona for Deanna Durbin? What were the plot configurations of the films that developed the "formula" for her success? What were the features of that formula and how does the formula change or is abandoned across time and in what films? What were the features of the Deanna Durbin persona and what was the relationship between that persona and the "formula" of her films? How was the construction of the Durbin persona consolidated through a conjunction of publicity and the reception of her early films? Finally, what was the relationship between her public life and her private life, and how did events in her personal life affect her star persona?

Considered by many to be one of the most profitable and important female child stars of the 1930s, Deanna Durbin's career did not happen by chance. In fact, from the beginning of her career in MGM's *Every Sunday* (1936), Universal Pictures optioned

Deanna when she was dropped from MGM and set out to create a profitable star.

Considering that Universal was “nearly bankrupt” during the early 1930s,³ the studio recognized Deanna’s overwhelming popularity with audiences upon the release of her first feature *Three Smart Girls* (1936) and continued to use the formula throughout most of the films in which Deanna starred. Therefore, the formula established in Deanna’s early films can be examined in relation to how Universal Pictures created and marketed the star/star-personas of its most popular performers.

A phenomenon in itself, the studio-system reflected the economic ideology of early 20th century America. As Ronald Davis explains,

The nation’s materialism, devotion to profit and social advancement, belief in dynamic leadership, technological know-how, practical invention, and expanding markets all emerged as goals and values within the old studios. At its height the movie industry mirrored the corporate ideology that catapulted the United States into economic prominence.⁴

Moreover the capitalistic notions of production have a strong influence on movie production in Hollywood. Issues concerning star-persona and construction, along with genre issues, particularly the idea of a formula for either a type of film or for a star, are wedded to the studio-system and its method of production. Arguably star persona can be tied into questions of genre, in so far as the star’s persona can become wedded to a specific genre. In Deanna Durbin’s case her persona was tied to musical comedy films and, in fact, she acted in a large number of these films in a short period of time. Quite

³ Ronald L. Davis, *The Glamour Factory: Inside Hollywood’s Big Studio System* (Dallas: SMU Press, 1993), p. 54.

⁴ Davis, *The Glamour Factory*, p. ix.

naturally her age and talent lent itself well to the styling of the musical comedy. Yet these were inevitably limiting factors in the growth and development of her career. These limiting factors became most evident when the studio wanted her to make only a specific type of film as she matured. This raises questions concerning the extent economics and the studio's desire to repeat an initially successful formula played a key role in the projects the studio chose for her and how the success of her early films had an adverse affect on her later career. When she tried to make films outside this genre/style, Robert Siodmak's *Christmas Holiday* (1944) for example, her critical and box-office success was limited. The failure of these films to meet audience expectations tied to both her star persona and the formula of her early films can be measured by their critical reception and their lack of box-office success. Consequently, understanding the studio's role in the construction of a star persona is important in the study of her career because insight into the commodification of stars in terms of selling an image becomes an important factor in her later films.

In addition, the publicity for her films and their reception are central to understanding the continuing viability of a star persona. Newspaper advertisements and reviews of the era provide evidence of a possible motive or motives for her departure from films. Since this historical study examines Deanna Durbin's career through the construction of her persona by the studio and how this constructed persona affected her ability (or inability) to make successful films, a study of the advertisements for various films and film reviews could provide answers to questions of type-casting and how box-office success or failure dictated the types of films in which the studio would cast her.

This thesis will argue that aspects of Deanna Durbin's career, particularly her star persona and the very "formula" that made her a success, help to explain choices she made later in her career and kept her from making a successful transition from a child star to an adult star. The thesis will focus on four main periods in Deanna Durbin's career.

The first chapter will focus on her early career. *Every Sunday* and *Three Smart Girls* represent the creation of the "Durbin formula." This formula will be the guiding force in her career. In addition, I will examine the influence of some key figures in her personal and professional life who were instrumental in devising the formula. The relationship between success and the formula for Deanna's success will be examined in terms of the phenomenon of the child star. The child star is an important niche within stardom and the film industry; and is used to sell films to the "8-80" age range. Specifically, the phenomenon of child star begins to occur during the era of the early 1920s and continues into the 1930s, which is the focus of my thesis, with female child stars such as Shirley Temple, Deanna Durbin, and Judy Garland.⁵ The female child star persona sold youthfulness, innocence, and precociousness to film audiences. Deanna Durbin's youthfulness is a product of her singing talent as a soprano. Unlike Garland, whose youthful energy is derived from her abilities as a vaudevillian, Durbin's youthful vitality is borne from her spirited operatic performances. High culture is made more accessible via the Durbin character's youthful determination and the amazing range of her singing ability. Temple's youthfulness can be explained, in part, in her ability to

⁵ Although there were many successful male child stars during this era, my thesis will focus on the life and career of Deanna Durbin in the context of female child stars.

perform and cute appearance with her dimples, bright eyes and curly, springy hair.

Durbin's youthfulness is also tied to freshness, a playfulness of spirit, and a lack of self-consciousness. If American families were looking to the screen for the ideal teenage daughter, the early films of Deanna Durbin offered such a figure. However the static nature of the child star persona limited these stars to making films in a specific genre; the cinematic limitations these stars faced with aging became problematic because audiences often had trouble adapting to any marked change in persona or style. As William Everson claims about audience reaction to Deanna's first grown-up film *First Love* (1939) "it was a saddening reminder that Deanna had to grow up, and the film was received with reservations."⁶ Unfortunately for most female child stars the inability to shift from child to adult films proved to be their career downfall. In the following chapters I will examine the dichotomy between the illusion and reality of Deanna Durbin's screen persona and how the idealization/commodification of her childhood became a stereotype that deadlocked her later career efforts.

The second chapter will examine Deanna Durbin's career at the height of her fame, before she made the transition into more mature and glamorous roles. *100 Men and a Girl* (1937), *That Certain Age* (1938) and *Three Smart Girls Grow Up* (1939) will be examined in relation to the established formula of her early films. Because she grew up both in and in relation to the studio, it is at this point that her personal life begins to assume an increasing role in relation to her career. This chapter will deal with some of the major events in her life at this time. An analysis of different forms of media publicity

⁶ William K. Everson, "The Career of Deanna Durbin," *Films in Review* XXVII, no.9 (1976): 522.

such as advertisements and reviews of her films will illustrate how the studio wanted the public and the critics to perceive the Durbin persona as she made the transition from girl to woman. The audiences' and critics' need for the Deanna Durbin persona to remain young and childlike created problems for Durbin's career.

The third chapter will discuss the transitional period in her career, 1939 to 1941. An examination of this period is essential in order to explain the reception of her films in the later years of her career. It is also important here to identify the types of films she worked on at this time and how her star persona affected the roles offered to her. Analysis of her transitional films *First Love* and *Nice Girl?* (1941) will illustrate the shift in Deanna Durbin's career. Biographical information from Deanna Durbin's private life clashes increasingly with the persona set forth in advertisements and reviews that originated with the Durbin formula and with the way the studio marketed the Durbin persona and her films.

The fourth chapter will focus on the end of Durbin's career, 1941-1946, in terms of how her films differ from her established formula in *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday* (1943) and how they adapt to the formula in *It Started with Eve* (1941). *Christmas Holiday* marks a complete departure from her persona and formula. Robert Siodmak's *Christmas Holiday* will be discussed in the context of critical and audience reception, how those involved with Durbin in the industry felt about this role, and how the opinions of Durbin herself affected the success of this film. *Christmas Holiday* will also be placed in the context of how the studio planned to shift Durbin's roles away from those of her early years and the degree to which this plan was successful or unsuccessful.

Chapter 1: Initial Success

With the overwhelming success of her first film, Deanna Durbin made the transition from child actor to star. During the 1930s Deanna became one of the most celebrated young stars in Hollywood and her success, in part, dictated the types of roles offered to her. In fact, *Three Smart Girls* was so successful that the plot of the film and her character would become templates for her later films. This chapter will examine various aspects of stardom and the subcategory of star Deanna became, namely the child star. In the course of the chapter, the focus will shift from the studio system and the construction and function of the child star to an examination of Deanna Durbin's early films: *Every Sunday* and *Three Smart Girls*. The chapter will conclude with an examination of the plot structure of *Three Smart Girls* and a brief outline of the features of the character established by Deanna that formed the basis for her star persona.

Stardom

Edgar Morin states in his book *The Stars*, "The star . . . is always recognized and recognizable. Her archetypal personality always transcends her attitude and roles."¹ Morin's account of a star is rooted in the idea of a distinct and fixed identity that is the foundation of the star persona that precedes and takes precedence over — in the mind of the audience and critic — both the star's own personal attitudes and film roles. He also

¹ Edgar Morin, *The Stars*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 56.

stresses "The star's personal life must be public . . . There is no hiding place for the star."² Before any exploration of the how and why a film star's persona is constructed, emphasis must be placed on the notion that a star persona is a public image disseminated by films, advertisements and publicity, popular media, fan clubs and networks. This public image is invariably quite different from a star's private life or inner self. The dichotomy between public and private spheres is very difficult for many stars to deal with. As Morin argues, "If a star dares protest, bitter echoes creep into magazine articles, fans become indignant. She is a captive of her fame."³ In the case of Deanna Durbin, instead of protesting she chose to leave films altogether. A captive of her fame, she moved to France where she began to live a normal life, a life apart from what Morin describes as the heroes and heroines, Gods and Goddesses of Hollywood. In essence, she became "mortal" again.

Stardom can be examined separately from the studio system. Although the studio is responsible for choosing films for the actors, the relationship between an actor, his/her screen persona, and the audience also plays an important role in creating and maintaining stardom. What exactly is "stardom" and how does this notion of actor/celebrity have a bearing on the career of the star? When does normalcy for a star begin to become performative? Performative in the sense that the lives led by the most famous and celebrated stars are far from normal in terms of their relative wealth, power, and personal

² Ibid., p. 58.

³ Ibid.

relationships which are all part of their public persona. Richard Dyer claims:

Stardom is an image of the way stars live. For the most part, this generalized lifestyle is the backdrop for the specific personality of the star and the details and events of her/his life. As it combines the spectacular with the everyday, the special with the ordinary, and is seen as an articulation of basic American/western values, this is no conflict here between general lifestyle and the peculiarities of the star.⁴

For the most part, Deanna Durbin lived her life in the public eye. In 1939 she received a special juvenile Oscar for achievement as a young star. The reason for presenting her with the award is for her "significant contribution in bringing to the screen the spirit and personification of youth."⁵ Although the award was present to Durbin for her work on screen, it could be argued that her star persona also personified a youthful spirit. In some respects this spirit became bound into certain aspects of the American Dream. One of the themes Dyer claims is part of the American Dream is consumption. As Richard Dyer claims in his book *Stars*:

The general image of stardom can be seen as a version of the American Dream, organized around the themes of consumption, success and ordinariness. Throughout, however, there is an undertow that, as it were, 'sours' the dream.⁶

Richard Dyer's final comment about stardom holds true especially for Deanna Durbin

⁴ Richard Dyer, *Stars: The New Edition* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), p. 35.

⁵ "Mini biography" (Internet Movie Database). <<http://us.imdb.com/Bio?Durbin,%20Deanna>> [24 January 2002].

⁶ Dyer, *Stars*, p. 35.

because she retired from film with the purpose of fading into obscurity in order to lead a “normal” life. But in the early stages of her career Deanna was a role model for her fans, and also a good role model for consumption. An example of Deanna’s effect on her fans can be seen in Jackie Stacey’s *Star Gazing*. Stacey uses the comments of fans in order to describe and examine star image. In Durbin’s case, Stacey uses comments from a member of the Deanna Durbin Society in order to examine the effect of a star on fashion trends. Stacey claims:

The spectator is connected to one of her favorite stars through her own purchase and wearing of this distinctive clothing item. Again the enduring quality of these investments in the star styles, replicated through commodity consumption, is striking: some forty years later the same [bolero] is worn with pleasure.⁷

Since Deanna’s on and off-screen persona personify youth, her fans buy into the illusion. In the act of emulation they become part of success identified with the American Dream. The line between realism and illusionism is blurred, but as Richard Dyer points out its the supposed ordinariness of the star that the audience is drawn to; ordinariness allows for the audience to interact with the star persona on a common level.

However, this common level is merely superficial because the audience uses stardom to escape from the realities of everyday life. Some aspects of reality or ordinariness could adversely affect an actor’s career. For example, for many of the child stars of the thirties aging became problematic because the fans did not want them to age.

⁷ Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship* (New York, New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 200.

Young female actors such as Deanna Durbin, Shirley Temple, and Judy Garland, were supposed to remain youthful, innocent and unspoiled by the troubles of adulthood. I argue later in the chapter that aging affected Deanna Durbin's career negatively, in terms of stereotyping her persona, and in subsequent chapters will argue that her physical and emotional maturation could not be staved off leading to a decline in the success her films, among many things.

Shirley Temple and the child star

By the time of Deanna Durbin's fame and success the child star niche in Hollywood was already carved out. Precursors to Deanna's career were Mary Pickford and Shirley Temple. Although the former was not actually a child when she became a star, Mary Pickford was categorized and idealized as a child. The process of infantilization will be discussed later in this chapter. At present I will discuss the role previous child stars played in the construction of the Durbin formula, as well as Deanna Durbin the child star.

The study of child stars is a relatively uncharted territory and many discussions of child actors in Hollywood tend to link history with the career of the child star in order to reveal ideological, or in the case of Shirley Temple, economic forces working within the narrative of the seemingly innocent surfaces of her films. Charles Eckert's article "Shirley Temple and the House of Rockefeller" is an attempt to explain Temple's stardom as a function of the economic climate of the 1930s. Eckert contends that capitalism played a part in the success and popularity of Temple. Although Georganne

Scheiner adopts a similar view with regard to examining Deanna Durbin's career and films in her book *Signifying Female Adolescence*, I do not find this tactic very fruitful in terms of the analysis of Durbin's film career. For one reason, she looks only at the films that fit her hypothesis, thereby leaving out the films that stray from the formula.

Arguably the films that represent an abnormality in the trajectory of Durbin's film career are many. I maintain that the implication of these films is tremendous; Durbin's film career was never able to rise above the initial success of the first films because her character persona fit into a narrative formula that effectively prohibited any marked deviation from the formula. Therefore her attempts at different roles or genres were met with critical and box-office failure.

How then can we find parallels between the careers of child stars like Temple and Durbin and identify appropriate methods of analyzing their careers? Some of Eckert's ideas make for a useful starting point for analysis. He deals with primary sources in order to examine the "dialectical play between her biographies and the real childhoods of many depression children".⁸ Even though his analysis is complex, the crux of his argument remains within this simple notion: Shirley Temple's existence is delicately intertwined with the economic history of 1930s America. A clear boundary is drawn between conscious and unconscious actions of creating the Temple persona. In other words, the creation of the Temple persona through the conscious actions of the studio's publicity department and the media, as well as through the unconscious actions of people, such as

⁸ Christine Gledhill, ed. *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (New York, New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 66.

Temple's mother, who inadvertently create a persona through the censorship of information. At this point in his examination of the Temple career he makes a curious comment that on the surface seems small. But the larger implications of his comment point towards the way star personas and information surrounding these personae are understood. He claims:

If [Shirley's] mother were not so straightforward a woman, and if there were no independent corroborators for some of these facts, one would have to presume that Shirley was not real – that she was a rosy image of childhood projected like a dialectical adumbration from the pallid bodies and distressed psyches of millions of depressed children.⁹

Arguably his claims are flawed in a fundamental way because the Temple film persona only existed in an illusory capacity — as a commodification of childhood, innocence and purity.

The “witnesses” he speaks of are only corroborators of the myth; their testimonies do little more than reinforce the illusion. Whether or not Temple's mother is a straightforward woman is beside the point. She helps to build the myth of Temple as the perfect child. Maybe human nature affects the way in which a mother wants her child to be perceived. If Temple is a good child then she could be perceived as a good mother. What information is disseminated about a star has a bearing on the success the star receives. In order to maintain success, any additional information about a star must reinforce the status quo. Or at least this is the case for child stars. I use the term “status quo” to express the idea that the child star must never change, must always remain in the

⁹ Ibid., 65-66.

realm of childhood, a realm of idealization and perfection. Shirley Temple was among successful child stars in the sound era and it would be the Temple persona that would become a precursor of other female child stars, for instance, Judy Garland and Deanna Durbin. Temple's successes would be echoed throughout the films of Deanna Durbin and the impact of Temple's success would have a deep impact on Durbin's career.

For many fans and even Durbin herself, today, Deanna Durbin is not real. She is a product of the culmination of films and photographs and the fond recollections of her fans. She exists within Hollywood nostalgia. Durbin, unlike Temple, came into her fame on the cusp of becoming an adolescent/teenager. Where Temple was able to bask in her fame throughout her childhood, Durbin could only bask in that fame a few short years before simple aspects of biology catapulted her into womanhood. The producer of many of her films, Joseph Pasternak kept Deanna from maturation until the last possible moment because he believed "Her growth should not be forced" and because he was also receiving mail by the "bagfuls" "always pleading that she be kept sweet and natural".¹⁰ In some ways what Pasternak saw as a natural process was unnatural and stunted because when the time came for her to become a woman and experience first love, she was quickly sexualized vis-à-vis the first kiss. Unable to contain her emotional and physical maturation, the producer, studio, and director concocted a publicity campaign and film for her to star in, *First Love* hoping that her adoring fans could accept her transformation. Curiously enough many of her later films would feature her in roles on the border

¹⁰ Joseph Pasternak, *Easy the Hard Way* (New York, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1956), p. 175.

between childhood innocence and adult woman. Although a grown woman, she would continue to play parts that were reminiscent of her childhood roles.

Unfortunately for Durbin the die was cast, so to speak, and she was unable to find fame and success as an adult star. The main reason for this is the “Durbin formula” that came out of her first feature success *Three Smart Girls*. However this formula was not entirely new or without cinematic roots. Georganne Scheiner claims that Temple’s success belongs to the “child-as-savior trope”, and “Temple’s films repeated the themes made popular a decade earlier by Mary Pickford.”¹¹ She quickly notes that unlike Pickford, Shirley Temple played roles suitable to her age. Similarly, Deanna Durbin would play roles suitable to her age during the early part of her career. As noted earlier, Pasternak was adamant about disallowing Durbin to play inappropriate roles while she was an adolescent. Moreover the roles that Durbin played echoed the Temple roles. As Scheiner explains, “[Shirley Temple] was capable, decisive, and efficient in solving the problems of the adults around her.”¹² Similarly, Deanna Durbin’s first role as Penny Craig in *Three Smart Girls* could be described in a like manner. The role of “Miss-fixit” would become part of the “Durbin formula” that would help to establish her career as a popular star.

The studio system and the child star

In her early films, her characters became the commodification of certain family

¹¹ Georganne Scheiner, *Signifying Female Adolescence: Film Representations and Fans, 1920-1950* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2000), p. 67.

¹² Ibid.

and values; even the American Dream was part of what the narrative of the films were trying to sell to the public. In some respects the time was right for producing Durbin films. The success of the Temple films during the Depression left the door open for the child star and a niche would be carved out in the musical genre. However Carl Laemmle Jr. would not be around for the success Universal would attain during the mid-thirties.

An important question arises in terms of how a formula is created and who is responsible for a star's character or persona. In 1936, Charles Rogers would take over as studio head and would eventually be responsible for Durbin's fledgling career. After MGM failed to option Durbin in 1936 after her debut in the film-short *Every Sunday*, Universal placed Durbin under contract and would put her to work immediately with Henry Koster and Joseph Pasternak. Not only was Durbin an angelic little girl but she also had a beautiful soprano voice as well, unlike Judy Garland who lacked classical training and whose singing voice and style were not quite as delicate as Durbin's.¹³ After the monumental success of *Three Smart Girls*, as Schatz explains,

Universal had a hot property in Deanna Durbin. Rogers's top priority in 1937 was to establish a Durbin formula and regulate its output, and Rogers, acting as executive producer, took charge of the Durbin Unit personally until this goal was accomplished.¹⁴

Arguably, Rogers was not solely responsible for the Durbin formula. Henry Koster and

¹³ The contrast of Durbin and Garland's singing styles is especially apparent in *Every Sunday* (1934) when the two girls showcase each style – classical and jazz.

¹⁴ Thomas Schatz, *Genius of the system: Hollywood filmmaking in the studio era* (New York, New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), p. 239.

Joseph Pasternak, the director and producer respectively, were just as responsible for creating "Durbin" as Rogers. As Koster explains, this young, sassy, innocent girl was a character of his own creation. In an interview with Irene Kahn Atkins he claims "I established a character which she played for me for six years. I didn't want to change it because she was so successful with it".¹⁵ Koster and Pasternak had the initial success; Rogers had the insight to allow them to continue with their formula. More importantly, Universal did not want to change her characters or the types of films she starred in because the "Durbin Unit" helped save the studio from bankruptcy. Not only would Durbin play the savior in her films, she would be one in her professional life. The Durbin formula was set and would follow her throughout her career, even when she tried to move outside her child-star stereotype and the musical genre in an attempt to move into other genres such as the thriller or detective genres. These films, however, were not successful, either critically or at the box-office.

In the effort to turn a profit, studios often maximized the role of the star in a film through a method of typecasting. In this respect a "formula" of success would often be derived from the initial role or the initial success of an actor or actress. The formula would then be used in subsequent films. As Shirley Temple Black explains in her autobiography, *Child Star*, Twentieth Century-Fox's head, Daryl F. Zanuck used the Temple formula because it worked. As Temple Black claims:

¹⁵ Henry Koster, *Henry Koster*. Interviewed by Irene Kahn Atkins. (Metuchen, N.J.: Directors Guild of America : Scarecrow Press, 1987), p. 60.

One way to handle me was to resist change . . . My formula was working – perpetual childhood and cheerful resolution to any problem, whether divorce, deceit, mayhem, loneliness, or war. The temptation was awesome. Simply repeat me, again and again. As long as I was a winner, it was relatively effortless and profitable. Afterwards? Forget me.¹⁶

Similarly, Deanna Durbin's career could also be explained through the formula of success; if a film is successful keep repeating the formula until it no longer makes money. The overwhelming success of *Three Smart Girls*, for example, began the "Durbin formula"/ "Durbin Unit" at Universal Studios.¹⁷ Part of this formula was the director-producer-star team of Koster, Pasternak, and Durbin, as well as the narrative formula of the miss-fixit musical.¹⁸ Like her contemporaries, Temple and Garland, Deanna's characters would be seen as the saviors in the film's narrative. From her first screen debut in *Every Sunday*, Durbin's characters would scheme and plan in order to triumph over any problem or adversity.

***Every Sunday* and the beginning of Deanna Durbin**

The beginnings of the Deanna Durbin formula and persona can be seen in her first

¹⁶ Shirley Temple Black, *Child Star: an autobiography* (New York, N.Y.: Warner Books, 1988), p. 167.

¹⁷ *Three Smart Girls* cost \$326,000 and earned \$1,635,800. From Helmut G. Asper and Jan-Christopher Horak "Three Smart Guys: How a few penniless German émigrés saved Universal Studios," *Film History* 11 (1999): 135.

¹⁸ In most of Durbin's films, her characters are schemers who work towards fulfilling goals/desires. For example in *Three Smart Girls*, she is a daughter scheming to reunite her estranged parents.

screen appearance in a short, two-reel film made at MGM studios.¹⁹ *Every Sunday* was directed by Felix E. Feist and would become a starting point for, what William Everson calls "Deanna's sparkling vivacity and youthful freshness" which would attract audiences.²⁰ The central component of the Durbin formula is hapless, helpless adults, who are unable to fix their problems, which is where the spirited Durbin character enters into the narrative. The characters Durbin plays use wit and ingenuity combined with luck to solve problems. Another key component is Durbin's singing talent, which helps her to get adults to take her seriously. A little girl with a mature singing voice enralls even the toughest adversary or attracts attention to her cause or plight.

Every Sunday concerns two girls, played by Judy Garland and Deanna Durbin, who try to save a man from loosing his job. It is a special case because it is Edna's (Deanna Durbin) grandfather whose job as a conductor of a town band is threatened by the city council. The audience sees that the Professor (Edna's grandfather) is unable to effect change; he does not seem to have any will to fight the decision to hire a new band. At this point, both girls use their will to fight the council. Over the eleven minutes of the film, both Judy and Deanna try everything to promote the concerts in the park. At the last minute, the girls use their signing talents to attract an audience. Durbin sings an aria, whereas Garland sings "Americana." In the end a duet, both singing in their different styles, finishes the film. Edna's grandfather's job is saved. Supported by Georganne

¹⁹ Refer to William K. Everson "The Career of Deanna Durbin." *Films in Review* XXVII, no.9 (1976): 514.

²⁰ Ibid., 515.

Scheiner's comment that *Every Sunday* "highlights the theme that would predominate both Durbin's and Garland's adolescent characterization: adolescent girls as saviors."²¹ I believe that it is this part of the Durbin formula that predominates the majority of her adult films.

Not present in the formula of *Every Sunday*, but present in her early feature films are sets of contrasting characters described by William Everson:

The "rich" people involved (other than Deanna's parents) were invariably callous or snobbish, existing to be won over by Deanna, or defeated by her. In contrast, there was always a richly assorted retinue of hired help – butlers, cooks, valets, chauffeurs – who instinctively sided with Deanna, and, even risked their jobs to help her. This rapport with working people enabled late-depression audiences to warm far more readily to a character, Cinderella or not, did seem to exist in an atmosphere of luxury.²²

I have focused on the Durbin formula as a construction of her first performance in *Every Sunday* and through the additional explanation by Everson. The formula follows her films until 1939 when the formula (and persona) try to account for emotional and physical maturity by adding romance and sexuality her films.

In terms of the Durbin persona, it is during this time with MGM when Durbin adopts the screen name Deanna, against her actual name Edna. In this respect, the dichotomy between the screen persona and real life person begins. Also, the beauty, youthfulness, innocence, wit, talent, and mischievousness of Durbin's character establish

²¹ Scheiner, *Signifying Female Adolescence: Film representations and fans, 1920-1950*, p. 57.

²² Everson, "The Career of Deanna Durbin," 516.

the inklings of the characteristics and personality traits that would be identified with her persona. It will be the characteristics of innocence and youthfulness that will prove the most difficult to change in Durbin's adult persona. However, it is these ethereal traits that would become part of the persona launched by Durbin's first feature film *Three Smart Girls*.

***Three Smart Girls* and the "Durbin Formula"**

New York Times critic Frank Nugent's comments about Deanna Durbin in *Three Smart Girls Grow Up*, the sequel to *Three Smart Girls*, offer an insight into her early screen persona that captivated audiences and created expectations for her subsequent films:

For Miss Durbin, in her new film at the Rivoli, is still the delightful half-grown Miss with a fresh young voice, clear eyes, a coltish gait and the artless art of being as lovely, refreshing and Springlike as nature made her.²³

While his comments refer to a later film, Nugent's comments could also be applied to earlier films because critical perception of the Durbin persona remained relatively unchanged. Nugent's comments parallel earlier accounts of Durbin's personality. Upon Koster's first meeting with Deanna Durbin in 1936, before she was signed to star in *Three Smart Girls*, he claims, "I saw this darling little girl. They had changed her name to Deanna Durbin. She was the sweetest girl, the most wholesome little girl, and very

²³ Frank S. Nugent, "The Screen," *New York Times*, 18 March 1939, 9.

charming.”²⁴ Within four years, perception of her changed very little. The studio constructed Deanna Durbin’s characters and films very carefully, however “artless” Nugent may have regarded Durbin, in order to maximize profit by taking advantage of previously successful formulas and in order to accelerate Durbin’s popularity within a certain child-star niche.²⁵

In her first feature film *Three Smart Girls* Deanna plays Penny, the youngest of the Craig sisters. Estranged from their father because of a divorce, she and her sisters live with their mother in Switzerland. With the introduction of “Universal’s newest star” in the credits, the film opens to a close-up shot of Deanna’s face while she sings. Her song matches the idyllic and carefree setting of the Swiss countryside and the girl’s leisurely sailing trip on the lake gives the audience the feeling they are watching a sincere and artless portrayal of girlhood. It is important to note that the setting is deeply important to the reception of Durbin’s character. The wholesome image of the girls in their matching sailing outfits on a serene and untouched lake is a picture of innocence. The idealism of childhood is matched by an ideal setting.

Although Durbin charms the audience at once with her “bell-like” voice and good looks, an element of imperfection is added. When the dinner bell is rung, Penny immediately jumps off the boat to swim to shore instead of sailing in with her sisters. Her puckish qualities shine through. In this respect she is a normal child, not one to be

²⁴ Koster, *Henry Koster*, p. 50.

²⁵ For a detailed discussion of previous child/adolescent narrative formulas see pages 13 and 17 above.

idealized, but one to be taken as a representation of active, somewhat unpredictable childhood. Also, this display of athleticism codes her character as a tomboy. Audiences do not expect her to race into womanhood and sexuality. "If this is what love does to people, I'm glad I'm an old maid!" Penny exclaims, signaling to the audience that she is just a little girl. She is an angel-faced fighter ready to tackle any obstacle. It is these parts of her character that subsequent audiences clamor for: the qualities of a determined angel.

Durbin's early characters are in every sense innocent in the ways of romance and adult issues. Her characters represent the id, acting only on impulses. Penny proposes plans and acts on them while her older sisters try to contain her. Penny is a child; therefore, she is treated as one: she has an early bedtime, dines on muffins and milk in posh restaurants, wears gloves to prevent her from biting her fingernails, and she must not be taken too seriously. Penny, however, is responsible for her parent's reconciliation. The primary narrative is constructed around Penny's schemes, whereas her sister's love lives constitute secondary narratives. Her sisters are unable to be any effective help with the parent's reconciliation because they are busy dealing with adult issues, namely their own love life and the prospect of marriage.

Penny might be "pig-headed" but she knows what is in the best interests of her family. Deanna's characters are neither good nor bad. Their personalities inhabit a gray area, perceived by audiences to be an authentic and sincere portrayal of childhood. She acts the way a normal child should. In this respect, the Durbin formula becomes constrictive because for Durbin's films to remain popular (and true to the formula)

disillusionment of adulthood. Becoming an adult means that her child characters are becoming tainted by adult truths and realities. In an adult world, divorce is not so easily reversed and parents may re-marry others. Although the plots of her films are criticized as being transparent, they work because her characters are so likable. And audiences forgive transparent plots for this reason.

Idealization of childhood

Georganne Scheiner provides a useful contextualization for the careers of female adolescent actors of the 1920s through the 1940s. When Temple got older, she was no longer the cute child of her early films or fame; therefore her popularity was greatly diminished. However Temple's success paved the way for other female child stars and the formula of her films would dictate the formulas of later child-star vehicles. As Scheiner explains:

Later in the decade several adolescents would gain stardom. In vehicles tailor-made to their unique talents, filmmakers would simply repackage the formula made successful by Temple for teens like Durbin and Garland. It had worked before, it would work again. Although children and adolescents were idealized, the world around them was not.²⁶

As Deanna Durbin matured her popularity began to decrease. Unlike Temple, however, Durbin continued to make films that were true to the formula. In this respect Durbin's career paralleled the career of Mary Pickford. Both careers suffered from infantilization.

²⁶ Scheiner, *Signifying Female Adolescence*, p. 67.

Both women would need to remain childlike in order to retain their fan bases and maintain successful film careers. Deanna Durbin disliked being “Deanna Durbin”, a persona created by the studio and the publicity department. Durbin’s later films would oscillate between the narrative formula of her early films and her need to make the transition to more adult and sophisticated narrative formulas.

Taking Scheiner’s comment further, since the idealization of childhood was a key component of the success of young stars, age would be damaging to their child images and career. Once an adult, these stars would make their way into the less-than-ideal world their earlier films rallied against. The happy illusion would be broken for the audience. As William Everson claimed, the only thing Durbin did wrong was to grow up.²⁷ The illusory film world wore thin and Deanna could no longer make the films of her youth; however, the stereotyping and constrictive “Durbin formula” kept her from prospering in Hollywood later in her career.

²⁷ Everson, “The Career of Deanna Durbin,” 522.

Chapter 2: Expectations Fulfilled

The formula and character type established in first phase of Deanna Durbin's career formed expectations in the minds of fans and critics that would determine the success of her subsequent films. Chapter two will focus on *100 Men and a Girl*, *That Certain Age* and *Three Smart Girls Grow Up*, films that use the formula and are successful. The reception of her second film *100 Men and a Girl* illustrates the public and critical perceptions surrounding her persona at this time. Another success for Durbin, *That Certain Age* is a film that subverts the Durbin formula in such a way that the Durbin persona still remains intact. Unlike most of her early films, *That Certain Age* focuses on the problems faced by adolescents as they mature into adults. In this respect the film is a narrative that parallels Durbin's career during this period. The popular and critical reception of her fifth film *Three Smart Girls Grow Up*, however, illustrates the anxiety her fans and critics had towards the idea of her increasing age and physical maturity. Although *Three Smart Girls Grow Up* uses the Durbin formula, this film marks the point at which Durbin's career begins to make the transition from child star to adult star. In the midst of all this was the studio's role in marketing the image of Deanna—not only through films but also through commercial advertisements. Complicating all of this was the increasing gulf between her on-screen persona and her off-screen private life.

Among the details that can be used to examine stardom is the actor's filmography. While Richard Dyer and Edgar Morin use the filmography to some extent to focus on defining the "type" of persona the star represents, the study of Deanna Durbin's filmography presents a challenge. Even though Deanna Durbin represents the child or

adolescent trope, her later films attempt to break away from the type of film that was most successful for her. This attempt is seen most obviously in how the narratives of her later films diverge from the earlier films. However her success in her later career was limited because she was associated too much with the films and formula of her early career.

One Hundred Men and a Girl: Formula, persona and the press

In their article "Three smart guys: How a few penniless German émigrés saved Universal Studios," Helmut Asper and Jan-Christopher Horak discuss Durbin's second film, also a collaboration between Joseph Pasternak, Henry Koster and Felix Jackson, as being part of the Deanna Durbin franchise.¹ A film that marks Durbin's second major success, the film also uses the formula set by *Every Sunday* and *Three Smart Girls*. To reiterate, the Durbin formula, consists of Durbin characters using their intelligence and vocal talents in combination with a spirited, mischievous personality in order to find solutions to the problems the adults around her face. It is important to note that these adults are helpless in terms of finding their own solutions, as seen before in the professor grandfather (*Every Sunday*) and the divorced parents (*Three Smart Girls*), adults who only find solutions when presented to them by the Durbin character. In the case of *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, Patricia "Patsy" Cardwell (Deanna Durbin) decides to help her unemployed father and ninety-nine of his fellow out-of-work musician-comrades. The

¹ Asper and Horak, "Three Smart Guys: How a few penniless German émigrés saved Universal Studios," 134-153.

continued use of the Durbin formula helps to create audience and critic expectations of Durbin's films.²

One Hundred Men and a Girl opens to rolling credits played to the sounds of a concert orchestra over a shot of Leopold Stokowski conducting. The camera roams around the audience before finally resting on the face of a man watching the performance through an ajar stage door. The viewer discovers as the shabbily dressed man is being ejected from the theatre that his name is John Cardwell (Adolphe Menjou), who is later discovered to be Patsy's father. In terms of the Durbin formula, John is the helpless adult and as Georganne Scheiner aptly claims, John and the other unemployed men in the film are "Grown men [who] are rendered impotent by the economic crisis, but the Depression makes Patsy more capable and effective."³ In terms of the film problems paralleling everyday conditions, this is the only Durbin film to deal with the direct effects of the Depression, and, although some of her other films, especially earlier films as Scheiner argues, deal with "cross-class coalitions," these issues are not always central to the formula.⁴ The formula becomes apparent through the actions of the daughter, Patsy, who is responsible for finding work for one hundred unemployed musicians. Using her wits and amazing vocal talents she fosters collaborations between John Frost (Eugene Pallette) the benefactor, as well as Leopold Stokowski and the musicians, so the film ends

² As Asper and Horak would argue, the collaboration between Koster, Pasternak, Jackson and Durbin also is part of the successful Durbin formula.

³ Scheiner, *Signifying Female Adolescence*, p. 74.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.75.

happily with Pasty's father employed and her performing with the orchestra at the end of the film.

Likewise her persona also corresponds to how audiences and critics perceived *100 Men and a Girl*. The central characteristic of her persona is youthfulness. This is apparent in a few lines from *New York Times* Frank Nugent's view of her:

Being a joyous sprite, with an astonishingly mature soprano, an exuberant nature and abiding faith in mankind, even in womankind, Miss Durbin makes the impossible seem moderately improbable. She finds her sponsor (Alice Brady of all people) by the simple expedient of returning a stolen purse. She finds her Stokowski by sneaking past doormen and butlers.⁵

As I will later discuss, the discourse surrounding Durbin's persona focuses on innocence and youthfulness. For example, Nugent comments that Durbin is a "joyous sprite." In this case she is not only childlike and happy but also a magical quality is bestowed upon the character of Patsy Cardwell. In addition, John Mosher of *The New Yorker* states, "She has also, I might add, a polite and pleasant little way with her for a child of her years."⁶ His comments also support the perception of an innocent and youthful Durbin persona.

In terms of advertising, an advertisement appearing in *The New York Times* has a banner across the top announcing "THE WORLD IS WAITING FOR THIS JOYOUS PICTURE... AGLOW WITH GOLDEN YOUTH!"⁷ The youth her character personifies

⁵ Frank S. Nugent, "The Screen," *New York Times*, 18 September 1937, 15.

⁶ John Mosher, "The Current Cinema," *The New Yorker*, 18 September 1937, v.13, 69.

⁷ Refer to Fig. 1.

is archetypal. The “golden youth” presented to audiences in this Deanna Durbin film is an image of Durbin that audiences respond to, which is apparent in the huge box office success of *100 Men and a Girl*. The advertisement also features a cameo-style headshot of Durbin – mouth agape in song, with her eyes open wide. The photo is very striking and is not the typical glamour-shot most female stars use. Deanna is presented in a non-artificial and natural way. The wholesomeness of the persona is also conveyed through this photo and the caption which appears beside it, which reads: “Glorious DEANNA...the entertaining star of “3 Smart Girls”...in a heart-warming picture so tender, so joyous, so exhilarating that you’ll call it ‘the grandest film you ever saw!’”⁸ Audience’s expectations of the persona are met when they view the film – Durbin is all she is advertised to be. In this respect the Durbin formula and persona are congruent. Deanna’s character is presented as a talented, well mannered, child, who has a mischievous streak. For example, when Stokowski asks his butler not to admit anyone into the house, as the butler and Stokowski walk off to their respective rooms, the camera focuses on a twittering feather peeking above a large statue — both an odd and humorous sight for the audience. But Deanna’s characters only do bad things if the ends justify the means. A few seconds later Patsy emerges from hiding to open the door for her orchestra. Filling Stokowski’s foyer with musicians, she invites Stokowski to witness the 100 “reasons” why she has behaved in such a disrespectful way. The audience admires her for her wit and courage, especially when Stokowski is an imposing presence in the

⁸ Refer to Fig 2.

film. By using these important personality traits, Patsy helps to end the film happily by finding employment for her father and the other musicians. And in the end, the character of Patsy helps to define and reaffirm audience expectations of the Durbin persona.

***That Certain Age* and the uncertainty about the changing Durbin persona**

Billed as Deanna Durbin's "First Crush," *That Certain Age* — while differing from the formula — still maintains the Durbin persona of youthful innocence, beauty and talent. In fact, *That Certain Age* is a comical, and at times poignant exploration of the difficulties adolescents face during emotional and physical maturation into adulthood. Deanna is not yet considered to be an adult, but is no longer a child, as the advertisements for the film claim: "Lovely Deanna...now grown to glorious girlhood."⁹ Instead of trying to fit Durbin's persona into an inappropriate adult role, the studio has chosen a role suited to the persona. The role of Alice Fullerton allows Durbin to act her age because the Durbin formula is used differently by the film's narrative. Instead of Alice solving the problems facing the helpless adults around her, the adults in her life — her mother (Irene Rich) and father (John Halliday) — try to solve Alice's problems and guide her through the awkwardness of the adolescent years. What makes the film even more interesting is the fact Alice does not suffer the tribulations of adolescence alone. Her boyfriend, Ken (Jackie Cooper) and their friends Tony (Jack Searl) and Mary Lee (Peggy Stewart) also require guidance. It is the interaction between these characters that makes this Durbin

⁹ Refer to Figs. 3 and 4.

film seem appropriate in terms of persona suitability. In other words, whereas in other Durbin films Deanna's character is placed in context with adults who are judged to be incapable of finding solutions to their problems Deanna's character is now placed in context with other characters her own age who are facing similar problems. In the earlier films, the Durbin character is judged to be more mature than the adults only because she is Miss Fixit.

The audience is privy to Alice's innermost thoughts and feelings because the audience constantly witnesses her writing in a diary. Not only do we see her writing, the camera position also allows the audience to see what she is writing. The audience discovers before any of the other characters about Alice's intense romantic feelings for Bullit (Melvyn Douglas). However, the audience is not suppose to take these feelings seriously because her feelings seem too romantic, almost melodramatic, feelings suitable for the turbulent adolescent years. The adults guide the adolescents, Ken and Alice, through these turbulent years. Mrs. Fullerton helps Alice by retelling stories of her own girlhood crushes, and Bullit tells Ken about his own boyhood in the Midwest. Both adults view that phase of their lives with fondness; however, they do not wish to reclaim or return to those years. Adolescence is seen to be natural, an initiation into adulthood. When Alice claims she feels as though she's "torn between two fires" her comment parallels both the trajectory of the narrative and her career in general. The "two fires" are represented by Durbin's shifting career, shifting from child star to adult star.

Audience expectations or concerns about any changes to Durbin's persona in terms of emotional and physical maturation are addressed at the beginning of the film

when one of Mr. Fullerton's clerks at his newspaper poses the question: "Shall we call her Alice or Miss Alice Fullerton this time?" Fullerton replies "Alice. She's still only a baby! Now that I've settled that important question..." as if to compare the issues surrounding the captioning of photos of Alice to important issues in the news. Arguably, the concerns or anxieties audiences feel at this time towards any changes to Durbin's persona are very important. His reply is meant to relax audiences' expectations because the rest of the film follows as a normal, (i.e. true to formula) Durbin film should.

Another point made clear in the advertising is that Durbin is not moving into adulthood, but into girlhood. Mr. Fullerton's reply also has comical undertones signaling to audiences that Alice's journey into girlhood will not be without conflicting notions of Alice's identity. On one hand, Alice is seen as a "baby." But on the other hand, Alice feels like an adult, especially when she appears at Bullit's birthday party in her mother's gown. Interestingly when Alice's comments on the party dress chosen by her mother, the comment could also be indirectly applied to the Durbin persona. "I look like a bottle of milk in it!" meaning that Alice/Deanna is uninterested in looking wholesome or like a young girl and both the milk and the bottle represent both of these qualities. The milk is wholesome and the bottle is without form. Going against her mother's wishes, Alice opts for one of her mother's gowns that reveals her figure with the adult nature of her appearance further accentuated by an elegant chignon. Quite remarkably Alice looks almost like a woman, although the audience knows the outward physical appearance is incongruent with Alice's inner emotional state, which is that of a young girl. To be sure, Durbin's physical maturation is one sign that her persona and formula will be modified,

as she becomes a woman. The audience of guests, like her parents are momentarily speechless as Alice descends the staircase in the gown. However her mother gains composure and stops Alice from going any further. Alice is forced to change because she is not ready for adult romance and adult feelings, which is what the gown symbolizes. Her lack of readiness is seen in the ending when she renounces her love for Bullit after she is fooled into thinking he is married. Reunited with Ken, the proper romantic lead, Alice is able to mature more gracefully than if she entered into an adult romance with a middle-aged man. The qualities of Durbin's persona — innocence, sweetness and youth — remain intact. The film begins and ends with the song "That certain age", which offers further explanation for the reversal of the Durbin formula. While atypical in terms of formula, *That Certain Age* remains a fixit film, however. The Durbin role is no longer that of savior; instead, she becomes the character who needs to be saved. Her next film marks a return to the formula with no romantic or awkward adolescent undertones. A reviewer from *Variety* states:

Providing a well-tailored and carefully planned story, the studio brilliantly bridges the adolescent period at one crack, and launches her into the broader fields of youthful romance and adventure where story material is more plentiful for future pictures.¹⁰

However are audiences willing to accept those future Durbin pictures? And even though this reviewer seems to view this film as a successful transition, why is there, as with the advertising and release of *Three Smart Girls Grow Up* and *First Love*, an anxiety on the

¹⁰ Debra Handy, ed., *Variety Film Reviews*, vol. 6, *That Certain Age* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1983), 5 October 1938.

part of audiences and critics towards a maturation of Durbin to adulthood, not just into girlhood? This anxiety will be examined further with the discussion of *Three Smart Girls Grow Up*.

Three Smart Girls Grow Up and the Press

Advertised as her first “glamorous role,” Deanna reprises her role as Penny Craig, the youngest of the Craig sisters.¹¹ A successful film, the narrative follows the Durbin formula, as Penny (Deanna Durbin) tries to find suitable romantic candidates for her two older, and hardly wiser, sisters Joan (Nan Grey) and Kay (Helen Parrish). As Frank Nugent of *The New York Times* claims in his review of the film:

It is, if you must have it, a Little Miss Fixit role and we all know (we who have seen Jane Withers or Shirley Temple playing tourist guide on the life journeys of their elders) how annoying a meddling brat can be. But Miss Durbin's Miss Fixit doesn't get on your nerves.¹²

His comments are evidence of the type of films Deanna Durbin made and the kinds of expectations her audiences had when patronizing her films. A shift in audience, as well as critical, expectations of her films was needed in order to modify the formula for age appropriateness. When the Universal publicity department advertised the film a small

¹¹ Refer to Fig. 2.

¹² Frank S Nugent, “The Screen,” *New York Times*, 18 March 1939, 9.

caption was added above the title, which stated "Her First Glamorous Role!"¹³ However, Penny Craig was a character who was far from glamorous. Even the picture of Deanna Durbin that appeared on the advertisement for the film seemed less than glamorous. Her hair and make up are done in a plain way and the look on her face seems more pensive rather than glamorous or seductive. Although the caption and the photo seem to contradict each other, this small caption was important to Durbin's fans, which is apparent in Nugent's review of the film. As noted in the previous chapter, Nugent believes that Deanna's audiences do not want her to be glamorous (or anything it entails). He states emphatically:

Praise be, it isn't so and we never have contradicted an advertiser with greater relief. For Miss Durbin, in her new film at the Rivoli, is still her delightful self, a joyous half-grown miss with a fresh young voice, clear eyes, coltish gait and the artless art of being lovely, refreshing and Springlike as nature made her.¹⁴

On the surface Nugent's comments seem valid; however, he is describing an almost eighteen-year-old woman.¹⁵ Deanna Durbin could hardly be considered as a "half-grown miss" at that age. His comments are inappropriate and only serve to maintain the public's skewed perception of Deanna Durbin. Although some reviewers do not use language in

¹³ Refer to Fig. 2.

¹⁴ Nugent, "The Screen," 9.

¹⁵ Not uncommon for studios to change the ages of their child stars so as to make them younger. Shirley Temple states in her autobiography that on her twelfth birthday Shirley discovers she is really thirteen years old. Her mother informs her of Fox's plan to make her appear younger than she is, the studio even has her

such a marked manner as Nugent does, reviewers still maintain this inappropriately young image of Durbin. John Mosher of *The New Yorker* states in his review of *Three Smart Girls Grow Up*, "The gifted child, now all of sixteen, sings these not altogether unfamiliar numbers."¹⁶ Important to Mosher's comments is the fact that Deanna Durbin is almost eighteen years old, thus maintaining the audience's perception of Durbin as someone who is youthful, yet emotionally immature. Another interesting point concerning Nugent and Mosher's comments is that their discourse maintains the film industry's unspoken involvement in Deanna Durbin's career. Indeed as Durbin's many comments concerning studio involvement in her career suggest, the Deanna Durbin persona was a fabrication on the part of the Universal publicity department. Far from being "natural," her image had to be maintained and her audiences needed to believe that the "artlessness" and innocence she represented was real.

In fact, I would argue that the advertising campaign was a way for the studio to gauge public reaction to a possible shift in the Durbin formula and image. Although *Three Smart Girls Grow Up* is not the point where her career changes, it is the point where her career begins to change. As I will argue later, the turning point of her career occurs during the publicity and release of *First Love*.

birth certificate altered. (Shirley Temple Black, *Child Star: an autobiography* (New York, N.Y.: Warner Books, 1988), p. 333.)

¹⁶ John Mosher, "The Current Cinema," *New Yorker*, 25 March 1939, v. 15, 66.

Three Smart Girls Grow Up and the Formula

Three Smart Girls Grow Up illustrates the relationship between the character Deanna plays in the film and how Deanna was perceived by much of the adult audience. The beginning of *Three Smart Girls Grow Up* also parallels Deanna's off-screen life. The opening of the film shows the Craig sisters walking arm-in-arm towards the camera, dressed in party attire. Unlike the first film, Penny is no longer a girl but is now a young woman. The two older sisters, Joan and Kay, are grooming Penny for her "coming out." Although not stated explicitly in the film, the party is being held in Penny's honor; there are no other debutantes in attendance, only adult friends of her parents. Just as Penny is admired by her parent's friends for being a lovely child with an exceptional voice, Deanna was admired by parents for representing the "ideal daughter". Not only is the party a "coming out" for Penny, the film represents a "coming out" for Deanna. Just as the advertisements state, this film and this role represent the desire to modify the established formula.

One of the characters at the party, the senator, acts as a representative for the audience when he replies to Penny's comment, "I look very grown-up tonight, don't I senator?" saying "Oh, I don't know, you're still just a little girl to me." Deanna, like Penny, remains in suspended animation never growing older than the people around her wish. Penny may look eighteen but her emotional maturity lags. When her father asks

her “Who’s your boyfriend tonight?” she sincerely replies, “Same one...you!”¹⁷ Her comments signal to the audience that while her character has become physically mature, her mentality and emotions remain the same — those of a “little miss”. As “little miss fixit,” her job is to find suitable men for her sisters. In this respect the movie follows the formula that was set by *Three Smart Girls*. Instead of fixing her parent’s love life she tries to fix her sister’s romantic lives. The only characters that are aware of Joan and Kay’s problems are Penny and Binns the butler (Ernest Cossart).¹⁸

By the film’s end Penny has resolved the problem of romantic coupling with the help of her father (Charles Winninger). Even though she has patriarchal help, in the final few shots of the film her father is photographed from a high angle, from the point-of-view of Penny who is on stage singing to the wedding precession walking up the aisle. Penny maintains a god-like presence over the ceremony. Almost as if her father was her puppet, he helps her to complete her plans for her sisters.

While *Three Smart Girls Grow Up* adheres to the Durbin formula in terms of Penny using her intelligence and talent to fix the problems of her romantically challenged sisters (a.k.a. the hapless, helpless adults), there are signs that both physical and emotional maturation will lead to a modification of the formula. As I will argue later, age

¹⁷ Although in her previous film, *That Certain Age* (1938), Deanna has her “first crush”(refer to Figs. 3 and 4) on Melvyn Douglas, in the end she settles for Jackie Cooper. For audiences, “puppy love” remained in the appropriate boundaries of “girlhood” because her emotions have not yet matured.

¹⁸ Interestingly, the butler character in many of Durbin’s film is a character that is aware of the world around him, even though the wealthy families he works for are not. Wealth is key to the level of awareness a character has. The more wealth, the less aware he/she will be.

plays a pivotal role in Durbin's career and is one aspect of her that the studio cannot control. *First Love* marks the turning point of her career because it is the point at which she reaches emotional maturity. Romance for Durbin and the characters she portrays is no longer relegated to mere "puppy love." As her following films indicate, she tries to make the transition into roles that not only modify the formula but also try to break away from it altogether. Her later career in terms of critical reception is often negative; the press magnifies the disappointment her audience's feel towards her growing-up. As a child star, the characters Deanna played resembled her off-screen persona more than when she grew older. By the time she was eighteen the characters she played diverged completely from her off-screen persona and her life. During this transition period of her life and career, age is important to the perceptions of her by both fans and the general audience.

On-screen Persona versus Off-screen Reality

What I didn't like was the publicity, the invasion of my private life. A person needs to have an identity of his own. When you're a star, it's virtually impossible. That's something I could never get used to.¹⁹

This quote by Deanna from Norman Zierold's *The Child Stars* is important when defining the boundary that Deanna felt between her personal life and public life.

However, as Edgar Morin defines the star, Deanna's need for boundaries is misplaced.

¹⁹ Norman J. Zierold, *The Child Stars* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1965), p. 199.

As a product of the Hollywood film industry, she is theirs to own and market. As Morin claims, "If it triumphs on the market, it still remains under the control of the manufacturer: the star's private life is prefabricated, rationally organized," which is a fact Deanna was aware of.²⁰ As mentioned by Zierold:

[Deanna] despised the publicity gimmicks her studio and reporters thought up. She was supposed to collect fuzzy toy animals "like pink teddy bears and purple and yellow monkeys." She was supposed to collect stamps. And on and on. The truth of it was that Deanna Durbin didn't collect anything.²¹

Deanna was a successful star for Universal; therefore, the studio kept tight control of the Durbin image. Moreover her image was not only marketed to the public to increase the box-office successes of her films, the studio used the Durbin persona to sell luxury items. For example the studio used the success of *Three Smart Girls* and *Mad About Music* to market automobiles. The advertisement for the DeSoto appeared in *Life* magazine in March 1938 and it claims "Deanna Durbin was smart when she picked DeSoto."²² The caption is a play on words involving the titles of her film successes and it is her success that sells the car; the company relies more on her image than the merits of the car. Furthermore Morin argues that "The star is a total item of merchandise: there is not an

²⁰ Morin, *The Stars*, p. 136.

²¹ Zierold, *The Child Stars*, p. 199.

²² Refer to Fig. 5.

inch of her body, not a shred of her soul, not a memory of her life that cannot be thrown on the market."²³

Another example of how Universal used Deanna's persona in marketing goods is shown in the *Life* article "Out-of-Town Buyers Crowd New York Showrooms as Sales Rise in Nation."²⁴ Although the main focus of the article is on the fashion industry, one of the photographs shows a life-size Deanna Durbin mannequin wearing a "Deanna Durbin dress." The caption reads "Mr. Horwitz of Horwitz and Duberman shows a \$10.75 (wholesale) Deanna Durbin dress on a dummy of the actress (who is now a Junior Miss size) to two Lancaster, Pa., buyers." The Deanna Durbin image and lifestyle is offered to her fans at a price. They can be just like Deanna. Interestingly, an enlargement of her signature appears under the mannequin, suggesting that this merchandise is authentic or legitimate. It is not simply the studio offering the image of Deanna to her fans, Deanna herself seemingly offers her lifestyle to her devoted fans.²⁵ Also, the personal information included about her dress size is another way to attract potential customers. Fans may feel a connection to Deanna through the clothing: the fan could be the same size as Deanna and in turn, as Morin explains, "The purchaser appropriates, consumes, and assimilates into his own personality a little of the star's body and soul."²⁶

²³Morin, *The Stars*, p. 137.

²⁴"Out-of-town buyers crowd New York showrooms as sales rise in nation," *Life*, 31 July 1939, 12-13.

²⁵ According to Georganne Scheiner in *Signifying Female Adolescence*, "[Deanna Durbin] received 5 percent of the gross sales of all her merchandise." p. 130.

²⁶Morin, *The Stars*, p. 169.

No aspect of Deanna Durbin's life was private and it was this fact that led to her dislike of the film industry. Although the studio, the media and her audiences expected certain things of her, Deanna tried to rebel against the niche Universal created for her. Her need to rebel caused a certain incongruity between her on-screen persona and off-screen private life. One such account comes from Joseph Pasternak's autobiography, *Easy the Hard Way*, in which he recounts tales about Deanna Durbin's temperamental nature:

You can imagine my consternation at a rehearsal one day when I heard Deanna break off her singing sharply and announce to the great composer in firm, unshaken tones: "You're not doing it right, Mister Stokowski!"²⁷

In this respect, behind the camera she was an opinionated "movie star," however, in front of the camera she was the little girl audiences admired and loved. In an article which appeared in *The Winnipeg Free Press*, "Deanna's Rise To Top Reads Like a Fable" relates to readers facts about Durbin's background and that, "When she stepped off the train to be greeted by mother, father, and sister, she was the same happy child."²⁸ The perception of Deanna Durbin was that she was a normal, well-behaved girl — not the type of girl who would challenge a great conductor! Another example of Durbin's rebelliousness occurs in April 1941 when she married Vaughn Paul against the wishes of the studio and her fans. And as Norman Zierold explains:

²⁷Pasternak, *Easy the Hard Way*, p. 172.

²⁸"Deanna's Rise To Top Reads Like a Fable," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 3 April 1937, 14.

The public, the studio, everyone, it seemed, did not want a mature Deanna. They wanted her to remain simple and charming and unspoiled. Deanna was the symbol of perpetual youth, of innocence, and even a kiss might spoil the image, to say nothing of the calamitous possibility of real romance.²⁹

Within the next ten years Deanna would be divorced and married twice, along with being the mother of two children.³⁰

²⁹ Zierold, *The Child Stars*, p. 200.

³⁰ Deanna Durbin's first marriage to Vaughn Paul would last from April 1941 until December 1943, her second marriage to Felix Jackson would last from June 1945 until 1949, her third marriage to Charles David would occur in December 1950 and last until his death in March of 1999.

Chapter 3: The Transition

In this chapter I will focus on the transitional period in Deanna Durbin's career, 1939 to 1941. A marked shift in the formula is noticeable in the publicity and release of *First Love*; the character Connie Harding is her first romantic lead role. Through an analysis of newspaper advertising and the critical reception of the film I will demonstrate how audience perception of her persona could be affected by her physical and emotional maturity, vis-à-vis the first screen "kiss." The studio's need to protect her formula becomes apparent as Deanna ages, especially with the hiring of Gloria Jean, in 1939, to take Deanna's place as child star. *Nice Girl?* following a few years after *First Love* will be examined to indicate the extent to which its narrative modifies the formula. Using Christine Geraghty's star categories, I will focus on Deanna's role in Hollywood and how her off-screen life was de-emphasized in terms of what kinds of information was considered pertinent for fans to know. Central to this period of transition is the biographical information that indicates how her on-screen and off-screen lives begin to diverge, and how that information circulated by the studio and by national magazines diverges from either her screen persona or her off-screen life.

Aging, Maturation and The Kiss

As noted earlier, one of the major problems the child star faced was aging — a problem faced by female stars in general. In her book *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies*, Susan Hayward touches on the difficulties of maintaining the illusion of the star persona and suppressing reality when she comments generally on the female film star as she grows older:

On the whole, her fans do not like her to age. Curiously, the process of aging matters when it is a woman star — it recalls our own ageing, ageing is too real – not the ‘real’ we want to see.¹

Arguably the same could be said of the child star. In Durbin’s case, the media along with her films perpetuated the myth of the innocent child. In a *New York Times* article “Deanna Durbin, Spinster” journalist Edward J. Eustace tries to reinforce Deanna’s childlikeness and unsophisticated nature during an interview for the release of her second feature *One Hundred Men and a Girl*.² At several points in the article he reinforces her age through phrasing such as: “juvenile genius,” “child,” “little girl,” “little Miss Durbin,” and “poor little her.” These are example of how the journalist’s discourse helps to reinforce her youthfulness and helps to set her apart from other young girls. In order to keep Durbin innocent and to properly contain her maturation/sexuality her voice must be described in terms of her inexperience. Although her voice sounds mature and sophisticated, it still belongs to a fourteen year-old girl who has no plans of getting married, however many proposals from fans she receives. Eustace asks her if “she fancied anyone around town” and she replies, “I shall probably never marry.”³ Although she has been in Hollywood for a few years, Deanna has remained untouched by the temptations of the Hollywood lifestyle. In her own words, “Just as Hollywood pin-up

¹ Susan Hayward, *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1996), p. 340.

² Edward J. Eustace, “Deanna Durbin Spinster,” *New York Times*, 12 September 1937, 3.

³ Ibid. (Interestingly, Deanna’s first of three marriages occurs in 1941, she is wed to producer Vaughn Paul.)

represents sex to dissatisfied erotics, so I represented the ideal daughter millions of fathers and mothers wished they had."⁴

Her comment also indicates her role as a child star: the ideal daughter. Where Edgar Morin claims,

The star not only provides information, but *formation*, not only incitation, but *initiation*. She reveals the forms of a caress, an embrace, the techniques of a kiss, develops the myth of miraculous and all-powerful love, inviting the reproduction of the sacred mystery on the alter of fatal, sublime, transcendent love.⁵

Deanna's role as star deviates from her earlier role as savior. Her new role is that of a romantic lead. In this respect the focus on romance shifts away from the wholesomeness and naiveté of her persona. Morin believes the underlying meaning of stardom is love. He believes that this love is romantic whereas Deanna's persona represents platonic and familial love. She is supposed to teach children how to be good sons or daughters because she represents the ideal. Deanna's characters reveal the personality traits of innocence and the precociousness of children. As she matures and she represents this ideal even less, the notion that she now represents romantic love is upsetting for her fans. Morin would argue that the adult-Deanna is a proper romantic model for younger viewers to follow. Her fans, however, were deeply disappointed by her later films in which she portrays glamorous, sexual women.

⁴"Biography for Deanna Durbin" (Internet Movie Database, 1959) <<http://us.imdb.com/Bio?Durbin,+Deanna>>[October 14, 2002].

⁵ Morin, *The Stars*, pp. 177-179. (His italics.)

Age is a key factor in the trajectory of Deanna Durbin's career. Even the titles of her earlier films maintain the discourse surrounding her age as someone youthful. She is always a "girl" and after she reaches "that certain age" she "grows up" and has her "first love." The titles seem to imply the normal maturation of a child to an adolescent. However, the films still operate on the Durbin formula, which still maintains her status as a child. The film that would break the audience's illusions and expectations of Durbin's character would be *First Love* a film that would provide Durbin audiences with evidence of Deanna's maturation. At the age of eighteen, Deanna Durbin has her first on-screen romantic kiss. In the words of film critic William Everson:

First Love '39, again directed by Koster, was the film that finally did allow Deanna to grow up. It was much publicized at the time for giving her a first screen kiss — from Robert Stack. Although a good gimmick, it was a rather saddening reminder that Deanna has to grow up, and the film was received with reservations.⁶

Everson's comments are very telling; particularly in the way the studio system is inadvertently described. Although Everson is not commenting directly on the role of the studio in Deanna Durbin's career, his comments describe a system in which the maturation of a young girl is exploited. The "first kiss" of a young woman is particularly important, which is especially true for female child stars.⁷ Therefore the studio had an excellent opportunity to exploit this personal moment publicly, a moment that would also

⁶ Everson, "The Career of Deanna Durbin," 522.

⁷ It should be noted that Shirley Temple and Judy Garland did not face such a publicized maturation — their careers did not parallel their personal lives in the same way that Durbin's life paralleled her screen life. The first loves of these girls would not be discussed in such a public way.

provide Deanna's devotees with a way of participating in her life in the role of a surrogate parent. A *New York Times* article "Deanna's First Kisser" described the moment of the first kiss as a moment in "which the entire cinematic world was fretting about."⁸ Arguably, it was also a moment the entire Deanna Durbin fan base was fretting about.

First Love, a modernized version of the Cinderella fairytale, depicts Deanna's character's first kiss as sweet and magical. The reality of that kiss, however, only pointed to the difference between reality and fiction. In the same article, "Deanna's First Kisser" Robert Stack described his feelings about the kiss as such:

"I feel terrible. . . I mean, isn't it wonderful . . . But with all these lights . . . and everybody on the sidelines but a notary public . . . it seems so different . . ."⁹

His somewhat inarticulate description of that scene helps to explain the difference between a kiss on screen that the audience witnesses and the actual processes of creating the kissing-moment through the mise-en-scene. On one hand, the public witnesses a flawless, cinematic moment whereas the actors, crew, etc. experience the kiss on a professional level. Perhaps, it is the audience's lack of understanding of the way in which the studio system, and to some extent stardom, operate. This is where separation of reality and illusion becomes difficult for the audience, and problems with image and

⁸ "Deanna's First Kisser," *New York Times*, 5 November 1939, 4.

⁹ Ibid.

stereotyping or typecasting occur.

Why should something like a kiss cause such difficulties for the studio, director, producers or the star? Since Deanna is classified as a child star and her roles tended towards portraying innocent, puckish, young girls, audiences felt protective of her innocence and childlikeness. Arguably the audience's feelings about Deanna Durbin stem from love. Edgar Morin and Richard Dyer both argue for the notion that at the core of stardom is love, although Dyer feels that this notion is agonized over more by fans and the audience of the cinema. Writing about the kiss, Morin argues:

The kiss is not only the key technique of love-making, nor the cinematic substitute for intercourse forbidden by censorship: it is the triumphant symbol of the role of the face and the soul in twentieth-century love. The kiss is of a piece with the eroticism of the face, both in ancient times and still unknown in certain civilizations. The kiss is not only the discovery of a new tactile voluptuousness. It brings to life unconscious myths which identify the breath from one's mouth with the soul; it thus symbolizes a communication or symbiosis of souls. The kiss is not only the piquancy in all Western films. It is the profound expression of a complex love which eroticises the soul and mystifies the body.¹⁰

Even through Morin's lengthy description of the kiss, there is a sense that there was much at stake with Deanna Durbin's first screen kiss, especially where her star persona and child star image collides with the adult world of romantic love. If the kiss represents the love, sex and eroticism, then Deanna's maturation seems accelerated. In one instance a child, in the next a grown woman. Meanwhile, the audience is left to reconcile this

¹⁰ Edgar Morin, *Les Stars (The Stars)*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1951), p. 179; quoted in Richard Dyer, *Stars, New Edition* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), p.45.

immense change and in any event frets over the first kiss of an eighteen-year-old girl. Interestingly, the publicity campaign for *First Love* in the *New York Times* is a perfect depiction of the kiss as a personification for what Morin called, “the profound expression of a complex love which eroticises the soul and mystifies the body”¹¹ because of the way Deanna Durbin is photographed. In the three advertisements her face is the most prominent feature: her eyes and mouth present gateways to her soul.¹² The expression on her face is wistful. In this film, the kiss is a discovery of love and eroticism, especially for Durbin’s screen persona. Finally the relationship between Durbin and Stack is shown through their closeness; Stack looks longingly at Deanna’s mouth foreshadowing events to come, mainly the metaphysical experience of the kiss, or the “symbiosis of souls.” The implications of her first on-screen kiss is enormous because her child star image is changing. *First Kiss* represents a turning point in her career. Could the studio adapt her persona so that her image would mature along with her physical body? Arguably the studio could not change Durbin’s persona because the fan base/ her devotees were just too caught up with Deanna Durbin, the child star. In this respect, age affected Durbin to a major extent and her later career and films reflect this, particularly in her inability to star in films outside of the musical genre or the Durbin formula.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Refer to Figs. 6 to 9.

Nice Girl? – The transition of a teenaged girl into a woman

With the pressure of her first on-screen kiss gone, the producer of the Durbin films, Joseph Pasternak, still had difficulties deciding how Deanna would make the transition from an ingénue to a glamorous star. At the age of twenty, Deanna Durbin's audience also found it difficult to accept her maturation. In 1941, with the release of *Nice Girl?*, Deanna's persona goes through another transition. Instead of the first kiss, her character learns the art of seduction.

Reiterating Morin's claims that "[t]he star provides not only information, but *formation*,"¹³ I want to examine Durbin's transitional films in which she holds the role of both advisor and advisee. Specifically I want to examine how her films educate the viewers and how Deanna's character becomes like the viewer, an adolescent who mimics the romance and love seen in the Hollywood films. As an ingénue, Durbin's purpose is to inform her adolescent audiences about the techniques and protocol of maturation. In *The Stars*, Morin contends that stars become both the patron saint and the model for their fans to follow either by asking themselves hypothetical questions such as "What would she/he do in this situation?" or by imitating what is seen on screen. He argues:

The process of identification with patron-models affects the problem of human personality itself. What is personality? Myth and reality both. Each of us has his own personality, but each of us lives the myth of his own personality. In other words, each of us fabricates an artificial

¹³ Morin, *The Stars*, 177.

personality which is in a sense the contrary of our real personality. Personality is generated by imitation as much as by creation. The personality is a mask, but a mask that allows us to make our voices heard, like the mask of ancient theater. The star provides the image and model of this mask, this disguise; we assimilate it into our character, integrate it with ourselves.¹⁴

Both the star and the viewer wear this mask, and it is this mask through which Deanna affects her audience. Adolescents learn how to become adults.

Taking Morin's ideas about constructing personality further, Deanna Durbin's personality, like those of her audience, is constructed of elements of myth and reality. The interplay between the on-screen characters she portrays and her real-life personality create her persona. Audiences associate and confuse the on-screen characters with Deanna's real-life personality. For the most part fiction and reality become one and the same, which is where some of the difficulties she faced under public scrutiny arose. In an interview with David Shipman, Deanna reveals some the problems she faced leading a double life,

My two broken marriages were not an asset either. When my first marriage failed everyone said that I could never divorce. It would ruin the 'image.' How could anybody really think that I was going to spend the rest of my life with a man I found I didn't love, just for the sake 'of an image'?!¹⁵

Her comments reveal one of the problems the star faces, the public's need for the star to live a seamless, perfect life. In Deanna's case, she was the eternal ingénue and her

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 175. (His italics.)

¹⁵ David Shipman, "Nostalgia: Deanna Durbin," *Films and Filming* (December 1983): 26.

“image” should remain that way for her audience. The “image” of the ingénue does not include divorce, scandal, or sexual innuendo. One of the reasons why Deanna left Hollywood is that she felt that the “mask” that was created through her youthful persona handicapped her career and her life. She was never able to integrate the mask into her real-life character. There were always two people: Edna Mae and Deanna.

The reality of Deanna’s situation was that at the age of eighteen Deanna received her first on-screen kiss. An important event for her persona because her innocence would fade, and in turn the youthfulness would fade without innocence to support the qualities associated with youthfulness. However, this event was not as important to her private life, as she probably received a first romantic kiss long before her persona did. Another quote from Shipman’s interview with Deanna reveals just how her upbringing differed from how the public perceived her upbringing,

It was drummed into me that I must never have sex with a man before I was married, and then the next day I was off to the studio where a very different set of rule prevailed. I must admit that it was lovely to be asked and even lovelier to be able to say no . . . or yes. Part of the fun of being asked meant that I wasn’t a little girl anymore . . . and that is why I wanted to look glamorous. I couldn’t wait to wear low-cut dresses and look sultry.¹⁶

Deanna was not a “little girl” anymore. The public, however, wanted to keep her from growing up. This need is evident in the discourse used in the reviews of her films. As noted earlier, journalists referred to Deanna as “little,” even when she was almost eighteen!

¹⁶ Ibid.

The studios, indeed, had a difficult decision to make when Deanna was too old to continue playing the ingénue. The awkwardness of Deanna's on-screen and very publicized maturation beginning with *First Love*. This is what young audiences could identify with, although her audiences would never know the pain she felt privately being controlled by the studios and producers at Universal. Her first kiss is what many of her young fans will aspire to, a first kiss that is tender and magical. The star inspires the romantic awakenings of many young girls. Two years later she would enter into her first marriage, another event that would be incongruous with her star persona. At this time Universal released another Durbin film, *Nice Girl?*, that followed Deanna through another awkward phase of adolescence. *Nice Girl?* is a cautionary tale for these young girls who are inspired by and aspire to be mature beyond their years, in addition to the caution that "nice girls" do not act seductive especially when older men are involved. Trying to become too mature too quickly, in Deanna's case dressing-up in a seductive pajama outfit, will lead to humiliation. Don (Robert Stack) represents the proper male Jane is to be coupled with, while Richard (Franchot Tone) represent the improper male.

Although Robert Stack represents the ideal model for an adolescent love affair (or at the very least for a first kiss), he does not seem like a good teacher of human sexuality. Or as one *New York Times* reviewer put it "learning about the rabbits."¹⁷ Jane Dana relies on Richard to be the teacher. *Nice Girl?* as one reviewer claims, asks the question

¹⁷ "The Screen," *New York Times*, 27 March 1941, 29.

“When and how should little Deanna be advised on what every young girl should know?”¹⁸ While the studio is advising Deanna, she advises her adolescent fans. Jane is a girl who is curious about “adult romance” but whose boyfriend is unaware and uninterested in the issue. The question remains: how can a “nice girl” like Jane Dana experience first love past a first kiss when her boyfriend is too interested in his car? The question is answered when Richard (an associate of her father) comes to their home. Narratively, Richard represents an innocent bystander of Jane’s active libido; sub-narratively Franchot Tone represents an ideal masculine hero that women and girls idolize.

The crucial scene occurs when Jane makes-over herself into a sultry goddess while Richard unwittingly waits to be the test subject of Jane’s seduction scheme. Both Jane and Deanna are trying to shed their “nice girl” images. Interestingly, the advertisement that appeared in *The New York Times* depicts a very glamorous Deanna Durbin — her hair in soft curls, wearing heavy make up, posed in a reclining position with her eyes half opened.¹⁹ The caption above the picture reads: “It’s a SALUTE to America’s New Glamour Girl!” The title of the film, *Nice Girl?* has audiences questioning whether or not Durbin is still a naïve, young girl. It seems that her innocent first kiss has catapulted her into a world of adult seductions and sex. However, the pictures of Franchot Tone and Robert Stack to the right of Durbin’s picture seem to be at

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Refer to Fig. 10.

ease with this “new glamour girl.” Both men are smiling and appear to have genuine looks on their faces. That said, audiences can relax a little because the advertisement is not as serious as it first appears. It may be a “completely different role” but the change is not as drastic as in her later films.

Just as the senator in *Three Smart Girls Grow Up* fails to recognize Penny’s maturity, the characters of *Nice Girl?* likewise fail to recognize Jane’s maturity. Jane is the town’s “nice girl.” Even her boyfriend, Don, feels she is incapable of any insincerity or dishonesty. Jane’s inner desires signal a redefinition of her role as a “nice girl.” And as many critics and reviewers point out, the question mark in the title is a signal to the audience of the shift in their response to Deanna Durbin’s films. Although this film was released past the turning point I have marked, her career is still in a transition period from a child to an adult star.

In “Re-examining stardom: questions of texts, bodies and performance” Christine Geraghty offers a different way of approaching the study of stardom or the star persona. Particularly useful for my examination of Deanna Durbin’s career is Geraghty’s star category of “star-as-performer”, where “it is the performance and work which are emphasized, not leisure or the private sphere.”²⁰ Interestingly in the transitional period of Durbin’s career, her maturity outside the narratives of her films caused a divergence of her on-screen persona — of which her abilities to sing and perform are essential to her

²⁰ Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, eds., *Reinventing Film Studies* (New York :Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 192.

success — and her off-screen private life. In this respect the category of star-as-performer is useful because her roles and films support the star as actor, and the studio or reviewers do not focus on her activities in her “private sphere.” If her film fails, it is not due to occurrences in her private life. The problem for Deanna, however, was that changes in her persona or formula brought dismay to her audiences and critics — regardless of her performance.

As a child star, the studio controlled Deanna’s image. As she got older, the sphere of influence shrank. Universal could control the films she starred in; however, they had increasing difficulties controlling her private life. As previously noted, Durbin’s fans and audience had a very specific perception of her persona. She was the eternal image of youth and innocence. Many of her fans had difficulties accepting her physical and emotional maturation, which is evident through the critical discourse and publicity surrounding her mid-career films. Examining the publicity surrounding Deanna’s career is essential for understanding the difference between the persona and the person. As Richard Dyer claims, “[Publicity] is also the place where one can read tensions between star-as-persona and her/his image, tensions which at another level become themselves crucial to the image.”²¹ The later years of her career reflect the transition to adult films in serious adult roles. Arguably during this period of transition, Deanna’s on- and off-screen personas split, which had a major effect on her popularity and her ability to work outside the realm of the Durbin formula.

²¹ Dyer, *Stars*, p. 61.

1940 and 1941: Biographical Information During the Transitional Years

Biographical information about Deanna Durbin's personal life becomes increasing important when marking the boundaries between the fiction of the persona and the reality of the person. Acknowledging articles in the popular press of the era is essential when defining her persona, as perceived by the general public. It is also essential to acknowledge that the personal information within these articles represents a conflict between the persona as disseminated by the studio and the person Deanna was in her private life. In the study of any star persona, Richard Dyer claims:

The importance of publicity is that, in its apparent or actual escape from the image that Hollywood is trying to promote, it seems more 'authentic.' It is thus often taken to give privileged access to the real person of the star.²²

Deanna's personal life was an escape from the persona promoted by Universal's publicity department as well as in her films. As will be discussed in the final chapter, the "authentic" Deanna breaks with the persona leaving audiences with her persona and the films of her youth, allowing her to retire and fade into normalcy.

In October 1940, *Life* magazine featured an article "Deanna Durbin grown to womanhood, makes her eighth straight hit."²³ In the opening paragraph of the article, the dualities of her personality were exposed:

²² Ibid.

²³ "Deanna Durbin, Grown to young womanhood, makes her eighth straight hit," *Life*, 21 October 1940, 85.

The news about Deanna Durbin, as this portrait by Peter Stackpole reveals, is that she is now a mature and exceedingly lovely young woman. She will be nineteen on December 14. This is a year older than Universal Pictures will publicly admit. What they are also reluctant to admit is that Deanna is in love with Vaughn Paul, a Universal producer, whom she will probably marry next year. For the rest, Universal publicity and Durbin fact coincide.²⁴

Although the difference between Deanna's on-screen persona and private life is exposed, the article seems uninterested in this difference. The main interest lies in her latest film, *Spring Parade* (1940). The opening paragraph is indicative of how Deanna's private life was handled by the studio. Clearly, the studio publicity department felt any off-screen romance could have a negative effect in her career; even a "real romance" could spoil her "unspoiled" image. Therefore, when Deanna married Vaughn Paul in April 1941, the media was not invited to cover the event. Instead of inviting fellow actors and celebrities, she invited the people who worked on her films — technicians and crew.²⁵ Even *Life* magazine, which had prior knowledge of the event, did not provide coverage for their readers, which is evident through "Letters to the Editors." In June 1941, Mrs. Joseph Sardon wrote:

I would appreciate knowing why absolutely *no* picture of Deanna Durbin's wedding appeared in LIFE. If that wasn't news, then I'm slipping. It would have been nice seeing her smiling face on some of the pages instead of pictures of war, etc. So how come?²⁶

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Pasternak, *Easy the Hard Way*, p. 181.

²⁶ "Letters to the Editors," *Life*, 9 June 1941, 6.

Oddly, Mrs. Sardon refers to the wedding as being the sole property of Deanna, possibly a subconscious reluctance on the part of Sardon to recognize the full meaning of the union. The reply seems to indicate reluctance on the part of the editors to acknowledge the "Durbin Nuptials." Accompanied by a minute photo of the couple, *Life* magazine replied:

Herewith a picture of Mr. And Mrs. Vaughn Paul, than whose wedding a large number of events seemed more important at the time.²⁷

Interestingly, the reply does not contain Deanna Durbin's name, but rather her married name. The name in *Life* is quite untypical of Hollywood marriages where the actress usually keeps her maiden name lest the public should create a homogenized image of the married couple. Durbin's need for normalcy is shown through the editor's use of her husband's name. In spite of this, Durbin does maintain her name after marriage. However, with her third marriage after retirement she takes her husband's surname. The letter and reply indicate the divergence between Durbin's on-screen persona and off-screen personality because of the fans' denial of facts in Deanna's life and the magazine's denial of Universal's publicity. Just as Geraghty's star-as-performer emphasizes work rather than private life activities, Deanna is represented as a performer while her audience and fans are expected to rely on her films, not publicity and gossip, to form an idea of her persona. The Universal publicity may lie, but the Durbin formula remains artless when

²⁷ Ibid.

portraying the “real” Deanna. Fans assume her roles are a personification of her real nature.

The earlier *Life* article also exposed a campaign of misinformation by Universal Pictures to deceive fans about the “real” Deanna. The misinformation causes the “real” Deanna to mirror the on-screen Durbin persona. If her “real” age does not match audience perceptions of her films, her real age becomes inconsequential because the studio can change it to fit their whims. Any information (i.e. love life or age) is property of the studio, and as such the studio uses this information as they see fit. Part of what the studio is trying to protect by lying to the public is the image and formula that are successful. Without a compatible relationship between persona and formula, what saved Universal from bankruptcy in the 1930s becomes a drain on studio resources if the formula is increasingly less successful.

Gloria Jean and the Rebirth of the Durbin Formula

The studio had been successful in promoting the success of the early Durbin films. To reiterate a key point, central to the formula was Durbin’s age in terms of how childhood symbolizes innocence. No longer innocent after her “first kiss”, her image becomes spoiled. As Deanna Durbin matures, her formula no longer guarantees the success of the earlier films. The Durbin formula needed to change and be modified as she aged. As Deanna made the transition into adult films, Universal Pictures hired a new child star to fill the place Deanna vacated.

Joe Pasternak “found” Gloria Jean, and hired her at Universal. Just as Pasternak found success with Durbin, he could mold Gloria Jean into a similar formula actress. In September 1939, Gloria was featured in a *Life* magazine article that announced “Eleven-year-old soprano from Scranton makes good as a ‘second Deanna Durbin.’”²⁸ Not only would she adopt the Durbin formula, she would, as the article points out, be “giving Trouper Temple a run at the box office.”²⁹ With the success of her first film *The Underpup* (1939) Gloria Jean would continue making successful films at Universal until 1945, when her manager decided she should go on tour.³⁰ Unfortunately when she returned to Hollywood in 1947 she discovered that her reputation was forgotten and she never did recover her reputation.³¹ Universal would try to capitalize on the child-savior trope Temple and Durbin made famous. However, Gloria Jean never enjoyed the level of stardom Durbin achieved.

During this transitional period in Durbin’s persona life and career, Universal was exploring other options for their former child star, who was now an adult. Hiring child or adolescent actresses to fill the Durbin’s place would be one way in which the studio could try to continue making money with the Durbin formula. However, as I will discuss

²⁸ “Eleven-year-old soprano from Scranton makes good as a ‘second Deanna Durbin,’” *Life*, 17 September 1939, 54.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Don Creacy, “The Gloria Jean Story,” *Classic Images* 280 (1998): 55, posted on <<http://www.gloriajeanchildstar.com/webpages/aboutgloriastory.html>> [16 January 2003].

³¹ *Ibid.*

in the upcoming chapters, the studio also planned to modify the Durbin formula and persona so as to diversify Deanna Durbin's appeal as an actress thereby possibly finding new popularity with different audiences.

Chapter 4: Limitations of Persona

[Deanna Durbin], like Judy Garland, was able to bridge the transition successfully between adolescence and adulthood on screen.¹

Deanna Durbin did bridge the gap between adolescence and adulthood. However, one could argue that her transition was far from successful, and would have severe consequences for her career and her personal life. Moreover, her early career, 1936 to 1941, would have massive ramifications for her later career choices. As noted in the previous chapter, as an adult Deanna Durbin's on- and off-screen personalities began to diverge; her public and private life activities were not congruent. During this period, 1941 to 1948, Durbin would continue to make films drawing on the same persona she established as child star. Personal events such as marriages, divorces and motherhood, however, would create an arena where the Durbin persona and the everyday Deanna Durbin could not coexist and would eventually separate.

Her later career will be examined in terms of how her persona and formula are maintained in the film *It Started With Eve*, and how the persona and formula are modified in the films *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday* and *Christmas Holiday*. As in the previous chapter, biographical information will be important to an understanding of the on- and off-screen Deanna Durbin. Negotiation between child and adulthood makes it

¹ Scheiner, *Signifying Female Adolescence: Film Representations and Fans*, p. 70.

increasingly difficult for the everyday Deanna Durbin to lead a “normal” life in Hollywood given her fans need for her persona and her films to remain the same.

It Started With Eve and the return of Henry Koster

Released after her marriage to Vaughn Paul, *It Started With Eve* marked the return of Henry Koster as director of Durbin films. Although the film garnered much critical success, it marks the finale to the Koster-Pasternak-Durbin collaboration at Universal. Interestingly, after the completion of *Spring Parade* the year before, Koster refused to make Durbin’s next film, *Nice Girl?*, explaining that Deanna had become too difficult to work with.² Deanna Durbin had become a young woman whose idea about the films she made, specifically about the characters she portrayed, would be a departure from earlier roles that focused on youth and innocence. Deanna Durbin wanted serious dramatic roles, and her opinions became increasingly important to the collaborative team. However Koster viewed Deanna’s lifestyle and maturation in a negative light. In her interview with Koster, Irene Kahn Atkins’ line of questioning is directed at Durbin’s maturation in Hollywood. She asks a leading question, “You must have found it difficult to have a child becoming a woman in front of your camera.”³ Koster replies:

Of course it was. Irene, there are two elements that have to be considered. One is that a girl who becomes a movie star at thirteen has

² Koster, *Henry Koster*. p. 74.

³ Ibid., p. 75.

no real growing-up time in her life. She misses all that makes a normal girl grow up slowly into the life of a woman. And then our close working together and never seeing anybody else was probably not too good for her.⁴

Unlike Pasternak, who felt that his job as producer of Durbin's films was to ensure that her growth was not forced, Koster felt that Deanna's life was not normal, and his reply indicates that he feels her maturation in Hollywood was unnatural. Although publicity he indicates Deanna's adolescence is genuine, Koster states otherwise.⁵ In so far that her childhood lacked normalcy, it is the idea of normalcy which she would presumably return to after her retirement in 1950.⁶ Returning to the Koster interview, Kahn Atkins' next question was "Did Deanna Durbin attend college?"⁷ Her line of questioning curiously seems to diverge from collecting information about Koster's career and moves towards the specifics of Deanna Durbin's lifestyle. Interestingly Koster's reply indicates that her abnormal childhood may have affected the adult she became:

She had private lessons. She had no time to go to college. There were tutors on the set and in her dressing room. She got her education alright. But it's not the same as being with hundreds of other youngsters, and all of that goes into the life into which we grow.⁸

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Refer to Fig. 1.

⁶ Everson, "The Career of Deanna Durbin," 513-529; Shipman, "Nostalgia: Deanna Durbin," 24-27; Zierold, *The Child Stars*, pp. 190-205.

⁷ Koster, *Henry Koster*, p. 75.

⁸ Ibid.

His reply is a reminder of how the seemingly perfect life of the child star was far from perfect. To Durbin's fans, she led a charmed life and seemed to enjoy her successes. Inwardly, however, Durbin felt trapped by her image in the media and the studio system.

Returning to Durbin's films, *It Started With Eve* marked the reunion of Durbin, Pasternak, and Koster in order to recreate the success of her early career. One hypothesis for the re-teaming could be found in Durbin's marriage to Vaughn Paul. In order to divert fan's attention away from the nuptials, studio publicity put an emphasis on the reunification of the partnership that launched Durbin's career and the success that made Universal solvent again. Deemed by Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* to be the "perfect 8 to 80 film," *It Started With Eve* marks a return to her earlier films.⁹ The narrative is no longer focused on romanticizing or sexualizing Durbin's persona: this film follows in the romantic-comedy vein of the fixit films.

Although Georganne Scheiner provides an interesting, albeit compact, analysis of *It Started With Eve*, she does not acknowledge key aspects of the narrative that are at times in conflict with her own analysis.¹⁰ Unlike Durbin's earlier films and formula, she is not, as Scheiner claims, "an orphan or the daughter of a single parent scheming to create a nuclear family."¹¹ The fractured family is present in the film; however, Anne Terry (Durbin) is not a product of such a family.¹² The fractured family in this case is

⁹ Bosley Crowther, "The Screen Review," *The New York Times*, 3 October 1941, 27.

¹⁰ Scheiner, *Signifying Female Adolescence*, pp. 75-76.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

the Reynold's family: John Sr. (Charles Laughton) and John Jr. (Robert Cummings). Without a mother or wife, the relationship between father and son is weak. It is Anne who becomes a rehabilitative force and reconciles the two men. However the film is more than just a "Miss Fixit" narrative; rather, it is a fixit narrative because Anne is "fixed" as well. John Sr. helps Anne's music career and helps her to discover love.

Although *It Started with Eve* was successful and followed the formula of her earlier films, her increasing age bore heavily upon studio management. Durbin, no longer able to realistically play the characters of her youth, would need to change and attempt roles unlike her previous roles. *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday* was going to be a film that marked an independence from the formula and the persona that made her successful.

The Amazing Mrs. Holliday and the Press

Interestingly, Samantha Barbas calls fandom "a search for authenticity," a validation of what fans witness on screen through "cinema's ability to create a realistic illusion of life."¹³ As a result, "[attempting] to confirm that the movies had a basis in reality, fans tried to learn as much as they could about the world behind the screen."¹⁴ It is this urge of the fan to discover and explore all aspects of the star's life that the

¹³ Samantha Barbas, *Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars, and the Cult of Celebrity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

advertising for *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday* caters to. In an advertisement, which appeared in *The New York Times*, shocking claims are made in order to pique audience's interests in Durbin's career: "The new Deanna Durbin... as the mother of nine... and the loveliest grandma in town!" and "She's so super even her own grandson can't resist her!"¹⁵ Thus far, audiences had been led to believe that Deanna Durbin's persona typified qualities associated with niceness; therefore, these statements seem to contradict audiences' perception and expectations of Durbin films. Implications of incest aside, the advertisements are upbeat. Apparently the studio is trying to shift audience expectations in order for her audience to become more accepting of changes to Durbin's persona and formula.

In another advertisement, the question is posed: "Why do they call her Amazing?" and a variety of possible explanations are provided in the form of interrogative statements: "Because she's in love with her own grandson?" "Because she's got nine children — one of them Chinese?" "Because all the boys from 8 to 80 want to marry her?" "Because she's as much at home in a Burmese bombing as at society teas?" But no information is given to the audience.¹⁶ The ads state: "You'll find out when you see the new Deanna Durbin in her most amazing role."¹⁷ If her persona is so dramatically altered, then any idea of authenticity is questionable. The advertising entices the fan to continue searching for the truth behind the characters she enacts on screen, thereby

¹⁵ Refer to Fig. 12.

¹⁶ Refer to Fig. 13.

¹⁷ Refer to Fig 13.

enticing fans to continue to consume anything related to Durbin. In this respect, the advertising is indicating that Durbin's persona has changed. Two other advertisements for *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday* indicate that Durbin is very extroverted and very cavalier about societal norms. One caption informs the public that this character is "Your Holiday Date!"¹⁸ The caption of the other advertisement reads: "Whe-e-e-e! What a gal! The new Deanna Durbin as mother of nine ... madly in love with her own grandson!"¹⁹ Both advertisements indicate that this "new Deanna Durbin" has changed, and that she's having fun flirting with possible controversy. In all of the advertisements she appears to be happy and unaware that people might think badly of her if she is involved in an incestuous relationship with her grandson. Is this too much change for a persona that has remained the same — innocent — for many years? In order to discover if these statements are really true, people must see the film. And in this way, the studios enticed viewers to the theatre. So many issues are brought to light in these advertisements that even the "sugar coated" Miss Fixit tone of previous Durbin films clearly changes, hinting at a shift in genre from romantic comedy to drama.²⁰

In many ways, the construction of her persona and audience expectations are mediated through publicity, thus creating a reciprocal relationship between the industry, star and audience. The publicity for *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday* cannot account for the

¹⁸ Refer to Fig 11.

¹⁹ Refer to Fig. 14.

²⁰ William K. Everson, "Deanna Durbin and Jean Renoir." *Films in Review*, XXXVII, no.8/9 (1986): 410.

extremely negative press it received in *The New York Times*. Instead of a positive reception to the “new” Durbin, the reviewer writes:

Most irksome is the fact that the authors at no point show any real concern for the children; they are merely scattered through the scenes to serve as a sort of pathetic background for Miss Durbin’s display of motherly love — and let it be said at once that Miss Durbin was a much more affective actress before she lost her girlish laughter... Her rendition of “Rock-a-bye Baby” in Chinese is simply sacrificing the genuine for the cute.²¹

The reviewers hold the authors accountable. I will return to the question of authorship later. Tampering with the Durbin persona is deemed inexcusable by critics because although the advertising suggests a “new” Durbin, the film only provides the audience with the “old” Durbin trying to make a transition into more mature, adult roles. The review concludes with, “it is a trivial story upon a theme much too sensitive and real to be exploited in such a shoddy fashion.”²² A film, which was to reveal a different side to the persona previously undiscovered by her fans, proved to be a dismal failure. In this respect, the negative reception of this film had adverse affects on Durbin’s career.

***The Amazing Mrs. Holliday* and Jean Renoir**

In the context of the critical reception of this film, why was it considered a dismal failure? Again, I refer back to *The New York Times* review and the reviewer’s use of the

²¹“The Screen,” *The New York Times*, 22 February 1943, 20.

²² Ibid.

term “authors,” and how these “authors” are held accountable for the film’s failure.

Although Bruce Manning is given directorial and producing credit for the film, information from articles by William Everson to Bernard Chardere provides evidence supporting the directorial connection of Jean Renoir to this particular Durbin film.

It was known that Jean Renoir had been slotted to direct the first non-Pasternak Durbins, to lead her into more mature material and help create a new image for her. But apart from pre-production publicity that Renoir was to direct *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday*, nothing more was heard about his association with that film, and when it was released Bruce Manning received both producer and director credits.²³

William Everson’s comments illustrate a serious desire on the part of Universal Studios to drastically change the persona of Deanna Durbin. Even though Jean Renoir was not credited for his participation on *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday*, it is clear that the types of films the studio intended to shift the “Durbin Formula” towards is indicated by the initial hiring of Renoir. The various comments concerning the authorship of *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday* and Durbin’s image are one indication of the number of people involved in creating the film and her character Ruth Kirke. Returning to the issue of Renoir’s hiring, Deanna Durbin’s has said:

Universal contacted Jean Renoir to make a film with me because we all wanted to change a, by then, stereotyped image of the ‘nice’ young girl, the sugar coated ‘Miss Fixit’, the kind of story Jean Renoir qualified as a ‘trop mini’.²⁴

²³ Everson, “Deanna Durbin and Jean Renoir,” 409.

²⁴ Ibid., 410.

In addition, note should be taken of Durbin's remark "we all wanted to change" implying that the studio was open to changing her persona, quashing the notion that it was the studio's fault for Durbin's lot.²⁵ Many elements caused Durbin to retain her stereotyped image. When this film was unsuccessful, the studio would then give her the roles that played to the "stereotyped image of the 'nice' young girl."²⁶

It was not the intention of the studio to shock her audience with a drastic change. Rather, her films and persona would change by small increments, and the end result would be a "new" Deanna Durbin although each film's advertising would tout a "new" Deanna, regardless of whatever change or improvement was made to her image. It is also important to note that Durbin was not the only persona affected by her professional relationship with Koster and Pasternak. They were also affected. In his autobiography, Pasternak states, "I knew Bobby was too splendid a talent to limit himself to one *genre* of filmmaking and one producer. I may have felt that as time went on, we'd branch out."²⁷ By producing only Deanna Durbin films in Pasternak's case and directing her films in Koster's case, it would be a limiting factor in their careers. Therefore, Jean Renoir was contracted by Universal to direct a Durbin film. A new perspective could alter the trajectory of Durbin's career. A director, whose reputation was far removed from the film type usually associated with the Durbin persona could only improve the chances of

²⁵ Ibid. (My emphasis)

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Pasternak, *Easy the Hard Way*, p. 179.

changing her persona. However, as noted by Bernard Chardere, William Everson, and Alexander Sesonske, the Renoir-Durbin-Manning collaboration was fraught with difficulties ranging from illness and script problems to other contractual obligations of those involved.²⁸ After Renoir left *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday*, Durbin stated:

The studio decided to finish the film as well as possible. If there are parts which relapsed into sugar and into the old personage they had wanted Jean to change and replace, it's because the factory took over, and the factory only knew one recipe.²⁹

As mentioned in the introduction, the star system "mirrored the corporate ideology that catapulted the United States into economic prominence."³⁰ Deanna's comment that draws an analogy between the films she participated in and the product produced by a factory signals the role the studio played in her life and career, what Durbin's professional expectations were, and consequently what her disappointments were. Subsequent films, *Hers to Hold* (1943), *His Butler's Sister* (1943), and *Can't Help Singing* (1944) only reinforced the stereotyped image of Deanna Durbin and the characters she portrayed. For example, *The New York Times* review of *Hers to Hold* states:

²⁸ Bernard Chardere, "The Film Renoir Left Unfinished," *Cinemateque*, no. 19, Spring (2001): 87-119; Everson, "Deanna Durbin and Jean Renoir," *Films in Review*, 409-412; Alexander Sesonske, "The Amazing Mrs. Holliday," *Films in Review*, XXXVIII, no. 10(1987): 355-358.

²⁹ Everson, "Deanna Durbin and Jean Renoir," 411.

³⁰ Davis. *The Glamour Factory*, p. ix.

At best, it is lightweight entertainment loaded with shopworn gags, situations and heart throbs. But in it Miss Durbin has a vehicle suited to her age and talents and the Durbin clubs are in for a grand time.³¹

The reviewer implies the reason why audiences (especially her most ardent fans) would enjoy this film is that the situations are well known; therefore, the audience's expectations will be met. The "old" Durbin remains, especially since *Hers to Hold* is the third installment of *Three Smart Girls* series and Durbin reprises her role as Penny Craig.

Similarly, reviews for *His Butler's Sister* seem consistent with reviews of *Hers to Hold*. Bosley Crowther writes:

Universal has had a rather tough time bringing Deanna Durbin to adult flower, and in her two most recent pictures she plainly lacked her potential bloom. Maybe the fault was inevitable; maybe Miss Durbin's elusive charm is strangely inconsistent with maturity and with the sternly pressing problems of today. Anyhow, the boys at Universal have frankly assumed that it is, and so they have turned the clock backwards as far as possible for Durbin's latest film.³²

He further states: "The story is egg-whites and sugar."³³ Again, the Durbin persona is held back by the "one recipe" the studio knows. Also Crowther's comments are indicative of the problematic relationship between the age of a star that begins as child star and the degree of success that can be obtained in later films. As noted earlier, aging is something audiences want their stars to avoid.³⁴ To remain youthful and perfect is

³¹"The Screen," *The New York Times*, 22 July 1943, 15.

³² Bosley Crowther, "The Screen," *The New York Times*, 30 December 1943, 13.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Refer to chapter 3, page 48.

ideal, and almost essential in order to maintain popularity and box office success for the child star.

Although Crowther referred to *Can't Help Singing* as diversionary, the studio still planned to change Durbin's persona, considering her for less diversionary roles.³⁵ An important Durbin film from this time, *Christmas Holiday*, will be discussed through an examination of how the film was received by critics and audiences, the long-term longevity of Durbin's persona, and her continuing and persistent popularity with fans.

***Christmas Holiday*: the departure from the Durbin persona**

As noted earlier, Deanna Durbin's persona represents platonic and familial love; however, as she aged and matured the persona began to represent romantic and sexual love, and desire.³⁶ To reiterate Morin's point concerning the meaning of stardom: the star's role is to provide information, formation, incitation and initiation into the mysteries of love.³⁷ In other words, her audience learns about love and the techniques of love (i.e. the kiss).³⁸ The kiss "is the profound expression of a complex love which eroticises the soul and mystifies the body."³⁹ Just as the first kiss is important to the publicity and

³⁵ Bosley Crowther, "The Screen," *The New York Times*, 26 December 1944, 22.

³⁶ Refer to Ch. 3, pg. 49.

³⁷ Morin, *The Stars*, pp. 177-179. Morin idealizes/generalizes the audience to some extent, in his view the audience's job (inherent need) is to mimic what they see on screen. What to eat, how to dress, walk, talk, etc. As is the case, especially where adolescent audience members are concerned – the actors on screen socialize youth and teach them about romance, love, etc.

³⁸ Refer to Ch. 3, pgs. 52-53.

³⁹ Edgar Morin, *Les Stars (The Stars)*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1951), 179; quoted in Richard Dyer, *Stars*, New Edition (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), 45.

advertising of *First Love*, the kiss becomes equally important to the publicity and advertising of *Christmas Holiday*. In two “teaser” advertisements, which appeared in *The New York Times*, Deanna Durbin’s profile is presented in close-up, emphasized by a key light.⁴⁰ Inches away, another profile, more masculine is placed in the shadows. The situation appears to be the moments before a kiss, and the lighting evokes the mystery and anticipation of that moment. Although the kiss, and any suggestion of sexuality, is not discussed overtly within the advertisements or publicity, it is implied. The “teaser” advertisement claims there “is something new about Deanna Durbin,” thereby alerting her audience and fans to a shift in her persona. It is again important to emphasize the role of the audience in the formation of the persona. As Morin explains, “it is the admiring crowds, in this last instance, who confer such qualities⁴¹ upon the star and who by this attribution of a soul will *make* her a star.”⁴² Therefore, her persona is a creation, in part, by the fans. These advertisements, which suggest love vis-à-vis the kiss, eroticises that soul given to Durbin by her fans, and it is this soul that her fans and audience wish to remain unchanged.

Billed on the advertisement for *Christmas Holiday* as “her first dramatic role,” this “new” Deanna Durbin is trying to change the persona that has already been

⁴⁰ Refer to Figs. 16-19.

⁴¹ These qualities Morin refers to are: beauty, spirituality and super-personality.

⁴² Morin, *The Stars*, p. 50.

entrenched through studio publicity and audience adoration.⁴³ An irate Bosley Crowther sums up his review of the film by stating “[I]t is really grotesque and outlandish what they’ve done to Miss Durbin in this film. Imagine a sweet schoolgirl performing the role of Sadie Thompson in ‘Rain’!”⁴⁴ Most obviously, her acting abilities are not questioned or evaluated, troubling if only for the fact that is what actors should be evaluated on: their ability to assume a role or character. In Deanna Durbin’s case, her persona is all-powerful and affects her chances of expanding her acting repertoire. In his meeting with Robert Siodmak, director of *Christmas Holiday*, Russell Taylor learned,

Deanna Durbin was difficult: she wanted to play a new part but flinched from looking like a tramp: she always wanted to look like a nice, wholesome Deanna Durbin pretending to be a tramp.⁴⁵

What Siodmak suggests is that even Deanna herself seemed resistant to modifying her image that had been constructed for her. Even her old producer Joseph Pasternak states, “I think she felt lost when I left and the pictures they gave her were often inappropriate. I would never have permitted her to do *Christmas Holiday*.”⁴⁶

Although the negativity towards *Christmas Holiday* and her modified persona is evident, it is contradicted by slightly more positive criticisms of the film. For example, in

⁴³ Refer to Fig. 20.

⁴⁴ Bosley Crowther, “The Screen,” *The New York Times*, 29 June 1944, 16.

⁴⁵ Russell Taylor, “Encounter with Siodmak,” *Sight and Sound*, 28, nos. 3 and 4 (1959): 181.

⁴⁶ James Bawden, “Joe Pasternak,” *Films in Review*, XXXVI, no. 2 (1985): 71.

a review from *Variety*, the reviewer feels that “because her performance is so appealing, as well as the good supporting cast and tasteful production, the film should do well at the box-office to justify the risks Universal took.”⁴⁷ Also, in a *Life* article published to accompany the release of the film, Deanna is shown to be more mature. The article, “Deanna Durbin: after 7 years of adolescent roles she becomes a dramatic star” chronicles her romantic maturation “spanning 14 screen performances.”⁴⁸ Interestingly, the article also draws on Deanna’s personal life: “In contrast to the smooth progress of her motion picture career, Deanna Durbin had done a lot of living since she first stepped onto the Universal lot.”⁴⁹ Married at 18, divorced at 22, the actual Durbin is far from the persona she represents in the minds of her fans. She is not even the “sweet school girl” Crowther perceives her to be. Interesting, and in contradiction to Siodmak’s remarks, is the photograph printed with the *Life* article, which is of a sexualized Deanna Durbin. With a “come hither” smoldering glance and a very low-cut revealing blouse, Deanna is the quintessential “Hollywood pin-up.”⁵⁰ In her 1983 interview with David Shipman, Deanna Durbin claims:

I couldn’t wait to wear low-cut dresses and look sultry. I remember the day in 1944 when Philippe Halsman from LIFE Magazine came to my home. He said he was going to photograph me ‘looking like an angel’.

⁴⁷ Debra Handy, ed., *Variety Film Reviews*, vol. 7, *Christmas Holiday*, by. Bron. (New York: Garland Publishers, 1983), 7 June 1944.

⁴⁸ “Deanna Durbin: After 7 years of adolescent roles she becomes a mature dramatic star,” *Life*, 3 July 1944, 53.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “Pin up of the past,” *Films and Filming*, September 1983, 40. Also refer to Fig. 15.

I answered that I may not know how I *did* want to be photographed, but if there was one way I certainly *did not* want to be photographed, it was looking like an angel!"⁵¹

And so it would be the "sultry" Deanna that would appear in *Life*. She admitted to Shipman "that for some of my public all of this must have been very hard to understand."⁵² Like royalty, she refers to "her public," those who bought into the "industrial Pygmalionism" of Hollywood and believed in the persona as authentic and true.⁵³ In addition, the *Life* photograph provides an interesting contextualization for the "teaser" advertisements. Not only did Deanna Durbin present herself dramatically, she presents herself as sexualized.

Continuing with positive criticisms of *Christmas Holiday*, in the "What the picture did for me" section of *Motion Picture Herald*, one rural exhibitor claims,

It is so interesting that the bobby-sox brigade, which is usually very unruly during heavy dramas, sat quietly through the entire show. That is a real tribute to a picture of this type. Miss Durbin and Kelly portrayed unusual characters for them very well.⁵⁴

Although this is only one opinion, it suggests that the reaction to the film was not as extreme as Crowther's, particularly when exhibitors did not positively receive many of

⁵¹ Shipman, "Nostalgia: Deanna Durbin," p. 26.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Morin, *The Stars*, p. 55.

⁵⁴ "What the picture did for me," *Motion Picture Herald* 157, n. 13 (1944): 40.

Durbin's later films as reported by *Motion Picture Herald*.⁵⁵ In his article from the mid 1970s, "The Career of Deanna Durbin," William Everson also praises her performance in the film by saying:

Deanna is wearing slightly excessive makeup as the part demanded, and acting in a somewhat *unrelaxed* and untypical manner, as the deliberately stylized approach also demanded, gave a remarkably good performance.⁵⁶

Again this positive account of the film, thirty-two years after release, illustrates the paradox between the Deanna Durbin persona and Deanna Durbin as individual and actor. Everson's account of her performance looks past her persona in order to evaluate her acting, whereas Crowther's account of the film cannot separate the persona from performance. And as Christine Geraghty claims,

The relationship between the audience and the star is deemed to be best figured by the fan whose knowledge comes from a wide variety of sources and who reworks the material in the interests of working through contradictory questions of identity.⁵⁷

Unlike the example Geraghty uses of Drew Barrymore, Demi Moore and Julia Roberts in the section "Analyzing the female star," Deanna Durbin presents more of a contradiction to her audience because her films are not supposed to be contextualized in terms of a

⁵⁵ Ibid., 161, n. 9 (1945):42, n. 10 (1945):41; 162, n. 12 (1946):42; 163, n.1 (1946): 54, n. 13 (1946): 49; 165, n. 7 (1946):57.

⁵⁶ Everson, "The Career of Deanna Durbin," 526.

⁵⁷ Gledhill and Williams, eds., *Reinventing Film Studies*, p. 185.

“turbulent private life” but in terms of a screen persona. The Durbin persona is a nexus of contradictory and paradoxical facts and fictions. Living her life of fact and fiction, Durbin was unable to accept the fiction part of her persona. Furthermore, her retirement arises from the stifling lifestyle borne by the Hollywood celebrities and personalities of the studio era.

Christmas Holiday and Characterization

Although *Christmas Holiday* is a film which Durbin feels is her best role, it is one of three Durbin films “currently off the market.”⁵⁸ One of the fascinating elements of the film is the “against type” casting of both Durbin and Gene Kelly.⁵⁹ As both Ian Cameron and Deborah Lazaroff Alpi argue, it is against type casting that makes the film more plausible.⁶⁰ There is also a disparity between audience expectations of the film and what the film actually presents to the viewers. As Ian Cameron rightly claims, “the gap between one’s expectations of a film with these two stars titled *Christmas Holiday* and the film itself could scarcely be greater: Deanna Durbin plays a prostitute, Kelly plays a murderer.”⁶¹ Although, as I have mentioned before, Crowther felt that this role for

⁵⁸ Everson, “The Career of Deanna Durbin,” 526.

⁵⁹ Deborah Lazaroff Alpi, *Robert Siodmak: A Biography*, (North Carolina: McFarland and Company Inc., Publishers, 1998), p. 127.

⁶⁰ Ian Cameron, ed. *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, (London: Studio Vista, 1992), 116; Lazaroff Alpi, *Robert Siodmak: A Biography*, p. 127.

⁶¹ Cameron, ed. *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, p. 116.

Durbin was inappropriate, he could not reconcile Deanna Durbin the actress with Deanna Durbin the screen persona. However, it is these types of psychological dramas, which, out of necessity call for actors to act against their image or “against type”.⁶² For example, Alfred Hitchcock uses James Stewart in his films because Stewart’s image is a strong representation of the “Good Joe” type as defined by O.E. Klapp and Richard Dyer.⁶³ The social types are, as Dyer comments, “a shared, recognizable, easily grasped image of how people are in society (with collective approval or disapproval built into it).”⁶⁴ Therefore, by using Stewart, Hitchcock uses Stewart’s “Good Joe” image in order to critique it and suggest that the one-dimensionality of the image could be expanded to create greater dimensionality, adding deep, dark underpinnings. Which is to say, even the “Good Joes” are capable of straying from proper, normative behavior.

Further, Robert Siodmak uses the Durbin persona in an attempt to explain the psychological motivations of Abigail Manette (Deanna Durbin), who is first presented to the audience as a “hostess” in a nightclub singing to patrons. Since Durbin’s persona is easily recognizable and understood, Abigail’s fall from innocence — occurring when she discovers her husband (Gene Kelly) is a psychopathic killer — is even more dramatic. Supported by Lazaroff Alpi’s conclusion that “[Deanna Durbin’s] reputation as a child star contributed substantially to the effectiveness and credibility of her transformation

⁶² Lazaroff Alpi, *Robert Siodmak: A Biography*, p. 127.

⁶³ Dyer, *Stars*, p. 48.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

from naïve innocent to fallen woman,” *Christmas Holiday* is the only Durbin film that deviates drastically from her persona and formula.⁶⁵ Her next film, *Lady on a Train* (1945), would not present the star in such a marked way. Even the film’s generic origins would be muddled, combining elements from mystery, suspense, comedy, romance and the musical, trying to appease both the audience and critic’s need for continuity in her performances and Durbin’s need to diversify her acting portfolio.

The “Durbin Plan”: post *Christmas Holiday*

Because *Christmas Holiday* was not as successful as the studio anticipated, the films Durbin made post-1944 reverted back to a reliance on her familiar persona. In terms of genre, these films would continue to follow in the romantic-comedy vein, resembling *It Started With Eve* more than *Christmas Holiday*. Consequently, her popularity reached a plateau and would never reach the same height it had been during her early career.

A *New York Times* article, printed prior to the release of *Christmas Holiday*, explored the need for a modification of her persona and the type of films she starred in. “A Plan Marked ‘D’ for Durbin” warns that “[*Spring Parade*] was successful, but storm signals were observed in the box-office barometer. They showed that Miss Durbin’s days were numbered in roles of that kind.”⁶⁶ The “emergency” signaled to the studios to shift Deanna from roles geared toward an adolescent star to roles

⁶⁵ Lazaroff Alpi, *Robert Siodmak: A Biography*, p. 127.

⁶⁶ “A Plan Marked ‘D’ for Durbin,” *New York Times*, 18 June 1944, 2X.

geared for a “straight actress.” The plan was that each role would make small incremental moves towards changing her into a dramatic actress. For example, *Hers to Hold* is described as her “most realistic role up to that date.”⁶⁷ In theory Durbin would sing less and act more. The focus of her career would no longer rest on her singing talents.

Lady on a Train would be a mystery-thriller role and would place Deanna’s character, Nikki Collins, at the center of a murder. However, the rest of New York believes the death is accidental, which is where Nikki must do some sleuthing. While a more dramatic role, some critics, such as Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times*, viewed Durbin’s efforts to shift her career negatively:

The sooner Deanna Durbin and her producers realize she is not a dramatic actress nor even a fair farceuse, the sooner we’ll all be spared the bother of such embarrassments as “Lady on a Train” . . . Her manner is awkward and childish, for which Charles David the director, must take some blame, and her timing in farce situations is out of “sync” . . . Miss Durbin is out of her class when it comes to playing a straight role. She’d better stick to frothy soubrettes.⁶⁸

Even her following film *Because of Him* (1946), a romantic-comedy, would fall flat with reviewers because she, as one reviewer suggests, “should make the most of her greatest asset — her voice.”⁶⁹ However, as “A Plan Marked ‘D’ for Durbin” claims, it would be

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Bosley Crowther, “The Screen,” *The New York Times*, 15 September 1945, 21.

⁶⁹ “The Screen Review,” *The New York Times*, 25 January 1946, 26.

these films I describe that would help Durbin's career as a dramatic actress (sans singing). Moreover, as the article claims these films were "arranged in a pattern so dovetailed that each picture is designed to correct the one before it, if that picture tracks off course."⁷⁰ Obviously films such as *Lady on a Train* and *Because of Him* did not have the desired "corrective" effect on her career.

The inference from this plan is that each film would delve, somewhat, into other genres until audiences were comfortable watching Deanna in other roles. *Christmas Holiday* would be one of those films that would give audiences a taste of Durbin's talents besides singing. Outlining her upcoming schedule, "Miss Durbin will do a romantic drama opposite Charles Boyer, then a mystery thriller a la Alfred Hitchcock and a comedy-drama about an opera clan."⁷¹ Unfortunately the film with Boyer would never be made, probably due to the poor critical success of *Christmas Holliday*, and the "mystery-thriller a la Alfred Hitchcock" (most likely *Lady on a Train*) would also fare poorly with critics. The article concludes by commenting that if audiences positively respond to *Christmas Holiday*, "The scripts are ready, so the studio can put her into either comedy or drama next."⁷² The studio's plan was not successful therefore Deanna Durbin was relegated back to the films and characters she could no longer plausibly or realistically portray. These roles, which are roles relying on the Durbin persona of youthful innocence, are apparent in her final films *Up in Central Park* (1948) and *For the*

⁷⁰ "A Plan Marked 'D' for Durbin," *New York Times*, 18 June 1944, 2X.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

Love of Mary (1948). *Up in Central Park* is a film version of the Broadway play of the same name. Rosie Moore (Deanna Durbin) is involved with a political scandal and romance. As the reviewer from *The New York Times* states: "Miss Durbin is fresh looking in a nice girlish way and displays a convincing amount of naïveté."⁷³ These remarks could describe a role from her early career. It is this kind of remark that illustrates the strength her persona had with her audiences and critics, so much so that she was unable to be successful with any other formulas or genres, and her critics and audiences were unable to accept her in any different roles, such as Ruth Kirke from *The Amazing Mrs. Holiday* or Abigail Manette from *Christmas Holliday*.

After twelve years in Hollywood, Durbin's career seems to have come full circle: starting with the persona and formula created in *Every Sunday* and ending with the same persona and formula in *For the Love of Mary*. Although attempts to change the course of Durbin's career were made, the entrenchment of her persona and formula during the early successes in her career had a negative effect upon those later attempts to build her repertoire as a dramatic actress.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ "The Screen Review," *The New York Times*, 27 May 1948, 29.

Conclusions: Post-retirement — 1950 and beyond

What do child stars become when they are no longer children? What options were open to Deanna Durbin when she could no longer star in the kinds of films that had made her famous? In terms of her contemporaries, Garland and Temple, both tried to make pictures outside the realm of child star; however, neither was wholly successful as a film star although they enjoyed some success in other areas. Although some may argue that *A Star is Born* (1954) represents the pinnacle of Garland's career, one could argue that her role was merely an extension of her tormented personal life and not the virtuosi performance of a professional actress. Durbin's career could be placed on a spectrum between, on one hand, Temple's career that eventually led into politics, and on the other, Garland's career that would eventually lead to her overdose/death. The ideals upheld by Durbin's star persona soured because of the way in which the studio system operates and the way in which it creates these stars. One reason for her retirement could be found in the declining popularity of her later films. As she matured the audience-appeal of her films lessened. Although she was no longer a child, the qualities that attracted viewers to films remained changed. Unable to break-free of the child star mould or the Durbin formula that marked her early in her career, and, unable to leave the "miss-fixit" image behind, she retired from the cinema for good. After her retirement from film in 1948, Deanna claimed, " 'Deanna' as a byproduct of my youth which had so many facets that I

had to struggle not to be engulfed by it and start leading someone else's life."¹

On March 6th 1950, a small headline on the front page of *The Toronto Daily Star* appeared: "Deanna Durbin Quits Filmland for Europe."² Although the story does not call this period in Deanna Durbin's life "retirement," the article does state she is "leaving Hollywood in two weeks for an indefinite stay in Europe."³ After her divorce from producer Felix Jackson, her second divorce in a decade, Deanna Durbin moved to France where she married French director Charles David and began to lead a "normal" life — a life away from public scrutiny. Although Durbin's abrupt retirement seems mysterious, one reason Durbin gave for this career move was the need for privacy and normalcy. In her first and only interview since her retirement, Deanna explained to David Shipman why she abandoned both acting and singing: "She did not want to continue making records when she left films because the required publicity would have destroyed the privacy she longed for."⁴ After twelve years living and working in the public arena, Deanna decided to retire both from acting and from the persona created for her by the studios and through her films. As Norman Zierold quotes Durbin as saying,

Sure I had a lot of fun and enjoyed things I otherwise wouldn't have had.
But I also missed out on a lot of the joys of girl who lead normal lives. . .
I'm one child star who grew up to be happy.⁵

¹ Deanna Durbin, "Letter to the editor," *Films in Review* XXVIII, 2 (February 1977): 127.

² "Deanna Durbin quits Filmland for Europe," *Toronto Daily Star*, 6 March 1950, front page.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Shipman, "'Nostalgia: Deanna Durbin,'" 27.

⁵ Zierold, *The Child Stars*, p. 203.

Her comments imply that the Hollywood system made it impossible for her to find happiness. For Deanna Durbin, the contradiction between public and private life was too great. Zierold also quotes a letter Durbin sent to Gavin Hodges of *The New York Post*:

My fans sat in the dark, anonymous and obscure, while I was projected bigger than life on the screen. . . Fans took home an image of me and studio press agents filled in the personal details. They invented them and before I would resist, this worldwide picture of me came back stronger than my real person and very often conflicted with it.⁶

Durbin also makes her feelings clear on who created her persona. The studio was responsible for creating the persona which held fans' attention and admiration. Moreover, the over-adulation of Deanna Durbin made the separation between persona and her real life personality virtually impossible.

The Durbin persona was merely an illusion upheld by the formula of her early films and the publicity and information circulated by the studio. The need for privacy was one reason why Deanna retired from film; however, the notion that her films in combination with the studio created persona made her attempts to try new roles, new formulas or different genres seemingly futile. Arguably the formula and the persona allowed for typecasting to overshadow Durbin's later career efforts. This being said, I believe Deanna Durbin had difficulties reconciling the discontinuities between her popularity with fans and the decline of the popularity of her films, especially in terms of critical reception and box office revenues. She would fade from public awareness

⁶ Ibid.

through a determined refusal to grant interviews, biographies, and the like. Her feelings are evident in this quote from Joseph Pasternak's autobiography:

"I don't think they want to see me anymore," Deanna said, and she was still a girl, hardly out of her twenties. "Darling, you amuse me," I had to tell her. "You talk about them — the audience — as though they get finished with people and throw them away as a child discards old toys. I'll tell you one of the few secrets I've learned from the theatre. The public is never 'through' with a star. It's always the star who is through with the public."⁷

The final portion of Pasternak's comment is an accurate statement illustrating Durbin's relationship with her fans. Although she retired over fifty years ago, she remains popular today. In August 1999, Deanna wrote a letter to the "Deanna Durbin Society" for the purpose of "re-retiring." As she claims,

This is not easy for me to do for many reasons...one of the most important is, the tremendous amount of mail I receive I cannot possibly answer. But it seems wrong to have people writing so kindly, not receiving an answer and not understanding why. There simply are not enough hours in a day!⁸

Regardless of her statement, Deanna Durbin is more "involved" with her fans now than at the height of her career in Hollywood. Her fans never were "through" with her. Although she does not grant interviews or has any plans to write a book about her experience as a child star, fans are still interested in her life and career. However, with

⁷ Pasternak, *Easy the Hard Way*, p. 183.

⁸ Deanna Durbin, "Deanna Durbin Re-retires," August 1999, <<http://www.hovers.nl/briefdeanna.gif>> [17 July 2002].

the advent of the Internet it is possible to show how fans maintain the Durbin persona, and how her image remains eternally youthful in the minds of fans despite being over 80 years old. With the advent of the Internet, these people can trade information about Deanna Durbin with ease.

Durbin is still a part of her fans' lives, and not just those who remember her from the 1930s and 40s, but those who discovered her films many decades after her retirement. In a way, the films that are available for viewing exist as a reminder of the "old" Durbin, perpetuating the persona Durbin found so distasteful. Of her twenty-one films, three are unavailable.⁹ One in particular, *Christmas Holiday*, could provide a useful contradiction to her seemingly stable persona. Without the films that exist outside the norm of the Durbin films, there is no way for new fans to realize that Durbin's persona is a contested site where expectations of the studio, fans, and even herself survive. Therefore perceptions of her persona remain relatively fixed in the minds of Durbin fans. In his article "Forever Young," Alexander McRobbie makes an astute observation: "Durbin is unique among actresses in that she will never grow old. Through her twenty-one feature films she will always be a sprightly teenager or an attractive young woman."¹⁰ And it is through these films that fans develop their perceptions of the Durbin persona. As William Everson concludes, "As long as Deanna Durbin's films exist they'll have the magic to generate that happiness to anyone fortunate enough to see them."¹¹ Taking

⁹ Everson, "The Career of Deanna Durbin," 526.

¹⁰ Alexander McRobbie, "Forever Young," 4 December 2001, <http://www.geocities.com/alex_mcrobbie/ddbirthday.html> [17 July, 2002].

¹¹ Everson, "The Career of Deanna Durbin," 529.

Everson's comments further, "as long as Durbin films exist", so to will her persona remain, constantly being re-established in the minds of fans newly introduced to the Durbin persona/phenomenon. And because there is very little critical work on the Durbin phenomenon, fans only have one source from which to understand her persona —the films.

Like Greta Garbo, Deanna Durbin left her career behind never to return to cinema. Both Durbin and Garbo would remain eternally youthful in the minds and memory of fans and critics alike.¹² In some ways, this could be a reason for her present-day popularity. Her fans still enjoy all of her films. Curiously enough, Durbin's retirement was such a mystery her persona remained an illusion. And without other later film appearances, her persona would remain youthful throughout her retirement. Fans from Durbin's era would always remember her persona constructed by her early successes and through her formulaic films. Contemporary fans would have been introduced to Durbin at that point in her childhood/adolescence when she was at the pinnacle of her success.

In a letter to William Everson, Deanna reasserts her refusal for an interviews, "In a sense, my films and I have gone our separate ways... The young Deanna of my films does not need explanation or introduction from me."¹³ Without any "explanation or introduction" on Durbin's part, fans will decide for themselves how to perceive her films

¹² Unlike Elizabeth Taylor who would remain in the public sphere from child star, in *National Velvet* (1944), until her recent appearance at the Kennedy Center Honors (2002) as an honoree.

¹³ Durbin, "Letter to the editor," 127.

and her persona. To reiterate, in the minds of fans Durbin will forever be idealized in the films of her youth; age can never be a factor because she never made films after age twenty-eight. Moreover, for contemporary fans her persona is created and maintained through the Internet. In this forum, new and old fans can discuss and exchange information and theories concerning Deanna Durbin's life and career. A Yahoo newsgroup exists, devoted to Durbin: "Deanna Durbin Admiration Society — Honoring the incomparable Miss Durbin." As one participant in the this new type of fan club states:

Prior to gaining access to the Internet a couple of years ago, outside my own family with one exception, during this period I never came across anyone in my age group who had even HEARD of the name Deanna Durbin, much less had any idea of her accomplishments as a singer/actress/moviestar.¹⁴

The Internet provides a way for Durbin's persona to be further disseminated. Old fans can still participate in fan clubs, and as one fan claims, "Deanna is my favorite of all time and I am an old codger from her time."¹⁵ The expectation of her audience remains the same — discussing the merits of Durbin films and reinforcing the persona. One reason why the appeal of her films is so great is that they appeal from the eight to eighty age range.

Oddly enough, Deanna Durbin appears to have believed that once she retired her

¹⁴ meresq1, "Re: The Amazing Mrs. Holliday," 22 August 2000, <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/deannadurbinadmirationssociety/message/35>> [13 February 2003].

¹⁵ blesko_2000, "General note on website," 21 May 2001, <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/deannadurbinadmirationssociety/message/35>> [13 February 2003].

screen persona would be left behind and that there would finally be a separation between the public and private person. She appears to have believed that Deanna Durbin would be able to live the “normal” life she believed had evaded her during her film career. However, her fans have maintained what the studio invented. As William Everson writes,

She is happy in a quiet, settled life, bemused that anybody remembers her or her films, and unable – even herself – to treat her screen image as anything other than a Hollywood manufactured stranger. There is really no need for her to return to films. She belongs to an age of filmmaking that has long vanished, and her basic attributes — innocence, and sparkling youth — are clearly not ones she could reconstitute.¹⁶

Everson’s comment captures the essence of what the Durbin persona has become in retirement and how her persona exists as a reminder of her youth, wholly apart from the woman she is today. Interestingly Deanna would never escape her adoring fans. The “Deanna Durbin” she retired from still exists for contemporary fans. The Durbin persona remains trapped in the “undertow” of stardom, unable to break away from how old fans remember her and new fans imagine her.

¹⁶ Everson, “The Career of Deanna Durbin,” 529.

Appendix

THE WORLD IS WAITING FOR THIS JOYOUS PICTURE... AGLOW WITH GOLDEN YOUTH!

Glorious DEANNA
...the entrancing star of "I Smart Girl"... in a heart-warming picture so tender, so joyous, so exhilarating that you'll call it 'the grandest film' you ever saw!

Starts TODAY
Doors Open AT 11 A.M.

DEANNA DURBIN
"100 MEN and a GIRL"

A New Universal Picture with
LEOPOLD STOKOWSKI
ADOLPHE MENJOU
ALICE BRADY - MISCHA AUER
BILLY GILBERT - JED PROUTY
Directed by Harry Koster
Joe Pasternak, Associate Prod.
CRAS L. ROGERS, Assistant Producer

5 BELLS
A great, new, modern picture - almost a hit!

ORCHESTRA TO THE
REMARKABLE AND
FELICIOUS DEANNA
DURBIN

ON STAGE IN PERSON
In Old New Variety Shows
NICK LONG, JR.
AL BERNIE
MADAME GAY - BOB BINA - The Girl
Knapp - Ed Gordon - GAY FOSTER
GAIL - The Lady Pearl & Sally O'Rourke

ROXY

Fig. 1 The Early Year: Deanna Durbin's second hit. (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 17 September 1937, 29).

Deanna Durbin

**3 SMART GIRLS
GROW UP**

With Nan Gray, Helen Parrish, Robert Cummings, Charles Winninger, William Lundigan • Produced by Joe Pasternak • Directed by Henry Hecker • A New Universal Picture

Of all the brilliant screen personalities who ever thrilled the country, she is now the most amazing, the most exciting!

STARTS 3:30 A. M. **TODAY** • UNITED ARTISTS **RIVOLI** • 5 way at 49¢ • Midnite Shows • EXTRA! With Deanna Durbin's "REMEMBER"

Fig. 2 Sequel to *Three Smart Girls* (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 17 March 1939, 25).

DEANNA'S HERE...with her 'First Crush'!

Delightful Deanna, grown to glorious girlhood, meets the "only" man...and you're in for the year's most joyous entertainment! It's Deanna at her very best!

Starts **TODAY** Doors Open 10:30 A. M.

NEAR DEANNA
SING THREE
HUGH ADAMSON
HITS: "My
Own" • "You're As
Pretty As A Picture"
"It's A Good Deal" ...
also the "Waltz from
"Romeo and Juliet"
and "Les Filles de
CACH" by DeLuxe

SPECIAL LATE
FILM SHOW
TODAY

Deanna's sure to "steal
someone's heart after him."

"But Daddy, what do grown-
ups know about love?"

Will Deanna tell him how
fascinating he is?

DEANNA DURBIN

ON OUR STAGE

A Gay New Revue with

"RED" SKELTON

Streamlined leader of
Stage, Screen and Radio

SYLVIA BORDEN CO.

PAUL GORDON

GAE FOSTER GIRLS

PAUL ASH & ROXY ORCH.

"That CERTAIN AGE"

with
MELVYN DOUGLAS

Jackie Cooper • Irene Rich • Nancy Carroll

John Halliday • Jackie Searl • Juanita Quigley

Screenplay by **BRUCE MANNING** • Original Story by F. Hugh Herbert

Music by Jimmy McHugh and Harold Adamson

Directed by **EDWARD LUDWIG**

A **JOE PASTERNAK PRODUCTION**

A NEW UNIVERSAL PICTURE

ANY DAY

ANY SEAT

25¢

SHOW VALUE OF THE NATION • 7th AVE. and 50th ST.

ROXY

CHILDREN

ALWAYS

15¢

Fig. 3 Deanna's first on-screen "crush" (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 4 November 1938, 27).

Deanna Has Her First Crush!

Lovely Deanna . . .
now grown to glorious
girlhood . . . is at
her gay best in the
year's most joyous
entertainment!

Starts **TOMORROW**
Doors open **10:30 A.M.**

**DEANNA
DURBIN**
*in "That
CERTAIN
AGE"*

MELVYN DOUGLAS
Jackie Cooper • Irene Rich
Nancy Carell • John Halliday
Jackie Dean • Jeanne O'Grady
A NEW UNIVERSAL PICTURE

ROXY
25¢ ANY DAY
15¢ ANY DAY & CHILDREN
ALWAYS NO
SHOW VALUE OF THE NATION
74th Avenue & 50th Street

*On Our Stage
A Grand New Musical with
"RED" SKELTON
Stunning new songs by
Mary Green & Harold
Gavin-Jordan Co.
Paul Gordon
Gus Foster lyrics
Paul Ash, Harry Dick*

Fig. 4 (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 3 November 1938, 27).

LEANNA DURBIN

ONE SMART GIRL PICKS ONE SMART CAR

WE'VE GOT THE BEST CAR IN THE WORLD... THE ONE YOU WANT TO BUY.

WE'VE GOT THE BEST CAR IN THE WORLD... THE ONE YOU WANT TO BUY.

Read How De Soto Engineering Saves You Real Money When You Buy—and EVERY MILE YOU DRIVE!

De Soto doesn't just want when the other cars do. It gets the best car in the world... the one you want to buy. It gets the best car in the world... the one you want to buy. It gets the best car in the world... the one you want to buy.

De Soto doesn't just want when the other cars do. It gets the best car in the world... the one you want to buy. It gets the best car in the world... the one you want to buy. It gets the best car in the world... the one you want to buy.

SEE YOUR DE SOTO DEALER

FOR A GREAT CAR, FINE SERVICE AND A SQUARE DEAL

Fig. 5 Deanna Durbin persona is selling merchandise. (Advertisement appearing in *Life*, 4, no. 20, 16 March 1938)

Fig. 6 Deanna Durbin Grows Up: Romance changes her persona (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 8 November 1939, 29).

James
DURBIN
in
Five Fingers

ALICE BRIDGES • EDITH MORLEY
THOMAS YALDEN • LORRAINE VANDERBILT
CHARLES LAUGHTON • JAMES DUNN • JAMES HANCOCK

TOMORROW at 9:30 A. M.
UNITED **RIVOLI** Way at 49th St.
ARTISTS Midville Shows

Best times today: CHARLES LAUGHTON in "JAMAICA INN"

Fig. 7 (Advertisement appearing in New York Times, 7 November 1939, 31).

Fig. 8 (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 5 November 1939, 4 X.)

Fig. 9 (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 6 November 1939, 20).

Fig. 10 Durbin persona is tarnished (Advertisement appearing in New York Times, 26 November 1941, 27).

Fig. 11 Deanna Durbin as a twenty-something grandmother! (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 22 February 1943, 21)

JUST WAIT TILL YOU
MEET HER!

the New
Deanna Durbin

... as a mother of five
... and the loveliest
grandma in town!

THE AMAZING
and that's no word for her
HOLIDAY

MRS. HENRI

She's so upper
class her own
grandchildren
don't know!

MORND O'RIEN
with
STACEY KEE - TREACHER
John Davidson - Gloria Dickson
Frank Craven - Elizabeth Taylor
and many more!

Open over
11:30 A.M.

Today!

RIVOLI

Don't miss
this
performance
starting
February 20th

Fig. 12 (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 20 February 1943, 10).

Why do they call her Amazing?

Because she's in love with her own grandsons?

Because she's got nine children — one of them Chinese?

Because all the boys want to marry her?

Because she's as much at home in a business bombing as in Society teas?

DEARLY MINE
the Amazing Mrs. Holliday
EDMOND O'BRIEN
 Barry Fitzgerald — Author Together
 Harry Davenport — Grant Mitchell — Frank Marshall — Richard Wilson
 Produced and Directed by DAVID WATKINS

Tomorrow! RIVOLI
 9:30 A.M.

Continued Performances Matinee Evening Monday

JOIN The MARCH OF DIMES

Fig. 13 (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 19 February 43, 23.)

Whe-e-e!
 what a gal!

the New
DEANNA DURBIN

as a mother-in-law ...
 ready in love with
 her own grandson!

Get Your Chance to Meet
The Amazing
 Mrs.
HOLLIDAY

EDMOND O'BRIEN
 DUFFY
 FITZGERALD - TREACHER
 Harry Sawyer - Green - Mitchell
 Primary Source - Elizabeth Kaden
 Produced & Directed by ALLAN CRANSTON
 Screenplay by William Shakespeare

Rivoli

Fig. 14 (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 21 February 43, 4X).

Fig. 15 Durbin as pin-up. (Photo appears in *Life*, 3 July 1944, 53).

Fig. 16 A drastic change in the Durbin formula/persona. (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 23 June 1944, 15).

Fig. 17 (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 25 June 1944, 2X.)

Fig. 18 (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 27 June 1944, 24)

Fig. 19 (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 18 June 1944, 2X).

JEANETTE
MACDONALD
GEORGE
RAFT

Christmas Holiday

with RICHARD WHORF • DEAN HARENS • CLADYS
GEORGE • GALE SONDERGAARD • DAVID BRUCE

Produced by FRANK MCKSON

Directed by ROBERT STODOLSKY • Associate Producer, Frank Shaw • Screen
play by HERMAN J. MANKIEWITZ • A UNIVERSAL PICTURE

TODAY
at 9 A. M.

LOEWE COOL
CRITERION 5TH FLOOR
Back the Invasion! ... OUT WAR BONDS!

Fig. 20 (Advertisement appearing in *New York Times*, 28 June 1944, 20).

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