

BY BRIAN HELLOW

hard to believe from our vantage point today, but in the 1930s, '40s and '50s, when the Hollywood studios were producing their greatest musicals, they were catering to an audience with tastes of tremendous depth and breadth. For a good twenty years, the movie musical showcased not only the bracing rhythms of Harold Arlen and Irving Berlin but the perfumed elegance of Sigmund Romberg and Oscar Straus. Accordingly, at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in the '40s and '50s, there were two main camps for the movie musical: the highbrow and lowbrow. It's the lowbrow that has survived the test of time: Judy Garland's tremulous lyricism, Ann Miller's relentlessly high-energy tap numbers and Esther Williams's gaudy Technicolor water ballets are among the most instantly recognizable symbols of MGM's glory years. But the highbrow element was also a potent part of the studio's lineup for well over twenty years. Starting with Jeanette MacDonald in the '30s and ending with Ann Blyth and Jane Powell in the mid-'50s, MGM offered plenty of opportunities for high-flying sopranos — and moviegoers flocked to see their films.

STYLING: JANE BROWN
HAIR: JANE BROWN
MAKEUP: JANE BROWN

The Last Metro Girls

MGM had Coble and it had Garland — and it also had three of the most popular
and talented sopranos to come out of the movie musical's golden age:

Ann Blyth, Kathryn Grayson and Jane Powell





BLYTH TODAY, ABOVE;
WITH HOWARD KEEL IN METRO'S *KISMET* (1955), RIGHT;
IN WARNER BROTHERS' *THE HELEN MORGAN STORY* (1957), BELOW

MGM wasn't the only studio, of course, that believed sopranos had as much potential for stardom as sweeter girls. In the '30s, Columbia got behind Grace Moore, and RKO signed up Lily Pons (Moore even received a 1934 Best Actress Oscar nomination for *One Night of Love*), while Deanna Durbin put a financially ailing Universal back in business with hits such as *One Hundred Men and a Girl* and *Three Smart Girls*. The driving force behind Durbin's career was Joe Pasternak, a Hungarian-born producer who had a passionate interest in classical music and opera; after he left Universal for MGM in 1942, he recruited talents such as Lauritz Melchior, Mario Lanza and Dorothy Kirsten. At MGM, Pasternak's achievements were bound to suffer in comparison with the dazzling innovations of the Arthur Freed unit (*Meet Me in St. Louis*, *The Ziegfeld Follies*, *On the Town*, *An American in Paris*), but to the "serious" music-loving moviegoer, he was indispensable.



Jane Powell. It's often a tricky business talking to anyone who happened to be under long-term contract to MGM during its heyday. It was regarded as the Tiffany's of studios, the best gig in town, a company that coddled and protected all its employees — probably far too much. Those who boasted of having "grown up" on the backlots at Culver City often discovered, once they were free of their studio contracts, that they hadn't grown up at all and now weren't quite sure how to go about it — like golden boys and girls who had peaked in high school and experienced the rest of their lives as an anti-climax. But Blyth, Grayson and Powell have weathered the years gracefully. If they miss the old days, they do a good job of hiding it.



Ann Blyth, especially. It's doubtful that even an accomplished muckraker like Kitty Kelley could finesse a snide, critical comment out of the ethereally ladylike Blyth. It's hard not to believe her when she stresses that she was grateful for all the chances Hollywood gave her. If there are no axes to grind here, perhaps it's because her path to stardom was relatively free of obstacles. Blyth was born in 1928 in Mount Kisco, New York ("only because my mother was visiting her sister when I decided to make my entrance into the world"), but really grew up in New York City. At a certain point, the family apartment was on East Forty-ninth Street, in the shadow of Saint Patrick's Cathedral — an appropriate setting for a girl raised with a strong Catholic faith. Her father left the family behind when Blyth was around nine, and she remembers that her mother raised her and her sister "with grace in what I think were very difficult circumstances." Her musical talent became obvious early on, and she sang in the children's chorus of the San Carlo Opera Company. "That began my love affair with opera," she says, "listening to all this beautiful music. Being an urchin in *La Bohème* and *Carmen* — I loved it." She was heard frequently on the radio and attended the New York Professional Children's School. One day, while Blyth was seated in a corner of the school cafeteria, Lillian Hellman and Broadway director Herman Shumlin strolled by her table, looking for a young girl to play one of Paul Lukas's refugee children in Hellman's forthcoming play *Watch on the Rhine*. "I think they

COLOR PORTRAIT: JOHN-FRANCIS BOURKE

noticed me because I was dressed simply, and I was by myself," Blyth recalls. "Perhaps I looked like an orphan of the storm."

The play had a successful Broadway run, and when it toured to Los Angeles, Blyth was noticed by a talent scout from Universal and signed up. But it was at Warner Brothers that she came to major attention, as Joan Crawford's vicious daughter Veda in *Mildred Pierce*. She had been one of dozens of young women tested for the part, and she feels she won it because Crawford happened to be at the studio that day and agreed to make the test with her. "A test like that is very difficult to do with a stand-in," Blyth says. "Unless you really have someone to connect with, it's difficult. You're being X-rayed. You're trying to play with someone, react to



someone who's just standing there reading the lines."

For her work in *Mildred Pierce*, she received a 1945 Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress. She worked steadily for the next few years, and in 1951 she was borrowed by MGM for its Mario Lanza vehicle, *The Great Caruso*. She claims she had no trouble with the temperamental Lanza, because Joe Pasternak had taken him aside "and had a nice chat about his behavior — minding his words and so forth." Making the movie was an altogether pleasant experience, and Dorothy Kirsten, who played a sympathetic colleague of Caruso's, became a life-long friend of Blyth's. The film, in which Blyth sang "The Loveliest Night of the Year," was one of the studio's biggest hits of the year, and soon she was signed to a contract.

Of all the soprano stars on the lot at the time, Blyth may have had the most naturally beautiful instrument. She phrased neatly and had solid breath support and control, which she credits to her teacher at MGM, Leon Cepparo. "He was wonderful — the only teacher that I studied with who was able to get across to me good technique. It was like turning on a huge light bulb that others hadn't been able to find. He taught me how to cross over that bridge, that can be so treacherous, into the higher register. And once you accomplish that, the sky can be the limit. It's a wonderful feeling."

That she was an apt pupil is obvious from the films she made after *The Great Caruso*. The last great peak of the MGM musical came in 1952 and 1953, with *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Band*

COLOR PORTRAIT: TERRY MCCARTHY

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GRAYSON AT HOME IN SANTA MONICA, ABOVE;
WITH MARIO LANZA IN *THAT MIDNIGHT KISS* (1949), LEFT;
AS GRACE MOORE IN *SO THIS IS LOVE* (1953), BELOW



Wagon. After that, the genre received less and less attention, largely because Dore Schary, who had taken over as production chief from Louis B. Mayer in 1951, preferred realistic social dramas to fluffy Technicolor entertainment. Since this was the case, it is odd that the MGM musical suddenly veered toward what would have seemed the most antiquated of forms: operetta. (Perhaps it was because operettas were a staple of the then-thriving summer-stock and tent-show circuits, and it was assumed that a large slice of the moviegoing public would be familiar with them.) In 1954,

Blyth starred in two elaborate operetta films, *Rose Marie* and *The Student Prince*. She's a little hard to take in the former, with her coy French-Canadian accent, but she's charming in the Romberg piece, as the spirited waitress who introduces Edmund Purdom to the pleasures of beer, sauerkraut and knockwurst. In both, she's in excellent voice, and one of the best things about her singing is its no-frills emotional directness. Next came *Kismet*, Vincente Minnelli's film version of the hit Robert Wright-George Forrest musical. Critic David Shipman judged that it virtually killed off the MGM

musical, and it is pretty ponderous, giving every indication that Minnelli was bored stiff by the assignment. But again, Blyth is in radiant voice, holding the final note of “Baubles, Bangles and Beads” for nineteen seconds. “I can still do it,” she says. “When I do my one-woman show around the country, I always include ‘Baubles.’”

By 1957, MGM was on its way to being a ghost town: the studio had parted company with most of its big stars, including Blyth. She made only two more films. One of them, *The Helen Morgan Story*, was directed by *Mildred Pierce*'s Michael Curtiz, and again, she won the role after many actresses — thirty-two in all — were tested. Again, Curtiz chose Blyth, but this time, things didn't work out well for her. “Before we started shooting, I had gotten some of Helen Morgan's recordings, just to listen to the voice. It was a very small voice, actually, but much more soprano than pop. But Gogi Grant — who is a wonderful singer, and whom I heard recently in a lovely revue — was very popular at the time, and Warner Brothers saw an opportunity to use her name and popularity” — so they dubbed in Grant's voice. It didn't trouble Blyth, who felt that “in this case, the acting part was as important as the singing part.” As Morgan, she had some fine moments, particularly in the alcoholic breakdown sequences, but unfortunately, the film did nothing for her career.

Not that she minded: her 1953 marriage to Dr. James McNulty has been a happy and enduring one that produced five children and ten grandchildren. Up through the 1970s, Blyth worked as often as she cared to in the theater: in *The Merry Widow*, *The Sound of Music*, *Show Boat*, *The King and I*. She still takes her singing quite seriously and works to keep the voice in shape. “It's the old story,” she says. “You've got to find out if it's there every day, if only for a few minutes. Like any muscles, your voice cords don't have a memory. I still do my one-woman show, so I try to move the voice every day.”

An altogether more aggressive performer, in every way, was Kathryn Grayson. She was a high, *high* coloratura — the Mado Robin of the movies — with a distinctively chirpy timbre that was at times quite impressive and at others slightly unnerving. Unlike Blyth's, her voice wasn't always warm and inviting; there was something steely, a kind of stand-back-I'm-going-to-show-you quality, in her high-flying triple Axels. Also, unlike Blyth, Grayson had ambivalent feelings about Hollywood and the opportunities it gave her. Her screen career barely survived her departure from MGM in the mid-'50s, but she continued for years in the theater and nightclubs, to great public acclaim. Eventually, she even appeared in opera — which had been her career goal long before she stepped in front of a movie camera.

Grayson was born in 1922 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, but her family soon moved to St. Louis. There, Grayson began to study with Frances Marshall, of the Chicago Civic Opera, where she was put on a path of study that might have fatigued Charlotte Church. At eleven, she learned *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Later, the family moved to Hollywood, and Grayson studied with Minnaletta White, a cousin of Grace Moore.

Louis B. Mayer heard Grayson in a concert in Hollywood and

signed her up. It was supposed to be temporary only — she still had her sights set on a career in opera — but she wound up staying at MGM for twelve years. Her film debut was inauspicious — *Andy Hardy's Private Secretary* (1941) — and it took quite a few years for her to hit her stride. During this time, Edward Johnson, general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, asked Grayson to make her company debut as Lucia. “Mr. Johnson thought I was a dramatic coloratura. Anyway, Mr. Mayer had a wonderful secretary, Mrs. Ida Koverman, who was a great music-lover. She was responsible for bringing out John Barbirolli and lots of the great conductors. She wanted me to make my Met debut, but Mr. Mayer said no, I was under contract. He said, ‘If she's known as an opera star, she'll have a short career. Just the operagoers will know who she is. If she is a motion-picture star, she'll be a star forever.’ So Mr. Johnson got Patrice Munsel. I think Lucia would have been fine for me. I had a four-octave range, up to B above high C. I was raised with the old RCA Red Seal records — my brother could sing Galli-Curci, and I could sing bass with Pinza. We learned all the operas, everybody's part. My parents both had beautiful voices and didn't think anything of it. We didn't, either. Everything was natural. I was taught not to use my chest, either. That's what ruins you. I wouldn't step across the street to see a Broadway show. They are even pushing children's voices down into the chest. They should be shot! It's so ugly!”

Grayson didn't come into her own at MGM until the end of the 1940s, when she was cast in a pair of Mario Lanza vehicles, *That Midnight Kiss* (1949) and *The Toast of New Orleans* (1950). “There was the greatest of all tenors,” she says. “You can't really tell [so much] from the way they recorded Caruso. But Mario could do more with his voice than Caruso. Someone asked Caruso how he got the high notes, and he said, ‘I'm a-push.’ He shouldn't have pushed. I could hold a note longer than Mario could. When we did the Hollywood Bowl a few days before my baby was born, he was afraid I'd hold a note longer and came back and put his arm around me and cut my note off when he cut off.”

In 1951, Grayson got one of her two best screen roles, Magnolia in George Sidney's Technicolor remake of *Show Boat*. The film grossed \$5.2 million and teamed her for the first time with Howard Keel; they were reunited for *Lovely to Look At* (1952) and *Kiss Me, Kate* (1953). As the tantrum-prone stage actress Lilli, Grayson was more petulant than fiery, but that same year, she gave one of her best performances, as Grace Moore in Warner Brothers' musical biography, *So This Is Love*. Her numbers ranged from “Mi chiamano Mimi” to “I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate,” and never before had she sounded so radiant.

Grayson acknowledges that she was “probably the most spoiled brat on the Metro lot. I loved to walk in the rain, but the limousine drivers would leave Joan Crawford or Greer Garson standing in the rain and take me to my lessons, because they didn't think, with my voice, that I should walk in the rain. You should have seen their faces when the drivers drove off with me!” She is also a great champion of her former boss. “Mr. Mayer brought in the best people he could find the world over — the seamstresses, the people who built the sets, were really artisans. Not just blue-collar people — *artisans*. Later,

Dore Schary went on the cheap side. We weren't used to that. He thought that instead of doing things television couldn't do, he would do things television *could* do, and that meant cheap pictures. Mr. Mayer was wining and dining CBS at the time [MGM dismissed him]. He wanted the studios to be able to handle television, not television telling the studios what to do. If he had had his way, we would have such quality on television that we don't have now. He was a very dear man."

While at MGM, Grayson got to mingle with several of the opera superstars working under contract. "Lauritz Melchior and [his wife] Kleinchon. I adored them. Lotte Lehmann [who came to the studio for one film, *Big City*, in 1948] was not too fond of



POWELL IN MANHATTAN TODAY, ABOVE; AS ELLEN BOWEN IN MGM'S *ROYAL WEDDING* (1951), WITH FRED ASTAIRE, LEFT; AS MILLY TO HOWARD KEEL'S ADAM IN *SEVEN BRIDES FOR SEVEN BROTHERS* (1954), BELOW

me. Then Marjorie Lawrence came, and she decided she didn't like me, so I didn't get to do *Interrupted Melody*, and Eileen Farrell did the voice for Eleanor Parker."

Grayson made her last film, *The Vagabond King*, for Paramount in 1956. She starred in the national touring company of *Camelot* and belatedly fulfilled her dream of singing opera when she performed Violetta, Lucia, Mimì and Cio-Cio-San in regional companies in the U.S. and Europe. She still studies opera scores for pleasure; when we spoke, she was working on Saint-Saëns's *Dalila*. Her views on opera, as on most things, are unconventional. When I mention that *Dalila* seems an odd choice because it lies so low, she snaps, "It is *not* low. Not at all."

Grayson's life today is serene and contented; she shares her house in Santa Monica with nine dogs and is still close to her only daughter, Patti. "[Years ago] Warner Brothers wanted to sign her, but she said no, she didn't want that," says Grayson. "I guess she saw how hard Mommy worked."

Hollywood allowed both Blyth and Grayson to grow up onscreen, but Jane Powell wasn't quite so lucky. From the beginning, she was an uncommonly bright young singer: bright eyes, bright smile, bright personality, with a bright, sunny lyric soprano. She sang with tremendous energy, rhythmic crispness and deep feeling; her vocalism is distinguished by a gleaming sincer-



ity. The high point of her MGM work is probably *Royal Wedding* (1951), in which she starred opposite Fred Astaire, as a brother-and-sister dance team appearing in London at the time of the wedding of Prince Philip and Princess Elizabeth. Powell is sharp and funny in her duet with Astaire, "How Could You Believe Me When I Said I Love You When You Know I've Been a Liar All My Life?" But her great moment in the film comes when she sings "Too Late Now" (to the singularly unappealing Peter Lawford). It's an example of a perfect popular song, and Powell sings it with a grace and beauty that none of its subsequent interpreters ever quite matched.

The arc of Powell's career is a long one, beginning in Portland, Oregon, where she was born, in 1929. She appeared on local radio shows in Portland. There were further radio appearances after the family moved to Los Angeles (as so many families with

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a talented singing daughter seemed to do in those days), and an MGM contract followed. Her movie debut, however, was on loan to United Artists, for *Song of the Open Road* (1944). They gave a parade for her in Portland; it rained, and practically no one came. It was the first of many indications of her home town's lack of interest in — perhaps resentment of? — Powell's success. "I've played Portland several times since, in concert, and it's the only place I've played where I've had consistently bad houses."

Life in Hollywood wasn't too different at first. "I was making \$5,000 a week when I started, and that was a lot of money for a beginner. My mother gave me \$10 a week as an allowance, and I could buy my lunch at MGM and ride the bus home. I really lived a very normal life. We still lived like we did in Portland."

At MGM, Powell studied with a coach whose principal advice was "Smile, and everything will come out all right."

Mayer was looking for another Durbin, and he believed he had found one in Powell.

"So, photographically, that's what happened," she says. "But that doesn't mean that's what happens vocally. And I don't think my coach knew any more than the top people at the studio did [about singing technique], so I just kept doing it. But then you get older, and the technique doesn't stay. Eventually, I must have gone to five or six different teachers, and I'd be fine for a while, but I never had a solid grasp of technique. They didn't find my voice for me, as to where it really should be. Maybe I shouldn't have been a soprano. I know I wasn't a coloratura. Anyway, I was always taking lessons, and I never felt secure. When I would breathe for my teachers, I would breathe from my diaphragm, but when I would perform, I wouldn't — and they were never aware of it."

When Powell arrived at MGM, Louis B. Mayer was still smarting over a blunder that had occurred years earlier, when he had failed to sign up Deanna Durbin, only to have her go to Universal and make millions for them. He was always searching for another Durbin, and he believed he had found one in Powell. For that reason, MGM was reluctant to let her mature onscreen; they started her in teenaged roles and did their best over the years to keep her there. In 1948, MGM cast Powell in *Luxury Liner*, co-starring Lauritz Melchior. "He was marvelous," Powell remembers, "although his wife Kleinchen was really the power behind the throne. He wasn't at all temperamental, but she was." After Kleinchen died, Powell sang at the wedding of Melchior and his third wife, Mary Markham. "She was like a daughter to the Melchiors," Powell remembers. "And Lauritz asked her to marry him, and she said yes. He was adding on another room to his house, and Mary fell in love with the carpenter who was doing the work. And then she didn't want to marry Lauritz! And there she was at the wedding, crying because she didn't want to go through with it! But she did, and they went to Hawaii for a honeymoon for about five days, and then he went off polar-

bear hunting somewhere, and soon afterward, they were divorced! It was very sad."

Like most of MGM's young talent, Powell came under the supervision of the studio's formidable drama coach, Lillian Burns. Many of the studio's stars, Esther Williams among them, considered Burns's bizarre coaching techniques to be something left over from Theda Bara's *A Fool There Was*. Powell agrees. "One thing she did teach me — not to talk with my eyebrows and wrinkle my forehead. I can't tell you anything else I learned. I see a lot of Lillian Burns in the young Lana Turner. She coached her a great deal. In fact, I think she taught her every single move, every gesture. The way Lana smoked a cigarette is *exactly* the way Lillian smoked it."

Not surprisingly, Powell reached her peak at MGM in two of the few grown-up parts they handed her: *Royal Wedding* and the studio's surprise hit, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, in which she created another indelible screen moment with her

buoyant performance of "Wonderful, Wonderful Day." These successes made her all the more frustrated by the studio's attempts to keep her in teenaged roles. At Twentieth Century-Fox, she tested for Laurey in *Oklahoma!*, which made a star of Shirley Jones. The script at MGM she craved most was *Love Me or Leave Me*, an intensely dramatic biography of singer Ruth Etting. "I don't think the studio [initially] knew that Doris Day was going to leave Warner Brothers. Anyway, her husband, who was her manager, talked them into letting her do it, and she did it. I would have loved to do that. It was such a strong acting part."

By this time, the MGM musical was all but dead, and in 1955, after filming *Hit the Deck*, Powell left. She didn't mind; she had never felt particularly included in the studio's much-publicized "family atmosphere." At other studios, there were some unsuccessful attempts to make the transition to adult parts, and then she turned to the theater, in tours of *The Sound of Music*, *My Fair Lady* and other musicals. In 1973, she replaced Debbie Reynolds on Broadway in *Irene*, and although the producers had predicted that the play would last only seven weeks with Powell in the lead, she played it for nine months in New York, then toured with it. But the vocal troubles that had plagued her for years grew worse. She battled difficulties well into the 1980s, and today she sadly admits that her voice has deserted her. She has found compensations, however, in a happy marriage (her fifth) to former child star Dick Moore, now a successful Manhattan businessman, and in occasional legitimate acting ventures in television and the theater. In 1995, she appeared in New York in Anne Meara's *Afterplay*; it was one of the most stimulating projects she'd worked on in some time, and she's hoping there will be more like it in the future. There's nothing pending at the moment, but as Powell says, "Who knows? You never know who's going to be on the other end of the telephone." □