

Judy: Singer-actress Judy Garland's sad fate brought to the screen

And Harriet: A film biography of abolitionist Harriet Tubman

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Famed American singer and actress Judy Garland (1922-1969) is portrayed by Renée Zellweger in the new film *Judy*, directed by Rupert Goold. The movie is an adaptation of the Olivier- and Tony-nominated West End and Broadway play *End of the Rainbow* by Peter Quilter.

Garland's youthful enthusiasm, freshness, humor and artistic talent endeared her to millions in the middle of the 20th century.

Having virtually started off life on stage ("born in a trunk") in an act with her family, Garland was later signed by the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film studio as a 13-year-old. Possessing the range of a contralto and great vocal expressiveness, she attained international stardom at the age of 17 with *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and was Oscar-honored for her "outstanding performance as a screen juvenile."

From there, in addition to two Andy Hardy films with Mickey Rooney, she went on to make some of the most celebrated and popular film musicals in history: *For Me and My Gal* (1942), *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *The Harvey Girls* (1946), *The Pirate* (1948), *Easter Parade* (1948), *In the Good Old Summertime* (1949) and, loosely speaking, *A Star Is Born* (1954). She also appeared movingly in movies such as *The Clock* (1945) and *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961).

Suffering from emotional problems and addicted to alcohol and prescription drugs, she was fired by MGM in 1950.

In 1951, Garland began a four-month concert tour of Britain and Ireland, where she played to sold-out audiences. That same year her performance at the Palace Theatre in Manhattan was dubbed "one of the greatest personal triumphs in show business history." Her 1961 concert appearance at Carnegie Hall was also a record-breaking achievement.

Judy Garland's career had extraordinary highs and lows, including suicide attempts, until her tragic death in London on June 22, 1969, at the age of 47.

Judy takes place during the final period of Garland's life in 1968-69, with pointed flashbacks of her teenage years as an exploited commodity in Hollywood. At the movie's onset, 14-year-old Judy (Darci Shaw), is under the steely thumb of studio boss, Louis B. Mayer (Richard Cordery), who calls her a "fat-ankled gap-toothed rube," among other insults. Living in a world of movie artifice, she is stripped of her childhood, guarded by an unflinchingly cruel matron and force fed diet and other pills. At one of her birthday parties, the swimming pool is fake and the cake is not for her consumption. She was Mayer's golden goose and "made millions before she was 20."

When the film jumps forward, Judy is in her 40s, dead broke and performing with two children by her third marriage to Sidney Luft

(Rufus Sewell). Thrown out for non-payment by her hotel, she is forced to return the children to their father, who points out that she is "unreliable and uninsurable." Judy agonizes about leaving Lorna (Bella Ramsey) and Joey (Lewin Lloyd) behind. She has lost what most keeps her grounded.

The bankrupt star accepts a lucrative five-week singing engagement in London at "The Talk of the Town" cabaret, run by Bernard Delfont (Michael Gambon), whose assistant, Rosalyn Wilder (Jessie Buckley), is charged with handling the erratic luminary. Things start off well, as she sings favorites, like "The Trolley Song," "Get Happy," and the gut-punching "By Myself." But substance abuse and one more unsuccessful marriage add to her downward spiral.

Judy is a watchable film with intriguing moments. Zellweger is more than competent and works hard to carry the movie. Some of the musical numbers are affecting, particularly the "Over the Rainbow" finale in which a faltering Judy is shored up by a compassionate audience. Sewell as Luft gives a brief but compelling performance, as does Finn Wittrock as Mickey Deans, Garland's fifth and last husband.

However, talented veteran actor Gambon is little more than a placeholder, and acting-musical dynamo Buckley as Rosalyn—the real Rosalyn Wilder consulted on the movie—is noticeably hemmed in by the script and/or the character's personality.

In the end, *Judy* is, to a large degree, an effort at impersonation to which certain relatively simplistic criticisms of the film industry are attached. The movie never genuinely grapples with the really troubling issues involved in Garland's life and career. The scattered scenes from the 1930s don't add or explain much beyond offering a brief glimpse at how Judy was mistreated by Mayer and the studio. Worse, the viewer is left with the impression that Judy was irredeemably damaged and a millstone around everyone's neck.

Garland was an unforgettable talent and personality. In interviews available online, daughters Lorna Luft and Liza Minnelli bristle at the notion their mother was merely a tragic figure. She was someone who also soared to enormous heights. As her biographer Gerald Clarke wrote: "Maria Callas, who knew about such things, said that the lady had the most superb voice she had ever heard. Bing Crosby, who was also something of an expert, said that when she was in form, no other singer could be compared to her. But Judy Garland was more than a singer, more than an actress, more than a movie star: She was probably the greatest American entertainer of the twentieth century."

Her emergence as an enormously gifted figure coincided with the expansion of the US film and recording industries into worldwide,

billion-dollar businesses. Garland was one of the great success stories of American entertainment, a status that almost always translates into personal tragedy. Rather than actively plumbing these contradictions, and in the process delivering a more rounded, sympathetic view, *Judy* largely rests on Zellweger's performance that tends to glide along the surface.

Moreover, one of the most striking aspects of Garland's career was that her colossal stardom coincided with great social misery and war. What those conditions and upheavals meant to her as a sensitive human being, not merely a performing machine, and what that meant to the public, not simply a machine for consuming performances, are questions worth exploring.

Like very few other performers, Judy Garland opened herself up to her admirers and fans, and they opened their hearts and souls to her. *Judy* hints at this, but perfunctorily. At one point in the movie she says she lives with her heart on the outside of her body. Furthermore, there is a pivotal scene in which the lonely diva cooks dinner for two gay admirers, played by Andy Nyman and Daniel Cerqueira. (Says Judy: "They hound people in this world ... anybody who is different.") This sequence reduces Garland's connection to the state of the world and the traumas of the 20th century to the price one pays for standing out in the crowd or sexual difference.

Judy's part of a proliferation of biographical films made over the last 20 years, most of which have followed a certain contrived formula: a bravura performance by a talented actor coupled with a few supposedly telling biographical details. Some of those figures more recently chronicled on film include Ray Charles, Freddie Mercury, Elton John, Johnny Cash, James Brown, Brian Wilson, John Lennon, Truman Capote, Maxwell Perkins, Stephen Hawking, J.R.R. Tolkien, Mary Shelley, Frida Kahlo, Beatrix Potter, Colette, John Nash, Steve Jobs, Ray Kroc, Walt Disney, Jesse Owens, Amelia Earhart, John Dillinger, etc.

One study published in 1992 (*How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, George F. Custen) listed 291 film biographies made in Hollywood between 1927 and 1960, and suggested the phenomenon died out with the end of the studio system in the 1960s. Many of those earlier works were idealizations or falsifications. However, there were efforts to construct certain biographies (Pasteur, Zola, Juarez, Lincoln, Madame Curie, Edison, Dr. Paul Ehrlich, etc.) along the lines of important themes: against intolerance, ignorance, backwardness or political reaction.

In fact, film biographies revived in the 1980s, but, much like many contemporary written biographies, were often reduced—in postmodern fashion—to mere collections of facts and episodes without “judgment” or explanation.

In 2018 alone, Hollywood studios produced 20 “biopics.” (IMDb lists more than 200 produced since 2008.) Various reasons may account for this, but both economic and intellectual causes seem to dominate.

Famous people's lives exist in the “public domain” for the most part. Screenwriters and studios can tap into or “borrow” dramas in this case without, at least initially, having to pay for anything. In addition, a movie about a well-known performer, for example, comes with a certain built-in audience. As one commentator notes, “Usually, these people are part of the cultural lexicon already. So you don't have to do much, just add drama and reasoning to the internal and external conflict provided by history.” Bound up with that is the lack of imagination and intellectual laziness that abound—the provocative or insightful film biography is the exception at the moment.

Harriet

Kasi Lemmons' *Harriet* features Cynthia Erivo in the title role, as the great abolitionist and political activist Harriet Tubman (c. 1822-1913). It is to Lemmons' credit that she has made Tubman's life her subject matter. There has been a dearth of films devoted to Tubman, Frederick Douglass, John Brown, Sojourner Truth, Wendell Phillips and other anti-slavery opponents, representatives of a profoundly egalitarian and democratic tradition.

Tubman's life and times raise issues of an essentially revolutionary character. However, Lemmons, a veteran actress and director of several films (*Eve's Bayou*, *The Caveman's Valentine*, *Talk to Me*, *Black Nativity*), turns in a relatively limited work. The tumultuous social dynamic of the Civil War period is largely absent.

The film's biography of Tubman begins in 1849, when she is a slave in Maryland known as “Minty” whose master refuses to grant her freedom despite legal documents entitling her to that. Her owner dies, but his cruel son Gideon (Joe Alwyn) now wants to sell her. She escapes from slavery at the age of 27, making a perilous journey to Philadelphia, where she meets the abolitionist William Still (Leslie Odom Jr.) and changes her name to Harriet Tubman.

Despite the relative safety of her new condition, Harriet, as “Moses,” makes 13 harrowing expeditions to the South to rescue approximately 70 slaves, including her brothers, Henry, Ben, and Robert, their wives and some of their children. After the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 is passed, she helps guide fugitives into Canada, using the network of safe houses and clandestine routes known as the Underground Railroad.

When the Civil War breaks out, Harriet becomes a scout and spy for the Union Army. As the first woman to head an armed expedition in the war, she leads a raid at Combahee Ferry, in South Carolina, liberating more than 750 slaves, many of whom joined the Northern forces.

The makers of *Harriet*, despite sincere intentions, skim the surface of Tubman's life and times, creating a relatively bland, rather than appropriately electrifying work.

When an early biography of Tubman was being prepared in 1868, the legendary abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote to her:

“The difference between us is very marked. Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in public, and I have received much encouragement at every step of the way. You, on the other hand, have labored in a private way. I have wrought in the day—you in the night ... The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism. Excepting John Brown [for whose October 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, Tubman helped recruit men]—of sacred memory—I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you have.”



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