

# Excerpt - Dancing With The Stars

## CHAPTER 1

### My Own Yellow Brick Road

As a child, I did a lot of dreaming. Not just at night after falling asleep, but the kind we all do throughout each day ... the "billions and billions," as Carl Sagan would say, "of both little and big (sometimes nebulous) thoughts and ideas weaving constantly in and out of our minds, regardless of where we happen to be or what we are doing during waking hours." It's interesting how this dream process goes through a series of changes as we move in and out of daily experiences and into answers.

Things were different in the '40s than they are today ... much different. Not just in Hollywood, but everywhere. Perhaps my biggest regret at this particular moment is that I didn't begin keeping a journal the day I stepped off the big red streetcar at Venice and Overland Boulevard after paying my 10 cent fare in Hollywood approximately 45 minutes earlier. The walk of a long block (or was it two, I can't be quite certain) seemed more like a mile, as I reverted to my childhood dreams. What would it actually be like? How would I act? What would I say? More than ever, I suddenly realized something: Dreams really do come true. Since the age of eight I had dreamed of working in the movies. The colossal building coming closer with every step was proof that my dream was about to become a reality.

Today is the day I will sign a seven-year movie contract with the world's largest and most prestigious studio, home to more movie stars than any other studio. These thoughts raced back and forth across my mind, over and over again. As I approached Washington Boulevard, I didn't simply walk across when the signal turned green. It was more like I floated to the other side. I glanced at the Greek columns and wrought iron gate. There was a sign with a large red arrow pointing left and lettering that informed me I should walk left, turn right, and use the auto gate.

I stopped dead in my tracks and looked at the sign again, but the information was the same. I couldn't believe it was correct. The auto gate was only for the stars and directors, people who came to the studio in chauffeur-driven limousines. Anyone would know that. I'd seen it a thousand times in the movie magazines I'd read. I continued to walk, stare like a tourist and quiver with anticipation. After turning right, my gaze was directed upward, stopping on what had been indelibly stamped upon my 26-year-old mind since age eight. There they were, the giant iron letters shouting to all the world that this was, indeed, the world of METRO GOLDWYN MAYER. For all like myself who had difficulty believing it, there was Leo the Lion, mouth open wide, roaring: ARS GRATIA ARTIS.

Approaching the window at the left of the gate, my questioning words to the guard were lost as he got up from his chair and stepped through the door facing the studio. Over my shoulder, I heard him say courteously, "Good morning, Miss Dietrich. It's a pleasure to see you again." He gave a slight bow, and then nodded to the chauffeur as the long black limo passed slowly through the gate, apparently unconcerned by Leo sitting high above the gate.

I don't know how long I stood gaping at the disappearing star in her limo. The next thing I was aware of was the guard asking (no doubt for the second or third time) what I wanted; did I have a pass? No, I told him, I didn't have a pass ... I was here to see Mr. Corder in casting. He did his nodding thing again and returned to the booth. He picked up the phone, and in a matter of seconds leaned up to the hole in the window and motioned me toward the last building on the right. I wasted no time floating through the magic gate, turned right, and continued on to the last building. What happened during the next ten or fifteen minutes remains, now more than 60 years later, somewhat shrouded in a sort of mystical fog. The bottom line was that I signed on the dotted line and, moment by moment, became aware that this place

was to become my home, so to speak, for the next seven years.

"Your first assignment will be working with Judy Garland in *Till the Clouds Roll By*. There's no actual starting date yet, but you're guaranteed 48 weeks' pay for each of the seven years, even during days or weeks when there may be no actual work. You'll possibly be loaned out to other major studios from time to time ... at the same rate, of course. Meanwhile, you are to be on call at all times. When you're not home, be sure someone is there who knows how to reach you." The secretary told me as she handed me a copy of the contract. "Feel free to call me any time if you have questions, Norman. I'm sure you're going to be very happy here." As she finished the sentence, the phone rang and I headed out through the door and into the beginning of my dreams.

I signed the contract and left the casting office as though on my own "Yellow Brick Road." After all, the secretary had said, "Your first assignment will be with Judy Garland." No wonder my feet barely touched the ground as I retraced my steps. I nodded a thank-you to the polite guard who had pointed me toward "the last building on the right" only a few moments ago. Pretending to already feel comfortable and at home, I stole a backward glance at Leo the Lion, just to assure myself that what I'd done had not been just another dream. Reassured that he and everything else I'd just encountered was real, I walked back around the building, crossed the street on the green light and headed back to Venice Boulevard. Soon aboard the next streetcar, feeling like it was my own private gondola, I floated once more through Beverly Hills and back to Hollywood.

Remember, this was 1943. All at once, I became aware that I would be assured of an income. I could pay the rent on the small house where I'd lived since 1941. It set me back \$20 a month, plus phone and utilities. Considering I'd been somehow managing on \$8 a week and an average of less than a dollar in tips, I felt like the floodgates of heaven had opened. Recalling the words of the secretary: "... and whether you work or not, you'll receive a paycheck beginning next Friday, with a guarantee of 48 weeks each year for the next seven."

The voice of the conductor broke into my reverie: "Santa Monica and Vine ... next stop ... Santa Monica and Vine." My hand automatically reached up and pulled the cord. The spell was broken and I was no longer floating in my gondola somewhere in the clouds above the rainbow. Excited and aware of the beginning of a totally new adventure, I stepped down from the red car and heard its doors woosh closed behind me.

The sign near the drive-in at the corner reminded me I was back in Hollywood, and for a moment there was a feeling of disappointment. Heading toward the building, I recalled all I'd experienced only an hour before regained my joy. It was as if Judy and I were skipping between the cars, traveling along the Yellow Brick Road and through the doors of the drive-in together. Never had the coffee tasted so good, and for the first time I didn't begrudge the 10 cents it cost me. After all, I was a rich man! I'd be able to quit my job at the parking lot this weekend; I'd give notice tonight and hope Tarzan (Johnny Weissmuller) would return at least once more before my final night. If he drank enough at the bar where he sometimes hung out, he might ask me to drive him home again. In that case, his usual 25 cent tip could possibly become \$2 ... the biggest I'd ever gotten. Then I could stop at the Hollywood Ranch Market on the way home and load up on groceries, plus a 25-pound hunk of ice from the ice machine outside. Even if Johnny didn't show up, the ice was only a nickel and I could always count on that much in tips, even during a slow evening.

As thoughts went through my head, Judy somehow slipped out the door when I paid for the coffee. I walked outside, but she was nowhere in sight. Walking slowly along my own Yellow Brick Road to 1018 N. Vine, just a short block and a half away, I opened the door of the little house I'd already learned to love, and wasn't surprised to hear, off in the distance of my mind, a familiar voice saying, "There's no place like home ... no place like home."

When the phone rang one afternoon three weeks and three paychecks (without working) later, it was not the voice of Judy, but the news it brought was so great I could scarcely refrain from yelling at the top of my voice. Yes, it was Jeanette, the secretary in casting, politely informing me I should, "... please report to Rehearsal Hall A at 9 o'clock tomorrow morning, with rehearsal clothes. You will be working for Bob Alton. The picture is Till the Clouds Roll By, with Judy Garland." That was it. For a split second I couldn't move. Dead silence ... then, like the roar of a lion, I let out a yell and collapsed on the floor in absolute ecstasy ... knowing that at long last my new life was truly about to begin.

The ride the next morning on the big red car was strangely similar to the one nearly a month before, but the walk from Venice Boulevard was most definitely different. The moment I stepped down from the car, my mind transformed the sidewalk and pavement into yellow bricks bordered with multi-colored flowers, and there were Munchkins skipping along with me, singing: "Follow the Yellow Brick Road." The road led me straight to the gate. The same guard was seated inside, and he greeted me politely by name and gave me directions to the rehearsal hall.

I turned, winked at Leo in his guardian position above the gate, and walked past the casting office, where I received a hearty greeting of, "Hi, young fella, beautiful morning!" He was gone before I was aware he'd been speaking to me. The voice was unmistakable - it was Jimmy Durante! It wasn't Clark Gable or Robert Taylor, but a warm glow came over me, assuring me this was truly going to be home, not just a place to work.

Suddenly I looked up, my heart skipped a beat and I did a double take. There, against a framed gold background, were letters spelling out: REHEARSAL HALL A. I stood transfixed for a moment before entering the huge sliding door that was partially open. I was about to meet my new family; all of the young dancers with whom I would soon be working with for the next seven whole years in more than sixty films.

I soon learned that most of the dancers had been brought to Hollywood (MGM, Culver City, to be exact) from New York by Robert Alton, who recently had been lured from Broadway where he had a total of five musicals running. When he first arrived, so he informed me later, he'd been disappointed at the lack of quality and number of dancers available, hence his decision to import a large number who had worked for him in the Big Apple. Because of the salary and the heretofore non-existent possibility of a seven-year contract, these young people had served notice and left the super-big musicals where they'd been working. They, too, were aware that this was the golden era of musicals, never-to--come-again. It was an honor just being a part of it all. Being asked to work for the world's largest and most prestigious studio, and being paid large salaries were just icing on the cake. Yes, we were the lucky ones, the chosen few - and we knew it.

To those not familiar with big names working creatively behind the scenes and cameras, it may mean little or nothing when I say I was excited to find Roger Edens as our rehearsal pianist, and Kay Thompson as our vocal coach. (Ten years later, Kay was primarily identified with Andy Williams and his brothers, and headlined as Kay Thompson and the Williams Brothers. They were tremendously popular at the time.) Kay could play a wild piano and belt out a song like no one else. Kay was Judy Garland's vocal coach. Anticipating involvement with both of them was even more cause for me to be nervous.

The first morning passed so quickly I was truly disappointed when Bob, Kay, and Roger disappeared and the assistant called out, "Okay, everybody, lunch, one hour. Be back at one." A few minutes later, seated outside the hall eating a sack lunch with most of the other dancers who preferred to bask in the sun rather than spend time and money in the studio commissary. My spirits took a major spiral upward when suddenly, from out of nowhere, a small pick-up truck pulled up beside us. A man got out, walked around the truck and removed a director's chair. As he disappeared into the rehearsal hall, I could plainly read the four magic letters in bold print across the back: JUDY.

Lunch now became a feast as my mind conjured up all sorts of images including Kansas, Auntie Em, the Yellow Brick Road, The Wizard, the Ruby Slippers, and Toto. Before I realized it, the hands of the clock pointed to one o'clock. In a few minutes, we were perspiring as we worked on an intricate combination with the assistant choreographer. Suddenly everything stopped ... at least in my mind, though physically all of us continued to dance. Out of the corner of my eye, with no fanfare, I saw Judy walk through the door with Bob, Kay, and Roger. She had a wonderful smile and her gaze drifted toward us as she made her way to the piano. Somehow it had truly never occurred to me how tiny she was, but then I'd only seen her on the silver screen until now.

Bob immediately called for us to take a break. Instead of heading outside to bask in the sun, we casually hung around, watching and listening as Judy stood next to Roger, who began working out an introduction to the number we had already begun, "Who stole my heart away, who makes me dream all day." While Kay sorted through sheets of music scattered across the huge concert grand, Bob was the only one making use of his director's chair. The others leaned casually against the piano, obviously intrigued by Roger's arrangement of the song. Seeing the names in heavy black lettering on those chairs brought out a determination in me to see my own name spelled out on canvas one day. Right now, it was still a part of the dream ... a part which would happen in less than a year.

Unlike the mad rush and pace of today's movie studio routine, the rest of that first afternoon in the rehearsal hall (though I was unaware of it at the time) was typical of what all of us would experience during most of the seven years to follow ... a laid-back atmosphere. Work, of course, was serious. The powers that be had not combed Hollywood and New York City for the best dancers they could find to complement the top Stars without demanding quality results. Yet the pace was relaxed and friendly, an integral part of what was then termed the MGM Family.

Regardless of the amount of work to be done, there was always time to get more done. If something planned for one day was not complete, it was continued on the following day, with no attempt to make up for lost time. If the budget for a particular film was six months, it was not uncommon that it be extended to nine. If it was a year, it might well go on for eighteen months or even two years. If there was stress or pandemonium anywhere, it was not visible to the performers. Even the producers, who often came to the set during a rehearsal to sit in a director's chair and watch some dramatic scene being shot with Hepburn, Gable, Astaire or Turner, were calm.

Yes, things were casual, regardless of technical involvement, primarily because there was plenty of time and, more importantly, plenty of money. There was absolutely no practice or concern for dollars spent superseding quality when it came to producing entertainment ... whether comedy, drama, or the musical.

Seeing Judy Garland on this first day was the beginning of what it was like to participate in creating a finished product, which was in most cases, both exciting and satisfying. It was the opening of a door to life-long memories of caring and sharing with others who enjoyed not only the work and success, but also the everyday camaraderie. Perhaps in the long run, this was the greatest reward.

Sometime during the afternoon following proper and friendly introductions, all of us gathered around the piano (or as close as we could, due to mere numbers) and listened to Roger, Kay, and Judy. As we swayed to the music, they hummed and memorized the lyrics. Then everything stopped, just as it had when Judy had arrived. A propman hurriedly slid two unmarked director's chairs close to the others and the huge doorway slid aside to admit Arthur Freed, our producer. We'd been told he would be visiting at some point during the afternoon. With him, much to everyone's surprise,

was a very special guest...the one and only Jerome Kern, composer of the music we were working on. Each of us felt the honor and privilege of meeting one of the truly great composers of the time.

The remainder of the day was taken up with an extended coffee break, followed by a run-through of the number we'd rehearsed with Bob and his assistant earlier in the day. When our guests departed, we joined forces to polish what we had thus far accomplished, before being casually dismissed and given our call for next morning. With a "thanks for the good work, kids" from our choreographer, plus a friendly acknowledgment from Judy, Kay, and Roger, we were done for the day.

In retrospect, to say that the first day of rehearsal in my new "home" was momentous is admittedly an understatement. There, in the giant hall, were not only an important pianist and vocal coach, but also three major stars from three different creative areas. Judy Garland, top MGM star, Jerome Kern, star composer of Broadway and Hollywood; and Vincente Minnelli, star MGM director (as well as husband of Judy, and soon-to-be father of Liza Minnelli), who had arrived midway through the coffee break.

To a new- kid on the block (me), all of this was unbelievably impressive, to say the least, and I was silently saying a big thank-you to the universe for an experience I knew would, in numerous variations, be repeated over and over during the coming years. My contract, still more dream than reality, again loomed bigger, brighter, and more meaningful in my mind than ever.

That evening, sitting on the patio of my little Hollywood home, looking up at the stars, I was quietly aware of another meaning of stars ... one much closer, more possible to reach out and touch ... even with a possibility of becoming one. Or was this, as the song says, the impossible dream? If so, at least I could go on dancing with the stars ... them in their heaven, and I in mine. Even in that possibility I found no conflict.