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Shirley Temple Stories

By Stephen Schochet

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When the Twentieth Century Pictures company had their expensive merger with the Fox Film Corporation in 1935, studio head Daryl Zanuck was depending on two contract stars to pull the new company through its money troubles. Tragedy struck the same year when Will Rogers died in a plane crash in Alaska. Zanuck turned his financial burden on the shoulders of six year old Shirley Temple (she was actually seven but wouldn't find that out till she was twelve).

Fox had signed her in 1933, a bad year for Hollywood with record numbers of movie theaters closing throughout the country. Her ability to sing and dance was off-putting to some scouts at the studio who called her, "a precocious little monster". Later when she became their chief financial asset the attitude around the lot changed. One time little Shirley walked into the commissary and was picked up by a friendly executive, "How are you doing sweetheart?" The room went quiet. Everyone was staring. If he dropped her, everyone there could lose their job. Very gently he put her down and backed away.

In real life Shirley the actress longed to have a normal existence, so Zanuck made her yearn for the same on the big screen. Depression era audiences fell in love with her determination and optimism. Because her films required no great special effects, locations or famous co-stars, they made enormous profits making her perhaps the most valuable movie star a studio ever had, which occasionally caused resentment. She once had a scene with Lionel Barrymore who flubbed a line then screamed bloody murder when she corrected him. Another time she worked with Adolph Menjou who left the set cursing, "That little blankety blank is making a monkey out of me." Not everyone felt that way. Her dancing partner in *The Little Colonel* (1935), Bill "Bojangles" Robinson often held hands with Shirley as they walked together through the Fox lot. And John Ford who resented Daryl Zanuck assigning him to direct Shirley in *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937) came to respect the child's work ethic. Zanuck rightly blamed Ford's bad influence when Shirley started to address the short mogul as "Uncle Pipsqueak."

She was a highly merchandised fad. She could have retired on the sales of Shirley Temple dolls alone. Once Director Alan Dwan was speeding to Twentieth Century Fox when he was pulled over by a

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policeman. "Ok buddy where's the fi--- Say! Is that one of those Shirley Temple police badges on your passenger seat? My daughter would kill for one of those. OK buddy, give me one of those badges and we'll forget the whole thing."

Shirley's career was guided largely by her over protective mother Gertrude who would grab her by the shoulders before each scene and say, " Sparkle Shirley, sparkle." Zanuck frustrated Mrs. Temple by not allowing Shirley to play more varied parts (not realizing she was a child, George Bernard Shaw offered her the lead in his stage version of Caesar and Cleopatra). Zanuck felt Shirley's spunky movie character had to be repeated for her to stay popular. Gertrude would demand that the studio cut any scene where another child looked better than her daughter. This caused great distress for other parents who retaliated by starting a rumor that Shirley was actually a midget.

Shirley's conservative banker father George had a difficult time dealing with the trappings of fame. One time he requested a meeting with Zanuck. "Mr. Zanuck, I want your advice about this fan mail I've been

getting. I haven't shown them to Gertrude and I'm tempted." Zanuck was startled to read letters from women across the country wishing for George to father their children. Zanuck, who was famous for his own womanizing ways gave simple advice, "If you can't promise them a little girl, stay loyal to your wife."

Zanuck kept spies to inform him of the child's activities at the studio. One time he interrupted a meeting with John Steinbeck to tend to her after hearing she had fallen and broke a tooth. On another occasion she was visited by HG Wells. Shirley was polite and after the famous author left, the little moppet was told she had just met the most important man in the world. "Uh uh. President Roosevelt is the most important man. And Governor Merriam is second." Later Zanuck heard this report while furiously puffing on a cigar. "Who did she say is third?"

No matter how much Zanuck hid it on screen Shirley aged. When World War II broke out movie goers turned away from sentiment. Twentieth Century Fox began to make weightier films like Steinbeck's *The Grapes Of Wrath* (1940). Shirley was declared over the hill at the age of ten. As a teen she became more independent. Without her mother to push her she never achieved the same acting success as an adolescent that she had as a child. But her grit and determination represented the American spirit to the world. A false report of her death in Hirohito's Japan in 1943 set off a wild celebration in the streets.

Stephen Schochet is the author and narrator of the audiobooks *Fascinating Walt Disney* and *Tales Of Hollywood*. The Saint Louis Post Dispatch says, " these two elaborate productions are exceptionally entertaining." Hear realaudio samples of these great, unique gifts at

MY SISTER SHIRLEY

By Irvin L. Rozier

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MY SISTER SHIRLEY

I have four sisters, Shirley was the firstborn
She has many talents but never toots her horn
She can play the piano and beautiful music make
Cook up some wonderful food and bake a delicious cake
In her later years, to college she went
Graduated with honors, Joe's money she spent
She's taught at elementary school for several years
Had the patience of Job and wiped away many tears
Her husband, Joe, no finer man could she love
He treats her mighty fine and he sings just like a dove
Shirley's three boys are mighty fine lads
They grew up pretty good and all made loving dads
Now as Shirley enters her golden twilight years
May God grant her peace and wipe away her fears
As a brother to a sister, I send my best wishes
Remember all those times you washed them dirty dishes
I'm so glad you are my sister and my friend
To this little poem I must now make an end.

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