

ESTHER WILLIAMS: STILL IN THE SWIM

A lifelong love of water brought America's bathing beauty fame, fitness, and enduring "grace."

by Pat Perry

Esther Williams didn't plan on swimming into history as America's most memorable mermaid. Blame it on Hitler. The pretty high-school athlete had qualified for three berths on the 1940 Olympic team heading to Finland. But while Williams was busy lapping the pool and perfecting her strokes, Hitler was terrorizing Europe and occupying the Scandinavian countries. The 1940 Olympic Games were cancelled.

What Williams didn't know was that showman Billy Rose was scouting for a performer to star in his San Francisco Aquacade. He noticed the young athlete's picture in the local newspaper and invited her to try out. With her shot at the gold medal cancelled along with the games, she accepted Rose's challenge and became an Aquacade headliner opposite Johnny Weissmuller of Tarzan-movie fame.

"So much was going on at that time in my life," Williams remembers. "I was just out of high school, and the idea of starring in a beautiful show like the Aquacade where people swam to music—they called it water ballet then—was certainly exciting."

The Aquacade show served as a platform to even greater fame. Williams' beauty and athletic ability caught the attention of MGM. The studio was waiting to discover an aquatic sensation to star in an upcoming series of swimming movies. After a screen test with Clark Gable, MGM put the 18-year-old Williams under contract.

"It was all happening so fast. I suddenly realized when I was under contract that I didn't know anything about being in front of a camera," she says. "I



Williams has spent much of her professional life promoting the health and benefits of swimming for people of all ages. "When you are in the water, you are ageless," she says.

asked if I could take on a couple of little roles before I starred in a big one."

Executives agreed and introduced the ingenue to movie audiences the same way they had Judy Garland, Donna Reed, and Lana Turner—in an Andy Hardy movie. Williams' vehicle was 1942's *Andy Hardy's Double Life*.

"The Andy Hardy series was almost like a screen test for the audience," Williams recalls. "We didn't know it at the time, but Andy Hardy was the precursor of situation comedy as we now know it in television. Years later, Michael J. Fox did 'Family Ties.' He was the image of Mickey Rooney—a

little fellow who was smart, cute, and talented. If you did a clone of the Andy Hardy series, 'Family Ties' would be it. The family was just updated to the '80s."

By 1944, MGM gave Williams a shot at stardom, casting her as lead in its first aquatic musical, *Bathing Beauty*, opposite veteran Red Skelton.

"The picture was originally called *Mr. Coed*. It was going to be Red's starring vehicle," she remembers. "They previewed the picture in a town outside of Los Angeles called Pomona. Audiences in those days wrote on cards what they thought and felt about the picture. The preview audience carried on about the girl in the bathing suit, so executives changed the title of the movie from *Mr. Coed* to *Bathing Beauty*. I dreaded seeing Red the day after that appeared in the paper. But he was as sweet as he could be about it. He was a dear, dear man."

With *Bathing Beauty*, MGM transformed Williams

from a run-of-the-mill contract player to the reigning bathing beauty. In her 19-year film career, she swam her way through 26 features (and an estimated 1,250 miles). The most lavish aquatic extravaganzas teamed Williams with Busby Berkeley, the legendary dance choreographer. Berkeley will be celebrated in late January during a Turner Classic Movie original documentary, *Busby Berkeley: Going Through the Roof*. Williams will be one of the featured interviewees on the special.

"I credit Busby with the invention of the Hollywood musical as we came to know it in the late '20s and '30s,"

she says. Dick Powell, Joan Blondell, Ruby Keeler, and Ginger Rogers were his repertory company people who went from one feature to the next. "These extravagant musicals are what prompted MGM to find Busby for my films. They knew his talent could help the kind of pictures I was doing. You can run out of ideas on how to get somebody in the water. I did three pictures with him."

Berkeley got most of his ideas while soaking in a bathtub. When designing the elaborate water-ballet numbers for a Williams film like *Million Dollar Mermaid*, he often called her from the tub at 2:00 a.m. to discuss ideas.

While the water ballerinas appeared to effortlessly glide across the screen, the off-camera action was not as serene. Many of the performers were professional dancers, but definitely not swimmers.

"They were going off high platforms in swan dives and hitting the water, getting water in their sinuses and sinking to the bottom," Williams remembers about the filming of 1949's *Neptune's Daughter*. "We had to literally teach the dancers to swim."

Asked about the seemingly "effortless grace" in the finished films, Williams confesses, "The directors told us, 'You're getting paid, so smile!'"

Berkeley's elaborate routines for Esther Williams weren't without risk. In one scene, Williams was hoisted 80 feet up on a hydraulic lift built into the stage. Dressed in sequins with an elaborate metal crown, she did a swan dive into the pool below.

"While I was in the air, it occurred to me that the crown should have been made of cardboard, not lightweight metal," says Williams. "My neck snapped and I spent the next six months in a body cast. The doctor told me that I came as close to breaking my neck as I possibly could without actually breaking it."

To recuperate, Williams did what she does best—got back in the water. A studio doctor had recommended intense physical therapy, but his physi-



Ever since the Turner Broadcasting Network bought the MGM library of over 6,000 movies, Williams has been "meeting a whole new generation."

cal therapy hurt, and her water therapy didn't. Within weeks, she was back at work, far ahead of schedule.

After swimming her way to stardom in aquatic musicals such as *Bathing*

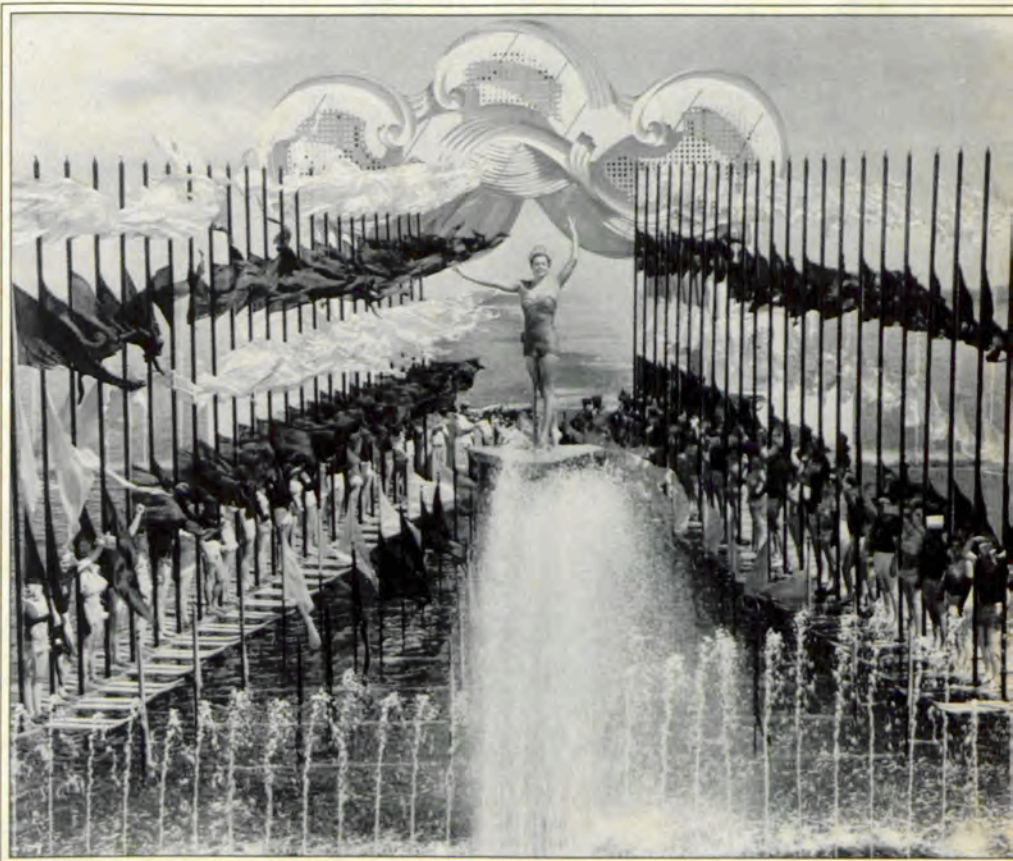
Beauty, *Neptune's Daughter*, *Dangerous When Wet*, *Pagan Love Song*, and *Million Dollar Mermaid*, she retired her sequins for a business suit and dove into a second career. She opened a swimming-pool business in 1959; it is still going strong. In 1988, with husband Edward Bell, Williams launched a successful line of swimsuits, The Esther Williams Collection. In between business meetings, the grandmother of three is writing an autobiography.

Throughout Williams' life, there has been one constant—water. She has never been far from a pool. But whenever and wherever people see her, "the question" pops to the surface: Do you still swim?

"Of course I still swim," she always replies. "Why would I ever stop doing something that feels so good? When I get in the pool, I know it's the best I'm going to feel all day."

Swimming has helped keep Williams vital and strong in her 70s. Ever since the 1940s, she has been one of the sport's most ardent and visible promoters, inspiring thousands along the way to take the plunge.

see Esther Williams on page 70



In *Easy to Love* (1953), set in Florida's Cypress Gardens, Williams rose majestically from the watery mist as the star in this lavish water spectacular featuring this Busby Berkeley production number—a style that became her cinematic trademark.

If you would like to find out more about synchronized swimming, contact U.S. Synchronized Swimming, Pan American Plaza, 201 S. Capitol Ave., Suite 901, Indianapolis, IN 46225, 317-237-5700, or visit the organization's Website at www.usasynchro.org.

plug the leak has been my only mistake—to date. Of course, I may run into problems more tiring than flushing oatmeal out of a radiator. But off-hand, I can't foresee one. ✱

Esther Williams

continued from page 37

"I'm just glad I could get them in the water," she says.

Through her films, she championed the then-little-known sport of synchronized swimming. After *Bathing Beauty* became a box-office hit in 1945, women wrote to Williams, asking for advice on how to "swim pretty like I did in the movies." The following year, the sport held its first official competition. In 1984, Esther Williams and Donna DeVarona were invited to host the first Olympic synchronized swimming competition. Today, in YMCAs and pools across the country, men and women of all ages enjoy, train, and compete in the sport. And Williams couldn't be happier.

"Swimming is for everybody! As you grow older, the thing you notice is that you are not walking as fast or jogging as often because it is so hard on the joints," Williams says. "Women are also prone to osteoporosis and do not have the same strength in their joints. But in water, you are totally ageless and weightless. It's the great equalizer!"

At her Beverly Hills home, she

swims "every day." And someone's always popping in wanting a few tips from her.

"I'm teaching little ones, older people," she says. "Even my schnauzer swims!"

Over the years, Williams has suffered the occasional injury. Once, she underwent knee replacement surgery: the result, she believes, of too much tennis. After the wound healed, she took to the pool, recuperating far ahead of schedule. Later at a party, she discovered singer-dancer Liza Minnelli limping around on crutches after undergoing a hip replacement. The "queen of chlorine" offered the actress the same advice.

"Liza, heat your pool, get in that water, and move that leg! Put a clock out by the pool and for 20 minutes at a stretch, churn away," she told her. "Weeks later, she had an opening in one of those huge auditoriums. She walked over to where I sat in the first row, leaned over, and announced to the crowded auditorium, 'This is my coach, Esther Williams, who got me back on my feet!'"

Williams attributes her stardom to her athleticism, which got her through the long days of demanding work at MGM.

"The agility from sports was a great help," she believes.

The benefits of fitness are still with her today, influencing everyone around her.

"My 14-year-old grandson is very talented in sports. I began teaching that little boy to swim at three months; he was paddling around the pool at six months," she says. "What I've noticed is that athletes, people in track and swimming for example, have this easy grace because their muscles respond to them. Muscles that have been trained in a sport do you very well in life, especially in an acting career. The sport has given me grace."

Williams believes that sports help one develop an inner strength that is an asset in all aspects of life.

"You develop a reserve that you can reach down and pull out in the last ten meters of a race, when you feel like your legs are going to fall off," she says. "It's a mental thing always at work. Even though you think you are going to die any moment, you say to yourself, 'I'll die when I hit the end of the pool' and hear 'You won!'"

Almost 60 years later, the winner is still in the pool, and she's doing swimmingly. ✱

Tee for Two

continued from page 41

know something about snakes, might have challenged this statement as to their habits, but he was afforded no opportunity of doing so. His companion had suddenly reached out a clutching hand, and only by coyly drawing it back was he enabled to preserve his neck intact.

"Here, just a moment," he said.

I have mentioned that publishers are sensitive and highly strung. They are also quick-witted. They are able to think on their feet.

"So you are proposing to tear me limb from limb, are you?"

"I am."

It was not easy for Harold Pickering to sneer, for his lower jaw kept dropping, but he contrived to do so.

"I see," he said, just managing to curl his lip before the jaw got away from him again. "Thus insuring that you shall be this year's club champion. Ingenious, McMurdo. It's one way of winning, of course. But I should not call it very sporting."

He had struck the right note. The blush of shame mantled Sidney McMurdo's cheek. His hands fell to his sides, and he stood chewing his lip, plainly disconcerted.

"I hadn't looked at it like that," he confessed.

