[AUTHORS](#)[BIBLIOGRAPHY](#)[EVENTS](#)[LETTERS](#)[PREVIEW](#)[QUIZ](#)

Once upon a time, long ago, there existed a vast and magical empire, ruled by money and power and fueled by imagination, talent and ambition. This magical place was not a work of fiction and its location was not a far away mountain top or a remote tropical island. It was found in Culver City, California and was known through out the world as Metro-Goldwyn Mayer Studios.



Through the M-G-M gates passed the greatest stars of filmdom from the Silent Era (Buster Keaton, Lon Chaney, Ramon Novarro, John Gilbert, Norma Shearer, Greta Garbo, and Marion Davies) to the Golden Era, (Jean Harlow, Joan Crawford, Clark Gable, Lana



Turner, James Stewart, Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney, Hedy Lamarr, Fred Astaire, Ava Gardner and Elizabeth Taylor)

and beyond (Debbie Reynolds, Glenn Ford, Rod Taylor, Elvis Presley, George Hamilton, and Doris Day).



The finest creative artists of show business, the world's most beautiful women, kings and queens, presidents and princes, titans of industry, the great and the near-great from all nations and generations of movie lovers from around the world found their way to this Movieland institution.

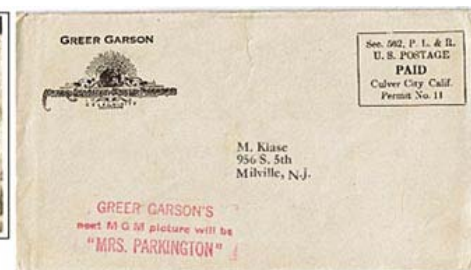
As the premiere movie factory, M-G-M Studios was a self-sufficient, self proclaimed "city within a city" built on six separate lots and spread across 185 fenced and gated acres. The controllers of this motion picture empire were located at the east end of Lot 1 in the Irving G. Thalberg building, named after the head of production responsible for most of M-G-M's early success. Its 235 offices housed additional studio executives, directors, writers, producers, and the Legal and Story Departments. Here as many as 7,000 books, plays and stories were read annually, with half a million synopses of story material on file. From his infamous all white office, studio executive Louis B. Mayer

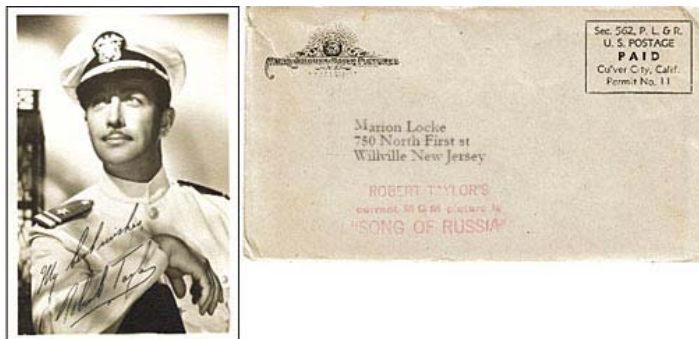


negotiated contracts and controlled studio expenditures. His power and influence could turn a new discovery into a star or turn a troublesome star into a has-been.

LOT 1

The 44 acres of Lot 1 were the center of activity and contained most of the studio's 195 permanent buildings. These included production support offices, a commissary, barbershop, fan mail department, publicity department, 28 sound stages, laboratories,





still photography studio, performance stage, casting department, sound facilities, and technical buildings, special effects department, miniatures department, camera and light department, neon studio and scores of other departments essential to the production and manufacture of motion pictures.

The industrial center of the studio consisted of carpenters' shops, a lumber mill, plaster and plastic shop, foundry, machine shops, blacksmith shop, florist, upholstering shop and nearly everything else used or needed for motion picture production. M-G-M even operated its own railroad and spur line to ensure regular delivery of trainloads of lumber and other supplies to keep the movie factory humming.



The library within M-G-M's Music Department had approximately four million selections, ranking it behind only the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library to make it the third largest music library in the world.

The Casting Office handled as many as 12,000 calls in a day. The Research Department averaged up to 500 fact-checking questions a day to insure authenticity in scripts, costume and set design. A huge modern film laboratory processed an average of four-and-one-half million feet of film per week and consumed up to 300,000 gallons of water per day supplied by the studio's three artesian wells. The Property Department was the world's largest and maintained more than 1,000,000 items from every country and historical period, providing anything from a mantel clock to a full-sized locomotive, row boats to horse drawn buggies, antique furniture and crystal chandelier to medieval swords and machine guns. The M-G-M Makeup Department was run by Jack Dawn and later, by Academy Award recipient William Tuttle. These artists could alter the appearance of an actor or actress, making them appear young or old, enhancing or hiding their unique facial features, or even changing their race. The Makeup Department had the capacity to meet the make up requirements of up to 1,200 actors an hour and could handle as many as 12,000 in a single day. The Art Department, headed by the legendary Academy Award winning art director Cedric Gibbons, was renowned for producing the most lavish and detailed sets that served to create M-G-M's indelible association with wealth and class. And with the enormous resources of the studio, M-G-M's historical period exterior and interior sets were considered the best by industry standards. As many as 100,000 yards of fabric and other materials were cut annually in the Wardrobe Department which had

15 warehouses, housing 150,000 costumes representing nearly every historical period. Here the fashion designer Adrian supplied the style for M-G-M's biggest female stars. This department could equip as many as 5,000 actors and extras in a single day. The 22 screening rooms operated by the Projection Department ran enough film every day to provide prints to 40 exhibitors. At its peak in the mid-1940's, M-G-M employed as many as 4,000 people and utilized more skilled technical help than any other form of manufacturing with 117 arts, professions and vocations and organized into 38 departments. The Studio Club, an employee support group, had over 3,000 members. To maintain security and internal control, as well as deter the starry-eyed gate crashers and Hollywood hopefuls, M-G-M supported its own 100 member Police Department headed by Chief W.P. Hendry. For decades, the officer stationed at the main gate was named Kenny Hollywood.

The studio operators handled a switchboard with 2,400 extensions and routed thousands of calls a day. The annual electricity used by the studio and supplied by the studio's own electrical plant, would light over 25,000 homes.

LOT 2

Across Overland Avenue to the west from Lot 1 was Lot 2. This 37-acre parcel was purchased specifically for studio expansion and some of the first films to use it were King Vidor's "The Big Parade" (1925) and "Quality Street" (1927). Many of the standing sets from the early backlot built on the west end of Lot 1 were moved here to form "Waterfront Street." The prison set from "The Big House" (1930) was built here, as was "New England Street," a curved street of well maintained, middle class homes used extensively throughout the "Andy Hardy" series. The swimming pool, stables and mansion from "The Young Philadelphians" (1940), the exterior Chinese set from "Green Dolphin Street" (1947) and the "Verona Square" set from "Romeo and Juliet" (1936) where among the many others built here.

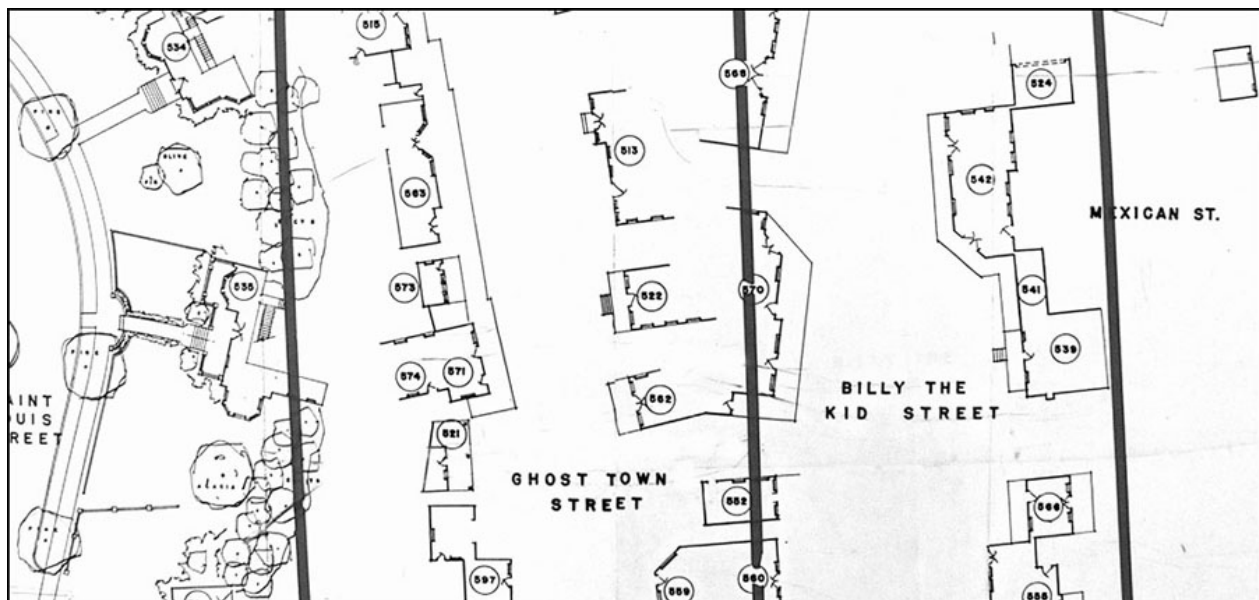
The Animation Department where cartoon characters "Tom and Jerry," "Droopy," and "Barney the Bear" were drawn and filmed was located in a streamlined building on the northeast corner of Lot 2. The team of Hanna and Barbera honed their cartooning craft here.

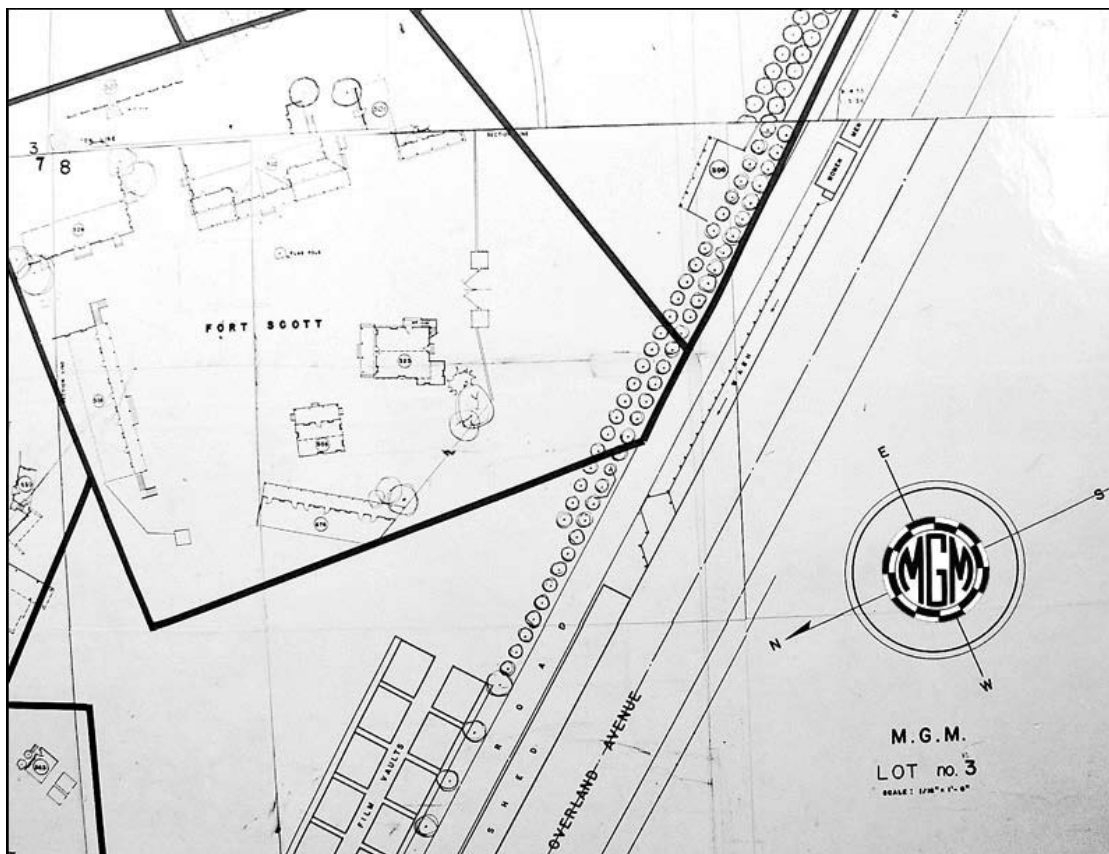


During the late 1950's, a young Hollywood hopeful named Jack Nicholson worked as an errand boy in this department and received his introduction to a business and a industry in which he would later become a legendary figure.

LOT 3

Eight blocks to the south at the intersection of Overland Avenue and Jefferson Boulevard was Lot 3, a 65-acre parcel where even more elaborate exterior sets were built and maintained. These included the "Jungle Island" for the Tarzan series that was at the southern end of a 63,000,000 gallon M-G-M made lake that was used effectively in "Show Boat" (1953) and "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" (1960). At the north end of the lake, a cluster of Colonial style commercial building called "Salem Waterfront" was built and seen in films including "All the Brothers Were Valiant" (1953) and "Plymouth Adventure" (1953). Most studio backlots would have had at most one western street façade, but not M-G-M. They had three. A prosperous and established town called "Western Street," a deserted and faded "Ghost Town" and a frontier town called "Billy the Kid Street".





Also found on Lot 3 was "Dutch Street" built for "Seven Sweethearts" (1942) and featured a lake and stone bridge. To the north of that set was a giant poured concrete processing tank with a massive painted sky background used for filming large scale miniature ships first used for "Mutiny on the Bounty" (1935). All of these were permanent standing sets that were used over and over again, altered, redressed, repainted and shot from multiple angles. They represented a realistic, yet cinematically stylized portrayal of nearly every place on earth. And by utilizing these sets year after year, movie after movie the studio's production costs were greatly reduced while giving studio management the opportunity to keep a close eye on the set. Spread around this Lot were 15 humming refrigerated film vaults to preserve the factory's pricy product.

LOT 4-5-6

The other three lots were located across the street on Jefferson Boulevard. The studio zoo was once located on Lot 4 where, at various times for numerous movies, lions, elephants, monkeys and dogs all found a home while waiting for their close-ups. In addition to the animal cages, pens, bungalow and a performance ring in the center of it all. The majority of the 5.4 acres of this lot was used for Lot 3 parking. The 7.8 acres of Lot 5 was south of Lot 3 and was used as the studio "bone yard" and featured all aspects of transportation, including wagon wheels, axels, circus carts, and sections of and parts for trains, planes and automobiles. The southeastern border of the lot contained horse stables with stalls for more than 25 horses where Louis B. Mayer and Fred Astaire kept their revolving collections of Thoroughbreds. To keep these champions in top shape there were 2 large and 3 small corrals with Tack shed and barn Lot 6 was kitty corner from Lot 5 and its 6 acres contained the studio nursery where plants, exotic trees, shrubs and flowers were grown for interior and exterior sets as well as studio landscaping. Here M-G-M even had the necessary facilities to grow their own grass sod!

A "City Within a City" Indeed!

Throughout its history, M-G-M was the premiere Hollywood studio, with top grossing pictures that lead the industry with both

Oscar nominations and wins. The company motto was "Do it Right, Do it Big, Give it Class" and as long as the money kept pouring in, they did just that. But by the late 1940's, the empire was developing cracks in the ample foundation. In 1947, an Anti Trust decree divorced studios from their theatre chains, which had a drastic effect on profits. Moreover, movie attendance started to drop dramatically; post war audiences' tastes were changing, and early television programming encouraged former regular paying movie patrons to stay at home and be entertained for free. Soon, what had been an almost sure thing at the box office became an ever-increasing game of chance.

During the 1950's, M-G-M's profit/loss charts resembled a roller coaster ride, with just one or two hits keeping the studio afloat. There was even talk of real estate developments on all the backlots. And to add insult to injury, Culver City officials began to grouse that the land M-G-M owned and occupied could be better suited for uses that would generate more property tax. By the early 1960's the very assets that had made MGM the biggest and best had become enormous liabilities. With huge overhead expenses and box office receipts more miss than hit, the red ink ran and ran. In the late sixties, new buyers emerged for the studio, but they were more interested in the perceived easy money of Las Vegas casinos than the movie-making gamble of Hollywood. Studio assets were sold at wholesale prices to halt the bleeding and to raise money for the new MGM Grand Hotel. Every prop and costume that could be carried or carted was dispensed of at an 18 day public auction. And what didn't sell at auction was sold for pennies on the pound. What wasn't sold, like M-G-M massive collection of neon signs, were bulldozed and buried in a landfill.

The fabulous backlots were in fact finally sold off for real estate development. Now tract houses and apartments would replace those once wondrous lands of make believe. What had been the greatest of all movie studios was now reduced to an empty shell. With the ever-changing fluctuation in global finances and ever-increasing sources of entertainment, and never ending advances in computer technology, the likelihood of such a magical empire ever being built again is highly improbable. Perhaps Frank Sinatra put it best in a line from the film "That's Entertainment", "You can wait around and hope, but I tell you, you'll never see the likes of this again."

But all is not lost!

Now, for the first time ever, this lost world of wonder has been rediscovered. After 12 years of research, interviews, photo collecting, screenings and writing, you too will have a chance to experience the majesty of this vanished institution of Hollywood's motion picture industry. Much like archeologists uncovering a long lost civilization and unveiling it for all the world to see, now the lost empire of M-G-M has been reconstructed in book form by its authors. This book, "M-G-M: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot will take the

reader on a comprehensive tour into this wondrous world of movie making magic.

By combining photos, maps and archival information, this book brings it all back to life from cover to cover. This is the closest movie lover or student of film can get to relive the romance of the classic M-G-M without having had the good fortune of working there or at least knowing someone who did. By the time the reader is finished with this book they will have a complete understanding of why the studio was know as "the Tiffanys" of all the studios within the industry itself.

A Lavish Illustrated History of Hollywood's Greatest Movie Studio

The book features many exclusives:

****Over 350 never before published photos and illustrations of the studio, stages and the backlot sets (including many from Marc Wanamaker's Bison Archives) <http://bisonarchives.com>***

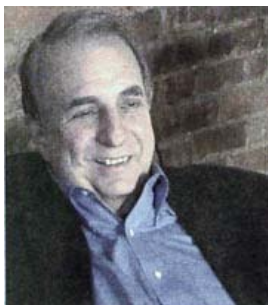
****Never before published maps of Lot 1, Lot 2 and Lot 3 that put the photos in their proper context and take the reader on a " virtual" tour.***

****Exclusive never published interviews with Richard Anderson and Betty Garrett and including the last interviews with Hollywood's Master of Make-Up and long time M-G-M employee, William Tuttle and Robert Nudelman, the preservation activist who valiantly tried to save Lot 2 from demolition.***

****An extensive list of the M-G-M titles that matches the films with the backlot sets utilized during their production.***

Here is your chance to take a trip to these magical lands of make believe. It's the perfect book for all movie lovers, serious students of film, architecture enthusiasts, and hopeless romantics. And last but not least, it's guaranteed to reignite the childlike sense of wonder that lives in us all.

THE REVIEWS ARE IN!



" For anyone who has ever dreamed what it was like to live in the Golden Age of Hollywood, this visit to my grandfather's studio will vividly re-create the experience.

From hometown USA to eighteenth century France to medieval England to a village in China, the memories of all the great films that were made there will spring back to life."

Daniel Mayer Selznick



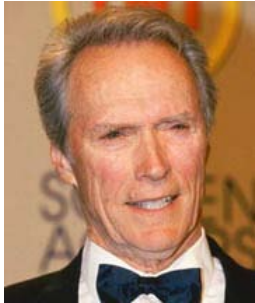
"This book reflects the truth about M-G-M'S backlot. I ought to know- I spent many hours there" -

Debbie Reynolds



"Under contract for six years in twenty four films...seeing this extraordinary new book of photos and commentary...took me and will take you on a journey where Louis B. Mayer's "More Stars Than Their Are In Heaven" acted on the magnificent grounds and sets of "M-G-M's Five Back Lots"

Richard Anderson



"Reading this was like being there. I know. I was there."

Clint Eastwood



"What a cornucopia of valuable behind-the-scenes information and rare photos. I've got one word to describe this book: irresistible."

Leonard Maltin



"The first ten films I made for MGM changed my life. Now, you can go back in time as I have in the pages of this remarkable book, learning how and where the Land of Make Believe became real. Once you take the journey, you, too will be transported. "

Angela Lansbury



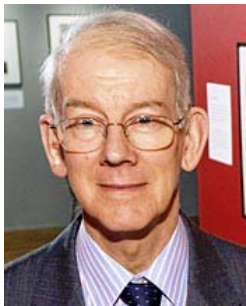
"I've read many books about Hollywood over the years and this is by far the best."

Robert Vaughn



"This book, 'MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot' brought back a lot of wonderful memories, many scenes from the original 'Time Machine' were shot there, Yvette Mimieux and I spent many long working hours at the old backlot."

Rod Taylor



"What an achievement! Having spent a great deal of time on the backlot myself, this book brought forth so many memories. The description of the last days of MGM is brilliantly done, and the list of films shot on the various sets is incredible. All in all, it's a spectacular project!"

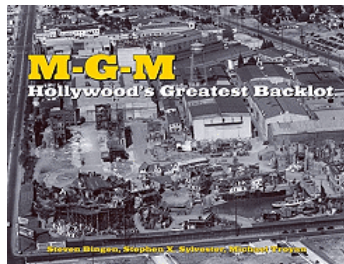
Kevin Brownlow

MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot

by Steven Bingen, Stephen X. Sylvester, and Michael Troyan

Edited by Steven Bingen, Stephen X. Sylvester, and Michael Troyan,

foreword by Debbie Reynolds Santa Monica, \$34.95 (312p) ISBN 978-1-59580-055-8



MGM backlot aerial photo. (Marc Wanamaker, Bison Archives)

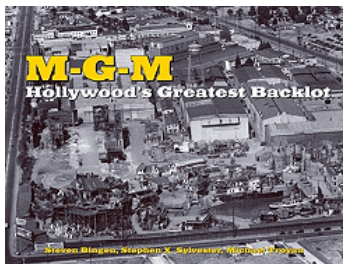
"The world probably will not see anything quite like it again," concedes talk show host Dick Cavett about the Culver City home to some of the 20th century's most renowned and respected actors, actresses, screenwriters, and artists. A production company in its truest sense, the eventual 1924 merger of Metro, Goldwyn, and Mayer pioneered an assembly-line approach to filmmaking and initial profits paved the way for the introduction of sound stages and innovations in set design, special effects, and many other aspects of film production. Chapters are sub-divided into "Lots"--as was the MGM site itself--and readers are transported into a bygone era through candid b&w photographs, lucid commentaries, testimonials, and anecdotes that bestow a behind-the-scenes experience.

But the tale had a darker side as well: cracks were showing in the pristine veneer and the editors aptly include the studio's undignified demise amidst squandered assets and disillusioned takeover attempts.

Film-buffs, historians, sociologists, and economists will swoon at the intricacy and insider information here; detailed balance sheets of frequently over-blown production budgets are even included. Readers will be educated, inspired, and enthralled by this handsome book. Photos. (Feb.)

Permalink: <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-59580-055-8>

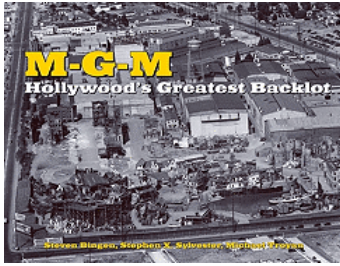
Vintage MGM - A nostalgic look at the Culver City studio is provided in the book 'MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot.'



MGM backlot aerial photo. (Marc Wanamaker, Bison Archives)

MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot, "a new coffee-table book from Steven Bingen, Stephen X. Sylvester and Michael Troyan, offers a nostalgic look at the sound stages and expansive outdoor sets of the famed Culver City studio that boasted of having more stars than are in the heavens. Besides interviews with folks who worked there — including a foreword by Debbie Reynolds — the book features hundreds of rare photographs that illustrate MGM's status as the dream factory."

[Copyright © 2011, Los Angeles Times](#)



MGM backlot aerial photo. (Marc Wanamaker, Bison Archives)

MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot

by Steven Bingen, Stephen X. Sylvester, and Michael Troyan

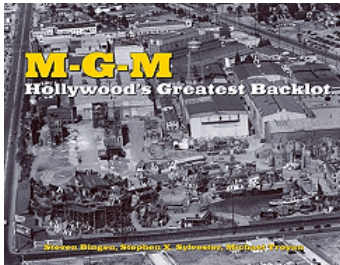
One of the most pleasant benefits of running a book review blog is getting free books, mostly pre-pub review copies but a few published editions as well. Authors, publicists, and publishers offer me titles almost every week. I say "no thanks" more often than not because the titles do not interest me. I suspect many of these book advocates do not bother to check the blog to see what kinds of books I read, for I am declining steamy romances, conspiracy thrillers, and miracle diet books with regularity. When I do accept a book, such as a biography or a history, I caution the giver that I will only review it if I enjoy it. The latest such book is MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot by Steven Bingen, Stephen X. Sylvester, and Michael Troyan, a big photo book celebrating the history of movie making.

As the title suggests, Bingen and company's book is more about the MGM maze of sets and soundstages than actors, directors, producers, and studio executives, though they all come into the story as well. Through maps and historic photos, the authors take readers on an extensive tour of MGM lots One (44 acres), Two (37 acres), and Three (65 acres), where they estimate twenty percent of America's 20th century feature films were made, including the Andy Hardy and Tarzan series, the beloved MGM musicals Meet Me in St. Louis, The Wizard of Oz and Singin' in the Rain, and the aquatic films of Esther Williams, as well as TV series, such as The Twilight Zone and The Man from U.N.C.L.E. The authors show how the flat lots of Culver City, California were made into the streets of New York, Western frontier towns, African jungles, and ancient Rome. The authors also identify and describe all of the administrative and support staff buildings. There were luxurious dressing rooms for the stars, a cafeteria with Mrs. Mayer's own chicken noodle soup, and endless prop departments. I particularly liked learning about the research department, which was a library with 20,000 books and a 250,000 item clipping file. The irony here is that a team of researchers would report the facts, and then the producers would play fast with history for the sake of story anyhow. I also liked learning about the combined newsstand/barbershop where the barbers sang four-part harmony. In some ways, it really was a magical place. What happened to it all? In the final twenty-four pages, the authors recount the slow dismantling of the MGM empire, highlighting executive errors in judgment in script selection, bad contracts with outside firms, and money-losing real estate deals. No one seemed to have a clear vision after Louis B. Mayer was dethroned. The MBAs who held more sway than career filmmakers essentially gave the assets away. Even when Universal Studios discovered that tourists would line up to take historic studio tours, MGM executives remained determined to bulldoze over fifty years of set building. Sadly, housing developments cover most of the land today. I know several movie buffs who will enjoy MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot and am putting this copy into our library collection. Other public libraries should consider it, too. Bingen, Steven.

MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot. Santa Monica Press, 2011. ISBN 9781595800558.

MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot

by Steven Bingen, Stephen X. Sylvester, and Michael Troyan - from TCM.com



MGM backlot aerial photo. (Marc Wanamaker, Bison Archives)

MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot is the illustrated history of the soundstages and outdoor sets where Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer produced many of the world's most famous films.

During its Golden Age, the studio employed the likes of Garbo, Astaire, and Gable, and produced innumerable iconic pieces of cinema such as The Wizard of Oz, Singin' in the Rain, and Ben-Hur. It is estimated that a fifth of all films made in the United States prior to the 1970s were shot at MGM studios.

All of this happened behind closed doors, the backlot shut off from the public in a veil of secrecy and movie magic. MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot highlights this fascinating film treasure by recounting the history, popularity, and success of the MGM company through a tour of its physical property.

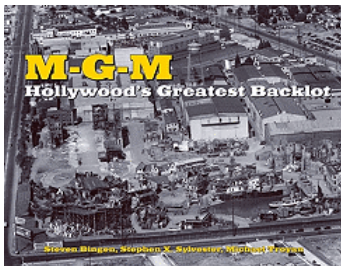
Featuring the candid, exclusive voices and photographs from the people who worked there, and including hundreds of rare and unpublished photographs, readers are launched aboard a fun and entertaining virtual tour of Hollywood's most famous and mysterious motion picture studio.

Product Details: Format: Cloth/hardcover

Publication Date: February 2011 - Publisher: Santa Monica Press

TURNER CLASSIC MOVIES

New And Notable Film Books BOOK REVIEW



MGM backlot aerial photo. (Marc Wanamaker, Bison Archives)

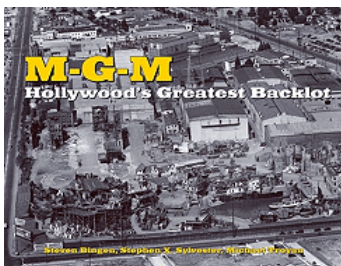
One might think that by this time, every conceivable film-related topic has been covered in book form...but the newest releases prove that this isn't so. Perhaps the most unusual, and exciting, addition to the library of movie books is **M-G-M: HOLLYWOOD'S GREATEST BACKLOT** by Steven Bingen, Stephen X. Sylvester, and Michael Troyan, with a foreword by MGM veteran Debbie Reynolds (Santa Monica Press). As the authors explain in their Introduction, "Our purpose in producing this book is not to discuss the films that MGM produced. That particular road has been well traveled elsewhere. Our interest here is not in the product at all, but rather the factory responsible for that product. Our goal is to preserve, in print and in memory, if not in brock and mortar, the actual physical place that was once Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer for the first time."

Once you start leafing through this beautifully-produced volume, you won't be able to stop. The authors have traced the history of the M-G-M lot with equal measures of thoroughness and panache.

This is much more than a collection of behind-the-scenes photos: it is a guided tour inside the walls of a magical kingdom, building by building, street by street, peppered with quotes from people who worked there over the years. From scene storage to the fabled Little Red Schoolhouse, from the standing sets to the backlot jungle and lake, this is a closeup look at Hollywood's most prestigious studio from its earliest days through the television era.

Leonard Maltin

Book takes readers on tour of MGM's legendary studios Published Monday, Mar. 28, 2011



MGM backlot aerial photo. (Marc Wanamaker, Bison Archives)

As last week's death of Elizabeth Taylor reminded us, the Golden Age of Hollywood can never be repeated. But an informed, nostalgic visit is possible in the pages of "M-G-M: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot" by Steven Bingen, Stephen X. Sylvester and Michael Troyan (Santa Monica Press, \$34.95, 312 pages).

"It was a 10-year project – longer when you consider I've been an MGM buff since childhood," said Troyan, who is the community relations manager for the Barnes & Noble bookstore in Citrus Heights.

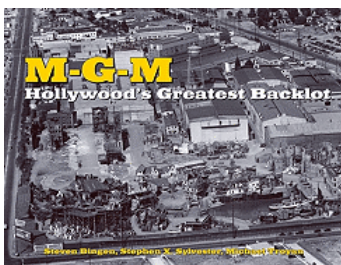
This is the definitive take on what was once the world's premier movie studio. It was torn down during the 1970s, and most of the memorabilia – props, signs, costumes – was auctioned, taken as souvenirs or thoughtlessly thrown away.

The book overflows with rare black-and-white photos that transport readers behind the scenes. Especially fascinating is the acre-by-acre tour of the MGM sets and soundstages that were legendary in their day.

<http://www.sacbee.com/2011/03/28/3507773/book-takes-readers-on-tour-of.html>

M-G-M: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot.

Santa Monica. 2011. c.312p. photogs. bibliog. index. ISBN 9781595800558. \$34.95. FILM



MGM backlot aerial photo. (Marc Wanamaker, Bison Archives)

For all aficionados of Hollywood's golden age, when MGM was at the apex of U.S. film production, with stars like Clark Gable, Greta Garbo, and Judy Garland (to name just the Gs), this book is rewarding because it isn't just another celebration of MGM's luster. But it's also a tearjerker. What was the most glorious back lot in film history is gone. The book's final section, "Backlot Babylon," narrates the studio's postwar decline and its 1969 purchase by Kirk Kerkorian, whose top executive declared "The old MGM is gone," and then bulldozed and sold off the back lots. Authors Bingen (Warner Brothers: The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of); Stephen X. Sylvester, who explored the MGM back lots before they were demolished and captured oral histories of many studio employees; and Michael Troyan (A Rose for Mrs. Miniver: The Life of Greer Garson), a film archives specialist, reveal the entire MGM infrastructure, including fascinating documentation (with hundreds of photographs) of the use and reuse of film sets across many years and genres. The oral histories of studio employees are treasures amid many in this revelation of all the workings behind that gloss. An appendix of "Films Shot on the Backlot" is invaluable. **VERDICT** Highly recommended to buffs and specialists alike; for all comprehensive film collections.—

Margaret Heilbrun, Library Journal

M-G-M: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot.

**Wall Street Journal review:
A Peek Inside the Dream Factory**



A production number from "Rosalie" (1937).
Turner Entertainment Co./Warner Bros.

One of the greatest surprises I ever received came on the day that a former student arranged for me to watch a rare 1932 movie in Louis B. Mayer's private screening room at MGM. For one glorious afternoon, I was transported back to Hollywood in its heyday, an experience I had never expected to repeat—that is, until I read "MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot," by Steven Bingen, Stephen X. Sylvester and Michael Troyan. As Debbie Reynolds writes in her foreword: "Although the studio is gone, it lives on vividly in the pages of this remarkable and beautiful book." Both a fan's delight and a scholar's roadmap, "MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot" is stuffed with rare photos, production charts, studio maps, shooting schedules, budgets and insider quotes from both the famous and the not-so-famous who worked there.

Founded on April 18, 1924, MGM was the Rolls-Royce of the old Hollywood studios. On its streets walked, as the studio itself put it, "more stars than there are in the heavens": Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Hepburn and Tracy, Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly, Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, and many, many more. Its roster of movies contains some of the most enduring and award-winning films in history: "Grand Hotel," "Ben-Hur," "The Wizard of Oz," "National Velvet," "Mrs. Miniver," "The Philadelphia Story," "Singin' in the Rain" and dozens of others. For those who love old movies, MGM was a romantic Ruritania. For those skeptical of its overly long and sometimes sentimental movies, it was closer to Freedonia, a perfect subject for satire.

M-G-M: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot

By Steven Bingen, Stephen X. Sylvester & Michael Troyan

Santa Monica Press, 312 pages, \$34.95

.Love it or hate it, MGM is hardly ever thought of as simply a place where people worked to make a living. For most people, Hollywood is a concept, not a physical space, but Ms. Reynolds locates it in reality. She calls MGM "my hometown, my prep school, my university. . . . I grew up there. . . . I learned about friendship and responsibility there. I laughed and cried there." Messrs. Bingen, Sylvester and Troyan (a trio of archivist, writer and historian) present MGM as a concrete environment without losing the wonder and magic that were its product. "Our goal," they write, "was to preserve, in print and memory, if not in brick and mortar, the actual physical place that was once MGM."

The authors have put together "complete and accurate maps of each of the main MGM lots." Page by page, a reader can "walk" around MGM as it once was—a highly organized, efficient modern factory. The first thing that stands out is the sheer size of the place—more than 175 acres of prime real estate. A 1932 aerial-view map of Lot One has a list of all the buildings and departments it took to manufacture dreams: a purchasing department, spaces for accounting, payroll and insurance, a property building (with clocks of all types, lamps in all shapes and sizes, and enough weaponry to outfit a large army), a barbershop and newsstand, a water tower, a power plant, and a first-aid department.



Turner Entertainment Co./Warner Bros.

By 1934, MGM had more than 4,000 employees, including 61 stars and feature players, 17 directors and 51 writers, all under exclusive contracts. By 1941, there were 178 people working in the costume building alone, overseeing 250,000 designs from almost every historical period. The Irving Thalberg Administration Building (built in 1937-38 as a tribute to its namesake, who died in 1936) was a white Art Deco edifice nicknamed "the iron lung" because of its early air-conditioning system. It had 235 offices. Mayer's was on the third floor, smack in the center, and above him, on the fourth, was a private gym, an executive dining room and a chiropractic office. Apparently it took a lot of aching backs to release 52 features per year.

Young stars Peggy Ann Garner, Elizabeth Taylor, Marshall Thompson, Jane Powell and Roddy McDowell gather in the commissary ice cream parlor in 1948.

.MGM had its own library and research department, which besides books and clippings had a supply of old Sears catalogs, menus from everywhere, 19th-century travel guides and esoterica such as specialized files on New York City manhole covers, World War II Quonset huts and French Foreign Legion caps. If you were an employee, you worked in a safe and gated environment (with a 50-man police force). You could eat good food at reasonable prices in the studio commissary ("MGM special chicken broth, \$.50, with matzoh balls, \$.60"). You labored within grounds that were beautifully landscaped and near special apartments for stars: The "first floor men" included Gable and William Powell. Your employer was financially secure. Every day a team of accountants kept track of the budget down to the last penny. "The Wizard of Oz" (1939) cost \$2,796,230.30. It was clearly marked as "over budget" by \$1,048,076.

The maps of MGM's famous sound stages and backlots (accompanied by lists of films shot on each) are particularly fascinating. "The Wizard of Oz" used Sound Stage No. 27 for Munchkin land. Esther Williams owned Stage No. 30, which had her swimming pool and underwater tanks. "The Thin Man" was shot entirely on Stage No. 9, and Joan Crawford ice-skated (on very thin ice) for "Ice Follies of 1939" on Stage No. 12.

A reproduction of the "Plan of Lot Number One" shows that MGM maintained a lake, a

castle, New York streets, a French district, escarpment rocks, an Irish street, a small town, a Spanish hacienda, and much else, including, inexplicably, a cabbage patch. Lot No. 2, which F. Scott Fitzgerald said "under the moon" looked like "the backlot of 30 acres of fairyland," had a cemetery, Tarzan's jungle, Grand Central Station, a Southern mansion and one of MGM's most familiar sets, the home of Andy Hardy and his family. It was officially known as "the New England street" even though the Hardys lived in Ohio, and it was used by other movies, including Elvis Presley's 1957 "Jailhouse Rock."

The authors acknowledge assistance from film historians such as Kevin Brownlow, Leonard Maltin and Richard Schickel, as well as the staffs and archivists at Warner Bros. (the company that now controls most of the MGM material). "MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot" does not shirk the sad task of explaining clearly why the assets of MGM's proud legacy were eventually sold. The reasons for MGM's decline are complex and not easily summarized. They include bad management and the collapse of the Hollywood studio system.

The listings at the final auction in 1970 of what was once the most storied studio in Hollywood included "Star Wardrobes," "Antiques and Furniture," and an item that broke my heart: "one Magnificent Paddle Wheel Steamer" (the Cotton Blossom from the 1952 musical "Showboat"). Debbie Reynolds sums up the truth that everyone who loved all those great MGM movies has had to face: "Well, it's all gone now." Gone but not forgotten.

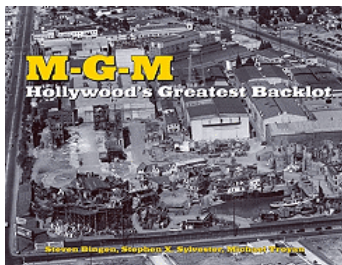
—Ms. Basinger is the author of "The Star Machine."

MGM: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot (Web Exclusive)

by Robert Cashill

by Steven Bingen, Stephen X. Sylvester, and Michael Troyan.

California: Santa Monica Press, 2011. 312 pp., illus. Hardcover: \$34.95



"From the Studio That Brought You *Iron Man*," declares the poster for *Thor*. Hmm, what studio? Marvel? Except that's not a studio. Disney owns it, so, Disney? No, actually, Paramount, due to deals that preceded the Marvel/Disney merger for those superhero franchises.

But, really—who cares? Studios generate balance sheets, not movie magic; little differentiates one from another. There's nothing "Paramount" about either of these films. The tag line resonates with Viacom shareholders, not the general public.

M-G-M: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot returns us to an era when audiences could tell the distributors apart, by the stars they had under their employ and the sorts of movies they specialized in. Dwarfing the other dream factories was Metro Goldwyn Mayer's, and this handsome, plus-sized volume is unique—not another paean to its Golden Era glories but an exhaustive, and revealing, anatomy of its architecture and inner workings, with each of its buildings given a look-see. At its height MGM was as much a city-state as it was a production company. Told by Prince Rainier, husband of Grace Kelly, that Monaco was five square miles, producer Dore Schary exclaimed, "Jesus, that's not even as big as our backlot."

"Do it right...make it big...give it class!" was the studio's slogan, and where better to practice this philosophy than a multitude of controllable environments, which proved remarkably durable against the elements and the occasional earthquake. Art director Cedric Gibbons was tasked with turning the large land purchases made by the front office into something, and it was he "who would find a look and physicality and for the MGM backlot—for backlots in general—and for the physical look of the 20th century."

Needless to say much ground is (literally) covered by this book, a good deal of it in pictures that are a triumph of archival research. Especially delightful are photographs organized as progressions, where we see, for example, the Girl's School on Lot Two age from a pristine, snow-covered campus for Elizabeth Taylor in *Cynthia* (1947) to a relic of a forgotten America in *Logan's Run* (1976), by which time the MGM of Taylor's day was also history. Until location shooting became more the norm (a factor that rang down the curtain on the backlot), we're shown how the ten acres of New York streets were synonymous with the city itself in movies like *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), complete with a three-sided house of worship that did triple duty for productions with Catholic, Jewish, or Protestant themes. The essential nature of the backlot was always transformation, so with redressing these streets also did shifts as Nazi Germany, India, and Red Square. In their ill-attended dotage, plagued with peeling brick, potholes, and other signs of neglect, dystopian fantasies returned them to a crumbling New York for the likes of *Soylent Green* (1973).



Though the authors are scholarly, unsentimental, and unflinching in their analyses—this is a coffee-table book that merits reading as well as gazing—a strain of melancholy runs throughout, as the properties are amassed, developed, and discarded. They're very good at going behind the facades, showcasing the ingenuity and beauty behind, say, Andy Hardy's neighborhood (a cozy hamlet of false fronts, with no interiors) or the elaborate French sets for 1938's *Marie Antoinette*, for which studio researchers spent a year in the country, sending back 12,000 photographs that Gibbons' staff then "improved on" for film and recycled for numerous other movies. "Gibbons's sets generally tended to be overlit, so as to show off their craftsmanship; whites, rather than shadow, tend to predominate...his 1930s Deco and later streamlined-Moderne stylings created, if not the actual look of an era itself, then certainly our later perceptions of what that era looked like."



But the idealized world that Louis B. Mayer revered and Gibbons authored, its tasteful and conservative values embedded in the very walls of the sets—Gibbons, Elia Kazan said, was the most influential person on the lot after the owners—clashed with the realism and harder edges that audiences began to expect from the movies. In the last theatrical film shot in full on the backlot, the detective picture *They Only Kill Their Masters* (1972), one could argue that the masters being killed are Mayer and Gibbons—on its weather-beaten streets lot stalwarts like Peter Lawford and June Allyson are cast way against MGM type as crooks, drug dealers, and predatory lesbians. They'd toe the company line once more in the teary-eyed *That's Entertainment!* movies, the last time audiences got a look at what was left of the once-mighty backlots.

Nostalgia, however, is only one facet of *M-G-M: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot*, which, thanks to the wealth of photos and keen writing, is an excellent map to this vanished terrain, with a helpful index to what was shot where. (Andy Hardy/*New England Street* was also home to *Jailhouse Rock*, *Some Came Running*, and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.) At a time when studios have to advertise their identities on the backs of superheroes, it's also a potent reminder that it wasn't just the stars who had faces then.—Robert Cashill

Robert Cashill, a member of the Online Film Critics Society, is a Cineaste Associate and the Film Editor of Popdose.com.

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Authors [Back to top](#)

Steve Bingen

Steve has long worked within the motion picture industry, both in production and as a writer and historian. He holds a staff position at Warner Bros. Corporate Archive – aiding in the preservation and management of the studios legend and legacy. Aptly enough, Steve also brings to our book an expertise in conducting studio tours, as he was in fact, years ago, a tour guide at Warner Bros. “one of the best jobs I ever had” he’s liable to tell you. Steve is the author of *Warner Bros. The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of* and contributed to *You Must Remember This: The Warner Bros. Story, In The Picture: Production Stills* from the TCM Archives, *Leading Couples*, *King Kong: The History of a Movie Icon*, and the documentaries “1939: Hollywood’s Greatest Year,” “Warner at War,” and “Thou Shalt Not: Sex, Sin and Censorship in Pre-Code Hollywood.” His numerous essays and magazine articles include recent pieces for “Mondo Cult” and “Perspective.” His screenplay “*The Ghastly Love of Johnny X*” is currently in production for director Paul Bunnell.

Stephen X. Sylvester

Alone among our trio of authors, Stephen was lucky enough to have explored MGM’s legendary backlots in 1968 and 1975. That experience was the genesis for this book and sparked a decades-long obsession which would ultimately lead to a collection of studio artifacts and to the accumulation of dozens of hours of oral histories and interviews with studio “survivors.” He is currently working on a documentary based on their shared backlot reminiscences. His other film projects include (as director-producer) “*Robert Kinoshita: Dreams, Designs and Robots*,” “*Richard Anderson: An Actor’s Journey*,” and “*Gurdon W. Wattles: The Man and the Mansion*.” From 1988 to 2008 Stephen was the Executive Director of the Wattles Mansion and Gardens, a Hollywood landmark and film location.

Michael Troyan

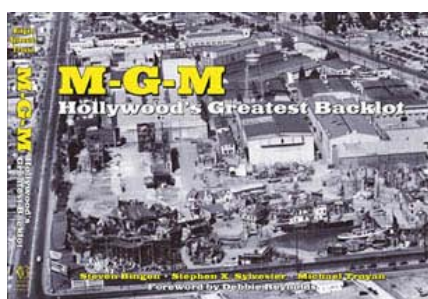
Michael is a freelance writer and has worked as an archivist and consultant at two of Hollywood’s major studios. A lifelong fan of Hollywood’s classic films, he has parlayed that interest into a variety of books about MGM and The Walt Disney Studios as author, co-author, or contributor. His books include *A Rose for Mrs. Miniver; the Life of Greer Garson*, about M-G-M’s reigning Queen of the Lot in the 1940s and 1950s – which is enjoying its third printing and recently went into paperback. Mike has also contributed to *Disney A-Z*, *The Disney Villains*, and *The Disney Poster Book*. He lives in northern California.

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Author and Cinematographer to Discuss MGM Backlots at Next [Culver City Historical Society Meeting](#) Stephen X. Sylvester, co-author of M-G-M Hollywood’s Greatest Backlot, and Academy award winning cinematographer Fred Koenekamp will share the spotlight at the next general meeting of [Culver City Historical Society on Wednesday, April 16, 2014, at 7 p.m.](#) in the [Veterans Memorial Building’s multi-purpose room](#).

Sylvester will present a short film and a PowerPoint presentation illustrating the history of the soundstages and outdoor sets where Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer produced many of the world's most famous films. The book features candid, exclusive voices and photographs from the people who worked there, and includes hundreds of rare and unpublished photographs. A signed copy of the book will be given away by drawing and all attendees will have a chance to win. You can also [order his book through this link](#) and bring it with you, and he'll sign it after the presentation. Koenekamp, known for his camera work on [Patton](#), [The Man from U.N.C.L.E.](#), [Papillon](#), and [The Towering Inferno](#), for which he won his Academy award, and many other fine films, will also share his memories of the MGM years.

There will be a brief discussion of upcoming programs and projects, as well as updates on the activities and exhibits in the Archives & Resource Center (ARC) which will be opened following the meeting. All members of the Culver City Historical Society and the public are welcome to enjoy this free program and students are encouraged to attend. The entrance to the multi-purpose room is through the back of the building near the parking lot, and through the Archive & Resource Center space.



DISTINGUISHED SPEAKER BOOK SIGNING & LUNCHEON

STEPHEN X. SYLVESTER

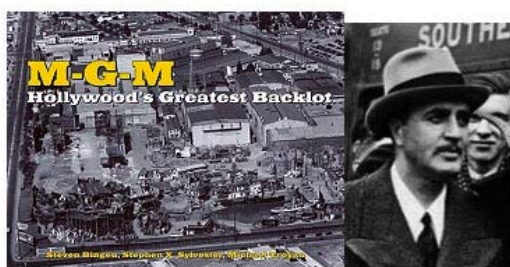
"M-G-M Hollywood's Greatest Backlot"

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2013

First in our two-part series focusing on the Academy Awards, we present Stephen Sylvester, whose talk will reveal the creativity and ingenuity of a bygone era when the studio system, without the *magic* of today's technology, produced screen gems such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*. The author's *insider* view will take film buffs back to Hollywood's "Golden Age" of Garbo, Astaire and Gable.

Reception & Book Signing 11:30 a.m. * Luncheon & Talk 12:00 noon * \$38 per person

The authors of "M-G-M: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot" Steven Bingen, Stephen X. Sylvester and Michael Troyan will conduct a presentation on the book at The Motion Picture Country Home on Saturday, September 15, 2012 @ 2 p.m. 23388 Mulholland Dr. Woodland Hills, CA



A Return to Classic Hollywood!

The authors of M-G-M: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot will offer a presentation on the

**M-G-M Studios to the members of the Art Directors Guild on Thursday,
September 13th at 7:00 PM, at the Guild (11969 Ventura Blvd., Studio City, CA 91604).**

**M-G-M: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot (Santa Monica Press) by Steve Bingen,
Stephen X. Sylvester and Michael Troyan, covers the history of the fabled
M-G-M Studios from its triumphant beginning to its tragic final days. Through
text and ample photographs, the authors bring this glorious studio and its
two massive backlots to life.**

**It was at this studio that legendary Art Director Cedric Gibbons and his associates
had over 140 acres of sound stages, backlot sets and multiple technical
departments at their disposal to help bring the glorious films of M-G-M to the silver screen.
Gibbons 32 year career at M-G-M (1925-1960) resulted in 11 Oscars for
Art Direction with an additional 28 nominations.**

**Please join us at the Art Directors Guild as we celebrate the history of the
M-G-M Backlot and the Art Directors Guild's 75th Anniversary.**



[CLICK TO HEAR AN EPISODE OF MOVIE MADNESS](#)

Hollywood Heritage Presents

EVENING @ THE BARN

Wednesday, October 12, 2011 at 7:30PM

Hollywood's Shattered Kingdom: The M-G-M Backlot

Hollywood Heritage and the Hollywood Heritage Museum are pleased to be celebrating the accomplishment of two long-time volunteers, Steve Sylvester and Michael Troyan – their recently published book, *M-G-M: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot*, which they co-wrote with Steven Bingen.

Steve Sylvester has been an integral part of Hollywood Heritage through his extensive work at the Wattles Mansion and Gardens. You may also remember Steve's terrific documentary on art director Robert Kinoshita, which was presented at the museum in 2004. Michael Troyan was a volunteer back when our museum was first named "The Hollywood Studio Museum." Since then he has authored *A Rose For Mrs. Miniver: The Life of Greer Garson* and contributed to *Disney A-Z*, *The Disney Villains*, and *The Disney Poster Book*. Steven Bingen is the author of *Warner Bros: The Stuff Dreams Are Made Of*, and works as an archivist at Warner Bros.

In addition to the authors sharing their knowledge of the legendary M-G-M Studio, the evening will also include a visual presentation and a short film Mr. Sylvester made on the former studio, followed by a question & answer session and book signing.



Come celebrate the legacy of what many believe to be Hollywood's greatest movie studio!

Hollywood Heritage Museum in the Lasky-DeMille Barn
2100 N. Highland Ave., Hollywood (across from the Hollywood Bowl)
FREE PARKING Information: 323-874-2276 or visit hollywoodheritage.org
Admission: Members: \$5 Non-Members: \$10

Plus, tickets can now be purchased online with your credit card via Brown Paper Tickets. A nominal service fee will be added. Just go to: <http://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/201441> for more information or call 1-800-838-3006 to reserve your tickets over the phone. It's that easy!

DOORS OPEN AT 7:00PM. SEATING IS LIMITED.

The authors will be appearing at Cinecon 47
September 1-5, 2011 for a presentation and
book signing at the Renaissance Hollywood Hotel.
For complete information visit
www.cinecon.org

The authors will be appearing at the Hollywood Heritage Museum
October 12, 2011 for a presentation and book signing.
For complete information visit
www.hollywoodheritage.org

KUNV-FM (91.5) npr

[Click to Listen to the Nighttime Interview With Ira](#)
Audio will start on it's own - adjust your speakers

Radio Interview
March 25, 2011
[CLICK HERE TO LISTEN TO THE INTERVIEW](#)

"AirTalk with Larry Mantle"
89.3 KPCC FM
11am-12pm

Events: Book signing

M-G-M: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot

Sunday, March 13, 2011

Egyptian Theater
6712 Hollywood Blvd.
Hollywood, CA 90028-4605
(323) 466-3456

4:00 pm: a book signing of M-G-M: Hollywood's Greatest Backlot with authors

5:00 pm: a double feature screening of M-G-M films
"The Band Wagon" (1953) and "That's Entertainment" (1974)

Tuesday, March 15, 2011

Santa Monica Barnes & Noble
1201 3rd Street Promenade
Santa Monica, CA
7 p.m.

WANTED

Do you or anyone you know have any stories, photos, maps, films, home movies, brochures or anything else associated with the legendary M-G-M Studios in Culver City, California? Is so, please contact us at: sxs@sbcglobal.net
Thank You

Take the M-G-M Quiz [Back to top](#)

1. What was the title of the first film to use the set called "Dutch Street" on Lot 3? This set was designed to represent what American

city in what state?

2. What was the name of the bar located on Washington Blvd. by the front entrance to Lot 1 where everything from studio business to studio gossip was discussed over cocktails?

3. What was the name of the future song and dance actress who appeared at the tender age of 14 months in the final scene of "In the Good Old Summertime" (1949)?

4. What were the names of the three Western themed streets of sets located on Lot 3?

5. What was the name of the 1920's M-G-M contract player that had a successful career as interior decorator and designer in Beverly Hills?

6. What famous M-G-M star returned to the studio after a ten year absence in 1953?

7. What was the name of the dish that was always listed on the M-G-M commissary menu?

8. What M-G-M star remained under contract to the studio for the longest period of time?

9. What was the reported amount of Clark Gable's annual salary in 1953?

10. Name the M-G-M employee of the studio Art Department that was responsible for the final design of Robby the Robot, created for the film "Forbidden Planet" (1955)?

LINKS [Back to top](#)

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences <http://www.oscars.org>

Hollywood Heritage Inc. - <http://hollywoodheritage.org>

Marc Wanamaker - Bison Archives - <http://www.bisonarchives.com>

Richard Anderson - <http://www.bionik.com>

Rod Taylor - <http://www.rod Taylorsite.com>

John Divola Photography - www.divola.com

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