

Virginia Bruce
Under My Skin

by Scott O'Brien

Foreword by
James Robert Parish

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Virginia Bruce

by James Robert Parish

It seemed Hollywood took movie actress Virginia Bruce largely for granted during her heyday in the 1930s as a contract leading lady at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. However, this very blonde trouser was a great favorite with moviegoers of the era. In more recent decades—thanks to television showings and DVD editions of some of her films—Bruce has gained new generations of enthusiasts who have quickly come to appreciate both the talents and quiet charisma of this fine-looking performer who boasted such captivating pale-blue eyes.

My first awareness of Virginia Bruce dates back to my childhood. It was then I saw a TV showing of *State Department—File 649*, a 1949 B movie dealing with a U.S. Foreign Service vice consul (William Lundigan) stationed in northern China and pitted against a marauding warlord (Richard Loo). Although Virginia Bruce was the film’s “name” star, she had a relatively minor part in this slight Cold War action drama which focused on the villainy of sadistic Loo and his chief henchman (played by Philip Ahn). What most stuck in my memory about the still quite attractive Bruce (then nearly 40 years old) in this programmer was the haunted, distracted look of her eyes.

Virginia Bruce

In subsequent years, I saw many of Bruce's old films on TV and watched her occasional new performances: such as playing the title assignment in a 1956 *Lux Video Theatre* presentation of *Mildred Pierce* and her relatively subordinate part in 1960's *Strangers When We Meet* (cast as Kim Novak's mother). Again, I was drawn to the barely concealed troubled look that seemed a permanent fixture of Bruce's performances.

As the years passed and I grew increasingly intrigued with cinema history and chose to make my career writing about Hollywood, I began acquiring more information about the professional and off-camera life of Miss Bruce. I read of her relatively short union—it was her first marriage and his fourth—to legendary screen lover John Gilbert, with whom she costarred in 1932's *Downstairs*, a minor but lively MGM melodrama. As time went by, I heard how Bruce's role as songbird Jenny Lind while on loan to United Artists for 1934's *The Mighty Barnum* had led to her being cast in MGM's 1936 extravaganza *The Great Ziegfeld*. In that Metro blockbuster, she appeared as a temperamental stage luminary whose drinking problem triggered her career demise. Myth had it among film buffs that her memorable portrayal of alcoholic Audrey Dane in *The Great Ziegfeld* led some of the public and several industry executives to believe that the real-life Bruce was much like her screen alter ego, which, supposedly, helped to trigger the actress's own career decline.

During Bruce's MGM tenure (1932 to 1939) she made scores of pictures and proved her ability of being a highly attractive cinema workhorse most noted for her porcelain-like beauty and her vibrant voice. By the early 1940s, Bruce was toiling at less elegant Universal Pictures, playing in support to the likes of boisterous Abbott and Costello in 1942's *Pardon My Sarong*. After World War II the veteran actress married a Turkish writer/pro-

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ducer (Ali Ipar) and endured difficult times when he returned to his homeland to visit family and then was denied reentry to the United States. Later, he was conscripted into the Turkish army and Bruce had to divorce him because an officer in the Turkish army could not be wed to a foreigner. Thereafter, they re-wed and she starred in 1953's *Istanbul*, a Turkish-made feature film that her husband wrote/produced/directed. Later on they settled in Hollywood, only to have him return to Turkey in 1960 where he was arrested during a political upheaval and jailed for many months.

Obviously, Bruce's off-screen life was far more exciting and exotic than any role she experienced on camera, and it is one of the reasons why so much allure has been attached to this leading lady of Hollywood's Golden Age. This is not to downplay Virginia's screen work, from being a chorine/ingénue at Paramount Pictures to her noteworthy berth at MGM, to her stay at Universal, and, thereafter, several freelance assignments on film and in TV. Personally, I liked the post-MGM Virginia Bruce best of all. Away from that Tiffany of studios, her film performances seemed gutsier, with Bruce playing no-nonsense, self-reliant women who had far more to offer than merely pretty looks.

And, now, in this full-length chronicle of Virginia Bruce, we have a full opportunity to learn much more about this complicated, beautiful, and charming woman who is very worthy of the professional reassessment this volume sets out to accomplish.



As Audrey Dane in *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936) (MGM)

Introduction and Acknowledgements

When I began writing her biography, I was under the assumption that Virginia Bruce was one of the top stars of her era (1932-1949). Her unique screen persona, and her skill as an actress, easily held its own among the great screen icons. Her distinctive look in the glamour department casts a deep shadow over most of her contemporaries -- she was stunning. I was surprised to learn that Virginia herself admitted that she never really reached the top. She blamed the absence of any real “push” on her behalf by the powers at MGM. Top stardom, for her, would remain an elusive dream. She left Metro in 1939 to freelance, but with the birth of her son Christopher in 1941, Virginia put her acting career on the back burner. She admitted she didn’t have the driving ambition to hold out for major roles that would have put her career in the same league, as say, an Ingrid Bergman or Barbara Stanwyck.

So why Virginia Bruce? I first saw her in *The Great Ziegfeld* in the 1960s. It took awhile for me to warm up to her – she was such a bitch on screen. She was so *convincing* in her role that I assumed she must have been just like that in person. Virginia’s own comment on her role as Audrey Dane, the archetypal Ziegfeld

CHAPTER ONE:

“I’ve Got You Under My Skin”

Just below Virginia’s languid, dreamy eyes -- her lips part, moist from sipping champagne. She gazes longingly and directly across from her, at a young, good-looking James Stewart . . . and sings:

“I’ve got you under my skin . . . I’ve got you deep in the heart of me . . .” The timbre of her light-soprano voice caresses the wistful elegance of each lyric. At the song’s emotional pique, she stands and turns away from him, singing to herself. “Don’t you know little fool, you never can win? Use your mentality. Wake up to reality.” Relenting, she again faces the intrigued, yet diffident Stewart and repeats, “I’ve got you under my skin.” Her smooth rendition of this particular song, coupled with the sweeping allegretto of Cole Porter’s music, would prove to be one of Virginia Bruce’s screen legacies. The film was *Born to Dance* (1936). Originally, Virginia Bruce was not part of the movie’s all-star line up. The fact was, Cole Porter, in his first movie assignment, had written “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” for someone else. Was luck, finally, turning Virginia’s way? Heaven knows her career thus far had plenty of jump-starts and setbacks.

Virginia Bruce



Scene from *Born to Dance* (1936) in which Virginia introduced the Cole Porter standard to Jimmy Stewart (Courtesy of MGM/Photoquest)

Part of the reason for the recasting in *Born to Dance*, was Virginia's star-turn as a temperamental Ziegfeld girl in the recently released *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936). MGM studio heads were turned and focused more than ever in her direction. She held her own against top-ranked stars like William Powell, Myrna Loy and Luise Rainer. In retrospect, Powell's unrevealing performance had no resemblance to the great Florenz Ziegfeld. Loy's sincere portrayal lacked Billie Burke's peculiar effervescence. And, by today's standards, Luise Rainer's Anna Held (for which she won an Oscar) comes across as a trifle mannered. When the film won an Oscar for Best Picture, many protested. *The Hollywood Citizen News* railed that *The Great Ziegfeld* was, "an atrocious production . . . a picture false in biography, a glittering avalanche of legs and tinsel."ⁱ

Chapter One

The Great Ziegfeld has maintained a reputation of being elephantine, and what film historian James Robert Parish calls, “a gaudy entertainment package.”ⁱⁱ Virginia Bruce, however, was able to capture what *Variety* referred to as “a composite of several Ziegfeld beauties.” And, her looks *were* dazzling. As the ambitious, temperamental Audrey Dane, Bruce was able to simmer in jealousy, throw tantrums, and plunge into an alcoholic stupor. In the film’s most impressive musical number, “A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody,” she graced the top of a gigantic 60-foot, winding, staircase confection (a spectacle that cost more to film than Ziegfeld put into an entire show). Her charms as a singer and dancer during “You Never Looked So Beautiful” were pleasantly diverting. But, then, Virginia knew *exactly* what she was doing. She had been a Ziegfeld girl herself. She had witnessed firsthand the pampered prima-donnas corralled by Ziegfeld, Broadway’s master showman. They had put the gray in his philandering follicles. Virginia knew about women like Audrey Dane, even though she herself was the antithesis of such a character. The fact is, when Virginia makes her glass-shattering exit, the overly-sanitized story loses much of its steam. Hers was one performance that would not go unnoticed.

Before the cameras rolled for *Born to Dance* in July 1936, Frances Langford, a brunette, for whom Cole Porter had specifically written “I’ve Got You Under My Skin,” was replaced with a blonde, who possessed more appeal and box-office potential. Virginia had



Virginia with co-star William Powell
in the 1936 Oscar-winning *The
Great Ziegfeld* (MGM)

Virginia Bruce

been studying voice with Roger Edens (MGM's vocal coach) for over a year. "It all came about very accidentally," said Virginia when asked how she landed the part. "Dorothy Di Frasso had a party and everyone was clowning around, singing and dancing. More for laughs than anything else, I sang 'Annie Laurie.'"ⁱⁱⁱ A studio executive happened to be present and the next day Virginia was told to start "cultivating" her voice. Edens was convinced Virginia had a real torch voice. Porter, who kept voluminous notes during the filming, documented Virginia's audition of the song. "She sang ... very well indeed," commented Porter, "and after she had left, they definitely decided to use Bruce."^{iv} Once again, MGM "rediscovered" Virginia Bruce.^v Frances Langford, a superb vocalist, was kept in the film, but placated with a lesser part. She needn't have felt slighted. James Stewart took over the lead from tenor Allan Jones who, along with poor little Judy Garland, was left completely out of the picture. The film also featured dancer Buddy Ebsen (Virginia's future in-law) and Una Merkle. But the film's main focus was tap-dancer Eleanor Powell, whose talent and technique far outshone any screen hoofing of her predecessors. Here, she seems to be tapping on everything in sight.

Born to Dance featured Virginia as Broadway star Lucy James who falls head-over-heels for a young sailor (Stewart) during a publicity stunt. She gets to sing another Porter number on the ship's deck titled "Love Me, Love My Pekingese," which apparently had an anatomical innuendo. (In 1929's *Gentlemen of the Press*, Kay Francis had seduced Walter Huston with the double entendre, "I'm sure you'll just love my Pekingese." Huston enthused, "Yes. I'm sure I will!"). In *Born to Dance*, however, Stewart has already fallen for the charm and terpsichorean talents of Eleanor Powell. Bruce was simply a fascinating, albeit tempting intrusion. When Bruce storms out of her dressing room to