

BIG SPLASH

By Kyle Crichton

How Hollywood, not having seen anything like this since the days of Annette Kellerman, is making the most of Esther Williams, who can act as well as swim



THERE is a new girl out at M-G-M in Culver City named Esther Williams, who is a cross between Lana Turner and a seal. An interviewer recently chased her from the studio to her home in Los Angeles and thence to the beach at Santa Monica, where he was told she certainly would be found. Inquiry of a lifeguard established her presence.

"That's her, out there, darn her!" said the lifeguard pointing to a bobbing speck out in the ocean.

Having said which, the guard pushed his lifeboat into the surf and rowed three miles out into the roaring deep. By the time he reached the little lady, he was bitter, irritated and worried.

"Get back in, won't you, Esther?" he pleaded tearfully.

Responding to his urgings, Esther turned her face shoreward and started to plow through the waves.

"Not with me, you don't!" cried the guard bitterly. "You race yourself in. I'm a wreck now."

Miss Williams happens to be that fortunate thing—a knockout in looks and one of the greatest swimmers in the world. She was a national amateur champion, and her one previous professional appearance was at the San Francisco Aquacade, where she duplicated the success Eleanor Holm had in a similar show at the New York World's Fair. Her first motion picture places her opposite Mickey Rooney on one of the interminable Andy Hardy triumphs. After that she will do the lead in the first great swimming picture Hollywood has had since the days of Herbert Brenon and Annette Kellerman.

"In this one," says Miss Williams, "I break the last remaining eardrum and become a mute."

Without attempting to make Miss Williams a monster of intellect, it may be said that the young one is as fully endowed with sense and wit as anybody seen in the film colony since the days of Mabel Normand. When Billy Rose launched the San Francisco Aquacade, he not only brought along John Murray Anderson to superintend the production but sought to save a few kopecks by using the old costumes from the New York show. When the company lined up at dress rehearsal, Esther wrapped her arms around her and hoped that nobody would notice her. She is five feet seven. Eleanor Holm is five feet four, and Esther was wearing the antiquated Holm costume. She looked like something discarded by the Salvation Army.

BIG SPLASH

The Retort Personal

"My dear Miss Williams," cried Mr. Anderson, from the orchestra seats, "are you sure you look just right?"

Miss Williams stepped to the microphone, so there would be no possibility of missing it. "My dear Mr. Anderson," she said, "are you sure you would look right in Billy Rose's old clothes?"

Since Mr. Rose has the approximate stature of a gnome, this silenced the opposition.

Miss Williams was born in Los Angeles, where her father is a commercial artist and her mother is a child psychologist in the Los Angeles public schools. This latter fact has caused Esther some embarrassment.

"When they used to ask what my mother did, I'd tell them the truth and they'd look at me in a way that showed they knew why Mother took up child psychology."

Although she had swum since childhood, she got her real start at Manchester Pool in Los Angeles, where she made enough money counting towels to buy a ticket for the pool. She went in at the noon hour when only the guards were around, with the result that her style is still less beautiful than powerful. She is lithe and feminine in looks but she has the strength of a man and plows through the water with the same effectiveness.

She was around ten at this time and in rather short order she was beating all the other girls of her age. That gave her ambitions, and what she wanted most of all was a chance at the ocean races. In training for that, she used to go out to Santa Monica early in the morning to practice.

Then she went down to the Los Angeles Athletic Club and put herself under the instruction of Aileen Allen, the coach. Miss Allen watched her in the pool for a few days and then talked to her.

"You'll be a national champion in four years," she prophesied.

"Oh, gee!" complained Esther. "Four years!"

She made it in two years, winning the national 100-meter free-style championship at Des Moines, with the temperature 126 in the sun, which was where they were swimming. She found swimming in national competition as strenuous as wrestling.

She swam later at Seattle and Miami, winning titles, and it was a great life, all but the training and the competition. Although her natural weight is around 125 pounds, she would be trained down to 115 for competition.

"You look like a wolf that swims," she says.

She had won a degree of fame from all this, and nobody seeing her pictures as a champion had shut the paper with disgust. The next move was a job as model at Magnin's in Los Angeles. This paid twenty-five iron ones a week, and she was happily strutting about showing her shape in sportswear and bathing suits when a call came from the fabulous

BIG SPLASH

Mr. Billy Rose. "Come over to the Ambassador immediately," said Mr. Rose.

He dragged her down to the Ambassador pool and shouted, "Do twelve of these, twelve of those, twelve of those others!"

That was enough to ruin a mule but Esther ended without taking a second breath, came before the great man, shook herself like a porpoise and waited for the oracle to speak.

"Okay," said Billy. "You got it. Forty a week. Report Monday."

She shook herself a bit more, preened herself to get the water out of her ears and said, "Mr. Rose, *really!* You shouldn't make jokes with little girls."

The negotiations that ensued were of classic proportions. Mr. Rose phoned and telegraphed, upping the ante each time by as much as a buck. He finally got it to \$175 a week and the papers were signed. She stayed at the Aquacade for eight months, appearing four times a day and five times a day on week ends.

"I lived constantly in three feet of water," says Esther, "and wrote my mother long psychological letters."

A Parting Gesture

Her associates in all this were the great Johnny Weissmuller and Morton Downey, the latter singing and not swimming. Conditions backstage were primitive. Esther, as the prima donna, was treated best. She had a dressing room that contained an Army cot, a mirror that would fit only in the smallest of pocketbooks, and no heat.

The beautiful Mr. Weissmuller added further to her troubles by pushing water so strenuously in her direction that she acquired a pretty case of sinus which still troubles her. When the Aquacade was over, she took off the Eleanor Holm costume, wrapped it neatly around a brick and threw it viciously into the pool. Then she and Mr. Weissmuller lifted Mr. Downey aloft and heaved him in. This gave them some sort of satisfaction.

During the period of the Aquacade, Esther was being worried by a certain Johnny Hyde, agent. He in turn brought up important executives from M-G-M. One Mr. Cummings talked to Esther like an aged family friend.

"Not interested," said Williams.

What they didn't know was that she was married to a young doctor, Leonard Kovner, and took the movie racket as just an extension of the Aquacade, which was rapidly impairing her faith in humanity. But Metro raised with regularity the figures in the offer, and finally the clan had a meeting and Esther became a movie minion.

The clincher was the technicolor film they are now promoting for her. The enthusiasm was great about it and then it waned. In the meantime Esther was being groomed. For eight months she took lessons in how to talk, how to dress, how to walk.

"All swimmers walk like seals," she explains. "Loose."

It got monotonous and she began to

BIG SPLASH

feel that after all she had made a mistake. She went to Mr. Sam Katz at the studio.

"Mr. Katz (*boo! boo!*), either put me in a picture (*boo! boo!*) or let me go home and have babies (*wah!*)."

The situation was strange because she had learned a great deal at San Francisco, and when she reached Culver City, she knew what she wanted. She had her own dressing room and maid. She was a personage on the lot, though she had never made a picture and in fact had only made one test, on a silent job. It was therefore startling when Clark Gable turned up at her dressing room one day.

"I've seen your picture, Esther," said Gable, "and I want to make a test with you."

"I've seen your picture, Esther," said Gable, "and I want to make a test with you."

"I've seen your pictures, too, Mr. Gable," said Esther, feeling that the words were a trifle unoriginal.

It was a good test, and then she heard that Mickey Rooney had been called in from a vacation to make another test with her. Mr. Rooney knows more about making pictures than most producers and he held her up admirably when the going got hard.

As is well known, the Hardy pictures are Metro's showcase for new girls. It was through this medium that Lana Turner, Donna Reed, Katherine Grayson, Pat Dane and Ann Rutherford were launched.

She finds Mr. Rooney a great actor, a highly amusing gentleman and an inspiration. When she swam underwater examining the foundations of the tank preparatory to a scene in which she was to kiss Mr. Rooney beneath the waves, she got nothing for her effort but another busted eardrum, very painful.

"You could have kissed me up here with less distress," pointed out Mr. Rooney with good sense.

But the Williams girl doesn't go around kissing strange men, even actors, because she is joined in wedlock with the aforementioned physician, now an interne in Los Angeles County Hospital. They live near the institution and have as best friends her husband's brothers, also doctors.

A Lesson for Male Swimmers

What other spare time was available was spent at Santa Monica, swimming. This pleasure has now been taken away by an ordinance declaring the section unfit because of pollution. She has never hinted that M-G-M may be behind this but it will ease the minds of Mr. L. B. Mayer and others to know that their property is not silently slumbering in the briny.

It will also be regarded kindly by certain manly swimmers who have met Esther just beyond the breakers and engaged her in contest. After the first mile, they are invariably fagged but determined. No woman is going to show them how to swim. At this point she en-

BIG SPLASH

gages them in discourse. "Are you all right?" she asks solicitously.

"Just go ahead and swim," they say grimly.

At the end of the second mile, she repeats the question in kindly fashion and gets no answer because they are conserving their last breaths. It is then that she awaits the next move, which soon comes.

"Help!" cry the gentlemen feebly, and she takes them over and begins towing them to shore like a log. She always makes a point of setting them down and putting them on their own just before they reach the breakers and before any busybody on shore can recognize the gentlemen's state.

"This is my definition of tact," says Miss Williams in a way which she does not mean to be tart. They're convinced at M-G-M that she'll be a great actress.

