

from Thomas Schatz, **THE GENIUS OF THE SYSTEM**, p.268

Oz premiered at the Loew's Capitol in New York on August 17, 1939, after a massive promotional campaign. It was accompanied during its Capitol run by a stage show with Garland and Rooney. This was the first time in almost five years that the Capitol had offered a live act along with a feature film, and the added entertainment undoubtedly contributed to the box-office records Oz set during its initial weeks in release. On opening day alone it played to a phenomenal 37,000 paid admissions. By week's end it had generated \$93,000 in receipts at the Capitol, roughly twice the usual take on a prestige hit. But despite its quick start, Oz slowed in the hinterlands and actually ran out of steam in its initial release—a remarkable fact, considering its stamina as an annual television event throughout the decades. By the time MGM released Babes in Arms in mid-October, Oz had settled into a solid but unspectacular run. As these weekend figures from late October indicate, it was lagging behind Babes in Arms and several other top MGM releases, even in major markets:

|           |                                     |         |
|-----------|-------------------------------------|---------|
| DENVER    | <u>Babes in Arms</u>                | \$6,527 |
|           | <u>The Women</u>                    | 5,766   |
|           | <u>Andy Hardy Gets Spring Fever</u> | 5,467   |
|           | <u>The Wizard of Oz</u>             | 5,400   |
| BALTIMORE | <u>Babes in Arms</u>                | 8,948   |
|           | <u>Boys Town</u>                    | 8,668   |
|           | <u>The Women</u>                    | 6,787   |
|           | <u>Andy Hardy Gets Spring Fever</u> | 5,811   |
|           | <u>The Wizard of Oz</u>             | 5,308   |

After Babes in Arms completed its domestic and overseas run, its gross totaled \$3,335,000, resulting in a tidy profit for Loew's/MGM. Oz grossed \$3,017,000, which, given its production cost of \$2.77 million plus heavy promotional and distribution expenses, translated into a loss of nearly \$1 million on its initial release. The picture itself was partly to blame. Oz is now considered a classic and a masterpiece, and rightly so, but critical and popular response at the time was mixed. Even more important was Loew's sales and marketing campaign, which was aggressive by prestige-picture standards but simply not up to the demands of a blockbuster musical. Selznick would demonstrate with the December release of Gone With the Wind what it took to exploit a picture of that magnitude—inflated prices, reserved seating, six-figure advertising budget, carefully orchestrated release strategy.