

# BEVERLY HILLS

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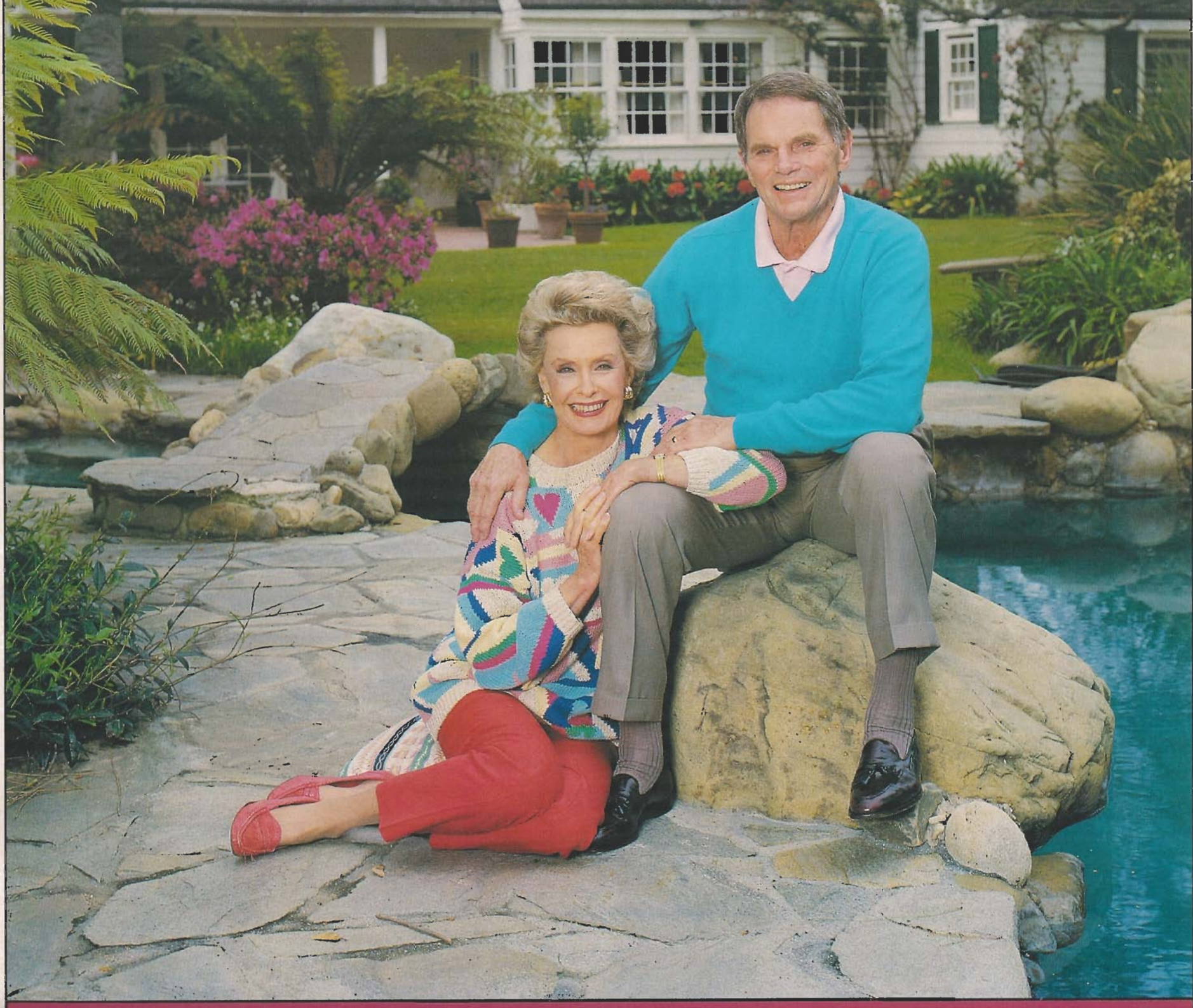
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DINA MERRILL &  
TED HARTLEY







# The Real Players

RKO Pictures is headquartered in a Century City highrise. With secretaries popping in and out of offices, a potential writing intern anxiously gripping his script, and the latest trade magazines piled on the desks, one expects an air of solemn business decorum. The last thing you expect is to discover that Vice-Chairman Dina Merrill has one heck of a sense of humor.

When asked if she has ever acted in any of RKO Pictures' movies, Merrill balks. "I keep hearing the old story, 'Well, who do I have to sleep with to get a part?' Well, I've been sleeping with the chairman of the board for four years now and it hasn't gotten me anywhere."

Ted Hartley, chairman of the board of RKO and, incidentally, Merrill's husband, eyes the recorder nervously. Like an electronic ticker tape, his expression reads, "I hope that quote doesn't make it into the article."

But it did. No one thinks less of Merrill for admitting she loves her husband, and no one thinks less of Hartley for letting his talented wife fend for herself in finding parts. "RKO is not about finding acting jobs for RKO employees," he explains. "Our mission is to produce great motion pictures which will distinguish the RKO name."

Merrill agrees. Her most recent credits prove she doesn't need anything but her training at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts to land a role. Audiences recently saw Merrill in Robert Alt-

man's critically acclaimed (and popularly enjoyed) *The Player* as the ruthlessly efficient secretary for the fictitious studio head. "With all of her charm and talent, Dina is not unusually well organized. But she can play organized." Hartley jokes.

Hartley's quips can only be tongue and cheek. Merrill and Hartley both had to be organized to bring RKO Pictures into its current production schedule. With 13 movies in active development, seven of which are set to begin production in the near future, they have effectively revitalized the industry's oldest studio.

From 1955 to the mid-1980s, RKO, the studio that produced *Citizen Kane* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, was not making those caliber, or any, films. Instead it concentrated on television and radio operations and programming, leaving motion picture production by the wayside. The studio saw a revival in the mid-1980s with eight feature films produced by 1989, the year Hartley came on board. Today's RKO is headed by two artists dedicated to bringing back the glory and creativity of "the last of the great studios."

While both Merrill and Hartley seem comfortable and confident in their roles as studio heads, they have found their niche only after wearing many other hats. Merrill, the privileged daughter of Marjorie Merriweather Post and Edward F. Hutton, was a trained actress who put her career on hiatus to get married and raise children.



*Dina Merrill and Ted Hartley  
are married, in love, and at the reins  
of RKO Pictures as they continue to  
steer the once stalled studio into  
the business of making films,  
films and more films.*



Photograph by Christopher Barr

Merrill eventually returned to acting, racking up 22 feature films, performances on Broadway, and over 100 television credits.

At 16, Hartley was appointed to the Naval Academy and eventually became a carrier-based jet fighter pilot. After his years with the Navy, which included a tour as a Presidential White House aide, he enrolled in the Harvard Business School. From the high seas of the Navy he joined the

bustle of Wall Street as a mergers-and-acquisitions associate. Subsequent experience included a partnership in an investment banking firm, an assignment as COO of a Gulf + Western company, and finally becoming the Executive Vice President of First Western Financial Corporation.

But what was all that when Hollywood called? A "corporate restructuring" gave Hartley the opportunity to give acting a try, which he did, landing the role of Reverend Jerry Bedford in the television series "Peyton Place." He worked opposite Cary Grant, Robert Redford, Clint Eastwood and Rock Hudson in films and starred in "Chopper One," a television series that ran in the 1970s.

He returned to the business world and in 1987 became a stockholder in Pavilion Communications which eventually merged with RKO Pictures Corporation. After a brief stint as RKO/Pavilion, the studio dropped Pavilion because RKO alone had better recognizability. Merrill and Hartley married in 1989 and the rest, as they say, is history.

**The couple brings more than charm and talent to the studio.**

With their acting experience and their behind-the-scenes knowledge of film production, and Hartley's financial background, the husband-and-wife team are armed with more than enough ammunition to win the box-office wars. But RKO isn't about blockbuster action movies and shoot-em-up car chase flicks.

"Each movie has to be made as a piece of cultural art," says Hartley. Both he and Merrill take motion

pictures seriously, examining each aspect of a film and calculating what will produce the greatest results, both financially and culturally.

To ensure that only quality films are made by the studio, the team is going to the source. RKO has the remake and sequel rights to 750 RKO hits and access to unproduced scripts by the likes of such greats as Orson Welles. (Seven of the 13 movies currently in development are from the RKO library.) "They've been tested," says Hartley. "We know [the potential for success] is there."

With over 200 Academy Award nominations already earned from the movies in the RKO library, Hartley and Merrill are betting on the tried and true success of these films and the recognition factor of the remake.

"I think people would love to see another version of a movie," explains Merrill. "They might not like it. They may say 'Oh, the old one was better.' But I think they'll be curious and love to go see it."

RKO has always been in the business of making "general audience-high quality" pictures, and to do this the studio needs talent. Good writers and good directors



are sought for each film, from the established to the up-and-coming.

Acclaimed director Robert Altman is working on RKO's version of *Mata Hari* with a script by David Williamson, who wrote the screenplay for *Gallipoli*. But the budget for *Nocturne*, a remake of a classic RKO film by the same title, is being scaled down and the writing turned into the capable, if not immediately recognizable, hands of David Arata and Alex Sokoloff. While both Merrill and Hartley "love to work with Altman," they are not adverse to giving promising writers and directors a shot at feature films.

"It's the writer's story," says Hartley, "But it's the director's vision. And our job as the producing studio is to take that combination and create an environment so the movie can happen."

That takes work. Merrill and Hartley, informed by one of those busy secretaries that a Friday meeting needs to be rescheduled for the following day, don't bat an eye. "We do a lot of Saturday work," Merrill explains. Merrill's official residence is in New York, while Hartley is a resident of Los Angeles. They shuttle between both locations and Europe, mostly for work. "We keep the airplane companies very well-funded," Merrill jokes. Hartley marvels that for all their work and traveling, "We're together most of the time."

Not all of their trips work in their favor, however, which is part and parcel of the movie business. "We did travel for a project that we thought we were going to do," explains Merrill. "It fell through, although it still may happen. We

went down to Mexico. Boy, we found the hotel where we were going to put the crew to keep them healthy and get them water and food. We found the Indian village where we were going to shoot the darn thing that was only 20 minutes away. Found the whole thing. Then it all fell through."

But for every film that falls, there are obviously plenty more that don't, as the production schedule for RKO fills up and more movies are brought into development.

Merrill, meanwhile, still manages to keep up her acting career. Her next role, says Hartley, will be shot in black and white. Hartley finds this hard to comprehend. "She is always in gorgeous color to me," he says. His offices are decorated with pictures of Merrill, and one assumes that hers is decorated with pictures of him. When he pauses to remember a name, she is there to give it. She is yin to his yang.

Unfortunately, time is running short, and an 11:00 a.m. appointment is waiting in the outside office. Hartley is starting a sentence when Merrill slips in, "They're waiting." "Can I finish my sentence, please?" he asks dramatically. She smiles, "Of course, dear."

"I have to ask permission," he explains, a glint in his eye. But something in the affectionate tone of his voice says he doesn't mind asking permission one bit. And Merrill doesn't seem to mind giving it.

—SLOANE LUCAS