

Jane Powell (1929–2021)

By Barbara Bennett Peterson

Portland native Jane Powell was an actress, singer, and dancer in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer musicals during the 1940s and 1950s, a period known as Hollywood's Golden Age. With wholesome girl-next-door looks and a versatile soprano voice—she had a range of two and a half octaves—she starred in movies that included *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, which the American Film Institute named one of the best musicals of all time. Toward the end of her career, she appeared with Pink Martini in Portland, New York, and Los Angeles.

Suzanne Lorraine Burce was born in Portland on April 1, 1929, to parents who hoped their only child would become the next Shirley Temple. Her father Paul Emerson Burce, who worked for Wonder Bread, and her mother Eileen Baker Burce, a homemaker, made sure their daughter got both dance lessons and a hair permanent when she was two years old. By the time she was five, she was a singing sensation on *Stars of Tomorrow*, a Portland children's radio show. At the Agnes Peters School of Dance, the Burces were persuaded to take Suzanne to Oakland, California, to be "discovered." Finding no success, they returned to Portland, where she attended Beaumont Grade School (now Beaumont Middle School).

In 1941, when Suzanne Burce was twelve years old, she was selected as the Oregon Victory Girl and toured the state singing at World War II bond rallies, military camps, veterans' homes, and hospitals. She earned widespread publicity and gained name recognition while selling war bonds to help the war effort. She also took a job at Portland's KOIN Radio, headquartered at the Heathman Hotel, where she sang two shows a week, one with organ accompaniment and the other with a live band. She earned \$8 per week, which she contributed to her family's income.

While on a family vacation two years later, Burce won a talent contest on *Hollywood Showcase: Stars over Hollywood*, a radio talent show, singing "IL Baccio," an aria from *Carmen*. After auditioning with Louis B. Mayer and David O. Selznick, she signed a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer contract, which lasted from 1943 through 1950. On loan to United Artists for her first film, *Song of the Open Road* (1944), she took her character's name, Jane Powell, as her stage name. *Song of the Open Road* premiered at Portland's Orpheum Theater, where a parade featured signs proclaiming "Portland Is Proud of Oregon's Victory Girl Jane Powell."

She attended the Little Red Schoolhouse at the studio and graduated from University High School in Los Angeles. Her parents moved to California to be close to their daughter, first to the San Fernando Valley where her father worked for Samuel Goldwyn as an electrician before purchasing an ice cream shop on Sunset Boulevard. She married ice skater Geary Steffen in 1949 and had two children; the couple divorced in 1953.

Powell appeared in *Delightfully Dangerous* (1945) and *Holiday in Mexico* (1946), her first Technicolor film and the first time she appeared as a blonde. Her other movies included *A Date with Judy* (1948) with Elizabeth Taylor, *Two Weeks with Love* (1950) with Ricardo Montalban, *Royal Wedding* with Fred Astaire, and *Rich, Young and Pretty* (1951) with Vic Damon and the Four Freshmen. Her best-known film was *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), in which she played an Oregonian who tamed the frontier and sang and danced with baritone Howard Keel. She had leading roles in *Athena* and *Deep in My Heart* (1954), *Hit the Deck* (1955), and *The Girl Most Likely* (1957), and she played a dramatic role in *The Female Animal* (1958) with Hedy Lamarr. Powell was awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1960.

A hard-working actress, Powell turned to musical theater in the late 1950s. She performed in a summer stock production of *Oklahoma* (1958) in Dallas and on television in *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1959) and *The Red Skeleton Show* (1962–1972). In Los Angeles, she played Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* (1964) and was the lead in *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1966), *Carousel* (1966), and *The Sound of Music* (1968). She starred in *Irene* on Broadway in 1973, replacing Debbie Reynolds, and sang with Howard Keel in *South Pacific* (1978). In 1954, Powell married Patrick Nerney; they had one child and divorced in 1963. She married James Fitzgerald in 1965 (divorced in 1975) and David Parlour in 1978 (divorced in 1981).

From the 1980s through the 2000s, Powell played cameo roles in television shows that included *Love Boat*, *Fantasy Island*, *Murder She Wrote*, *Growing Pains*, *As the World Turns*, and *Law & Order*. In 1995, she was the Queen in the New York City Opera's production of *Cinderella*. She joined with Pink Martini in Portland on New Year's Eve 2007 as the narrator of Sergei Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* and appeared with the band at Lincoln Center (2008) and the Hollywood Bowl (2010).

In 1988, Powell married Dick Moore, a former actor who owned a public relations firm, and moved to Wilton, Connecticut. Her autobiography, *The Girl Next Door* (1988) reveals her as straightforward, responsible, and with a sunny disposition. She was "candid" and "honest," her friend Susan Granger said. "You never asked Jane a question that you didn't want an absolutely honest answer to." Jane Powell died in Wilton on September 16, 2021.

Sources

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