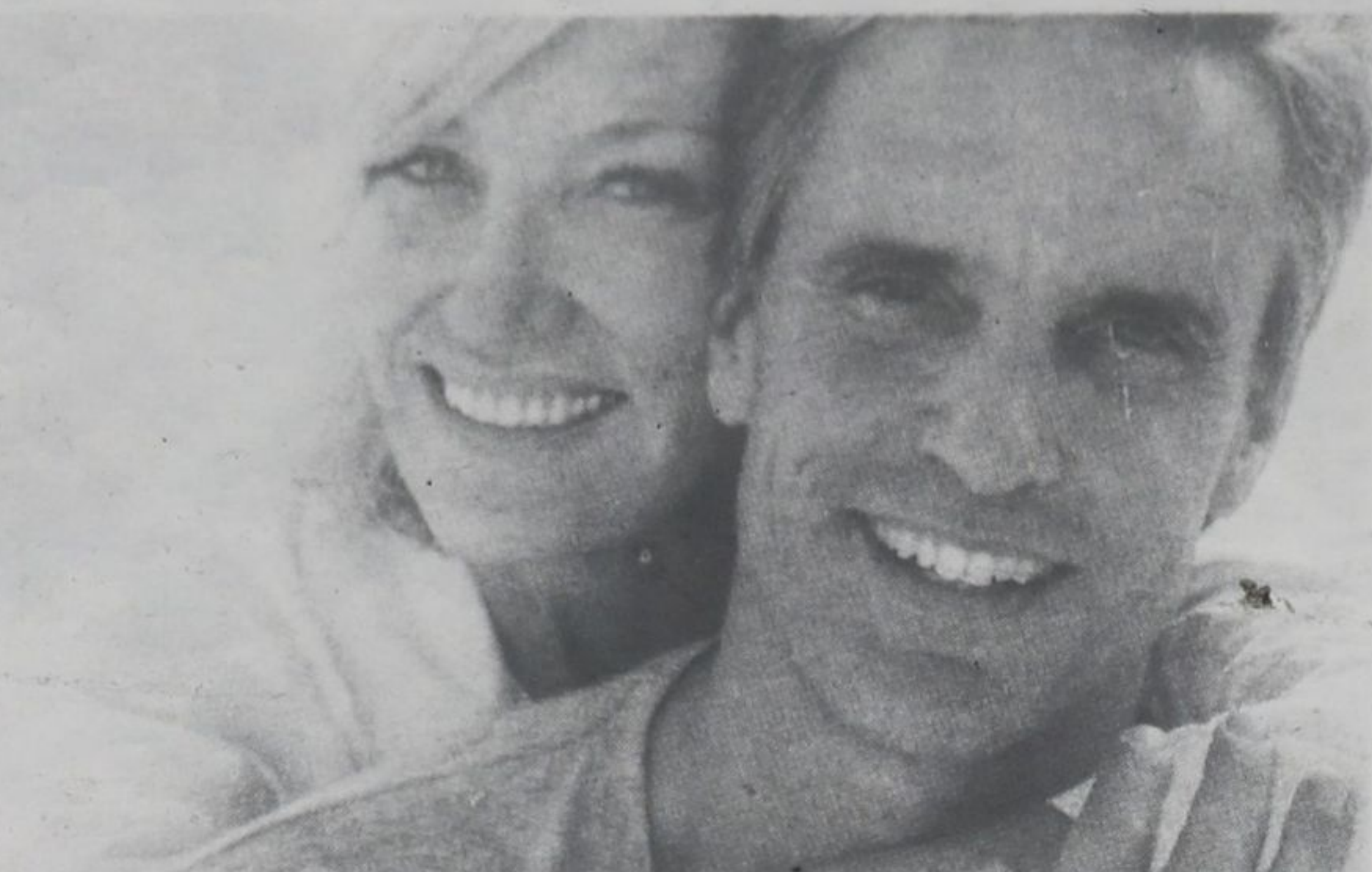


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Renée Zellweger as Judy Garland in "Judy". Photo by David Hindley/LD Entertainment/Roadside Attractions

## Renée Zellweger

The Bridget Jones star is reborn as Judy Garland

By Jonathan Dean

Renée Zellweger plays Judy Garland in a new film about the velvet-voiced, if damaged, star of *The Wizard of Oz*. "She was so witty, smart and sexy," Zellweger beams. "And sang like a dream."

Why, I ask, was Zellweger right to portray this explosion of a personality? "Oh, gosh, I don't know," she gasps. But she belted out Garland classics for the producers of *Judy* and fell for what they wanted to achieve. "They are not showing the woman everybody knows," she says. "Rather, they are filling in the blanks a little bit, about the cost of things."

*Judy* tells of the singer in her final year, during a 1968-69 London residency that delivered shows both ghastly and great. Garland was a wreck, eaten away by emotion, pills and booze; in the film, directed by Rupert Goold, Zellweger wobbles as required before delivering a note-perfect performance and going back to her hotel to

collapse. Some help Garland, others take advantage; a companion piece is Asif Kapadia's Amy Winehouse documentary. By the time Zellweger is nominated for next year's Oscars, *Bridget Jones* may no longer be the role she is best known for.

These, then, are heady and headline-making days for her, but the actress herself is subdued company. Indeed, it is disorientating, given how silent our room is, high above busy London streets, that I have to lean in to hear her. After all, people in her work are often really loud. She, though, is courteous, her Texan drawl still intact, often smiling, but with sentences that drift into a whisper. She seems timid, cowering in a big armchair. Maybe this is because the role means a lot and she doesn't want to offend superfans. More likely, though, she knows how the press gossips about changes to her looks and why she had a lengthy career break, and she is wary of being impolite.

That break, between 2010 and 2016, would

have helped Garland. (The singer needed money, though, and died just months after the events depicted in the film.) "Oh, absolutely," Zellweger says. "I can't imagine..." She pauses. "You have days when you would not choose to greet an audience, given what may be happening with your private life or health. But you don't have a choice, because you made a professional promise. Those are rare for me, but real, and you've got to get on with it, as with any job. You've got to get on with it."

Or pause, as she did. Why did she do that? "I was bored with myself and it was time to stop," she says bluntly. Were roles getting worse? "No, I was just drawing from a dry well, regurgitating emotion and experiences I didn't need to live again. I didn't have anything to give any more to the characters I was playing and felt, 'What's the point?'"

"It felt like a lie!" she continues, as loud as she gets, after a beat. "I could hear my voice when doing dialogue, but just thought, 'No.'" So why return for *Bridget Jones's Baby*, the third in the Helen Fielding series? "I love *Bridget* and wanted to explore her next chapter. It is so rare you get to revisit a character in different stages of her life." Could there be a fourth film? "Maybe. I guess they'll decide and let me know."

One of the obvious reasons Zellweger works well as Garland is that she can sing. This has been known for a while, since she starred in *Chicago* in 2002; all Judy's vocals are hers. It adds weight to the emoting. Zellweger is also brilliant at both serious and funny. Garland is hurt, yes, but also full of sass, so the range that Zellweger has demonstrated, from *Jerry Maguire* to *Nurse Betty*, is fully deployed. Drama and comedy — she can do both. She says nothing, and I explain that that was a compliment. There is a humility to her that is largely alien to the rest of her profession. She claps. "Thank you! Thank you!"

*Judy* is an unconventional biopic in that it doesn't simply trawl through a Garland Wikipedia page, but concentrates on one era. Think of the parts of *The Iron Lady* when Margaret Thatcher was old. You leave with an impression of the subject, not their history. I ask Zellweger what impression she thinks the film leaves.

"It's a personal film," she says, "about how she went between being this superstar and those moments when she's just the woman, Judy, trying to live in difficult circumstances. It fills in the blanks not accounted for by her critics. It looks at the

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She's already being tipped for an Oscar for her role as Judy — but what did playing the great singer teach Zellweger?

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