

Belita

THE ICE QUEEN OF FILM NOIR

By Eddie Muller

Sounds a bit incongruous: figure skating and film noir. But there may be no better example of the pervasiveness of noir in postwar Hollywood than the short, strange career of Belita, an Olympic figure skater who wanted to be the next Sonja Henie but ended up Audrey Totter on ice. When she died on December 18, 2005, obituaries accorded her film résumé scant respect, focusing more on her renown as an athlete and star of theatrical ice shows. I suggest that her most memorable legacy should be a trio of low-budget crime thrillers that she made, in succession, between 1946 and 1948: *Suspense*, *The Gangster*, and *The Hunted*.

The limbo state of these titles* is unfortunate because all three are strong and intriguing, featuring contributions from significant writers: Philip Yordan (*Suspense*), Steve Fisher (*The Hunted*), and Daniel Fuchs (*The Gangster*, adapting his novel *Low Company* with an uncredited assist from Dalton Trumbo). While none rate as neglected masterworks, each is unique, inventive, and deserving of rescue, restoration, and critical rehabilitation . . . as is Belita herself.

In all three, Belita is an oddly out-of-place presence, and it works to each film's advantage. Her athletic physicality contrasts with her refined diction (she's hiding a British accent). Her regal bearing is often at odds with the low-rent surroundings. She seems the most worldly and experienced member of each cast, yet she's only in her mid-20s.

Barry Sullivan, her costar in both *Suspense* and *The Gangster*, remarked candidly (if ungallantly), "I always had a fondness for Belita because she didn't know what the fuck was happening! She was a great

skater, but acting and particularly filmmaking were totally foreign to her."

Though unschooled as an actress, Belita displays an innate confidence and charisma, bordering on haughtiness, that sets her above the cheapness of the productions and the grinding genre mechanics. She seems, frankly, like a circus animal—a superior creature trapped in a cage for the amusement of lesser beings. This was, we now know, how Belita unhappily saw herself. But it's that proud, defiant sense of self, more than acting skill, that brings to life the stock characters she played.

THE "BALLERINA ON BLADES" was born Maria Gladys Olive Lyne Jepson-Turner in 1923 in the pugilistically named town of Nether Wallop in Hampshire, England. The stage name Belita (roughly translated "little beauty") came from the name of one of five Argentinean cattle ranches established by her great-grandfather, Charles Drabble, an Englishman credited with helping found Argentina's meat-producing economy.

Her grandfather, Dr. Bertram Lyne-Stevens, was a consulting physician to all the royal families of Europe. Her father, Major William Jepson-Turner, was a Boer War veteran and a high-ranking member of Britain's Home Guard during World War II. Her two brothers were officers with General Montgomery's rifle brigade in North Africa, both wounded and cited for gallantry in action.

Yet the person who had the most profound impact on her life was, without a doubt, "Queenie," perhaps the most ambitious stage mother of all time. Mrs. Jepson-Turner, who'd harbored her own dream of being a professional figure skater, first put her only daughter in the spotlight at 11 months of age . . . hanging her as a live ornament on a Christmas tree at a royal fam-

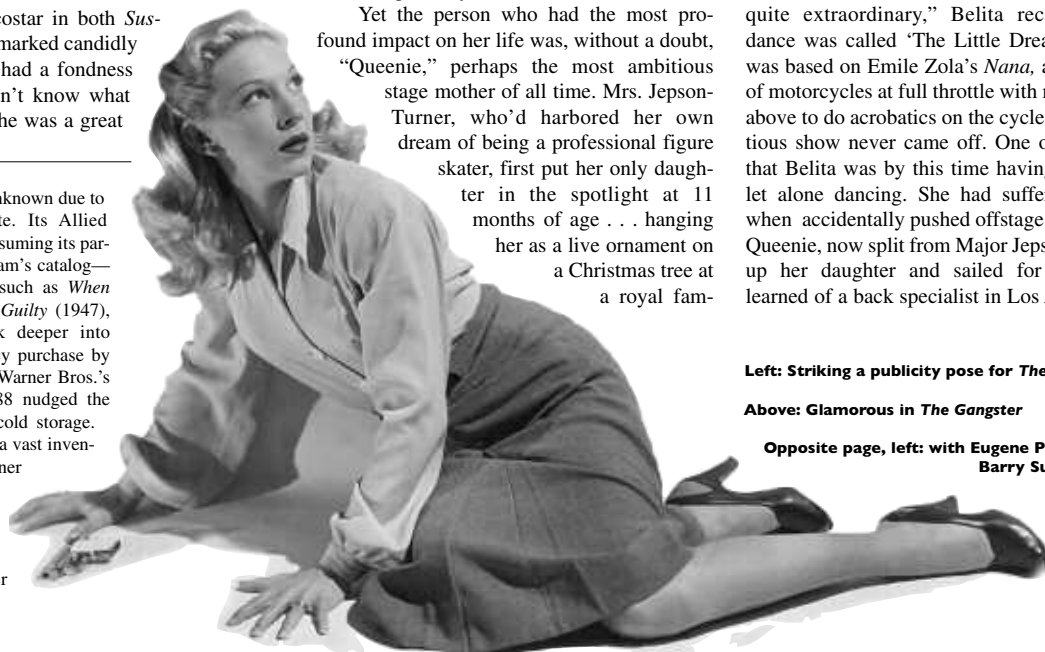


ily charity event. At age two she was doing public pantomime shows with her brothers. At three she was studying ballet. Ice skating began at age four, eventually leading to private instruction from the Swiss skating champion Jakob Gerschweiler.

Queenie convinced the renowned London ballet dancer and choreographer Anton Dolin to take her six-year-old daughter on as a pupil. Five years later, little Gladys became Dolin's dance partner. She made her solo ballet debut at 11 at a grand event in Cannes. Her musical accompanist was Noël Coward, who remarked, with his inimitable panache, "I was told I was to play for a little girl. Had I realized I was to play for an artist, I would have practiced." A few months later she participated in both the British and world figure skating championships. At 13 she was chosen to represent Britain in the 1936 Olympic Games in Germany. She finished 16th. Sonja Henie, the 24-year-old Norwegian sensation, won gold for the third time.

The following year, the 14-year-old prodigy starred in *Opera on Ice*, a London skating spectacular. "The show was a disaster, but I received good reviews," Belita related in a 2003 interview. She and Queenie then toured Europe, with a French maid and Pekingese pooch in tow. In France she was offered the starring role in a combination dance-skating show co-conceived by Jean Cocteau, Cecil Beaton, and Salvador Dalí. "The stretch of their imagination was quite extraordinary," Belita recalled. "Cocteau's dance was called 'The Little Dream Girl,' Beaton's was based on Emile Zola's *Nana*, and Dalí's had lots of motorcycles at full throttle with me appearing from above to do acrobatics on the cycles!" Alas, the ambitious show never came off. One of the reasons was that Belita was by this time having trouble walking, let alone dancing. She had suffered a back injury when accidentally pushed offstage at Covent Garden. Queenie, now split from Major Jepson-Turner, packed up her daughter and sailed for America, having learned of a back specialist in Los Angeles.

* These films remain largely unknown due to Monogram's complicated fate. Its Allied Artists subsidiary ended up subsuming its parent company in 1953. Monogram's catalog—including wonderful B noirs such as *When Strangers Marry* (1944), *The Guilty* (1947), and *High Tide* (1947)—sank deeper into obscurity after AA's bankruptcy purchase by Lorimar Productions in 1980. Warner Bros.'s acquisition of Lorimar in 1988 nudged the Monogram titles deeper into cold storage. Today they're at the bottom of a vast inventory of films in the Time Warner empire. One only hopes the resurrection of *Decoy* (1946) as part of Warner Bros.' Film Noir Collection bodes well for the eventual release of other recondite Monogram titles.



Left: Striking a publicity pose for *The Hunted*

Above: Glamorous in *The Gangster*

Opposite page, left: with Eugene Pallette and Barry Sullivan in *Suspense*



"The doctor didn't help, and I was in a wheelchair for a few months until Peter Lorre came into my life. He said he knew a man who could certainly cure me. This man turned out to be a veterinarian, who hung me as he did cows with bad backs. I was walking again in a couple of weeks."

By now the war had started and Queenie was unable to get money from home. "I had to get a job," Belita stated. She was given a regular dancing gig by her old friend Sol Hurok, who was just starting his ballet theater in New York. But the \$50-a-week headliner pay couldn't cover Queenie, the French maid, and the Pekingese. During a rehearsal break, Belita's colleague Nana Gollner commented that hard times had convinced her to teach flying once again (Gollner was a pilot as well as a dancer). When Belita commented that the "only" other thing she could do was skate, her friend blurted, "You little fool! That's the second-highest-paying job in the United States, next to film. Get on with it!"

Belita immediately quit ballet theater and took a job skating during the period breaks in hockey games . . . at \$300 a night. "I thought I had it made. Until I realized I was responsible for my own expenses—which meant Mother, the French maid, and the Pekingese." She accepted an offer to appear in the touring company of John Harris's popular ice show. Her entrée to Hollywood was in the 1941 Republic film version of that show, *Ice-Capades*. Her costar, the 20-year-old Czech figure skater Vera Hruba, married studio chief Herbert Yates, who, despite his wife's lack of off-ice talent, starred her in 26 films at Republic.

Sonja Henie's contract at 20th Century-Fox made her at that time one of the highest-paid stars in Hollywood, and lowly Monogram decided to ante up in the European-skater sweepstakes by signing Belita to a seven-year contract. The Poverty Row studio would have been the laughingstock of the Hollywood press were it not for the bounteous (and slightly suspicious) buffets it provided at its press previews during World War II food rationing. One of these bacchanals, for 1943's *Silver Skates*, served as Belita's coming-out party. Writer Philip K. Scheuer recalled Queenie doing virtually all the talking for her daughter, whom he described as "a medium-tall girl, little more than a child with her large eyes and crown of flaxen hair (only lately done up, surely, from adolescent braids), she seemed all but lost in that center of noisy conviviality, speaking seldom but always politely and wearing on her irregular but piquant features an expression that could have hidden petulance, sadness, or a little of both."

That fairly captured the persona that Belita, following one more "gay" turn in *Lady, Let's Dance* (1944), would bring to film noir.

SUSPENSE (1946) WAS A WATERMARK in the rising tide of Hollywood noir. Dark psychological murder dramas were proving so popular with both filmmakers and the public that the notoriously penny-pinching King Brothers, Frank and Maurice, decided that their first \$1 million-budget movie—specifically designed to showcase Monogram's skating star—would be a dose of *Double Indemnity* over ice. Belita eagerly embraced the sordid material, believing it would once and for all dispel comparisons between herself and the eternally sunny Sonja Henie.

Frank Tuttle (*This Gun for Hire*) was hired to direct Yordan's script (originally entitled *Glamour Girl*), a Cain-style tale of infidelity and murder festooned with absurd, if entertaining, plot gimmicks and visual gimcrackery. Foremost among these are Belita's story-stopping ice routines, reportedly choreographed by Nick Castle but actually mostly arranged by the skater herself. One number climaxes with Belita's breathtaking leap through a ring of Dalí-esque swords. "The ring was made of very sharp aluminum, and the knives were hard rubber," Belita explained. "I refused to rehearse it. Frankly I was scared. I figured that if I was going to be cut to pieces it had better be on film. I asked for 'danger pay.' Fat chance. It went OK, but I refused to do a second take." It should be noted that Belita was known to augment her salary with wagers. "I'd bet whoever was game that I could do the tough stunts in one take. Most times I did."

She was devastated to learn that her main routine, a wonderfully bizarre solo-in-spotlights called "Introspection," had been cut from the script. "I refused to finish the film unless that number was restored," she said. She shot it in three hours one afternoon. Sheathed in a sexy black outfit (suggesting, perhaps, the world's first skating dominatrix?), Belita was a sensation and the film was a box office hit.

Her goal, she said, was to limit her film work to one straight acting role and one "semi-musical" per year. She proudly announced that in her next film, *The Hunted*, she wouldn't skate at all. The success of *Suspense*, however, and her chemistry with costar Barry Sullivan altered Monogram's plans. She was cast as Sullivan's society-dame paramour, Nancy Starr, in *The Gangster*, a baroquely expressionistic drama that chronicles the collapse of a small-time mobster's big plans and the disintegration of his psyche. Although it veers into verbosity at times, *The Gangster* is unique

and compelling. It was the final directorial effort of the little-known Gordon Wiles, who for most of his career was an art director and production designer. Belita is a frosty foil for Sullivan's meltdown, a slumming sophisticate who saves the fragile ego of a paranoid and potentially violent man. It was a relationship she'd also enact in real life.

In 1946 she married aspiring actor Joel McGinnis Riordan, partly to escape Queenie's stranglehold. Suddenly liberated, Belita revealed herself in interviews as alarmingly bright and sophisticated. She noted that her upbringing caused her to approach life, and acting, as a competition. She played the violin and was fluent in four languages. She was compelled to become an expert skier and swimmer as well as a skater. She appeared on the cover of *Life* performing an "underwater ballet," which was, according to Belita, "nothing more than an exercise session to help stretch my injured back. I didn't even know they were photographing me."

Her intelligence and ambition left her "savior" jealous and embittered. In a 1956 divorce petition Belita asserted she had "feared for her life and safety" when she agreed to pay Riordan 40 percent of her earnings during the preceding years. She testified that her husband "drank very heavily" and beat her "rather frequently," including twice in public. She was, indeed, a woman trapped. Precisely her role in *The Hunted*, in which she plays a parolee who gets a typical ex-con job: skating in a local ice show!

Despite this silly bit of business, *The Hunted* is one of the better B noirs. Steve Fisher's script crackles with tension between the two leads. Preston Foster (25 years older than his costar) plays Johnny Saxon, a cop who's sent Laura Mead (Belita) up on a robbery charge even though he's in love with her. Or, to be exact, *because* he's in love with her. He couldn't have her, so he railroaded her, despite evidence of her innocence. Laura swears revenge. Four year later, on parole with nowhere to stay, she shows up at Saxon's apartment. He's still obsessed. In a marvelous scene, the two sit in the dark trading bitter, lovelorn jabs, thunder and lightning splitting the darkness. Director Jack Bernhard (*Decoy*) plays it mostly in a single long take, heightening the tension as Saxon (and viewers) wait for the vengeful dame to pull a knife and settle the score.

Opposite a natural like Preston Foster, Belita seems edgy and uncertain, which works just fine. Laura is a character on thin ice, and the audience, like Johnny, is kept guessing as to her true motivations. Fisher's "is-she-or-isn't-she" handling of the femme fatale, and his notion of love as a form of persecution,

form the hard core of this small gem. Oddly, in the 2003 interview regarding her career, Belita had no recollection of ever making this film! Perhaps that's because in terms of budget and prestige, *The Hunted* was a long step down from the extravagance that surrounded her "breakout" in *Suspense* only two years earlier. Her champions, the King Brothers, had lost influence at Monogram with the rise of in-house producer Walter Mirisch, who soon transformed the studio into Allied Artists. Belita wasn't part of his long-term plans.

She leaped at an offer to skate again in Europe—perhaps to escape further domestic bruising—and once across the Atlantic opted to spend a year on ice as the lead in "London Melody," a skating spectacular that enjoyed a full year's run at Empress Hall. While in Paris she met Charles Laughton, who was there shooting an adaptation of Georges Simenon's *The Man on the Eiffel Tower* (1949), directed by and costarring Burgess Meredith. "Charlie took me under his wing," Belita said. "Once again I had fallen on my feet, having such a great artist as a teacher."

Like a true athlete, Belita focused only on improving herself. Instead of being disappointed that her star had dimmed, she landed leading roles in Laughton's revivals of *The Cherry Orchard* and *Twelfth Night*, taking a pay cut in order to learn acting from her new mentor. "I loved him very much," Belita recalled fondly, laughing at the memory of how Laughton would always leave the door open whenever they were alone together so there would be no hint of scandal.

Returning to London, she enacted the femme fatale once again—this time in a series of four interpretive dances as a character actually named the Femme Fatale—in Gene Kelly's experimental *Invitation to the Dance* (1956). Unbeknownst to Kelly, she moonlighted on the same stage set as a Russian ballerina in MGM's *Never Let Me Go* (1953), with Clark Gable and Gene Tierney. "Sadly," Belita recalled, "the number was cut from the film because there was something wrong with the Cyclorama, which they hadn't noticed in rushes." She also appeared, uncredited, in Fred Astaire's final musical, *Silk Stockings* (1957). Producer George Abbott approved her for the part of Lola in the 1958 London stage version of his hit show *Damn Yankees*. "I got lousy reviews for my singing," she admits, "for which I can't blame anyone. I can't sing."

Between these jobs she had appeared in a grueling series of ice skating shows—precisely the type she'd previously denigrated. In 1956 Belita suddenly hung up her skates, never to hit hard water again. She retired to England, where in 1967 she married the Irish actor James Berwick. While he enjoyed a prolific career on British television, she opened a gardening center in West London and contentedly watched her fame and recognition gradually diminish. She remained with Berwick until his death in 2000, then spent the last five years of her life in isolation at a second home in the south of France. "I have a lovely time doing absolutely nothing," she happily said at the conclusion of her 2003 interview.

Immediately following her retirement from skating in 1956, Belita declared: "I hated the ice. I hated the cold, the smell, everything about it. I only did it for the money."

Spoken like film noir's true Ice Queen. ■

Thanks to Susan Austin, Mac Moses, and the Pro Skating Historical Foundation for providing an audio recording of Belita's 2003 "self-interview" from which many of her quotes here were taken.



Tanya Ilieva (background) and Zahary Baharov in *Zift*

Courtesy Miramar Film

New Bulgarian Film Mines Classic Noir

ZIFT (2008) IS THE SHIT. Pun intended.* It represents, in the words of its screenwriter Vladislav Todorov (also the author of the novel on which it is based), the first cinematic attempt to marry Communism with American film noir. He and director Javor Gardev reportedly watched and analyzed nearly 100 noirs in preparation for making the film, and they successfully absorbed the thematic thrust and spirit of such classics as *Brute Force* (1947), *D.O.A.* (1950), and *Criss Cross* (1949) rather than merely attempting to emulate their look and feel. The result is something unique: an peculiarly American storytelling style applied to a tale set in Cold War Bulgaria. Cross-cultural sparks fly, and distant cinematic echoes come through loud and clear.

The film isn't quite as well realized as it might have been, stemming in large measure from Gardev's overzealousness. He seems determined to bring to modern Bulgarian cinema not only classic film noir, but all the dyspeptic traits of over-adrenalized modern film editing.

The story follows a man named Moth (Zahary Baharov), an existential antihero in the classic noir tradition, who is being paroled after spending more than 20 years in prison for a murder he did not commit. He was jailed just before the Communist coup of 1944 and reemerges into a completely changed Bulgaria. His accomplice in the ill-fated heist that led to his arrest is now a corrupt commissar. His wife is a jaded nightclub chanteuse named (what else?) Gilda. His young son, whom he never got to know, is dead and buried. All Moth wants is to escape to the tropics and live the rest of his life a free man (just like Joe Sullivan in *Raw Deal* [1948]).

The film rumbles through the 24 hours following Moth's release, a span in which everything he believes turns out to be a lie, and the prediction of his philosophical cellmate—that the world outside is worse than prison—proves true. The film uses a couple of noir staples, including a complex flashback structure and a rueful voice-over by the protagonist, to reveal past and present storylines almost simultaneously. Todorov even borrows film noir's most famous gimmick, *D.O.A.*'s "luminous toxin," to add propellant to Moth's deadly flight through nocturnal Sofia.

Zift is presented in black and white, reinforcing its film noir roots. As Todorov explained to an audience at the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, accomplishing this was no mean feat. In Bulgaria today, DVDs of black and white movies are routinely returned to video stores as "defective." The

filmmakers shot the movie in color and only succeeded in getting black-and-white prints made after several good reviews of festival screenings.

Out of the gate, the film feels more like hyperkinetic neo-noir than one of the more measured 1940s forerunners. A theater director by training, Gardev displays an obsessive pictorial sense that immediately caused me to peg him as a comic book artist. He literally hurls images onto the screen rather than letting scenes develop organically (maybe he was excited to be liberated from static stage sets). Once Gardev gets a grip on his flashy pyrotechnical technique and allows the actors to carry the script's weight, the film settles into its intriguing new spin on noir.

The key is Baharov's charismatic and determined presence as Moth. Despite his punkish exterior (bald head and leather jacket), he suggests an Eastern European equivalent of familiar hunky chumps like Burt Lancaster, Dennis O'Keefe, and Robert Mitchum—believers in true love who are eternally thwarted by female betrayal.

As the femme fatale, Tanya Ilieva (a fashion model making her film debut) projects the requisite implacable allure. She even does an intentionally tired rendition of Rita Hayworth's legendary number "Put the Blame on Mame" (which in translation becomes "Put the Blame on the Moon"). Todorov's script goes as far as any noir I've seen in dissecting the character of its femme fatale, albeit from an entirely male viewpoint. Gardev can't resist a sex scene that draws a graphic parallel between the character and her nickname, Mantis.

As the villainous crook-cum-commissar known only as the Slug, Vladimar Penev is effective in a role once owned by Raymond Burr.

What is ultimately most interesting about *Zift*, however, is how its makers transpose bits and pieces of classic noir to virtually unknown terrain—Communist Bulgaria behind the Iron Curtain. Once *Zift* overcomes its reliance on the comedic value of bodily functions (and that moment doesn't come soon enough), it becomes an intriguing if uneven example of hard-core noir. Which means, in the words of novelist Jim Nisbet: "You're fucked on page one, and it all goes downhill from there."

—Eddie Muller

* *Zift* is a tarlike substance that Bulgarians gnash like chewing gum. It's also the Bulgarian slang equivalent of "shit."