

Encore, Encore

Now behind the camera, Dina Merrill and Ted Hartley make movie magic together



"She's the best experience a man could ever have," says Hartley of Merrill, his wife of nine years (at their Los Angeles home).

Ted Hartley fell for Dina Merrill more than 40 years ago—just after losing to the then-budding actress's husband Stanley Rumbough Jr. at tennis. "Across the lawn came this vision in a tea gown," Hartley recalls, "with a little child tugging on her skirt and the maid behind with a tray of iced tea." Then a

naval attaché, Hartley had befriended Merrill's spouse, a White House aide. But Hartley knew, he says, that "this incredibly beautiful woman would someday be part of my life."

But he never could have imagined that the consummation would take 30 years—or that their romance would read so much like a Holly-

wood script. Before their lives finally entwined, the high-society heiress, now 73, and the dashing ex-pilot, 64, took separate paths to the limelight: she as the bombshell-with-breeding star of such movies as *Butterfield 8* and *Operation Petticoat*; he as an actor in films (*High Plains Drifter*) and TV's *Peyton Place*. Now

the two, who wed in 1989, are reviving a piece of Hollywood's Golden Age. A decade ago, they and some investor friends bought the struggling RKO Pictures. Mining the once-grand studio's library of remake-ready classics, new chairman Hartley and vice chairman Merrill reaped more than \$50 million with their first hit, last December's *Mighty Joe Young*. Says Merrill: "I love working with Ted."

The daughter of New York financier E.F. Hutton and cereal heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post, Merrill (who adopted her stage name from a relative) acted on Broadway before settling down with Rumbough in 1946. "My mother had brainwashed me," she says. "I turned down my career to marry my Marine."

But a decade later, Merrill, who split with Rumbough and married actor Cliff Robertson (*Charly*) in 1966, was back in show business. Starting with 1957's *Desk Set*, she racked up roles in dozens of films and TV productions. Meanwhile, the Iowa-reared Hartley, who cut short his flying career when he broke his back in a 1961 crash landing, traded his post-Navy business career for a



Merrill (with Laurence Harvey in 1960's *Butterfield 8*) has "a lot of confidence," says director Robert Altman.



Hartley (in the '60s) played a minister on TV's *Peyton Place*.

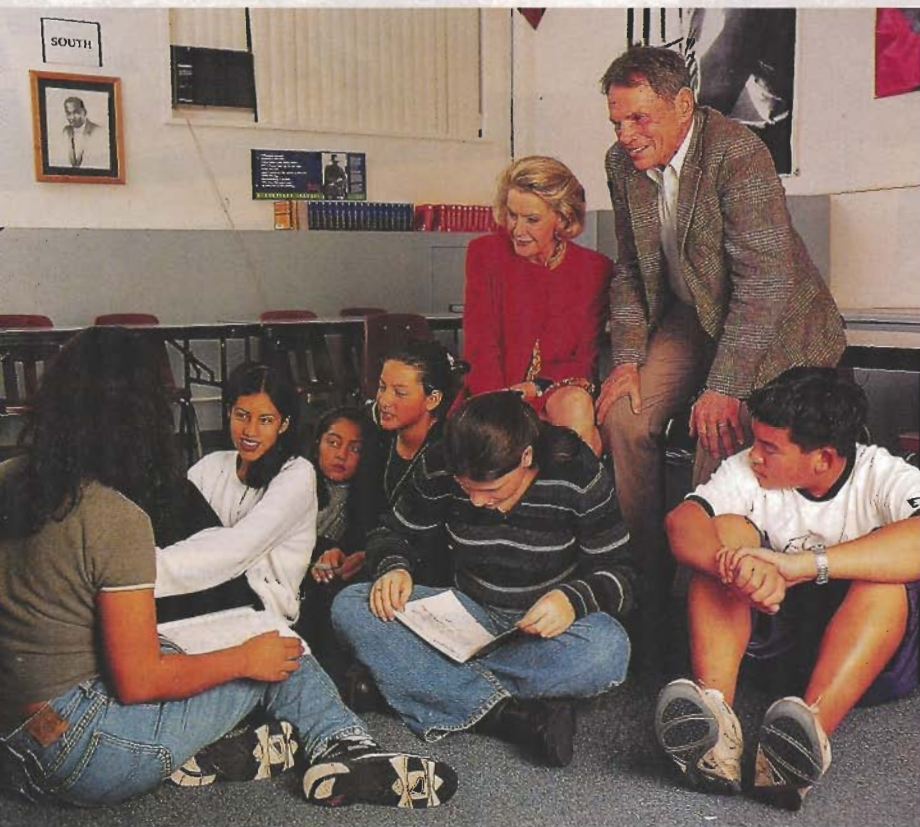
whirl at stardom. Pal Rip Torn came up with a plan. "You get that big balcony apartment up there at the Chateau Marmont [hotel]," Hartley says Torn told him. "You have a lot of parties, and you invite everybody. Eventually someone is going to say, 'Are you an actor?'" It worked. Hartley played a minister on the '60s hit *Peyton Place*, then appeared in

eight films before retreating to investment banking in the 1980s.

In 1986, having snared the newly separated Merrill's phone number from a mutual friend, he asked her out. "I was so nervous," he says. "A whole lifetime I waited for this dinner." This time, it was a love match, though the mother of four balked at tying the knot. "I had decided I wasn't wife material," she says. But the never-wed Hartley, a dad to one (son Philippe, now 43, born to a woman he dated while stationed in Morocco, came to live with him in the '60s), won out. His "naughty" sense of humor "is very sexy to her and her kind of steadiness and sensibility," says actress pal Joanna Kerns.

Now, while Hartley oversees RKO's production slate (including a remake of 1943's *I Walked with a Zombie*), Merrill pores over the studio's stash of unproduced screenplays by such legends as Orson Welles and takes roles in such features as 1992's *The Player*. "I'd like to drift into Jessica Tandy-type parts," she says. She and Hartley, who share a Brentwood house, also fund the Story Project, which pairs poor kids with screenwriter mentors. Their friends marvel at their energy. "At their age, people usually talk about the things they did," says producer Saul Zaentz. "Well, they're still *doing* them."

- Samantha Miller
- Danelle Morton and Vicki Sheff-Cahan in Los Angeles



Their Story Project "gets kids motivated to write," says Merrill (with Ted in Santa Monica).