

What Next for Sandra Dee?

Sandra Dee trips over the college traces in "Take Her, She's Mine," much to the chagrin of her dad in the film, James Stewart.



Her career is riding high, her marriage to Bobby Darin sinking low—and, at 21,

she's torn between work and love

By JACK RYAN

SANDRA DEE slipped out of her New York City hotel recently for a quiet dinner date with a handsome escort. Much to her dismay, a gossip columnist heard about the rendezvous and printed the item.

"The next day," she says, "everybody I met pulled out a clipping and waved it at me. 'Did you really have dinner with him?' they'd ask. It was embarrassing."

It is indicative of the topsy-turvy world of Sandra Dee that the man she was embarrassed to be seen with was her husband. He's popular with young audiences, too—singer-actor Bobby Darin. Why was she "embarrassed"?

"We're separated, you know, and we just can't be seen together. It causes talk."

Sandra Dee, at 21, has lived nearly half her life as a top-priced child model and teenage movie money-maker. She is one of three women (others: Doris Day and Elizabeth Taylor) among the top 10 box-office stars, and her latest film, 20th Century-Fox's comedy, "Take Her, She's Mine," costars veteran James Stewart. Her fantastic furs and fanatical fans are no legends.

But a growing legend is that she is the frothy creation of a stage-door mother and a Pygmalion-inspired director. When Sandra denies this, articulately and vehemently, she also explodes the canard that she is a simple "Tinkertoy," as one publication labeled her.

Sandra's mother and father were divorced when she was four. Her mother subsequently married a well-to-do New Jersey real-estate operator, Eugene Douvan, and the couple lavished wealth and affection on Sandra.

"But they didn't push me into a career, as some people say," Sandra explains. "A girl friend told me about a Girl Scout fashion show, and I entered. Harry Conover, the modeling agent, was there and offered me my first job, a cover for the Girl Scout magazine."

SHE WAS soon earning \$30 an hour at age 12 and running around to four or five sittings a day. "I got fed up and was going back to school—and my parents were happy about it—when a Hollywood offer came. I haven't stopped working since and never wanted to—except once."

Through her teen years, Mrs. Douvan was in constant attendance, especially after Sandra's stepfather died. Hollywood claimed Mrs. Douvan stared with tearful eyes through the window while Sandra received tutoring; that she chaperoned Sandra and Darin on their dates.

"The part that is true," Sandra says, "is that my mother was usually with me. She had to be. I was a working minor, and California law required her to be near. Besides, I was in a totally adult, sophisticated world, and what mother wouldn't be protective? I never had a friend my own age to play with or confide in; my mother had to take on those things, too."

Ross Hunter is the director and perhaps father-substitute who has guided Sandra through most of the 21 films she has made in six years. But Sandra denies he is a Svengali, although when she and Bobby bought their

honeymoon house, it was next to Hunter's.

When talking about her marriage, however, Sandra implicitly admits that the sheltered life under her mother and director left her unprepared for adulthood. She had never had a real date when she met Darin in Italy in 1960. After a six-week courtship, they eloped to Elizabeth, N.J., "because it was the only time we were sure we could have six weeks together."

Bobby is a tough boy from the Bronx who set out early to be a "living legend by 25" and alienated some with his brashness and ego. But not Sandra. She says: "Whatever happens to my marriage, I'll never regret it. I owe Bobby so much. He taught me responsibility. He made it on his own, so he knew how to stand on his feet. Now I do, too . . ."

"Certainly, I still love him. You don't just 'fall out of love.' Sometimes, though, you don't know how to handle it. I'm 21 and no smarter or dumber than any other 21-year-old. People ask me how my teen-age fans react to our separation. You know, it's funny—they aren't teen-agers now, any more than I am. They've grown up, too. They're 21 or so, married, having babies—and marriage problems. So they write with sympathy because we're all the same, star or fan . . ."

THE HAPPIEST TIME of my life was when I learned we were having a baby and I quit work. Bobby was making a picture in Redding (Calif.), and we rented a little cabin. No maids, just Bobby and me—me, who'd never even picked up my clothes! I kept a good house and liked it, I knew I could quit the movies and be happy. Yes, I know housewives get bored, but there was so much I wanted to learn.

"But I never got a chance to quit. We separated, and I went back to a 15-hour day. I liked it because I could forget."

Sandra doesn't say what caused the rift which left their baby, Dodd Mitchell, 20 months, in the care of her mother, grandmother, and assorted maids. ("Too many women," Sandra admits.) But when a young woman, who is now No. 6 at the box office and wants to be No. 1, marries a young man who aims at being a "living legend" (now 26, he has had to move his target date back five years), you get a glimpse of a conflict area.

Sandra had a teen-age reputation of accepting advice but—"Nobody has advised me on my marriage," she says. "My mother is no help. I'm right, Bobby is wrong. But I'm always right with my mother. No, only time will tell what Bobby and I will do. But with his club dates and movies and my commitments, we never seem to have time."

"Here's some advice," I said. "You love him, you want a solution, but you don't have time to find one. Well, why don't you both quit for a while and go off together to talk things out?"

"We couldn't do that!" Sandra said, only half-kiddingly. "If we were together, we'd be reconciled; we wouldn't have to go off somewhere and talk things out. No, time will have to tell."

Unfortunately, Sandra Dee and Bobby Darin are two people with everything but time.