



I MARRIED A WITCH is an October, 2014 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd film.

United States 1942 black-and-white 77 minutes live action feature screwball comedy Producers: Preston Sturges and Rene Clair Paramount Pictures
15 of a possible 20 points ****1/2 of a possible *****

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates juvenile performer

Points:

- 1 Direction: Rene Clair
- 1 Editing: Eda Warren
- 1 Cinematography: Ted Tetzlaff
- 2 Lighting
- Special Visual Effects: Gordon Jennings*
- 2 Screenplay: Robert Pirosh*, Marc Connelly*, Dalton Trumbo*, Rene Clair*
based on the story "The Passionate Witch" begun by Thorne Smith and completed by Norman Watson
- 1 Music: Roy Webb
- 2 Art Direction: Hans Dreier*, Ernst Fegte*
Set Decorator: George Sawley
Costume Designer: Edith Head
Make-Up: Wally Westmore
- 1 Sound: Harry Mills, Richard Olson
- 2 Acting

2 Creativity

15 total points

Cast: Veronica Lake* (Jennifer), Fredric March (Wallace Wooley), Susan Hayward* (Estelle Masterson), Cecil Kellaway* (Warlock Daniel, Jennifer's father), Robert Benchley (Dr. Dudley White), Elizabeth Patterson (Margaret, Wallace's housekeeper), Eily Malyon (j) (Tabitha Wooley, Jennifer and Jonathan's daughter), Nora Cecil (Harriet), Emory Parnell (Allen), Ann Carter (j) (Jennifer Wooley, daughter of Jennifer and Wallace)

Due to the outbreak of war in Europe, French director Rene Clair relocated to Hollywood in autumn of 1939. His first American film, THE FLAME OF NEW ORLEANS for Universal, has largely been relegated to the archives. More successful was his second, I MARRIED A WITCH, released in 1942. With production and promotion from Paramount Studios, the whimsical fantasy of romance and witchcraft proved a box office winner. Partially this was a result of inspired casting. The comedy benefitted additionally from opulent sets designed by Hans Dreier and Ernst Fegte and a screenplay crafted wittily by Marc Connelly, Dalton Trumbo, Robert Pirosh, and Rene Clair himself.

Formulated as screwball romance, I MARRIED A WITCH utilizes blithely playful Veronica Lake as charmingly obnoxious wooer of circumspect political candidate Fredric March. March's character is due to be married within twenty-four hours. Not that it makes a bit of difference to Lake's Jennifer. She has a completely different goal for him.

It seems an ancestor of Mr. Wallace Wooley was responsible centuries earlier for providing testimony sending Jennifer to the stake for practicing black arts. In revenge, the putative witch maledicted all Wooley males, present and future. Each was condemned to a lamentable mismatch.

Viewers watch the curse unfolding in a series of vignettes spanning several hundred years. Each successive Wooley male is played by March in appropriate period costume. Regardless of the setting, every Wooley wife is clearly and briefly presented as a repellent nuisance.

Jennifer plans to plunge Wallace's marital bliss into a sea of jealousy created to infuriate his prospective spouse. Her plans change when she accidentally drinks a love potion intended for the double W. As the concoction takes effect, malevolent seeker of vengeance transforms into ardent, admiring seductress. She pursues singlemindedly a totally confused host, even to the extent of imprisoning her obstructionist parent, warlock Daniel. Dad sees no reason to spare Wallace grief, embarrassment, and misery. He compromises the aspiring governor by a faked murder scenario and convinces campaign promoter J. B. Masterson of Wooley's infidelity on his wedding day. That is a typically perverse Clair touch. Prospective bride Estelle, a nitpicking termagant, is left in wind-racked fury, her espousal a shambles. What else could it be, when her fiancé inexplicably leaves the sacred ritual for what appears to be a bedroom tryst with a blonde siren? Snobby Estelle Masterson's comeuppance, ambitious political hopes dashed in an instant by an insignificant playgirl, is a classic reveal played out perfectly by Susan Hayward and Veronica Lake.

Will Jennifer turn the tables successfully on her malicious elder? To find out, watch the climax and conclusion of this delightful mix of horror, comedy, romance, and political satire.

For unclear reasons, screenwriter Dalton Trumbo clashed with producer Sturges, who himself became disenchanted with Clair. Both Trumbo and Sturges left the project, according to Glenn Erickson's review at the DVD Talk web site. Jeff Stafford, in his review for TCM at its web site, reports considerable animosity developed between the two film leads, though the final product camouflages that completely. Love and hate are ever commingled, it seems.

However, offsets are performances by Veronica Lake as Jennifer, a loving witch, and Susan Hayward as frustrated society queen bee. Further gems to scout are a variety of excellent character actors portraying jailhouse regulars, taxi driver, constables, owner of ill-fated Pilgrim Hotel, Puritan food vendors, goodwives, and a succession of luckless Wooley brides. These provide considerable pleasure and are dispersed throughout the picture.

As already mentioned, the screenplay is more gold than dross. Though Fredric March seems a bit too stodgy, his uninflected speeches effectively convey a character more dull gray than vibrant.

Roy Webb's music score mingles dreamy surrealism with bubbly humor, making a strong counterpoint to Ted Tetzlaff's mood-inducing camerawork, a union of foggy exteriors with blazing hotel rooms and posh mansion interiors.

Though generally unheralded, Eda Warren's editing meshes precisely with the comedy timings of Veronica Lake's Jennifer and Cecil Kellaway's Daniel, cutting away at just the right moments repeatedly to propel one scene dynamically into the next.

Special visual effects contributed by veteran Gordon Jennings make a credible atmosphere for Jennifer and Daniel, whether as corporeal presences or wisps of smoke.

Lighting and sound recording are excellent, a tribute to the fine restoration work done on the film.

Clair's influence on later productions is far-reaching. Young Jennifer Wooley, played by Ann Carter here in a cameo, becomes the terrified, credulous kindergartener lost in a snowstorm at Sleepy Hollow in *THE CURSE OF THE CAT PEOPLE*. Later, the television series *BEWITCHED* would showcase another multi-generational family of comically meddling witches. *BELL, BOOK, AND CANDLE* provides a similarly smitten and double-minded witch pursuing an initially disinterested neighbor while attempting to derail his romance with a rival.

Criterion's dvd release includes an essay by director Guy Maddin, an audio interview with Rene Clair, and a transcription of a late sixties interview with Clair by film researcher R. C. Dale. The Dale featurette places Clair's Hollywood productions in the context of his overall career and makes informative reading. Maddin's rambling essay offers useful details about secondary role casting.

Suitable for family viewing, though racy, *I MARRIED A WITCH* makes exceptionally droll Halloween fare for discriminating cinephiles seeking intelligent, unconventional romantic comedies. Highly recommended by Kino Ken.