



THE DEVIL AND MISS JONES is an LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that screwball comedy.

14 of a possible 20 points

*****1/2 of a possible *******

United States 1941 black-and-white 92 minutes live action feature screwball comedy
Frank Ross—Norman Krasna Inc. Producers: Frank Ross and Norman Krasna

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- 1 Direction: Sam Wood
- 1 Editing: Sherman Todd
- 2 Cinematography: Harry Stradling, Sr.*
 Special Visual Effects: Vernon Walker*
- 1 Lighting
- 2 Screenplay: Norman Krasna*
 Musical Direction: Roy Webb
- 1 Music: Roy Webb
- 2 Production Design: William Cameron Menzies
 Art Direction: Van Nest Polglase and Albert D'Agostino
 Costume Design: Irene Lentz (Jones Gibbons)
 Makeup: Mel Berns
- 1 Sound: John Cass
- 2 Acting
- 1 Creativity

14 total points

Cast: Jean Arthur* (Mary Jones), Robert Cummings (Joe O'Brien), Charles Coburn* (John Merrick), Edmund Gwenn* (Mr. Hooper, shoe department manager), Spring Byington* (Elizabeth Ellis), S. Z. Sakall (George, Merrick's butler), William Demarest (First Detective), Walter Kingsford (Allison), Montagu Love (Harrison), Richard Carle (Oliver), Charles Waldron (Needles), Edwin Maxwell (Withers), Edward McNamara (Police Sergeant), Robert Emmet Keane (Tom Higgins, detective), Florence Bates (Secret Shopper), Charles Irwin (Second Detective), Matt McHugh (Sam), Julie Warren (Dorothy), Ilene Brewer (j)* (Sally, daughter of Merrick's maid), Regis Toomey (First Policeman), Pat Moriarity (Second Policeman), Brooks Benedict (Mr. Felspar), others

Tycoon John Merrick has a problem. This lover of anonymity still owns Neely's Department Store, a property he thought himself rid of years earlier. More than four hundred of Neely's sales clerks are campaigning for unionization, a threat to profits, freedom, and economic status quo. Ringleaders promoting wage increases have publicly demonstrated dissatisfaction with store ownership, hanging a primitive effigy of John Merrick publicly for the benefit of newspaper photographers.

John Merrick is in the spotlight, like it or not. So what can he do to clamp down on this disgraceful popular crusade and return his life to normalcy?

Three toadies arrive at his swank suite. They assure Merrick steps have been taken to investigate who is leading the protesters. A private detective named Thomas Higgins has already been hired to pose as a salesman at Neely's and dig out information. In a matter of only weeks, Higgins should be able to provide a full list of troublemaker names, addresses, and phone numbers. They will be summarily fired in one big roundup.

Too slow, Merrick insists. The papers will have a field day advertising Neely worker discontent day after day. His photo may appear again and again, along with news of his residence. Who knows how many reporters might start showing up at the lobby, hunting for his private mailbox, searching for interviews with Merrick's maid and butler. No, he has a better solution. He'll go to Neely's himself tomorrow, pretending to be Mr. Thomas Higgins, a new hire. Save money that way, too.

So the next day a fake Mr. Higgins arrives at the department store, almost immediately becoming locked in verbal combat with Mr. Hooper, officious manager of the shoe department. Hooper finds it amazing Personnel actually hired such a nettlesome character. He accepts, disgustedly, their official approval, reluctantly assigning the newcomer to Ladies' Shoes and hoping for miracles.

Taking pity on a senior citizen who appears financially strapped to the extent of foregoing lunch, generous Mary Jones, a departmental co-worker, offers to take him to the store cafeteria. Its bill of fare repulses Merrick, accustomed to nothing more than a couple health

food crackers washed down with wholesome milk or water. Another cash conservation practice.

Faced with the prospect of dining on hoi polloi fare, Merrick instead accompanies saleswoman Elizabeth, an older retail veteran, to a nearby park. There his companion persuades him to try nibbling on some of her homemade lunch food. For he appears famished. Maybe the downtrodden gentleman won't get another bite to eat that whole day.

To his amazement, Merrick discovers Elizabeth's treat is actually tasty. After initial resistance, he winds up devouring several tidbits. A change in diet might just be welcome.

One thing about the new arrival puzzles Elizabeth's friend Mary. Why does he jot down notes in a little pad he periodically pulls from a pocket? Is he compiling a register of customer names and phone numbers? That would be commendable, but out of keeping with all his other behaviors. Mary can't figure the guy out.

That doesn't stop her from introducing him to boyfriend Joe O'Brien, the firebrand organizer hoping to crash through Neely's non-union exclusiveness. O'Brien has what Merrick wants: a list of over four hundred sympathetic sales staff with complete contact data.

Can undercover spy get it for close inspection without arousing suspicion? Just how successful is John Merrick going to be as a common pink-collar worker.

In his new workplace, the anti-labor adherent starts to develop a romantic interest in fellow single Elizabeth, who is also being courted by antagonistic Mr. Hooper. She returns Merrick's attentions initially out of pity, later through growing friendship and involvement.

Norman Krasna's screenplay takes prime advantage of working-class slang and preferences, equally disdainful of epicurean pretension and popular ignorance. For example, an excursion to the shore by romantic dreamers turns Merrick's world upside down when his special treat of imported vintage wine is ridiculed and then poured out on the sand by Joe. With complete approval of Elizabeth and Mary, who find a cheap domestic concoction far tastier.

When Merrick rents a swimsuit, he naturally forgets where he obtained it because all rental stalls look alike to him.

Still later, having become separated from the rest of his party at Coney Island, that conservative couch potato is forced to spend hours of pain trudging along a boardwalk in search of the unique location where he had left his street clothes.

This results ultimately in an unplanned trip to a local precinct station. Nobody there believes his excuses for belligerence and inappropriate beachwear. Nor his claim to be friends of the governor. When the friendly trio from Neely's finally track Merrick down, Joe only further fans the flames by defying police orders, affirming his rights as an American citizen to speak out as he pleases. Krasna seizes that opportunity to satirize one of the Constitution's most cherished liberties, the guarantee of free speech.

Despite self-imposed vocabulary restraints, screenwriting reveals unexpected emotional depth, particularly as Mary philosophizes about what constitutes happiness in simple reflections quite in keeping with a character not accustomed to profound self-examination. Even an absurdist finale recalling THE LAST LAUGH's epilogue cannot overshadow the shopgirl's moment of illumination about her life and its meaning as she gazes into starry blackness. That scene has the emotive richness of The Clown's discussion with Gelsomina about human existence in Fellini's LA STRADA.

Krasna's verbal craftsmanship merited an Academy Award® nomination for Best Original Screenplay.

Roy Webb's music score is mostly low-key, subtly dissolving into appropriate mood music. It becomes more exuberant in passages of turbulent action.

Lighting and sound are adequate, though not especially remarkable.

However, Harry Stradling and Vernon Walker team to capture marvelous views of urban traffic and retail bustle in their photography.

William Cameron Menzies supervised decors. It shows. Neely's shoe department is totally credible, both with regard to sales floor and stockroom. Equally crammed with detail are Coney Island rental shacks.

Assisting in keeping entertainment constant are engaging performances by Jean Arthur as Mary Jones, one of the world's worst judges of character, and Edmund Gwenn as imperious egotist Hooper. Spring Byington's solicitous Elizabeth, Ilene Brewer's obstinately perverse brat, and Florence Bates' martinet of a secret shopper are unlikely to be soon forgotten.

THE DEVIL AND MISS JONES is a cheerfully ridiculous treat for viewers ages ten and up who will accept the large amount of screen time devoted to romances. It's also a showcase for assorted familiar character actors, such as S. Z. Sakall playing Merrick's butler, William Demarest as a detective, and Regis Toomey portraying one of New York City's finest.