



BALL OF FIRE is a February, 2017 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is a review of that film by Kino Ken.

18 of a possible 20 points

******½ of a possible *******

**United States 1941 black-and-white 111 minutes live action feature
screwball comedy Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Producer: Samuel Goldwyn**

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- 2 Direction: Howard Hawks* 2nd Unit Direction: Arthur Rosson**
- 2 Editing: Daniel Mandell***
- 1 Cinematography: Gregg Toland**
- 1 Lighting**
- 2 Screenplay: Charles Brackett* and Billy Wilder* from an original story by
Billy Wilder* and Thomas Monroe***
- 2 Music: Alfred Newman, David Buttolph, Gene Krupa,* and Roy Eldridge*
Singer: Martha Tilton for Barbara Stanwyck
Dance Direction: Nick Castle**
- 2 Art Direction: Perry Ferguson,* McClure Capps***

Set Decoration: Howard Bristol,* Julia Heron*

Costumes: Edith Head

Makeup: Mel Berns

Props: Irving Sandler

2 Sound: Frank Maher* and Thomas Moulton*

2 Acting

2 Creativity

18 total points

Cast: Gary Cooper* (Professor Bertram Potts), Barbara Stanwyck (Sugarpuss O'Shea), Oskar Homolka (Professor Gurgakoff), Henry Travers* (Professor Jerome), S. Z. Sakall (Professor Magenbruch), Tully Marshall (Professor Robinson), Leonid Kinsky (Professor Quintana), Richard Haydn (Professor Oddly), Aubrey Mather (Professor Peagram), Allen Jenkins (Garbage Man), Dana Andrews* (Joe Lilac, gangster), Dan Duryea* (Duke Pastrami), Ralph Peterson (Asthma Anderson), Kathleen Howard (Miss Bragg, housekeeper), Mary Field (Miss Totten, subsidizer), Charles Lane (Larsen), Charles Arnt (McNeary), Elisha Cook, Jr. (Waiter), Alan Rhein (Horseface), Eddie Foster (Pinstripe), Aldrich Bowker (Justice of the Peace), Addison Richards* (District Attorney), Pat West (Bum), Kenneth Howell (College Boy), Tommy Ryan (j) (Newsboy), Tim Ryan (Motorcycle Cop), Will Lee ('Benny – the Creep'), Gene Krupa, Roy Eldridge, others

By 1941, screwball comedies were proliferating as popular film fare, with A-list directors such as Frank Capra, Gregory La Cava, Leo McCarey, and Lewis Milestone helming landmarks of that genre. Howard Hawks had proven his mastery of the form in the late 1930s, directing BRINGING UP BABY and HIS GIRL FRIDAY. For his third essay into verbal mayhem, he drew upon the formidable screenwriting talent of Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder. Hooking onto an earlier box-office smash, script writers of BALL OF FIRE incorporated elements of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs with contemporary slang. Hard-

boiled gangsters in the Warner Brothers mold and a typically saucy, independent Hawksian female spiced up proceedings.

Gary Cooper and Barbara Stanwyck teamed for a hilariously mismatched romantic duo. With camera setups designed by Gregg Toland and flaming hot music courtesy of the Gene Krupa Orchestra, BALL OF FIRE promised to be wildly entertaining and musically explosive. Peppery, brisk dialogue matched incredible accelerations on Krupa's drums. To the immense satisfaction and pleasure of successive generations, Hawks' masterpiece delivered the anticipated goods, possibly even raising the bar a bit for competitors such as Preston Sturges.

Oh, the story? Eight professors have been hired by a foundation to compile an encyclopedia, a hopeless task involving to that point nine years of research and at least three more looming before publication. This is the reason Miss Totten's so eager to expedite the pace of their work. Visiting subsidized scholars without prior announcement, their benefactor makes it clear a deadline date must be established and met. Failure to comply, happily inconceivable, could only result in eight more men joining the ranks of the unemployed. This fate might be averted by an intimate dinner with the youngest of these academics, Professor Bertram Potts. He's played with sincere dignity by a bashful Gary Cooper.

Potts has been stymied in his effort to author a comprehensive entry on American slang. He finally decides, after listening to the jargon of an intruding garbage man, there can be no substitute for pounding the concrete. It's essential for him to visit every joint, dive, campus, newsstand, and dance hall where people gabble in unreserved patois. This brings him eventually into contact with Kathryn "Sugarpuss" O'Shea, an ecdysiast at a night-club who's being strung along by hoodlum boss Joe Lilac.

Lilac's a sadistic killer with a soft spot for overexposed singers. He and his show business gal pal are wanted for questioning by authorities about an unsolved murder case. In order to insure the lady in question doesn't shoot off her yap, two Lilac henchmen persuade "Sugarpuss" to hole up in the mansion where Potts and his comrades are compiling learned articles. Better a brief stay there than a prolonged Q and A session at precinct headquarters.

Lilac is grilled by the district attorney, but refuses to provide information. In the meantime, his girlfriend tantalizes bachelor residents in her hideout, teaching them the conga while supplying Potts with a flood of contemporary jargon. The nit-picking grammarian finds her sexy, attractive, naïve, challenging. Fortuitously available, too. Just what he's been seeking in a helpmate.

"Sugarpuss" plays along, encouraging fumbling romantic overtures simply because she loves being idolized.

In order to eliminate any possibility a loose-lipped dame might rat on him, Lilac sends O'Shea an oversize, showy engagement rock. He can always obtain a quickie parting of the ways once the heat is off.

Spouses need not testify against one another, a legal loophole Joe plans to crawl through as quickly as possible. He discounts Potts's growing infatuation with "Sugarpuss," sure the gangly fellow and encouraging associates pose no serious threat to him.

With gungel Duke Pastrami and loyal backup Asthma Anderson to enforce his orders, Joe holds meddlers at bay. "Sugarpuss" travels south to Jersey in order to protect her friendly hosts. There a daft justice of the peace is supposed to tie the knot for Lilac and O'Shea.

Eight inconvenienced bookworms are not about to let such coercive shenanigans go unchecked. They manage to overpower Lilac's apes and tease a ticklish Pastrami into blabbing the whereabouts of his chief. Can these timid ivy tower types get to the wedding scene in time to torpedo it?

Stanwyck gives a richly textured performance as female lead. She's spunky, alluring, belligerent, flippant, even compassionate. And just as resourceful as males surrounding her. Like Cooper, she knows the virtues of silences and gradual shifts of expression, using both with charming effectiveness.

Dan Duryea is cocky, sneering, and utterly relaxed as Duke Pastrami, a rather small man, still defiant even when disarmed. He plays largely to type.

Quite the opposite is Dana Andrews as Joe Lilac. Lilac is violent, vicious, smug. An overbearing bully with neither conscience nor any trace of altruism. That is a radical reversal of the usual Andrews role as innocent victim or sturdy upholder of law and order. There's no indication the veteran performer was the least bit uncomfortable portraying such an unfamiliar, thuggish character.

Though most members of the supporting cast fail to escape stereotypes in vogue at the time of filming, Henry Travers and Addison Richards rise above that level. Travers' portrayal of Professor Jerome is infused with a subdued melancholy reflective of philosophical detachment from bustling, spontaneously reactive lives of those around him. Richards employs cynicism and acerbity to memorably depict a public servant weary of dodges by lawbreakers hiding behind machinations of crafty mouthpieces.

Edith Head's costumes for Barbara Stanwyck highlight spangly, superficial glitz beloved of tawdry nightclub showgirls and their devotees. Arguably, there's a bit too much freshness of appearance in some of the star's wardrobe, particularly when considering her hectically hazardous informal exits.

Powered by virtuoso swing music, **BALL OF FIRE** radiates the intensity and energy typical of that rhythmically-inspired era. Watch for a brief but dazzling appearance by trumpeter Roy Eldridge in a short solo.

Eccentric humor, artfully-positioned puns, luxuriously plush set furnishings and crackerjack sound recording of all registers and volumes further enhance a delightfully antic film. Superlative editing by Daniel Mandell, serviceable cinematography taking a backseat to actors, and consistently adequate lighting are additional assets.

BALL OF FIRE is recommended viewing for all ages, but especially endearing to those old enough to appreciate instrumental brass and percussion virtuosity.