

FRANK CAPRA: THE EARLY COLLECTION, a five-dvd set of live action feature dramas, is the October, 2013 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Five films comprise this collection: LADIES OF LEISURE, RAIN OR SHINE, THE MIRACLE WOMAN, FORBIDDEN and THE BITTER TEA OF GENERAL YEN. All are geared to adult viewers.



LADIES OF LEISURE United States 1930 black-and-white live action feature melodrama 98 minutes Producer: Harry Cohn Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc.

8 of a possible 20 points

\*\* of a possible \*\*\*\*\*

\*indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

#### Points

- 1 Direction: Frank Capra
- 0 Editing: Maurice Wright
- 1 Cinematography: Joseph Walker
- 1 Lighting
- 0 Screenplay: Jo Swerling based on the play LADIES OF THE EVENING by Milton Herbert Gropper
- 1 Music
- 1 Art Direction: Harrison Wiley
- 1 Sound: Edward Bernds (Sound Supervisor), John Livadary (Chief Sound Engineer) and Harry Blanchard (Sound Mixing)
- 1 Cast: Barbara Stanwyck (Kay Arnold, a female escort), Lowell Sherman (Bill Standish, a lush and cad), Ralph Graves (Jerry Strong, a painter), Marie Prevost (Dot Lamar, friend of Kay's and a party girl / escort),

Nance O'Neil (Mrs. Strong, Jerry's mother), George Fawcett (Mr. Strong, Jerry's father), Juliette Compton (Claire Collins, Jerry's fiancée), Johnnie Walker (Charlie) and Charles Butterworth\* (Party Guest)

## 1 Creativity

8 total points

An early and unimpressive sound film directed by Frank Capra, *LADIES OF LEISURE* was a foray into dated and unpleasantly risqué territory by a director more at home with sociopolitical themes. The picture opens with a completely abandoned society party being hosted by Jerry Strong, scion of a patrician family, in his rented studio suite. At this point, nearly all guests are soused and uninhibited, trying to outdo one another in recklessness and exhibitionism. Sober Jerry leaves the festivities and a materialistic fiancée in disgust, apparently unconcerned about property damage and cleanup. Money can fix both problems. He has plenty to spend.

About thirty miles out of New York City, a flat tire brings his travels to a halt. After installing a spare, Jerry pauses for a breather. His eyes spot a gold digger rowing a boat. She is fleeing a drunken orgy on a yacht, where at least one participant was becoming too playful even for her.

A conversation begins between chivalrous driver and sopping sculler. Jerry offers to convey the stranger back to urban safety, intrigued by a combination of attractive profile and brassy independence. The more he observes her face, the greater grows his desire to paint it. She, plagued by cash flow problems, can't resist an upscale modelling fee. So Miss Kay Arnold and Mr. Jerry Strong soon become a quarrelsome couple, unfettered by social responsibilities until meddling senior Strong's intervene.

With arrogant cynicism, Papa threatens son with disinheritance. Mama pledges social ostracism to her potential daughter-in-law.

Kay, too weak a character to defy privilege and money, deserts her artistic lover for the less possessive Bill Standish, whose nocturnal companionship on a Havana-bound liner is simply temporary fun and games. But real love has struck Miss Arnold. A maritime affair cannot bring her joy or peace. There is but one solution.

This being a Capra romance, true love wins out, very unconvincingly, with a last minute salvation. Drama is sacrificed to melodrama, a string of clichés substituting for genuine insightful dialogue at the film's closing.

Aside from some inspired rim lighting and rain backdrops, there is little to commend this film. Once naughty premarital seduction scenes are too sensual to be credible, for Barbara Stanwyck is raging fire and Ralph Graves a human iceberg. Their screen chemistry is nonexistent, something apparently unobserved by the director.

Adapted from a successful, though creaky stage play, LADIES OF LEISURE is very difficult to stomach. The depicted debauchery seems tame and uninvolved. A lengthy seduction scene is more memorable for precipitation in the background than sensuousness in the foreground. Dialogue scenes are extended without adding any shading to characterization or setting, sometimes merely providing a pretext for comic business of supporting players, such as Marie Prevert.

Lighting, sound, photography and art direction are adequate, though not exceptional.

Frank Capra would direct better films in later years. Barbara Stanwyck's enormous talent would be displayed to greater advantage in several of them.

Bypass this one without regrets.



RAIN OR SHINE United States 1930 black-and-white live action feature  
dramedy 88 minutes Producer: Harry Cohn Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc.  
13 of a possible 20 points \*\*\*1/2 of a possible \*\*\*\*\*

\*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points

- 1 Direction: Frank Capra
- 2 Editing: Maurice Wright

- 2 Cinematography: Joe Walker
- 1 Lighting
- 2 Special Visual Effects
- 0 Screenplay: Jo Swerling, Dorothy Howell (dialogue) based on a book by James Gleason and Maurice Marks
- 1 Art Director: Harrison Wiley
- 1 Sound: John Livadary (Recording) and E. L. Bernds (Mixer)
- 1 Cast: Joe Cook (Smiley Johnson), Louise Fazenda (Frankie, the Princess), Joan Piers (Mary Rainey), William Collier (Bud Conway), Tom Howard (Amos Shrewsberry), Dave Chason (hot dog vendor), Alan Roscoe (Dalton, the ringmaster), Adolph Milar (Foltz, a lion tamer), Clarence Muse (Nero), Nella Walker (Mrs. Conway, Bud's mother), Edward Martindale (Mr. Conway, Bud's father), Nora Lane (Grace Conway, Bud's sister), Tyrrell Davis (Lord Hugo Gwynne)
- 2 Creativity
- 13 total points

RAIN OR SHINE is Frank Capra's dual salute to the American circus and vaudeville. It was designed as a star vehicle for Joe Cook, then a stage superstar whose specialties were doubletalk and acrobatics. In Capra's mind, Cook was an ideal cinema performer, embodying visually arresting movements and aurally fascinating patter. Sort of a gymnast equipped with the mouth of a William Gilbert character.

The story provided by Jo Swerling originated in a book by James Gleason and Maurice Marks. Its point-of-view character is manager of a small travelling circus i awash in red ink. Current owner of the troupe is bareback riding acrobat Mary Rainey, whose deceased father had assembled and bankrolled it. Although offering two spectacular shows on a daily basis regardless of sunshine or showers, the circus is dependent primarily on subscription investors rather than ticket sales. Since bills are going unpaid, due partly to Smiley Jones' dodgy accounting methods, gullible financiers are becoming increasingly difficult to locate. Yet Jones still manages to hornswoggle one by the name of Amos K. Shrewsberry, who is neither shrewd nor practical, though he prides himself on both qualities. Using

Shrewsberry's openly visible wads of cash and speedy unscheduled departures under cover of darkness, Smiley keeps the show functional, though certainly not legal.

His biggest problem seems to be sincere affection Mary feels for young bumbling roustabout Bud Conway, an admirer from a moneyed family. Smiley resents their prospective marriage, for it endangers his position both financially and emotionally. Mary is Management's personal property. If she weds Conway, the lucky spouse would become her investment counselor, leaving Jones without access to finances and payroll books. So he determines to sabotage their relationship, doing everything possible to embarrass and socially discredit his employer in the presence of prospective in-laws. In this he is assisted by Dave, a hot-dog concessionist who sells considerably less than meets the eye.

Meanwhile a plot is underway to sell out the circus to creditors. The mastermind of that scheme is Dalton, a ringmaster who aspires to become owner of The Greater John T. Rainey Show. Why not? Supervision is his talent and trade. Undermining Mary and Smiley's cooperative mismanagement is a task pursued with the pleasure and determination of a dutiful accountant. Lion tamer Foltz is a willing accomplice, having been promised half-ownership in the operation when it's reorganized by Dalton.

Both Smiley and Dalton achieve their goals, temporarily. But a life-threatening conflagration brings the circus to complete destruction. Mary escapes incineration, the ringmaster is foiled and Smiley gets his just desserts. All of this is completely unbelievable, but Depression audiences loved it.

Night rain sequences, with caravan wagons battling for traction in muddy ruts, are memorably filmed. And the climactic rescue of a damsel in distress has as much sustained suspense as the Mount Rushmore sequences of Hitchcock's NORTH BY NORTHWEST.

Less successful are forays into slapstick comedy, which all too often feature uninspired hick and snob stereotypes.

Special commendation must be given the superlative editing of Maurice Wright, particularly with respect to the climax. Joe Walker's cinematography also evidences consummate craftsmanship in both composition and selection of shooting angles.

As for the screenplay, it is twisted around Joe Cook like a pretzel, and is only serviceable for him. Plot engineering is handled with great skill, but Dorothy Howell's dialogue is riddled with stale vaudeville exchanges which only interrupt the propulsive rhythm at awkward intervals.

For its storm and fire sequences, RAIN OR SHINE must be seen to be believed. But don't expect the impassioned rhetoric or profoundly affecting performances of Riskin-scripted dramas Capra would direct later in his career.



THE MIRACLE WOMAN United States 1931 black-and-white live action feature drama 90 minutes Producer: Harry Cohn Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc.

14 of a possible 20 points

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

\*indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

#### Points

- 1 Direction: Frank Capra
- 2 Editing: Maurice Wright
- 2 Cinematographer: Joseph Walker\*
- 1 Lighting
- 2 Screenplay: Jo Swerling, based on the play BLESS YOU, SISTER by John Meehan and Robert Riskin
- 1 Music
- 1 Production Design
- 1 Sound: Glenn Rominger (Sound Engineer)
- 1 Cast: Barbara Stanwyck\* (Florence Fallon), David Manners (John Carson), Sam Hardy\* (Bob Hornsby, promoter), Beryl Mercer (Mrs. Higgins, John Carson's landlady), Russell Hopton (Dan Wolford), Charles Middleton (Simpson), Eddie Boland (Collins), Thelma Hill (Gussie), Aileen Carlyle

(Violet), Al Stewart (Brown), Harry Todd (Briggs)

2 Creativity

14 total points

THE MIRACLE WOMAN is Frank Capra's earliest must-see sound film. It is his second casting of Barbara Stanwyck as a female lead. Here she is given a far more intense and complex character to work with than the shallow party escort of LADIES OF LEISURE. The director is discovering the depth of her talent and generously showcasing it for viewers to share.

When the film opens, the father of Florence Fallon is being cashiered from a post as preacher in what appears to be an upper-middle class urban church. From what little information is provided, it would seem the senior Fallon is a weak, uninfluential pastor, more Bible scholar than evangelist. Deploring the despicable manner in which her dad's departure is being handled and his subsequent premature death, probably from a stress-induced heart attack or stroke, Florence decides to create a valedictory sermon of her own. Stanwyck's delivery of that is a savage indictment of religious complacency and economic hypocrisy, still the most electrifying ever spoken on film. No adult in the congregation escapes unscathed, though all but one take an early exit.

Bob Hornsby, the cynical huckster who remains, sees untapped potential in this fiery female orator. What a terrific actress. Yeah, her message needs some amending. But he can fix that. Just preach faith and glory, sister. Be upbeat. Play up patriotic duty. Boy, would the money roll in then. He'd buy some baubles for Florence to keep her happy and a luxury car for yours truly. It should be easy to convince the young woman that remaining in her present location would be impossible. A change of scenery would be mutually beneficial.

Soon the duo is off to a blatantly sinful metropolis where reinvented Sister Fallon can stage the grandiose spiritual revival tent shows, featuring a hired choir and fraudulent miracle cures.

Eventually Hornsby and Fallon obtain enough moolah to buy radio airtime. Their messages impact countless unseen lives. A blind war veteran, unable to find a buyer for his sheet music, is contemplating suicide. But overhearing Sister Fallon's exhortation to perseverance on a neighbor's radio, ex-aviator John

Carson changes his mind. Instead he decides to locate the remote angel who unwittingly saved his life. She is not hard to track down.

Opportunity presents itself serendipitously when Sister entreats intrepid observers to join her, like Daniel, among lions. Infatuated by the resolution in her voice, blind believer Carson makes his way to a huge animal cage on the main platform. Perhaps the situation is not so frightful for him, as he cannot see what awaits there.

Of course, Sister is not particularly impressed with this sightless volunteer at first. She assumes he is a Hornsby recruit, no more blind than her manager. When the mystified promoter disavows Carson as hired help, Florence gets curious about the young stranger. They meet again in his apartment, where life stories are shared, entertainment being provided by the host's appallingly obnoxious dummy. This plot device is a galling disaster, since the ventriloquist act not only masks Carson's shyness, but simultaneously distances viewers from the interlocutor. What should be a steadily sweetening romance instead becomes a test of audience patience.

Hornsby gradually grows envious of his partner's repeated visits to an undisclosed location. Has she a secret admirer he doesn't know about? She better not. Only one man can impact her life and that fellow is Mr. Bob Hornsby. Without his publicity and subterfuges she would never have transformed from shunned local virago into charismatic, beloved performer.

No one can be permitted to meddle with their partnership. Not if Management can prevent it. When a mob connection threatens to spill the beans about the backroom operations of Sister Fallon's tabernacle, he is quickly eliminated. Bob then blackmails a dumbfounded Florence, suggesting she needs an overseas vacation, not to mention an alternative headline to a looming indictment for homicide involvement.

Sister decides to apprise her naïve boyfriend of the unethical entanglement in which she is now trapped. Will he desert her?

Why not watch the rest of the film and find out?

Unsurprisingly, *THE MIRACLE WOMAN*'s climax is one of Capra's patented infernos, possibly suggested by an equally spectacular incineration befalling a church in William S. Hart's silent *HELL'S HINGES*.



There are five glorious achievements in THE MIRACLE WOMAN, any two of which validate screening it. First, a mesmerizing fiery performance from Barbara Stanwyck. Second, the pyrotechnics mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Third, Joseph Walker's exquisite cinematography, favoring chiaroscuro and frequent cutaways to expressive individuals within crowds. Fourth, the sermon declaimed by Florence Fallon at her father's church, a masterful skewering of pious double-facedness. Fifth, Sam Hardy's portrayal of a conscienceless opportunist with no qualms about blackmail or murder, dramatically comparable to Burt Lancaster's Elmer Gantry.

Drawbacks are unappetizingly lengthy vaudeville routines with Carson's dummy, intermittent glitches in sound recording, some blurry lighting probably due to print age, and overabundance of fine books in the apartment of a cash-deprived unemployed veteran. It is disconcerting also to find astoundingly bitter rhetoric early in the film gradually being replaced by conventional romantic tripe later. Too many screenwriters destroy script coherency and credibility. Also, David Manner's overly sentimental acting not only clashes with convincingly realistic drama offered by Hardy and Stanwick, but often even sabotages it.

Be sure to see this motion picture at least once. Feel free to judge whether the resolution seems apt or contrived. It is not typical classic Hollywood melodrama.



FORBIDDEN United States 1932 black-and-white live action feature drama  
85 minutes Film producer: Harry Cohn Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc.

11 of a possible 20 points

\*\*\* of a possible \*\*\*\*\*

\*indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

(j) = juvenile performer

Points

- 1 Direction: Frank Capra
- 2 Editing: Maurice Wright
- 1 Cinematography: Joseph Walker

- 1 Lighting
- 0 Screenplay: Jo Swerling, based on a story by Frank Capra
- 1 Music: Irving Bibb, Edvard Grieg, G.H. Clutsam, David Broekman, William Baumline, Alfonso Corelli, Sam Perry
- 2 Art Direction
- 1 Sound: Edward Bernds
- 1 Cast: Barbara Stanwyck (Lulu), Adolphe Menjou (Bob Grover, a.k.a. Albert Collins), Ralph Bellamy (Al Holland), Dorothy Peterson (Helen, Bob's wife), Thomas Jefferson (Wilkinson), Myrna Fresholt (j)(Baby Roberta), Charlotte Henry (Roberta, age 18), Oliver Eckhardt (Briggs), Flo Wix (Mrs. Smith), Halliwell Hobbes (florist), Claude King (Mr. Jones), Robert Graves (Mr. Eckner), Harry Helman ("Mary Sunshine," Advice to the Lovelorn columnist), Roger Byrne and Robert Parrish and Dick Winslow and Cooke Phelps (office boys), Mary Jo Ellis (j) (Roberta, age 12), Jessie Arnold (nurse), Chuck Hamilton (Wilkins), Eddie Kane (maître d'), Edward LeSaint (Grover's doctor), Charles Middleton (pianist), Helen Parrish (j) (Roberta, age 8), Matty Roubert (j) (newsboy), Ford West (librarian), Henry Armetta (Emile), Wilson Bengé (Grover's butler), Nora Cecil (chambermaid on phone), Jack Chefe and Bess Flowers (Havana gamblers), Lynn Compton (j) and Larry Dolan (j) and Carmencita Johnson (j) and Seessel Anne Johnson (j) (Halloween children), Bill Elliott (reporter), Sherry Hall (Henry), Arthur Hoyt (Martin), Fred Kelsey (Marty), Margaret Mann (hospital visitor), Edmund Mortimer (man at convention), William O'Brien (waiter), Spec O'Donnell (Spec)
- 1 Creativity
- 11 total points

FORBIDDEN is a sordid tale of dreary adultery, owing its successful distribution to the lack of a national production code in early Depression America. When Columbia applied for rerelease approval in 1935, its request was denied due to the film's principal theme, a blatant violation of the production code. The ongoing presence of an illegitimate child was intolerable on Yankee Doodle screens.

Barbara Stanwyck plays a small-town librarian who one spring day decides to quit her job, cash out her life savings and take an ocean liner cruise, presumably in search of a fun-loving mate. At first neglected and socially inhibited, Miss Lulu Smith encounters a drunken shipmate who's misread her cabin's number 66 as his cabin's 99. Both find the situation pleasantly amusing. Soon the two are no longer strangers. Swims at Cuban beaches and horseback rides along the island's coast cement their mutually pleasurable relationship.

Once back on the mainland, Lulu acquires a newspaper job where fellow office worker Al Holland becomes romantically drawn to her, despite persistent rebuffs. She's too infatuated with Bob Grover, Cuban adventure companion, to devote time or interest to a humdrum underpaid reporter. Bob conveniently resides in the same city that houses her job. So the two lovebirds meet occasionally, though always at her apartment.

Lulu begins to wonder why she's never invited for a visit to her beau's residence. Bob's parrying of inquiries about his home leave the questioner exasperated and increasingly uncomfortable about their future.

Matters come to a head one Halloween evening when Grover springs the nastiest trick imaginable upon his hostess, informing her he is married and cannot imagine divorcing his sickly wife. But he's equally unable to sever relations with Miss Smith, being more craven cad than dashing cavalier.

Lulu is just as foolish, spurning a marriage offer that very evening from Al Holland, preferring to continue an illicit affair with clandestine intrigues. Why the prospect of marriage to Al is so repugnant will gradually become clear. But at this juncture her preference seems idiotic, unless she is a born masochist.

When Bob temporarily asserts a necessity to bring their involvement to a rapid close, Lulu demands his immediate departure. Sadly acquiescing, the two-timer descends the stairs to the street, leaving behind a mournful ex-mistress.

Lulu's life just keeps getting more complicated, even without Grover's tempting presence. She has become pregnant. And there is no question in her mind about the father's identity. To prevent public shame of them both, she enters a maternity ward under an assumed name, becoming just as covert and guileful as her former lover.

Meanwhile the uninformed ex-suitor has entered politics, winning election as municipal district attorney. Still dissatisfied with both wife and popularity, Bob relentlessly tracks down Lulu. He eventually discovers his enamorata is not really a governess as she initially claims, but a mother with his own child in tow. Perceiving both political and domestic advantage in “adopting” the “impoverished” offspring of an unwed mother, Bob wastes little time in passing off the infant as a surprise present for child-coveting spouse Helen, who seems as interested in acquiring a trophy infant as Bob is in maintaining a trophy wife. These two pathetic souls seem made for each other in a mutually uncomfortable whiplashing from which both benefit socially while marital happiness is as chimeral as Bob’s legalization of Lulu’s transferred child.

Of course, Grover would be quite willing to continue mother-child bonding by hiring his girlfriend as the infant’s governess. But antagonism between the two women he’s loved torpedoes that plan.

Lulu returns to a relatively shabby apartment, content to be flirting partner of the persistent Holland and unacknowledged booster to a mayoral candidate.

Bob becomes mayor, but even that and an unexpected child cannot compensate for losing a soulmate. So he plunges into a gubernatorial campaign, possibly hoping to lure his sweetheart out of obscurity by finding her a patronage job. No one is inclined to reveal the guilty pair’s secret to maturing Roberta, who innocently believes legal guardians and parents are identical.

Obviously, public disclosure is becoming ever more scandalous for Roberta’s true family. Al Holland, now a crusading editor at the local metropolitan newspaper office, launches a campaign of vilification against candidate Grover, a man he personally despises. Grover is appalled by his ugly press attacks. Justifiably, the politician fears Holland will probe public records relentlessly until he uncovers details of Roberta’s birth. It appears the moment is at hand for making full disclosure of past indiscretions, however painful such revelations will be to daughter, wife and prospective son-in-law.

This scheme is preempted by Holland’s detective work, which finally leads to the conclusion new wife Lulu’s no virgin and more than a little duplicitous. Threatening to make headlines with this discovery, and exhibiting a brutality partly screened up to this point, Holland engages in an escalatingly violent

confrontation with a panicky mate. Lulu avenges herself on the attacker by shooting him.

Now how can Bob Grover stay in the shadows when his confederate's indicted for murder? What will he do to save her from the big chair?

If curiosity cannot be curtailed, watch the conclusion of the film and see how this monstrous mess is ultimately resolved. Or not.

While the single most outstanding feature of FORBIDDEN is its production design, no one is credited with it. Was Columbia's supervising art director, Stephen Goosson, responsible for elaborate, profusely furnished interiors? If anyone is aware of who created sets and furnishings for FORBIDDEN, Kino Ken would be happy to hear from him or her. Just contact him via [kinoken@ligoniervalleycinemaassociation.net](mailto:kinoken@ligoniervalleycinemaassociation.net).

Joseph Walker's cinematography is unable to disguise the fundamentally limp story line. Nonetheless, Capra's requisite rain scene with Stanwyck and Menjou and passages revealing them riding on horseback at the seaside and communicating silently in shared anguish at a political convention are authentically moving and memorably photographed.

Performances are consistently undercut by a clichéd script which makes the stars sound like mouthpieces for radio soap operas penned by greenhorn hacks. Bellamy is such a sadistic loudmouth screeners probably wish Stanwyck would have blown him away a half-hour earlier and then capped her mission of mercy with an encore performance involving Menjou as target.

Capra coaxes the best performances possible from seasoned thespians, but even he cannot overcome a frequently risible script. Original audiences responded to a combination of star charisma and socially shocking material by making FORBIDDEN Columbia's top-earning film of 1932. Could prevailing economic conditions then have been so awful that violent dispatches of overprivileged males were perceived as acceptable correctives?

Lighting and sound are adequate, but, possibly due to fading print quality, far from pristine.

Music comes from a variety of composers, ranging from Edvard Grieg's dreamy wistfulness to the boisterous swing of Irving Bobo. Most frequently it is

unremarkable wallpaper accompaniment, present only because it is expected in a sound drama.

Fairly tight editing by Maurice Wright sends viewers leaping over chasms of time and geography that align nicely with Columbia's limited budgets, but play havoc with character motivation and establishing shots.

Devotees of Barbara Stanwyck will probably find this motion picture a treasure. Others beware. Capra wouldn't find his way to sound masterworks until Robert Riskin joined his crew as screenwriter later that year. This early tediously overfamiliar soap opera can be safely bypassed.



THE BITTER TEA OF GENERAL YEN United States 1933 black-and-white live action feature drama 87 minutes Producer: Walter Wanger Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc.

13 of a possible 20 points

\*\*\* ½ of a possible \*\*\*\*\*

\*indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

#### Points

- 1 Direction: Frank Capra
- 2 Editing: Edward Curtiss\*
- 2 Cinematography: Joseph Walker\*
- 2 Lighting\*
- 0 Screenplay: Edward Paramore, based on a story by Grace Zaring Stone
- 1 Music: W. Frank Harling
- 2 Art Direction
- 2 Sound: E. L. BERNDS

0 Cast: Barbara Stanwyck (Megan Davis), Nils Asther (General Yen), Toshia Mori (Mah-Li), Walter Connolly\* (Jones), Gavin Gordon (Dr. Robert Strike), Lucien Littlefield (Mr. Jackson), Richard Loo (Captain Li), Helen Jerome Eddy (Miss Reed), Emmett Corrigan (Bishop Harkness), Moy Ming (Dr. Lin)

1 Creativity

13 total points

Frank Capra's first serious attempt to capture a Best Picture Oscar is seriously marred by miscasting, rampant racism and a screenplay that dodges a definitive position on the topic of culture clash. In 1933, the director was flush with the financial success of the miserably melodramatic FORBIDDEN and eager to provide American audiences with a second excursion into ethical quagmires and self-serving amorality. By moving the setting to war-torn China, Capra may have thought he was providing a buffer between scandalous miscegenation and acceptable exotic courtship. If so, the ruse failed. Contemporary audiences found the situations depicted repulsive and morally intolerable. Whether they dismissed the story as hopelessly ridiculous or pandering to racist sensibilities, cinemagoers from New York City to Peoria greeted it with censure and disdain.

By questioning missionary motives and rationalizing murder by starvation, THE BITTER TEA OF GENERAL YEN, proved fulfilling of its title. It was a brew too intoxicatingly sensual for public approbation, despite moments of starkly succinct sermonizing. Christianity seemed to be as fully under siege as stoic surrender. Not necessarily what Capra intended. But Edward Paramore's screenplay oscillates between condemnation of Occidental smugness and dispassionate exposition of Oriental callousness to human suffering. Western compassion challenges Eastern fatalism with unsatisfying results.

At the electrifying opening scene, chaos has rendered Shanghai a respectable simulation of Hades, as panicked refugees attempt to evade street fighting and aerial strafing. In the midst of this chaos, Western guests are arriving at an unscarred residence where an impending wedding is anticipated. The bride is coming from New England, unused to the civil disorder encompassing her transport. Oblivious to other considerations, the groom, a Christian missionary to

China of unidentified denominational affiliation, has resolved to let nothing so secondary as a wedding obstruct him from saving lives of beleaguered orphans in a section of the city overrun by insurgents.

Both Megan Davis and Dr. Robert Strike believe their nationalities will insure safe passage. This despite an earlier incident in which Megan's rickshaw driver is killed. An apparently unflustered General Yen offers a handkerchief and some cash in hand as compensation. This reinforces an anecdote delivered by Bishop Harkness and unconsidered remarks of companions about Chinese inscrutability and devaluation of human life.

Megan disdainfully rejects Yen's offer and proceeds to enter the home of Mr. and Mrs. Hansen, senior American missionaries who must have wondered what fiend urged the young lady to visit Shanghai at such a moment. Soon Doctor Strike joins them. He cajoles his adventurous fiancée into accompanying him on an ill-conceived expedition into a conflict zone where bandits and rebels vie for territorial mastery.

Caught in a lethal crossfire, Megan is separated from Bob, and then unceremoniously knocked unconscious.

When she awakens amid unrecognized surroundings, the only familiar face is that of the last person she desires to reencounter, General Yen. Megan finds herself on the private train of this formally courteous commander, speeding away from Shanghai and into terrifyingly unknown Chinese hinterland. No news is provided about Bob Strike, an individual Yen mocks as an immature meddling foreigner, no more able to save children than safeguard an imminent spouse. In his eyes, Strike does not have sufficient courage and prudence to marry a woman of Megan's pluck. The American missionary deserves to lose both girl and kids.

Yen and his party arrive eventually at a palace where he plays chivalrous host to Megan while routinely ordering withholding of food from local peasants and execution by firing squad of captured rebels. Despite, or perhaps because of his mistress Mah-Li's jealousy, the general instigates a persistent courtship of the white captive who fascinates him. This runs counter to the advice of American financial consultant Jones, who sees no joy in such an interracial relationship and is obsessed solely with acquiring money through lucrative arms sales. If Miss Davis



represents the beautiful soul of America, Jones is its greedily opportunistic heart. They mutually loathe each other, an animosity incomprehensible to the Chinese warlord who finds both attractive, though for widely differing reasons.

Megan allies herself with fellow female Mah-Li, erroneously judging the mission-educated young woman incapable of disloyalty. When Jones discloses at dinner one night that the host's favorite Chinese lady has been passing vital military intelligence to enemies, the negligent official is incensed and orders execution of Mah-Li and her confederate, Captain Li. Megan intercedes, entreating Yen to spare the girl, a proper Christian response. The general inquires if Miss Davis would be willing to stake her own life as pledge for Mah-Li's atonement and abstention from politics. The American woman accepts the gamble, backed into an ethical corner allowing no gracious retreat by her own ill-timed platitudes.

But Mah-Li is a remorseless nationalist, hardened by years of poverty and oppression. Going to a Buddhist shrine accompanied by Megan, the treacherous native girl takes advantage of her companion's complete inability to read Chinese characters to pass along what she claims to be a prayer scroll to a complicit priest. He, in turn, covertly relays vital intelligence about Yen's troops movements to a rebel officer hidden in a rear chamber.

The consequence of this action is insurgent capture of automatic weapons, which are then trained on the general's forces in a surprise night attack. Most palace defenders are wiped out or desert.

Yen, accepting altered circumstances with philosophical resignation, releases Megan from her pledge, realizing further bloodshed will be of no avail. He advises the American to return quickly to Bob, for the two impotent foreigners are cut from the same cloth after all. Neither understands either the country or the customs of the people they've chosen to assist.

When the vanquished official subsequently rings for a servant there is no answer. Like the troops cleaving to Yen primarily because of his money, the palace staff abandons him in his hour of need.

Left behind are the two foreigners, one of whom is about to take the remaining funds and run. Megan, on the contrary, dresses herself as a Chinese servant and prepares to make her host comfortable as he sips his tea, failing to realize the

contents of the cup he's poured for himself. She is now prepared to love him as an equal. But whose self-sacrifice is nobler?

To learn the eventual fates of Megan, Jones and Yen, watch the contemplative conclusion of the film. It follows the most dramatically potent climax of any Hollywood film of the thirties, one which contains the real poetry Capra failed to achieve earlier in the picture with a notorious horrific dream sequence where Megan imagines herself about to be ravished by a vampirish Yen. However, *THE BITTER TEA OF GENERAL YEN* ultimately is not another Von Sternberg excursion into fatalism, despite its title. Instead, it continues the Capra tradition begun in *THE MIRACLE WOMAN* of forcing viewers to judge for themselves what constitutes happiness for the heroine, offering a complex paradox unprecedented in American film.

Once again, top honors must be accorded the Art Department, whose studio recreation of strife-ravaged Shanghai is unmatched in grimly realistic detail. Edward Curtiss's editing of battle and refugee scenes is worthy of Alexandrov's work for Eisenstein in *STRIKE!* Nor is the soft-focus special diffusion photography employed by Joseph Walker in romantic interludes of this film anything short of enchanting.

W. Frank Harling offers a functional music score which never overpowers or weakens the film, but is not at any point memorable.

On the other hand, E. L. Bernds provides outstandingly nuanced sound recording.

Whoever supervised the lighting did a magnificent job, for no important frame details are obscured or garishly overlit. Working with Joseph Walker, the anonymous master craftsman enables every facial muscle and fold of robe to be clearly distinguished, highlighting Robert Kalloch's costume skills as well as the enigmatic rationality of Nils Asther's General Yen and the bullying belligerence of Walter Connolly's Jones.

Aside from the physical inappropriateness of a Scandinavian actor as an Oriental warlord, Capra's choice of Barbara Stanwyck to play a missionary wife is disastrously wrong-headed. Virtually any kind of role featuring strong-willed carnality is ideal for Stanwyck. But there is no spiritual dimension to her screen personas, neither in *THE MIRACLE WOMAN*, where religious dissembling is

required rather than actual piety, nor in this film. Helen Hayes would have been a far better candidate for Miss China Mission, but she might not have been available or interested.

Fusing a makeup overload on Asther, who gives an excellent and inspired performance to offset it, with the spiritually challenged Stanwyck adrift in a role calling for complete wordly innocence and a screenplay peppered with brutally racist speeches is not a recipe for creating a cinematic masterpiece. Credit for the ultimate success of the film as art belongs overwhelmingly to the heavily uncredited technical crew. They bequeathed screeners a realistic view of China that even today withstands drawbacks of an unconvincingly fabricated storyline, racial stereotyping and misguided casting.

Essential viewing for every admirer of world cinema.