

## LP<sup>2</sup> STUDY GROUP PROPOSAL FOR FALL 2022

### SIX SCREWBALL COMEDIES

**Coordinator:** Lynn Brenner

Screwball comedy is a uniquely American movie genre that combines witty, fast-paced dialogue and brilliant slapstick, and casts a skeptical but affectionate eye at gender and class conflict. Film critic Richard Schickel once called it “the best cinematic representation of the workings of the male and female intelligences, how they clash and how they mesh.”

Masters of the genre include directors like Preston Sturges and Howard Hawks, screen writers like Robert Riskin, Ben Hecht, Billy Wilder and Sturges, and stars like Cary Grant, Katherine Hepburn, Rosalind Russell, William Powell, Carole Lombard, Barbara Stanwyck and Henry Fonda. Screwball comedies were hugely popular among movie audiences living through the Great Depression and the rise of fascism; and they're still among the most engaging films ever made. We discuss what makes them work, and how the movies and the battle of the sexes have (and haven't) changed since they were made.

**Lynn Brenner** spent her working years in the theatre and in journalism, and loves both. She has previously coordinated and/or co-coordinated New York City and the Movies; Hollywood Goes West, The Art of the Profile, and Reel Justice.

**Type of Study Group:** Presentation and discussion

#### **Readings and other Materials/Online Services ;**

The six assigned movies are available for streaming on Amazon Prime, HMO Max/TCM hub, YouTube, Fandango, etc. (Participants will receive an update on specific current availability in their welcome email).

Clips from additional movies will be shown and discussed in class.

**\*\*\*\*\* SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS \*\*\*\*\***

### **WEEK 1**

**TOPIC:** *His Girl Friday* (1939)

Directed by Howard Hawks, starring Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell.

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A star reporter is torn between the job and the rat she loves, and suburban security with the mouse she's engaged to marry.

### **QUESTIONS:**

In the original play, the editor and his star reporter are both men. How did Howard Hawks's decision to make the reporter a woman – and the editor's ex-wife -- change the dynamic of this comedy? *His Girl Friday* may be the most gleefully cynical, un sentimental film about American political corruption ever made. Could it be made today? Are there any modern movie equivalents? What's this movie's view of newspaper reporters? How has Hollywood's view of journalism changed?

## **WEEK 2**

### **TOPIC:** *The Philadelphia Story* (1940)

Directed by George Cukor, starring Cary Grant, Katherine Hepburn, and James Stewart.

### **QUESTIONS:**

Like many screwball comedies, *The Philadelphia Story* is set in – and makes a point of remarking on -- the rarified world of very wealthy people. How does it portray them? Like *His Girl Friday*, *The Philadelphia Story* centers on divorce and remarriage. Why did so many screwball screenwriters choose to focus on potential romance between divorced or separated couples? This movie presents tabloid journalism from the outraged viewpoint of its subjects. Does the movie ultimately sympathize with their view? In the late '30s, Katherine Hepburn was declared "box-office poison". Audiences saw her (and disliked her) as too patrician, opinionated and sure of herself—very much like the character she plays in this movie. Yet *The Philadelphia Story* is widely credited with saving her career. How did the movie redeem her in the public's eyes?

## **WEEK 3**

### **TOPIC:** *The Lady Eve* (1941)

Directed by Preston Sturges, starring Barbara Stanwyck and Henry Fonda. She's a con artist who falls for her mark. He's a naïve herpetologist and heir to "the Pike Ale fortune".

### **QUESTIONS:**

Jean (Stanwyck) epitomizes the screwball heroine: smart, sexy, pragmatic...and more vulnerable than she anticipated. Hopsie (Fonda) doesn't stand a chance against her. Is the movie on her side? Screwball movies often include an avuncular older man. *The Lady Eve*

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gives us four, the most important of whom is Jean's father. What do you think of the father/daughter relationship depicted here? *The Lady Eve* has been described as "a flawlessly engineered farce that never sacrifices the humanity of its characters to the machinery of the plot." Do you agree?

### WEEK 4

**TOPIC:** *The Palm Beach Story* (1942)

Directed by Preston Sturges, starring Claudette Colbert, Joel McCrae, Mary Astor, and Rudy Vallee.

### WEEK 5

**TOPIC:** *The More the Merrier* (1943)

Directed by George Stevens, starring Jean Arthur, Joel McCrae, and Charles Coburn

**Or:** *The Major and the Minor* (1942)

Directed by Billy Wilder, starring Ginger Rogers and Ray Milland

### WEEK 6

**TOPIC:** *To Be or Not to Be* (1942)

Directed by Ernst Lubitsch, starring Carole Lombard and Jack Benny