

THE AWFUL TRUTH

Program Notes by Kimberley Jones

So why not THE PHILADELPHIA STORY?

That was the reaction I almost universally received when I told friends and film fans about this series. *Almost* universal: For every five PHILADELPHIA STORY diehards, I find another AWFUL TRUTH devotee; we're like a secret society sharing knowing nods. THE AWFUL TRUTH isn't obscure – it's widely recognized as one of the best screwball comedies ever made – yet it's oddly underloved.

Cary Grant starred in both films; he was king of the comedy of remarriage, starring in three classics – THE AWFUL TRUTH, HIS GIRL FRIDAY, and THE PHILADELPHIA STORY – and one lesser-so, MY FAVORITE WIFE. The philosopher Stanley Cavell, who wrote a whole book on the subject of the comedies of remarriage, 1981's PURSUITS OF HAPPINESS, also claimed the undeniably delightful BRINGING UP BABY as a member of the genre, but I think that's an academic distinction.

But Grant's character in THE PHILADELPHIA STORY is arguably tertiary. Additionally, one remembers Katharine Hepburn and Jimmy Stewart's boozy nightswim with fondness; Grant palming Hepburn's face to push her to the ground, less so. The film hasn't aged all that well. Hepburn's high-society daughter is too abrasive, too un-hip to the vital idea that for love to have a fighting chance, you have to have a sense of humor about it. Still, you wince for her, as the film's cast of characters, from father to mother to ex-husband and on, hectors and lectures her at every turn about her failings as a woman, a wife, and a member of the human race. I wonder if, as cultural mores recycle themselves, THE PHILADELPHIA STORY's emphasis on Hepburn as a prudish ice queen haven't actually grown more interesting again in these hyper-sexual times. But that, too, is academic. Which is all to say: It's a marvelous movie I'd praise to the ends of the earth, but that praise has to be qualified, while THE AWFUL TRUTH – quite simply, unequivocally, un-eggheadedly – is magnificent.

The Cary Grant comic persona – silky, sophisticated, mostly unflappable, and utterly charming – was born with this role. He began his career in vaudeville, but his movie roles up until 1937 were largely dramatic. Under the direction of Leo McCarey, he found a style that would become his signature, even modeling his performance on the witty and dapper McCarey himself. But the relationship, at first, was fractious. The story goes that on the first day of filming, McCarey gave Grant notes on scraps of a brown paper – a slap-dash strategy that did nothing to calm the nerves of his leading man, leaning way out on the ledge of his comfort zone. On the third day of filming, Grant offered to play supporting actor Ralph Bellamy's part instead. On the fourth day of filming, Grant offered the producers \$5,000 in cash to be let off the picture. When McCarey found out, he reportedly went to Columbia's studio head Harry Cohn and doubled the offer to \$10,000 to fire Grant.

Cooler heads prevailed, and the resulting film is a paragon of the subgenre and of screwball in general. It was nominated for five Oscars (Grant was overlooked, which would become something of a habit for the Academy), and McCarey took home the prize for Best Directing. He was always bitter, though, for being rewarded for *THE AWFUL TRUTH* and not for his *other* 1937 film, the autobiographically inspired domestic drama *MAKE WAY FOR TOMORROW*, which he also collaborated on with *AWFUL TRUTH* screenwriter Viña del Mar.

It's a remarkable about-face from one film to the next. Even moments after watching *THE AWFUL TRUTH*, it's hard to recall the gossamer-thin plot. In easy breakdown, Grant and Irene Dunne's Jerry and Lucy Warriner toss off a perfectly nice seeming marriage when Jerry refuses to believe Lucy's story about a car breakdown that resulted in her staying a night at a motel with her singing instructor. Lucy and Jerry then spend the rest of the movie sabotaging the other's attempts to move on with some stooge – Molly Lamont's upper-crust Barbara Vance in his case, Bellamy's Oklahoma-hokum Dan Leeson in her case. (This, coupled with his role in *HIS GIRL FRIDAY*, immortalized the broad-faced actor's type of second-place suitor as "the Bellamy.") The film has the feeling of being cobbled together from a series of set-pieces: none too showy, but perfectly adept at routing out the comedy in the tragedy of separation. What is essential – to their marriage and to the genre in general – is that they fundamentally *get* each other, and the getting involves a lot of laughter. ("Oh, we've had some grand laughs together," Lucy admits when she realizes she's still in love with "that crazy lunatic" Jerry.) It seems that the couple that laughs together is destined to wend its way back together – an idea never more perfectly realized than at Lucy's choral recital, in which her husband's dim-witted collapse in a broken chair reduces her high-note finale to a lyrical giggle.

Cavell argued a distinguishing feature of the comedies of remarriage were their "emphasis on the heroine," in a throughline he traced back to Shakespeare's early comedies and, surprisingly, Ibsen's *A DOLL'S HOUSE*; indeed, one of the great joys of screwball comedy is how often the woman is the agent of action. When contemporary viewers come to *THE AWFUL TRUTH*, it's with great affection and familiarity with Grant's long career, while Irene Dunne, in the annals of cinema history, is now ranked as a far lesser star. Pauline Kael was no fan; she savaged what she called Dunne's "coy gurgles" in the film, skipping over what is a nimble two-step between outward blitheness and inner pain.

Leading up to the film's second-act break, we've seen Dunne's Lucy clever and crafty, but also largely restricted to being acted *upon* – not a little bit as a result of her sex; during her separation, she's either stuck in a rented apartment with her dowager aunt or taken out into the world by a male companion (indeed, it was the requirement of a gentleman escort that first thrust her into the path of Bellamy's Dan Leeson). But here, Lucy takes control, and the film's seemingly discrete plot points – Lucy's skill as a singer and a nightclub sequence involving a lightly risqué performance by a singer called Dixie Belle with whom Jerry had a brief fling – are called back on.

On the eve of her divorce to Jerry, Lucy seizes agency by showing up at his new fiancée's palatial family home and posing as his tippling, funnily slutty sister. She's plucked the inspiration from Dixie Belle, but it's not mere mimicry; there's something far more sophisticated going on. She manages in one fell swoop of sublime comedy to prove the unsuitability of both alternatives we've seen Jerry with, the nightclub performer and the stuffy heiress. By playacting as his sister (bonus points for injecting a frisson of the sexually taboo), she reaffirms the primacy of their pairing: first by aligning herself as family then by reigniting their shared sense of play in a room full of stuffed shirts.

Jerry's resistance hasn't yet completely collapsed, but he's tempted enough by the revelation he's underestimated his wife to go along for the ride – literally. On the pretext that Lucy is too drunk to get behind the wheel (although there's strong evidence he knows she's faking), he drives her to Lucy's aunt's house in the country. It's an escape to what the literary critic and Shakespeare scholar Northrop Frye called "the green world," a term Cavell uses to describe a regular occurrence in the canonical comedies of remarriage: the abandonment of the city and society to "a place in which perspective and renewal are to be achieved" (which, more often than not, turns out to be Connecticut). On the way, Lucy contrives to wreck the car, and they must hitch a ride with state troopers to Aunt Patty's house. They're stuck for the night, in a canny re-creation of the events that first led to their divorce. Jerry can no longer deny the plausibility of her story – cars break down, clear as day – and the final impediment to their reconciliation falls away.

Well, almost. In a significant evolution from the inactive Lucy who let divorce proceedings steamroll ahead, she has by now ably demonstrated her resourcefulness, understanding of her own mind, and willingness to fight for the marriage. But only minutes from the divorce going into effect, Jerry's still poking around. Here, McCarey stages an end scene that practically purrs with sexual tension, placing the soon-to-be exes in adjoining rooms separated by a door that keeps blowing open. Another gust reveals Jerry on the floor, trying to peep at Lucy through the keyhole.

Lucy: You're all confused, aren't you?

Jerry: Uh-huh. Aren't you?

Lucy: No.

And here, finally, Jerry awakens to his own knuckleheadedness. They'll reunite alright – not by habit or default – but rather with eyes wide open.

Jerry: Well, you should be, because you're wrong about things being different because they're not the same. Things are different, except in a different way. You're still the same, only I've been a fool. Well, I'm not now. So, as long as I'm different, don't you think things could be the same again? Only a little different?

Lucy: You mean that, Jerry? No more doubts?

He takes the step over the threshold into her bedroom and the door blows shut again, locking him in the room with Lucy and sealing their fate. How does she react? How else? By dissolving into laughter.

SOURCES:

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