



PHFFFT!

Kimberley Jones

Guest Curator and *Austin Chronicle* Books and Screens Editor

“And introducing Jack Lemmon.” That’s how Lemmon was billed – third-billed, in fact – in his first credited film role, in director George Cukor’s *IT SHOULD HAPPEN TO YOU* (1954). It’s a sweet trifle of a film, with Lemmon playing a documentary filmmaker who fights Peter Lawford for the attentions of a kooky, celebrity-obsessed Judy Holliday. Lemmon and Holliday share an enchanting, extempore duet of “Let’s Fall in Love,” and by the last reel they’ve done just that, literally riding off into the sunset of presumed marital bliss. Lemmon re-teamed with Holliday that same year for *PHFFFT!* (she still took top billing), and it’s hard not to read the film as a slightly dispiriting rejoinder to *IT SHOULD HAPPEN TO YOU*’s untested optimism.

*PHFFFT!* opens in (married) media res. Lemmon plays Robert Tracey, a tax attorney. Holliday is his wife Nina, a successful showrunner of a serial melodrama called *Serena Noble, Doctor’s Wife*. In the first scene, he lounges in the living room, reading a sexy paperback for the kicks he’s long lost in his own marriage, while she fumes on the couch, all pent-up rage. Their marriage has grown stale after eight years (screenwriter George Axelrod shaved a year off the clock for *THE SEVEN YEAR ITCH*). When the topic of divorce comes up – almost as an afterthought – they take the ball and run with it, mutually disgruntled and hungry for change. Indeed, when their quickie divorce comes through, Nina is stunned that the game played out so swiftly and irreversibly: “I called his bluff.”

*PHFFFT!* wouldn’t be the first or last time Axelrod explored the topic of marriage with a deeply cynical eye. (His titles alone – *HOW TO MURDER YOUR WIFE*, *THE SECRET LIFE OF THE AMERICAN WIFE* – are enough to raise a red flag.) Axelrod started in radio, where it was easier to slide sexual innuendo past the censors, and garnered a theatre hit with 1952’s *THE SEVEN YEAR ITCH*, which he adapted to screen with Billy Wilder in ’54. Axelrod was the first to admit – and lament – that the sexual provocation of his play was defanged for the Production Code’s puritan tastes. Still, he earned a Writer’s Guild Award nomination for *THE SEVEN YEAR ITCH* in 1956, the same year he was nominated for his original script for *PHFFFT!*. (He lost – twice – to Frank S. Nugent and Joshua Logan for *MISTER ROBERTS*.)

Axelrod made a career out of trying to outfox the censors. “The bulk of my sex comedy career was done with this enormous handicap: not being allowed to have any sex,” he told an interviewer. By his own estimation, his métier was “boobs and boobs” – dumb guys and sexy girls, he put it. With that kind of wheelhouse, the gatekeepers of propriety

were on high alert whenever Axelrod's name was attached to a film, which made him all the more curious a choice to adapt Truman Capote's worldly novella about a call girl and her gay neighbor, *BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S*. (Axelrod downplayed the raciness of Holly Golightly's night job, stripped out the homosexuality, and earned an Oscar nomination in the process.)

"Boobs and boobs" aside, Holliday certainly adds up to far more than her parts in *PHFFFT!*. Instead, Kim Novak, in only her third film appearance, supplies the overt sex as a dim-bulb dalliance of Robert's, post-divorce, in a role that was modeled after Marilyn Monroe. (Monroe was a friend of Axelrod's – in addition to *THE SEVEN YEAR ITCH*, she also appeared in his adaptation of *BUS STOP* – but Novak's airhead giggler nonetheless feels like a cruel characterization.) But Holliday's Nina is a rare invention of the times: a professional woman who suffers no repercussions or scolding lessons for prioritizing her career. Interestingly – and in another crossover from *IT SHOULD HAPPEN TO YOU* – Holliday's character in the first spies notorious gossip columnist Walter Winchell across a crowd and yips with star-struck glee; in the second, Winchell notes in a column the demise of Nina and Robert's marriage – it's gone "phffft!," he puts it – and it's surely Nina's celebrity as Serena Noble, not Robert's name as a tax attorney, that warrants the tabloid attention.

*PHFFFT!* is not a particularly sophisticated film; it lacks the jazzy syncopation of the great screwballs of the Thirties and Forties and the play-dumb, cheeky double-entendres of the Sixties' sex comedies. In a late-in-life interview, Axelrod – ever plain-spoken – shrugged that his jack-of-all-trades director Mark Robson (*VALLEY OF THE DOLLS*, *EARTHQUAKE*, *PEYTON PLACE*) wasn't cut out for the job: "I had a sweet, dear, darling man, Mark Robson, who hadn't a clue how to do comedy. Not a clue. I had Judy Holliday, one of the finest comedy technicians in the world, and Jack Carson, another great comedy technician, and Jack Lemmon, too, but the director was miscast."

The film's charms are cruder, more carnal. The jaguar-like sound a Murphy bed makes as it unleashes from a wall. Axelrod's playwright surrogate, Jack Carson, with his master/grasshopper teachings on the power of a mustache over the female prey: "The efficacy of facial hair both arouses and angers them." Lemmon's eyes popping, on the hunt, as he toots the horn of his newly bought sports car (thanks, midlife crisis!) at a comely woman on the sidewalk, seen from behind... who turns out to be his ex-wife. She doesn't "still have it" – she never lost it. He just forgot to look.

And, most especially, there is the film's delirious high point – an impromptu, electrifying mambo. As man and wife, learning to dance was on the list of things to do that never got done, one more casualty of a complacent marriage. When Nina and Robert divorce, they tackle their own to-do lists: She studies French, he grows that silly mustache, and they both enroll – separately – at an Arthur Murray studio. One evening, in a New York City nightclub, they bump into each on the dance floor. The band tears into a mambo. They each shake a leg, and their dates are forgotten as they inch toward one another. Former man and wife discover anew: They still keep perfect time.

SOURCES:

*Fifth Avenue, 5. A.M.: Audrey Hepburn, Breakfast at Tiffany's, and the Dawn of the Modern Woman* by Sam Wasson (HarperCollins, 2010)

"George Axelrod: Irony!" (chapter), *BACKSTORY 3: Interviews With Screenwriters of the 60s*, edited and with an introduction by Patrick McGilligan (University of California Press, 1997)

*The New Biographical Dictionary of Film: Fifth Edition* by David Thomson (Knopf's, 2010)