

5.12 I Watched 7 Old Movies in 7 Days

Intro

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[upbeat vintage jazz music fades in]

Angourie [host]

Welcome back to The Community Library: a fortnightly podcast for anyone interested in stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[music fades out]

Angourie [host]

I grew up watching old movies. In our house, the bookshelves were stacked with biographies of Marilyn Monroe, books about the history of 20th Century Fox and big picture books of movie stars from the 40s and 50s. And this was definitely part of the reason why I wanted to become an actor. If you haven't been here before, hello and welcome! I'm Angourie, and while this podcast is one of my favourite hobbies, my day job is being an actor. In January and February of this year I was working on a new film, which is why I took a break from the podcast, and, incidentally, a break from reading. Which is tough when you host a podcast about books and storytelling. But in our last week of work, I decided to sit down and watch an old movie every night for seven days.

His Girl Friday (1940)

On Monday, I began with *His Girl Friday*, a 1940 comedy starring Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell, directed by Howard Hawks. Cary Grant plays a newspaper editor who uses every trick in the book to keep his reporter ex-wife, Rosalind Russell, from remarrying. On the eve of her wedding, he convinces her to take on one more story – the case of a man who is going to be hanged for murder – in the hopes that she will stay once she remembers how much she loves journalism, and moreover, how much she loves him.

Based on a play, the movie is just like that – a filmed play. With long scenes and lots of wordy dialogue, the actors give big performances to a camera that never punches in closer than a mid-shot. It's a classic 1940s comedy, with hairbrained schemes and overlapping dialogue and everyone talking a million miles a minute. And I loved it. It's a very theatrical movie – when you watch it, you get the feeling the actors aren't just performing for the camera; they're performing for the crew, they're performing for each other, they're performing for the entire audience who's going to watch it in cinemas. And it's a style you

don't really see in films anymore, but you do see it in sitcoms. And so this reminded me of some of my favourite episodes of *Friends*, like The One Where Everybody Finds Out, or The One With the Embryos – which is the one where Rachel and Monica go against Chandler and Joey in a trivia game and they lose their apartment. And *Friends*, too, is filmed like a play, because it kind of is: there's a live audience, the actors are actually performing to more than just the camera, and their performances are big because of it. Much like *His Girl Friday* and similar films of this era, the plots of *Friends* episodes revolve around ridiculous rivalries and schemes, but there's always a bit of romance, and a happy ending.

So is this similarity due to the fact that *His Girl Friday* is surprisingly modern, or that *Friends* is surprisingly old-fashioned? Maybe it's a bit of both. But for me, *His Girl Friday* was exactly what I needed on a lonely Monday night – a film with a fast-talking, wise-cracking dame, an even faster-talking Cary Grant, and lots of telephone gags.

To Have and Have Not (1944)

On Tuesday I watched *To Have and Have Not* (1944), starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall – the first of their four films together – and also directed by Howard Hawks. Loosely – and I mean very loosely – based on a 1937 Ernest Hemingway novel of the same name, *To Have and Have Not* is set during World War II in Martinique under the Vichy regime. Bogart plays an American fisherman, who reluctantly helps transport a French Resistance leader on his boat, all the while falling in love with a mysterious woman: Lauren Bacall. It's your classic Bogart role: he plays a grumpy guy who doesn't do nuthin for no-one unless he gets paid, but then he ends up doing a lot for lots of people and gives up the money, because under that hardened exterior, he's a big softie.

To Have and Have Not is very similar in tone, premise and subject matter to *Casablanca*. *Casablanca*, 1942, also stars Bogart, and was nominated for a bunch of Oscars and won Best Picture. And *To Have and Have Not's* similarity to *Casablanca* highlights its inferiority, which is very unfortunate. The characters aren't as vivid, the plot isn't as interesting, nor as emotional, and it's also not as visually striking. It's a shame, because had I not seen *Casablanca*, I probably would have enjoyed *To Have and Have Not* much more than I did. In my opinion, the best thing about this movie is Lauren Bacall. Though she's playing the femme fatale love interest of the 44-year-old Humphrey Bogart, she was only nineteen at the time of filming. And she looks a lot older than nineteen; she's got a very strong jawline and high cheekbones, but she's also wearing dramatic lipstick and skirt suits to make her look older. I spent the entire movie scrutinising her and her performance, trying to find a break in her cool, calm, collected exterior. I think what I was really looking for was a glimpse of a teenager – but I'd forgotten that, in 1944, the concept of the teenager didn't really exist. There were girls, and there were women, and there wasn't a transitional age. I think this was especially due to the war, which divided the male population into two groups: those too young to fight were boys, and those who could go and fight were men. And so the advent of the teenager really only happened in the 50s and 60s. So in 1944, Lauren Bacall at nineteen was considered a grown woman, and an appropriate love interest for Humphrey Bogart. It was only when Lauren Bacall smiled with her teeth when I thought I saw that she was a lot younger than she was playing.

To Have and Have Not is really Lauren Bacall's movie. Her screen presence is electric, and she delivers all the lines that are now really famous. And it's worth watching to see her first role of what would be a very long career.

The 39 Steps (1935)

On Wednesday I wanted something short, so I watched *The 39 Steps*, a 1935 Alfred Hitchcock film which was only 86 minutes! Starring Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll, this is what I'd call a soft thriller – before Hitchcock got into his really suspenseful stuff. Here's what IMDb says: 'A man in London tries to help a counter-espionage Agent. But when the Agent is killed, and the man stands accused, he must go on the run to save himself and stop a spy ring which is trying to steal top secret information.'

If *His Girl Friday* was like a filmed play, then *The 39 Steps* was filmed like a movie. Even though it was made five years earlier, Hitchcock has that movie-making vision that carried him through his long career. He uses overlays, inserts, extreme close-ups and extreme wide shots. And the camera isn't just the audience's viewpoint, the camera is its own character. It hides and reveals things to tell an exciting story. I think I had this idea that films in the 1930s and 40s were all filmed like plays because they didn't have the technology we have today to make things interesting – but *The 39 Steps* exhibits a lot of interesting camera work and very technical set-ups. And I'm glad – I'm really glad of it, because this film needed all the style it could get to make up for what I thought was pretty average characters and dialogue. It's like the female characters had less agency with every film I watched, with poor Pamela in *The 39 Steps* being the worst of them all.

But then, this film isn't about its characters – it's about intrigue, suspense, style, and of course the 39 steps, one of the most famous MacGuffins in film history.

To Be or Not to Be (1942)

On Thursday I asked around for a recommendation, and my mum put forth *To Be Or Not To Be*; a 1942 war-time dark comedy set during the Nazi occupation of Poland. Carole Lombard and Jack Benny star as actors in a theatre group who become embroiled in a Polish soldier's efforts to track down a German spy. It's very dark, very tongue-in-cheek, and was very controversial at the time, with some critics saying it was in poor taste to merge comedy and satire with the tragedy of war – specifically the bombing of Warsaw. The closest references I can make to try and illustrate the tone and premise of this film is *Jojo Rabbit* meets *Galaxy Quest*. It's ridiculous and farcical, but it also addresses the devastation of war.

This was definitely the most unexpected film I watched that week. I was completely taken aback by its risky jokes and subject matter – especially knowing that it was made in 1942, when the war was still ongoing. The director is Berlin-born Ernst Lubitsch, who had, at that point in time, been living and working in America as a director for twenty years. The screenplay was based on a story by Hungarian writer Melchior Lengyel, who also wrote *Ninotchka*. But though this film is set in Poland and is about a Polish acting group, all the actors are American and it was filmed in Hollywood. So just all of that combined into this

bizarre film that's a comedy, but also set during the war, I found it to be a very interesting film. And some parts of it were really funny – they made me laugh out loud – and some parts of it were also quite old-fashioned. Carole Lombard, in my eyes, was the comedic star of the show, though the ensemble of the acting troupe was really funny, as well. This film, I think, is a very interesting commentary on theatre and war, but it's just wrapped up as a comedy. And a very edgy comedy, at that. What I also find interesting is the director's comments on the film. As I said, it was very controversial when it was first released, and in an open letter to a newspaper who criticised the film, he writes:

'What I have satirized in this picture are the Nazis and their ridiculous ideology. I have also satirized the attitude of actors who always remain actors regardless of how dangerous the situation might be, which I believe is a true observation. It can be argued if the tragedy of Poland realistically portrayed as in *To Be or Not to Be* can be merged with satire. I believe it can be and so do the audience which I observed during a screening of *To Be or Not to Be*; but this is a matter of debate and everyone is entitled to his point of view.'

So the film is, given what's happening in the world today, not one that I immediately recommend. It could perhaps be very upsetting and triggering for some people. But I think it's an interesting example of one of the many pieces of art that came out of World War II, and also interesting to see how it was received at the time, and how it's been remembered since.

Bringing Up Baby (1938)

On Friday, I asked the good people of Instagram what I should watch. I gave you four options: *Dancing Lady* (1933), *My Man Godfrey* (1936), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and *You Can't Take it With You* (1938). *Bringing Up Baby* took the lead with 104 votes, and so I rented it and sat down to watch this 1938 screwball comedy also directed by Howard Hawks. The film stars Cary Grant as an awkward palaeontologist trying to secure a million dollar donation for his museum, and Katharine Hepburn as a flighty and erratic heiress who enlists Grant to help transport her pet leopard, Baby. What follows is a lot of fast back-and-forth dialogue, a lot of singing *I Can't Give You Anything But Love*, and of course trying to wrangle a leopard.

This was a controversial movie in my family: my mum had watched it by herself and loved it, and then my dad and sister tried to watch it and hated it so much that they couldn't finish it. How was I going to feel about it? Well, drumroll please ... I loved it. My dad and sister's issue with it was that they found Katharine Hepburn's character unlikable and completely irredeemable. My mum and I, funnily enough, did not have that issue at all. I mean, sure, in the film she was shrewd and conniving, but no more than Cary Grant's character in *His Girl Friday*. In fact, I see *Bringing Up Baby* as a gender-swapped version of *His Girl Friday* – and it's so exciting because Katharine Hepburn takes on the role of the hairbrained schemer with such vigour and energy. Her comedic timing is impeccable, and she has that effortless about her that she always brings to the screen. And it was also really fun to see Cary Grant in a very different role: as the nerdy and awkward scientist who can't help being roped into this wild leopard chase. What I loved about this film – aside from the crazy

plot and the leopard – was Hepburn and Grant’s performances. They are both so quick and so committed, they never miss a beat. They’re a wonder to watch – individually, and when they’re together on the screen. They’re perfectly matched in their screen presence, and their strength of character, and their ability to deliver a sharp line. And watching this film just brought me back to how I felt watching movies as a kid – just looking at these incredible actors delivering amazing performances and saying to myself: ‘I want to be able to do that.’

So, although this film might not be for everyone, Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant have been named two of the greatest actors of the Golden Age of Hollywood for a reason.

Ladies of the Chorus (1948)

On Saturday I wanted a short movie. And so I sorted my watchlist by film length, and vowed to watch the shortest movie on that list. And it was *Ladies of the Chorus*, coming in at just 61 minutes. This 1948 B-Grade film directed by Phil Karlson stars Adele Jergins and Marilyn Monroe. Jergins and Monroe play mother and daughter chorus girls. When Marilyn Monroe’s character falls in love with a wealthy young man, their relationship is jeopardised by her mother’s fears about the reaction of his family to falling for a – quote unquote – ‘burlesque queen’. Yes, that is a direct quote from the movie.

Listen. *Ladies of the Chorus* is a movie no one would care about if Marilyn Monroe wasn’t in it. It’s straight up not a good movie. My sister described it best: It’s so short, there’s barely any plot, and yet every scene still seems unnecessary. And she’s completely right – the plot is flimsy, the performances are mediocre, and the production value is non-existent. According to IMDb trivia, they filmed it in 10 days. It shows. To me, it looked like they did one take of every set-up and then moved on, mistakes be damned. To fit it all into 10 days, they probably did. There are two interesting things about this movie – to me, at least – the first being that it’s Marilyn Monroe’s first major role in a feature film. She looks different: her hair isn’t as short or as blonde, and her face is still very round and youthful. I wouldn’t say her performance is particularly good – though the script doesn’t help. Of the cast, she doesn’t stand out as someone who would go on to be one of Hollywood’s biggest stars. But whether Marilyn’s success was due to her talent or her sex appeal has always been a point of contention – an episode for another day, perhaps, I have many thoughts on that. The other interesting thing about this movie is that it’s a B-Grade film that, at the time of its 1948 release, did terribly at the box office and disappeared completely, but has been remembered much more than other B-Grade films of that era, because of Marilyn. It’s good to watch as a curiosity of sorts, rather than good cinema, or even good entertainment. It’s just a weird time capsule of low-budget musical entertainment of the 1940s.

This is one that I’d recommend only to fans of Marilyn Monroe – everyone else can probably skip it. But if you are considering watching it, hey, it’s only an hour of your time.

Frankenstein (1931)

And on the final day, God created ... a monster. On Sunday I watched *Frankenstein*. Directed by James Whale, and starring Colin Clive as Dr. Frankenstein, and Boris Karloff as his

monster. This is the original 1931 movie. Though I'm sure we're all familiar with the story of *Frankenstein*, I'll recount it here for those who might not know. As IMDb puts it: 'The ambitious Dr. Frankenstein dares to tamper with life and death by creating a human monster out of lifeless body parts.'

Up until watching this film, I hadn't seen any adaptations of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, but I have read it. And uh ... to say that this film is an adaptation of the book is ... well, it's a very loose adaptation. This film takes the premise and key themes from Mary Shelley's novel, but the plot is very different and very simplified. Though Mary Shelley's novel is quite short, it's very dense with plot and philosophical writing, and what I liked about this film is that it gets the same themes across in a plot that is much easier to follow. But what surprised me most about this movie is the difference between the representation of Frankenstein's monster in pop culture, and how the monster is represented in the film. So, Boris Karloff's version of the monster – both his performance and its design – has become such a pop culture icon, so parodied and satirised that I half-expected this movie to be a camp B-grade horror – but it's not at all. It's a very sad story, told with a lot of pathos. It's filled with suspense, and vivid imagery, and it explores themes of religion and ethics. I mean, sure, some of the dialogue is a little silly, but is that because it's bad writing or because it's been parodied so much it's hard to take seriously?

I think ninety years later, this infamous adaptation *Frankenstein* is still unnerving and entertaining, successfully balancing moments of theatricality with moments of real sincerity.

Conclusion

So at the end of the week, I had watched seven black-and-white films made before the year 1950 – the oldest one being *Frankenstein* (1931) and the newest being *Ladies of the Chorus* (1948). The films were of varying degrees of quality, I dabbled in comedy, drama, and horror, and the longest I spent watching a film was an hour and forty minutes with *Bringing Up Baby*. And here stands my final ranking, of least favourite to favourite:

7. *Ladies of the Chorus* (1948)
6. *The 39 Steps* (1935)
5. *To Have and Have Not* (1944)
4. *To Be or Not to Be* (1942)
3. *Frankenstein* (1931)
2. *Bringing Up Baby* (1938)
1. *His Girl Friday* (1940)

Coming in at number seven, my least favourite was *Ladies of the Chorus*. In sixth place is *The 39 Steps*. Fifth place: *To Have and Have Not*. Fourth, right bang in the middle, a film that I'm still not sure how I feel about: *To Be or Not to Be*. And rounding out the top three, in third place is *Frankenstein*. In second place is *Bringing Up Baby*, and my favourite that I watched is *His Girl Friday*.

And what have I learnt from this? Well, I don't think old films are inherently better, they're just different. And sometimes different means better than anything you've ever seen before

– but the same can be said for new films, too. Old films are different because they had access to different technologies, there were different styles and trends in design and performance. Some techniques and practices have aged well, some we still use today, and some are best left in the past. I feel like I often hear the phrase ‘they don’t make films like they used to’. And that’s true, they don’t. But I don’t think that’s a bad thing. As much as I love them, we don’t need to make films exactly like *His Girl Friday* and *Bringing Up Baby* anymore, because they’ve already been made. There’s a whole era of movies like this – the exciting thing about the film industry is that we build on the past and we grow from it. And while I think it’s important revisit and remember the past, we don’t need to recreate it.

I don’t think any of these movies are a ‘must-watch’ – especially if you’re a casual movie-watcher. If you’re interested in going into filmmaking as a career or a hobby, then maybe they’re worth a watch. For me, I like watching old movies as research: to understand the history of film and the foundations of filmmaking today. One of my favourite books last year was *The Whole Picture* by Alice Proctor, which deconstructs the colonial history of art museums. And this one quote really stuck with me: ‘You have to know your history to understand how to challenge its legacy.’ And I think for me, working in the film industry, that’s a really important sentiment. Going back through old movies teaches me about how movies were made eighty years ago, yes, but often it teaches me more about how we make movies now. Which practices we’ve held onto, for better or for worse, and which practices we’ve changed and adapted for modern audiences and modern times.

A movie I really enjoyed last year was *Passing*, based on Nella Larsen’s 1929 novel of the same name. The story follows a light-skinned black woman who reconnects with a childhood friend, who she discovers is living her life passing as a white woman. I loved the book, and I thought the movie was a really strong adaptation, and I also thought the performances were fantastic. But something that I especially loved about it was how it looked like a film from the 1920s. It was shot on film, with an aspect ratio of 1.37 : 1 – which is almost square. This was the standard aspect ratio for films during the 20s, 30s and 40s. The widescreen ratio we know today was popularised during the 1950s. And so the design, direction, and score of this movie, all called back to the early days of filmmaking. But of course it’s a story about race and sexuality starring black women and written and directed by a woman, too – something that would have been very difficult to make in 1929 and get the wide release that it did almost a hundred years later. I loved how *Passing* used elements of filmmaking from the 20s and 30s to tell a story with a production team, cast and marketing release that wouldn’t have been possible to make ninety years ago. If you’re interesting in watching it, it’s available on Netflix.

[twinkly piano theme music fades in]

Watching seven old movies in seven days was a fun experiment for me to do over a week in which I had no other work to get on with. Would I recommend it? I don’t know, do what you want. We only have a limited number of precious hours on this earth, I’m not going to tell you how to spend them. But I had a great time. Thank you for listening! If you want to follow more of my bookish and filmic adventures, you can follow me on Instagram @the_community_library. Once again, I’ve been Angourie, you’ve been fantastic, and I’ll chat to you in two weeks. Bye!