



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Only Angels Have Wings

Everyone drawn to action cinema is drawn to Howard Hawks. And those who love Hawks love *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) in a particularly intense way. It is a virtual encyclopaedia of his gestures, obsessions, and stylistic manoeuvres, and I think it has defined, in a way still unsurpassed, what Hollywood action cinema has been in the subsequent six decades.

I esteem *Only Angels Have Wings* to be the central work in the Hawks canon, but with caveats. It's not as visually beautiful a film as *Scarface* (1932) or *Red River* (1947). Its central romantic pairing of stars, Cary Grant and Jean Arthur, is not as charismatic as that of Bogart and Bacall in *The Big Sleep* (1946) or *To Have and Have Not* (1944). Its humorous moments are not as wildly funny as the best moments in his comedies, and its action sequences, while well done, are not particularly memorable by contemporary standards. What *Only Angels* does have going for it is a unique completeness of vision. Of this film you can say what you can say of few films: that it is a thorough creation of a world, a complete expression of one artist's programme. To me this is as good a pragmatic definition of a masterpiece as there is.

Larry Gross, *Sight & Sound*, February 1997

Many fine films screened in last year's [2014] BFI London Film Festival – indeed, there were some great ones – but of those I saw, none gave me more utter enjoyment than *Only Angels Have Wings*, made 75 years earlier by Howard Hawks. The film was playing in a new 4K digital restoration, and judging by the response of those sitting around me in a packed NFT1 at BFI Southbank (there was a loud round of spontaneous applause at the end credits), I was far from alone in my happiness.

I mention the personal pleasure I derived from that screening – which remained as great as the pleasure I've derived from the film each and every time I've seen it over the years (and that must be getting on for about a dozen viewings now) – because I've always found it quite strange that I like the film so very much. By that, I don't mean that I don't like the films of Hawks, who's long been one of my favourite American directors), nor that I have an aversion to the movie's stars: who wouldn't be pleased to be watching Cary Grant, Rita Hayworth, Jean Arthur and Richard Barthelmess, not to mention such agreeable character actors as Thomas Mitchell, Sig Ruman and Noah Beery Jr?

No, what always surprises me about my liking this film (which I'm seriously tempted to designate as a masterpiece) is that it is also, in many respects, patently quite absurd. The story – Hawks's own, apparently, though the screenplay is attributed to the great Jules Furthman – is pretty much a Boys' Own-style affair about a bunch of daredevil pilots down in some anonymous banana republic flying dangerous missions over the Andes. The company, headed by Grant's Geoff Carter, is on the brink of going bust unless they keep the cargo – which runs from mail to medics to explosives – constantly moving. And since this is a Hollywood film, and a Hawks movie to boot, as if that weren't enough along come a couple of women to add to Carter's worries: marooned showgirl Bonnie Lee (Arthur), gooey for Geoff after an

initially bumpy meeting-cute; and old flame Judy MacPherson (Hayworth), now married to a flier the rest of the team regard as... well, not one of the team.

To give away more might spoil your enjoyment. What I can reveal, however, is that some of this derring-do involves scenes involving light airplanes which are clearly models; it also features a high Andean pass that is evidently a studio set – complete with a donkey named Napoleon whose relevance to the narrative is entirely obscure – and an airfield and company headquarters which appear actually to consist of a bar with a piano, a couple of rooms and a few square yards of patio.

Then there's Carter himself: Grant in a kind of cowboy hat, wearing trousers hitched up halfway to his armpits, so heedless in his heroism that his right-hand man The Kid (Mitchell) adores him almost as much as – or perhaps even more than – poor Bonnie. Is that because Carter's forever lighting the Kid's cigarettes for him? Or is it because Carter – once bitten, twice shy where women are concerned – is simply a man's man, and won't let silly stuff like feelings get in the way of his work?

How are we meant to take this seriously? You may well ask. On paper this sounds like prime escapist hokum – which in many ways it is. But – and it's an extremely big 'but' – Hawks somehow pulls it all off, so that we are wholly engrossed, from beginning to end, in the lives and deaths of these people. He manages that partly because he mixes the studio artifice up with some stunning footage of real planes in the air (one flight out to a remote plateau includes moments that always make my stomach churn), and partly because he's as heedless about what does or doesn't look 'real' as Carter is about the risks he and his fliers have to take.

Like Carter, Hawks simply gets on with the job that has to be done and, being very versatile, adapts his methods according to the problems at hand. When fog threatens a pilot's landing, Hawks wisely focuses, mainly in close-up, on worried faces watching the sky, letting the plane engine on the soundtrack do most of the narrative work. Later, a funereal scene is deftly turned into a boisterous singalong by the stark, simple phrase, 'Who's Joe?' – an example of Hawks' skill at handling quickly shifting moods. Later still, a deathbed scene is handled with a delicacy of tone one would probably never expect from a director known for making movies about (supposedly) rugged masculinity.

But then Hawks, for all that he kept returning to certain situations, phrases, character types and predicaments, was never one to stick to what one would expect – from him or from anyone else. A little like Yasujiro Ozu, he worked wondrously rich variations on a small number of themes. And like Ozu, he used a very light touch to explore, to serio-comic effect, the parameters of life, love and death. Absurd? Hardly. Just great.

Geoff Andrew, bfi.org.uk, 12 May 2015

ONLY ANGELS HAVE WINGS

Directed by: Howard Hawks

©/Production Company: Columbia Pictures Corporation

Presented by: Columbia Pictures

Screen Play: Jules Furthman

Photography: Joseph Walker

Aerial Photography: Elmer Dyer

Special Effects: Roy Davidson

Film Editor: Viola Lawrence

Art Direction: Lionel Banks

Gowns: Kalloch

Music by: Dimitri Tiomkin

Musical Director: M.W. Stoloff

Technical Adviser/Chief Pilot: Paul Mantz

uncredited

Producer: Howard Hawks

2nd Unit Directors: Sam Nelson, Richard Rosson

Assistant Director: Arthur S. Black

Screenplay Contributions: William M. Rankin, Eleanore Griffin

Story: Howard Hawks

Cast

Cary Grant (*Geoff Carter*)

Jean Arthur (*Bonnie Lee*)

Richard Barthelmess (*Bat MacPherson*)

Rita Hayworth (*Judith 'Judy' MacPherson*)

Thomas Mitchell (*Kid Dabb*)

Allyn Joslyn (*Les Peters*)

Sig Rumann (*'Dutchy' van Ryder*)

Victor Kilian (*Sparks*)

John Carroll (*Gent Shelton*)

Donald Barry (*Tex Gordon*)

Noah Beery Jr (*Joe Souther*)

Maciste (*the singing guitarist*)

Milissa Sierra (*Lily*)

Lucio Villegas (*Dr Lagorio*)

Pat Flaherty (*Mike*)

Pedro Regas (*Pancho*)

Pat West (*Baldy*)

uncredited

Vernon Dent (*ship's captain*)

Budd Fine (*first mate*)

Rafael Storm (*Rafael, purser*)

Charles Moore (*servant*)

Forbes Murray (*Harkwright*)

Bud Wolfe, Ky Robinson, Eddie Foster, Lew Davis, James Millican,

Al Rhein, Curley Dresden, Ed Randolph (*mechanics*)

Elena Duran, Cecilia Callejo (*blonde señoritas*)

Forbes Murray (*Harkwright Sr*)

Stanley Brown (*Harkwright Jr*)

Samme Tong (*cook*)

Victor Travers, Francisco Maran (*plantation overseers*)

Tex Higginson, Jack Lowe (*banana foremen*)

Wilson Benge (*assistant purser*)

Enrique Acosta, Raúl Lechuga, Dick Botiller, Harry Bailey,

Aurora Navarro, Tessie Murray (*tourists*)

Cecilia Callejo (*Felice*)

Candy Candido (*musician*)

Inez Palange (*Lily's aunt*)

Robert Sterling

USA 1939©

120 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Thelma and Louise

Sun 1 Aug 18:00; Sat 14 Aug 20:35; Sat 28 Aug 20:20

Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice

Mon 2 Aug 20:40; Fri 13 Aug 20:45; Wed 18 Aug 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by Julie Lobalzo Wright, University of Warwick); Mon 23 Aug 14:30

Bright Star

Tue 3 Aug 20:30; Fri 27 Aug 17:50; Mon 30 Aug 18:10

Boyz N the Hood

Wed 4 Aug 17:45 (+ pre-recorded intro by film critic Leila Latif);

Mon 9 Aug 20:50

Les Demoiselles de Rochefort (The Young Ladies of Rochefort)

Thu 5 Aug 17:50; Thu 26 Aug 17:40

The Big Lebowski

Fri 6 Aug 20:45; Mon 16 Aug 20:50; Wed 25 Aug 14:15

Only Angels Have Wings

Sat 7 Aug 12:00; Tue 24 Aug 14:15; Tue 31 Aug 20:30

A Farewell to Arms

Sun 8 Aug 12:20; Fri 20 Aug 14:30; Wed 25 Aug 18:00

(+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-large)

Matewan

Tue 10 Aug 14:15; Sun 15 Aug 18:20; Sat 21 Aug 12:20

Cutter's Way

Wed 11 Aug 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-large); Tue 17 Aug 14:30; Fri 20 Aug 20:50; Fri 27 Aug 20:50

The New World

Thu 12 Aug 14:30; Sun 22 Aug 12:00

Big Wednesday

Thu 19 Aug 17:50; Sun 29 Aug 18:10

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