



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

Howard Hawks' marvellous musical comedy, based on Anita Loos' novel about a pair of gold-digging cabaret artists raising the temperatures of various lamentable males on a transatlantic liner, boasts supremely imaginative song-and-dance set-pieces (shot in sumptuous Technicolor), and unforgettable performances from Monroe and Russell. Truffaut praised its 'pitiless' intelligence, its sense of the absurd and its tendency towards excess.

bfi.org.uk

Before even the credit titles can appear, Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell arrive to a blast of music at screen centre from behind a black curtain, in matching orange-red outfits that sizzle the screen covered with spangles, topped with feathers to look at one another, toss white ermines towards the camera and out of frame and sing robustly in unison. As electrifying as the opening of any Hollywood movie that comes to mind, this jazzy materialisation so catches us by surprise that we are scarcely aware of the scene's fleeting modulations as the dynamic duo makes it through a single chorus. The black curtain changes to a lurid blue, then a loud purple; the two women twice exchange their positions on stage while gradually dancing down a few steps; and the complex flurry of gestures they make towards each other – all gracefully dovetailed into Jack Cole's deft choreography – makes the spectator feel assaulted by them as a team as well as individually: a double threat.

This opening to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is just the first in a series of rude shocks. The second comes only moments later – after the credits have appeared over the same stage curtain and an off-screen choral version of 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend' (in a passage of relative respite, during which we're shuttled through no less than seven more garish colour changes) when, after 'Little Rock' resumes, the film cuts from Monroe singing solo to a reverse angle of a tuxedo-clad Tommy Noonan watching, waving and wanly blowing a kiss from a cabaret table. The lumpy, passive, decisively unheroic presence of Noonan in the shot – as the film viewer's uninvited surrogate, as a neuter/neutral surface off which the dynamism of Monroe is allowed to ricochet creates a dialectical montage of collision, like lightning striking a plateful of mush, as jolting in its way as the first apparition of Monroe and Russell.

Henceforth, all Howard Hawks' cards are on the table. The viewer is warned that the unbridled spectacle of his two female stars and the flabby repose of male reaction shots comprise the dialectical limits of this film's cartoon universe, and the only equals to be seen anywhere will be the two stars themselves. Indeed, in a world where competition and corruption are taken for granted, their non-competitive friendship forms a united front which is the film's only moral centre.

If we pause, finally, to consider the words of their song, the notion of spiritual kinship becomes even more striking when we realise that they're assuming

precisely the same identity. They begin as ‘two little girls from Little Rock’ who ‘lived on the wrong side of the tracks.’ But after Monroe takes over to describe how, after ‘someone’ broke her heart in Little Rock and she ‘up and left the pieces there,’ she eventually drifted to New York with a more hardened view of men and what she wanted from them, Russell promptly becomes the ‘I’ in the same narrative: ‘Now one of these days in my fancy clothes/I’m going back home to punch the nose,’ before they end in unison, ‘Of the one who broke my heart ... in Little Rock.’

In effect, though neither Lorelei Lee (Monroe) nor Dorothy Shaw (Russell) has yet been introduced as a character, the movie is already offering both as Lorelei the gold digger. If we check back to Anita Loos’ 1925 flapper novel which provided the original source material, written in the form of Lorelei’s diary, we discover that she’s the only one who comes from Little Rock, and her departure is precipitated specifically by shooting an unfaithful lover. Yet with a magical transmutation made possible by musicals, the movie Lorelei is accorded not only a softer centre but a spiritual essence multiplied by two, and distributed equally to Dorothy.

Hawks is famous as the director who never once deigned to film a flashback, and the pasts with which he furnishes his characters before their screen appearances are generally scanty. Sometimes this involves an unhappy love affair, as in *Only Angels Have Wings* and *Rio Bravo*; here it is dispensed with as quickly as possible, vaguely to motivate Lorelei’s gold-digging, and then just as quickly dropped so that the rest of the movie can bask in the immanence of a continuous present tense. The thing to stress is that the absence of any narrative discontinuity between song and story makes the numbers a form of being for both characters rather than a form of acting; and within this being, Dorothy is quite willing to assume or share Lorelei’s identity, without warning, explanation or regret.

While Hawks’ only pure musical might conceivably be the most popular of his movies today, critics on the whole tend to be confounded by it. Treated only marginally in books devoted to the director, it has received attention more recently from feminist writers, who often disagree about essential characteristics. For Maureen Turin (‘Gentlemen Consume Blondes’, *Wide Angle*, No 1), it is sexist, racist and colonialist; for Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca (‘Text and Pre-Text: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*’, *Film Reader*, No 5), it is jubilantly feminist and, at least by implication, proto-lesbian. Molly Haskell (‘Howard Hawks’ in *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*), no less persuasively, finds it ‘as close to satire as Hawks’ films ever get on the nature (and perversion) of sexual relations in America, particularly in the mammary-mad 50s.’

Like the blind men grasping different parts of the elephant, each of these writers is on to something – which helps to explain why the movie manages to accommodate some of the viewpoints and fantasies of heterosexuals and homosexuals of both genders. If doubts remain (as with Robin Wood, Gerald Mast, Leland Pogue and Donald Willis in their Hawks books), these mainly have to do with the lacklustre male leads, Noonan and Elliott Reid. But Richard Dyer in *Stars* goes further and, in judicious detail, finds incoherence at the very heart of the film, in the figure of Lorelei as played by Monroe: ‘a quite massive disjunction’ between the innocence of Monroe’s image and the calculation of Lorelei’s character. ‘This is not a question of Lorelei/Monroe being one thing one moment and another the next, but of her being simultaneously polar opposites.’

In so far as Lorelei/Monroe is perceived as an isolated character, Dyer’s point is irrefutable. But seen as an integral function in a diabolical machine that also incorporates Russell, Noonan and Reid, she projects a coherence and legibility that is as sharply defined as theirs. In fact, the movie’s innate capacity to suggest readability and unreadability, feminism and sexism, optimism and pessimism, beauty and grotesquerie at one and the same time makes it the ideal capitalist product, malleable to every consumer need: a distillation of Hollywood which is also a parody of same, a calculated/innocent excess of effect which rewards characters and spectators equally so that everybody gets what they think they want.

Central to the achievement of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is the extraordinary rapport between Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe, which constantly enhances the interaction between Dorothy and Lorelei. This notion of documentary imposed over fiction is related to Hawks’ flair for instilling a relaxed atmosphere on his sets.

It is worth noting, therefore, that Monroe and Russell actually became friends while working on *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* – despite the fact that Russell was paid \$200,000 for her part (and got top billing), while Monroe, on her Fox salary and not yet a star, got only \$500 a week. Hawks once explained their unusual ‘chemistry’ as screen presences by describing Monroe as a fantasy and Russell as ‘real’.

Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1984-85

GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES

Directed by: Howard Hawks
©/Produced and Released by: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation
Produced by: Sol C. Siegel
Assistant Director: Paul Helmick
Screen Play by: Charles Lederer
Based on the musical comedy by: Joseph Fields, Anita Loos
[Play] Presented on the stage by: Herman Levin, Oliver Smith
Director of Photography: Harry J. Wild
Technicolor Colour Consultant: Leonard Doss
Special Photographic Effects: Ray Kellogg
Film Editor: Hugh S. Fowler
Art Direction: Lyle Wheeler, Joseph C. Wright
Set Decorations: Claude Carpenter
Costumes Designed by: Travilla
Wardrobe Direction: Charles Le Maire
Makeup Artist: Ben Nye
Colour by: Technicolor
Music and Lyrics by: Jule Styne, Leo Robin
Musical Direction: Lionel Newman
Vocal Direction: Eliot Daniel
Orchestration: Herbert Spencer, Earle Hagen, Bernard Mayers
Choreography by: Jack Cole
Sound: E. Clayton Ward, Roger Heman
Sound System: Western Electric

Cast

Jane Russell (*Dorothy Shaw*)
Marilyn Monroe (*Lorelei Lee*)
Charles Coburn (*Sir Francis Beekman*)
Elliott Reid (*Ernie Malone*)
Tommy Noonan (*Gus Esmond*)
George Winslow (*Henry Spofford III*)
Marcel Dalio (*magistrate*)
Taylor Holmes (*Gus Esmond Sr*)
Norma Varden (*Lady Beekman*)

uncredited
Henri Letondal (*Grotier*)
Leo Mostovoy (*Philippe*)
Alex Frazer (*Pritchard*)
Harry Carey Jr (*Winslow*)
George Davis (*cab driver*)
Alphonse Martell (*Louie, headwaiter*)
Jimmie Moultrie, Freddie Moultrie (*boy dancers*)
Peter Camlin (*policeman*)
Jean Del Val (*ship’s captain*)
Ray Montgomery (*Peters*)
Alvy Moore (*Anderson*)
Robert Nichols (*Evans*)
Charles Tannen (*Ed*)
James Young (*Stevens*)
Charles de Ravenne (*purser*)
John Close (*coach*)
William Cabanne (*Sims*)
Phil Sylvestre (*steward*)
Jack Chefe, John Hedloe
Alfred Paix (*Pierre*)
Rex Willenz (*court clerk*)
Rolfe Sedan (*waiter*)
Robert Foulk, Ralph Peters (*passport officials*)
Jimmy Saung, George Chakiris, Matt Mattox, Ralph Beaumont,
George Dee (*dancers*)
Robert Fuller (*man*)
Harry Seymour (*captain of waiters*)
Jamie Russell (*athlete*)
Sam Harris (*old spectator*)

USA 1953©
91 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes
Sat 8 Jan 16:00, Thu 13 Jan 18:10, Mon 17 Jan 18:20

Ordet (The Word)
Sun 9 Jan 13:20, Tue 18 Jan 20:30

Smiles of a Summer Night
Sun 9 Jan 16:00, Thu 20 Jan 20:50, Tue 25 Jan 18:10

Bigger Than Life
Mon 10 Jan 14:30, Wed 19 Jan 18:05 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large), Wed 26 Jan 20:50

La Grande Illusion
Tue 11 Jan 18:15, Sun 16 Jan 12:40

Citizen Kane
Tue 11 Jan 17:50, Thu 27 Jan 18:00

Casque d’or
Wed 12 Jan 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by film critic and historian Pamela Hutchinson), Sun 23 Jan 13:10

Twelve Angry Men
Fri 14 Jan 14:40, Mon 24 Jan 18:20, Fri 28 Jan 18:20

Letter from an Unknown Woman
Sat 15 Jan 15:40, Mon 31 Jan 20:45

Shadow of a Doubt
Sat 22 Jan 12:10, Tue 25 Jan 14:30

Rome, Open City (Roma, città aperta)
Wed 26 Jan 18:00 (+ intro by lecturer and writer Dr Julia Wagner), Sat 29 Jan 13:00

Les Enfants terribles
Sun 30 Jan 15:15

NEW RELEASES

Titane
From Sat 1 Jan

West Side Story
From Sat 1 Jan

Boiling Point
From Fri 7 Jan

Licorice Pizza
From Thu 13 Jan

Memoria
From Fri 14 Jan

Parallel Mothers (Madres paralelas)
From Fri 28 Jan

THE ANTOINE DOINEL CYCLE

The 400 Blows (Les Quatre cents coups)
From Fri 7 Jan

Antoine et Colette (from L’Amour à vingt ans) + Stolen Kisses (Baisers volés)
Sat 1 Jan 17:50, Tue 11 Jan 20:35, Sat 15 Jan 12:10, Sun 23 Jan 15:30

Bed and Board (Domicile conjugale)
Mon 3 Jan 13:00, Thu 13 Jan 20:45, Wed 19 Jan 14:30

Love on the Run (L’Amour en fuite)
Wed 5 Jan 20:40, Sat 15 Jan 15:30, Mon 31 Jan 20:40

THE RENOIR TRUFFAUT

Une belle fille comme moi (A Gorgeous Kid like Me)
Sat 1 Jan 20:40, Tue 4 Jan 20:40, Sat 22 Jan 18:10

Day for Night (La Nuit américaine)
Sun 2 Jan 18:30, Fri 7 Jan 18:10, Sat 15 Jan 20:45, Tue 25 Jan 20:45

L’Enfant sauvage (The Wild Child) + Une histoire d’eau
Mon 3 Jan 18:10, Mon 10 Jan 20:40, Mon 24 Jan 18:10

The Last Metro (Le Dernier metro)
Sat 8 Jan 17:10, Fri 21 Jan 17:50, Sat 22 Jan 20:30, Wed 26 Jan 20:30

Pocket Money (L’Argent de poche)
Sat 8 Jan 20:55, Sat 29 Jan 18:00

The Man Who Loved Women (L’Homme qui aimait les femmes)
Sun 9 Jan 18:20, Mon 24 Jan 20:40

BFI Course: François Truffaut
Every Tue from 18 Jan-22 Feb 18:30-20:30

FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT: FOR THE LOVE OF FILMS

For the Love of People... The Films of François Truffaut
Mon 19 Jan 18:20

François Truffaut’s Cinematic and Literary Influences
Sat 29 Jan 12:00-16:30

Seniors’ Free Talk: François Truffaut on TV
Mon 10 Jan 11:30

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at **bfi.org.uk/join**

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on **player.bfi.org.uk**

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at **www.bfi.org.uk/signup**