



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

His Girl Friday

Howard Hawks describes the origins of *His Girl Friday* in one of his favourite and most consistent anecdotes: ‘I was going to prove to somebody one night that *The Front Page* had the finest modern dialogue that had been written, and I asked a girl to read Hildy’s part and I read the editor and I stopped and I said, “Hell, it’s better between a girl and a man than between two men.” and I called Ben Hecht and I said “What would you think of changing it so that Hildy is a girl?” And he said, “I think it’s a great idea,” and he came out and we did it.’

Behind the laconic delivery, the story gives various clues as to why *His Girl Friday* is the Hawks film in which everything seems to work as it should. First of all, the script does indeed build cinematically on the overlapping dialogue of the play, in which the reporters provide a chorus to ongoing speech and action. Sound and speech orchestrate the changing rhythms of the story so that what happens on the sound-track demands as much attention as the image. Second, as the male Hildy’s character is feminised and as his relationship with Walter is heterosexualised, the story comes to revolve openly around typical Hawks themes to do with same-sex friendship, sex roles and their reversals. Finally, these Hawksian additions and insertions are carried by the tightly plotted Hecht and MacArthur original. Because he valued great scenes and good gags with immediate screen punch over coherent narrative construction, Hawks can seem lackadaisical about the way the bits of his movies fit together. How story is sacrificed to screen ‘attraction’ in *The Big Sleep*, for instance, is well known. But *His Girl Friday* profits from the economy of the original plot and, using very nearly continuous narrative time, builds up a situation and a suspense which survive outside interference.

It was Charles Lederer, Hecht and MacArthur’s young friend and admirer, who turned *The Front Page* into *His Girl Friday*. As well as generally overhauling the script, he wrote the opening scene between Hildy and Walter and added the incidents in which, like a series of running gags, Walter has Bruce arrested and jailed. The original play (and its first film version directed by Louis Milestone in 1932) offered Hawks a lot of material he liked. Hecht and MacArthur’s *The Front Page* has Hildy torn between journalism, with its professionalism and inbuilt excitement, and ‘ordinary’ life, love and domesticity; underlying the conflict is an ethical choice. The play’s Hildy wants to escape from an unscrupulous and exploitative profession that has no regard for truth or human feelings, that plays along with political corruption rather than exposing it. While there is good Hawksian material here, *His Girl Friday* plays down the ethical elements in the conflict so that this Hildy is really choosing between professional satisfaction and excitement and provincial living death. If the spectators of *The Front Page* sigh with relief when Hildy leaves with Peggy, the spectators of *His Girl Friday* feel equally relieved when Hildy stays with Walter. For Hawks, cinema is inseparable from the excitement and energy of movement. Ralph Bellamy’s Bruce is the inverse of energy and everytime we see him behind bars the image suggests the constraints awaiting Hildy in Albany. (It would, perhaps, follow that if Hildy had turned her back on Walter, she would have metaphorically turned her back on her own celluloid existence). While Hawks certainly de-politicises *The Front Page*,

His Girl Friday throws interesting light on the much debated issues of Hawks' women and 'love affairs between men' (as he described the relationship between Victor MacLaglan and Robert Armstrong in *A Girl in Every Port*, (1928). Aside from the actual question of gender, Hawks' stories tend to revolve around either a carefully orchestrated double act (mainly the comedies) or a professional group with a charismatic central figure (mainly the action films). His most successful movies integrate the two, but only *His Girl Friday* manages to combine a man/woman central double act with the professional group milieu. While most action genres relegate the woman to the margins, good only, if 'good enough', for romance, the female Hildy is a perfectly credible professional journalist, equal in the male group.

More than any other Hollywood director, Hawks was prepared to take male friendship to the edge of eroticism, enjoying transvestite jokes from the early days of *Fig Leaves* (1926) and *Cradle Snatchers* (1927) to the more serious homoerotic undertones of, for instance, *Dawn Patrol* or *Red River*. He would obviously have been attracted to the relationship between Hildy Johnson and Walter Burns in *The Front Page*. When he found that Hildy's part was 'better with a girl' he arguably found a way to masquerade the love affair between two men. Is his Hildy Johnson, then, simply a man in drag? Certainly, Rosalind Russell's performance, with all its energy and sparkle, is one of the least overtly erotic of all Hawks' heroines. On the other hand, there is a sexual intensity in the Hildy/Walter relationship. Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell convey the physical intimacy of once-married couples, but, even more, the perfection of their performance together creates the kind of erotic charge that Hawks needed to energise the screen. Unlike the insolent sexuality of the Bacall/Bogart seduction, the Grant/Russell double act conveys a truly equal and already experienced sexual relation. There is no reason, of course, why this heterosexual rapport need not affect readings of homoerotic relations between the heroes of Hawks films. The ambivalence adds to the interest.

His Girl Friday was the third of the three films Hawks did with Grant in straight succession and it shows in a performance that is polished to effortlessness. While Rosalind Russell has to be able to deliver lines at breakneck speed and keep up with the rhythm of repartee, Grant uses a vast range of vocal effects, sometimes culminating in a characteristic yelp when words fail him. He can, without a hint of hamming, slip into mime (a couple of paces with his hands behind his back, for instance, evokes the expectant father and reporter, Sweeney, he's invented who's unable to cover the Williams story). Hawks likes his actors to play to each other and keep up a rhythm and pace that is matched by the editing of the film itself. But at the moment when Walter realises that he has really lost Hildy, at the line 'I'm getting married tomorrow', Grant falls silent, facing the camera. Only his hands move slightly as though something was slipping through their grasp until, still without a word, he puts a carnation in his button hole.

The scene in which Walter wins Hildy back is also unusual for Hawks. It is shot in a single take, over about two minutes of screen time. The two move like dancers around the reporters' table between Hildy's two poles of attraction: the door leading to her marriage to Bruce and the desk which contains her story on Earl Williams. Although a lot of this scene's dialogue comes straight from *The Front Page*, the action, the physical relation between the two of them and the mise-en-scène are of infinitely more significance than the words. In the play, this scene allows Hildy to finish the Earl Williams story with a good conscience. In *His Girl Friday* formal, cinematic, qualities

overwhelm content. The long take is not an Ophulsian display, but a quiet complicity between camera and character. The camera follows Walter and waits while he makes his bid, playing Hildy like a precious fish on a line. But the shot ends, not with Hildy capitulating, but with her taking control. She shuts Walter up and starts work on her story.

Perhaps, with *Bringing Up Baby*, (1938) *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) and *His Girl Friday* (1940), Cary Grant managed to make a complete composite of a Hawksian man. The women in these films are, in their very different ways, wonderful. But Hollywood’s inability to come up with women stars who are erotically female but masculine in style and who could perform with total professionalism obviously bothered Hawks. In the end, he did what he could with Lauren Bacall and she was probably lucky to be animated on the screen by the love of an old pro. Only Frances Farmer, who worked with Hawks immediately before this cycle (*Come and Get It*, 1936) might have had the qualities he was looking for. But she didn’t like Hollywood.

Laura Mulvey, *Sight & Sound*, March 1997

HIS GIRL FRIDAY

Directed by: Howard Hawks
©: Columbia Pictures Corporation
Production Company: Columbia Pictures Corporation
Presented by: Columbia Pictures Corporation
Screen Play by: Charles Lederer
From the play The Front Page *by:* Ben Hecht, Charles MacArthur
As Produced by: Jed Harris
Director of Photography: Joseph Walker
Film Editor: Gene Havlick
Art Direction: Lionel Banks
Gowns by: Kalloch
Musical Director: M.W. Stoloff
Sound System: Western Electric Mirrophonic

uncredited
Producer: Howard Hawks
Assistant Director: Cliff Broughton
Sound: Lodge Cunningham

Cast

Cary Grant (*Walter Burns*)
Rosalind Russell (*Hildy Johnson*)
Ralph Bellamy (*Bruce Baldwin*)
Gene Lockhart (*Sheriff Peter B. Hartwell*)
Helen Mack (*Mollie Malloy*)
Porter Hall (*Murphy*)
Ernest Truex (*Roy V. Bensinger*)
Cliff Edwards (*Endicott*)
Clarence Kolb (*Fred, the mayor*)
Roscoe Karns (*McCue*)
Frank Jenks (*Wilson*)
Regis Toomey (*Sanders*)
Abner Biberman (*Diamond Louie*)
Frank Orth (*Duffy*)
John Qualen (*Earl Williams*)
Alma Kruger (*Mrs Baldwin*)
Billy Gilbert (*Joe Pettibone*)
Pat West (*Warden Cooley*)
Edwin Maxwell (*Dr Max J. Egelhoffer*)

USA 1939©
92 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

All the President’s Men
Fri 1 Jul 20:25; Tue 5 Jul 18:00; Sat 9 Jul 17:45
Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)
Sat 2 Jul 11:50 (with live piano accompaniment); Fri 22 Jul 18:30 and
Mon 25 Jul 20:50 (with Edmund Meisel score)
Pandora’s Box (Die Büchse der Pandora)
Sat 2 Jul 15:10 and Sat 16 Jul 12:20 (with Peer Raben score); Sun 31 Jul
15:20 (with live piano accompaniment)
Theorem (Teorema)
Sat 2 Jul 20:50; Mon 4 Jul 20:50; Tue 26 Jul 18:00
Rome Open City (Roma città aperta)
Sun 3 Jul 13:10; Mon 18 Jul 18:20; Wed 27 Jul 20:40
To Sleep with Anger
Wed 6 Jul 18:15 (+ intro); Fri 8 Jul 18:10
Day of Wrath (Vredens Dag)
Thu 7 Jul 18:15; Mon 11 Jul 20:30

Blue Velvet
Thu 7 Jul 20:40; Sun 17 Jul 18:30; Fri 29 Jul 20:40
Matewan
Fri 8 Jul 20:25; Tue 19 Jul 18:00
Manhunter
Fri 8 Jul 20:40; Thu 21 Jul 18:20; Sat 23 Jul 20:40
His Girl Friday
Sun 10 Jul 16:50; Wed 20 Jul 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew,
Programmer-at-Large); Thu 28 Jul 20:45
The Scarlet Empress
Wed 13 Jul18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sun
24 Jul 13:20
The Piano
Thu 14 Jul 14:20; Sat 23 Jul 17:50; Sat 30 Jul 11:45
Mandabi (The Money Order)
Fri 15 Jul 20:40; Wed 27 Jul 18:10

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