



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Dance, Girl, Dance

Dance, Girl, Dance

Directed by: Dorothy Arzner

©: RKO Radio Pictures

Presented by: RKO Radio Pictures

Executive Producer: Harry E. Edington

Produced by: Erich Pommer

Assistant Director: James H. Anderson

Screenplay by: Tess Slesinger, Frank Davis

Story by: Vicki Baum

Director of Photography: Russell Metty

Special Effects by: Vernon L. Walker

Edited by: Robert Wise

Art Director: Van Nest Polglase

Associate: Al Herman

Set Decorations by: Darrell Silvera

Gowns by: Edward Stevenson

Musical Director: Edward Ward

Dances staged by: Ernst Matray

Recorded by: Hugh McDowell Jr

uncredited

Director of Photography: Joseph August

Cast:

Maureen O'Hara (*Judy O'Brien*)

Louis Hayward (*Jaes 'Jimmy' Harris Jr*)

Lucille Ball (*Bubbles/Tiger Lily White*)

Virginia Field (*Elinor Harris*)

Ralph Bellamy (*Steve Adams*)

Mary Carlisle (*Sally*)

Katharine Alexander (*Miss Olmstead*)

Edward Brophy (*Dwarfie Humblewinger*)

Walter Abel (*judge*)

Harold Huber (*Hoboken gent*)

Maria Ouspenskaya (*Madame Basilova*)

Ernest Truex (*bailey 1*)

Chester Clute (*bailey 2*)

Lorraine Krueger (*Dolly*)

Lola Jensen (*Daisy*)

Emma Dunn (*Mrs Simpson*)

Sidney Blackmer (*Puss in Boots*)

Vivian Fay (*the ballerina*)

Ludwig Stossel (*Caesar*)

Erno Verebes (*Fitch*)

uncredited

Stanley Blystone (*plainclothesman at Palais Royale*)

Wade Boteler (*policeman at Palais Royale*)

Paul E. Burns (*reporter calling Elinor*)

Leo Cleary (*court clerk*)

Clyde Cook (*Claude, Harris' valet*)

Ray Cooke (*reporter in hallway*)

Gino Corrado (*Gino, Club Ferdinand waiter*)

Kernan Cripps (*night court bailiff*)

Jay Eaton (*nightclub patron*)

Bess Flowers

(*woman with Elinor at Club Ferdinand*)

Paul Fung (*Chinese waiter*)

Lew Harvey (*reporter at Taxi*)

Lew Hicks (*grumpy man in elevator*)

Donald Kerr (*photographer in hallway*)

Milton Kibbee (*reporter at Taxi*)

Jeanne Lafayette (*Nanette, Elinor's maid*)

Robert McKenzie (*Otto, the fat man*)

Anthony Merlo (*head waiter*)

Frank Mills (*man booing Judy*)

Bert Moorhouse (*Jimmy's friend in nightclub*)

Pat Moriarty (*night court guard*)

Philip Morris (*policeman*)

Barry Norton (*disapproving theatre patron*)

William O'Brien (*man in audience at Burlesk House*)

Robert Emmett O'Connor

(*plainclothesman at Palais Royale*)

Jack O'Shea (*patron of Palais Royale*)

Lee Phelps (*plainclothesman at Palais Royale*)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Dance, Girl, Dance is, today, the best-known of Dorothy Arzner's films, and it has become something of a classic in feminist film studies. Since 1970s film theory developed an analysis of cinema based on the way in which the look functioned as the quintessence of power – cinematic and narrative, as well as sexual – the scene which has drawn the most attention in the film occurs when a female performer turns to her audience and tells them how she sees them. This scene in Arzner's film functioned both as a summary of the limitations of the classical Hollywood cinema (where woman was the object of the male look) and an indication of what would be unique and specific to women's cinema (a 'return' of the look, and an attendant critique of the assumptions of classical film narrative).

The plot of *Dance, Girl, Dance* concerns the differing paths to success for Bubbles (Lucille Ball) and Judy (Maureen O'Hara), both members of a dance troupe led by Madame Basilova (Maria Ouspenskaya). The dance troupe performs vaudeville-style numbers in bars and nightclubs, much to the chagrin of Basilova (who bemoans her status as a 'flesh peddler'). Bubbles has 'oomph,' a kind of dancer's version of 'it,' and eventually she leaves the troupe and enthusiastically pursues a career as 'Tiger Lily White.' Judy, in contrast, is a serious student of ballet, and the protégée of Basilova. However, it is Bubbles who gets the jobs, and she arranges for Judy to be hired as her 'stooge,' i.e., as a classical dancer who performs in the middle of Bubbles's act, and thus primes the audience to demand more of Bubbles. Hence two radically different modes of performance, burlesque and ballet; and two radically different approaches to one's career, exploitation versus artistic self-expression, are juxtaposed in the film. One of the achievements of the film is the fact that while Bubbles and Judy embody different poles of the opposition, neither woman is villainised in the process, surprising in terms of Bubbles.

Arzner was brought in as director of *Dance, Girl, Dance* as a replacement for another director, and she immediately made changes in the script, which had been adapted by Tess Slesinger and Frank Davis from a story by novelist Vicki Baum (best known in Hollywood circles as the author of the novel *Grand Hotel*). The most significant change made by Arzner was to transform the head of the dance troupe from a man to a woman, from 'Basiloff' to 'Basilova'. The crucial change in gender refocuses the entire film. In the original screenplay, Steve Adams becomes a substitute for Basiloff, with paternal authority passed from one man to another, in a conventional female oedipal drama. In the original script, with Basiloff in charge of Judy's destiny, the relationship between dancer and manager is entirely paternalistic, and the major movement is the change in Judy from one kind of tutelage (Russian, classical) to another (American, modern). The paternalistic effect remains a constant from one 'master' to another, and the script presents a female oedipal drama, in which the romantic figure replaces the father figure. In Arzner's version, the female oedipal element is subverted; Basilova may be a nurturing figure vis-à-vis Judy, but she is hardly maternal in the same stereotypical way that Basiloff is paternal. To be sure, Basilova is supportive and encouraging of her dancers; but with her slicked-back hair, necktie, and overall butch appearance, she

Paul Phillips (*reporter*)
Paul Renay (*head waiter*)
Dewey Robinson (*Palais Royale manager*)
Ralph Sanford (*taxi driver*)
Ruth Seeley (*Dimples*)
Lee Shumway (*policeman*)
Harry Tenbrook (*night court spectator*)
Harry Tyler (*Bailey Brothers' barker*)
Lee 'Lasses' White
(*Bailey Brothers' stage manager*)
Thelma Woodruff (*Mary*)
Marjorie Woodworth (*Jane*)
USA 1940©
90 mins

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confuses gender expectations. In particular, Basilova gazes longingly at Judy when she practices a new dance, thus appropriating the desire that traditionally and stereotypically in Hollywood films is reserved for men.

This is an example of how, in the film, relations between and among women are every bit – if not more – important than the entry of the female characters into the world of 'coupledom' and heterosexual romance. And in the process, a figure from Arzner's own past is suggested – the name 'Basilova' is surprisingly evocative of 'Nazimova,' both of them Russian, both of them émigrées, both of them dancers. Basilova seems to be a strongly condensed figure of Nazimova, of Marion Morgan, and of Arzner herself. Indeed, when Basilova is pictured with Judy, the effect is strikingly similar to the numerous publicity photographs of Arzner pictured with female stars. Not only do Arzner and Basilova dress alike; they both exchange looks of desire and longing with their more 'femme' companions.

Hence, the change from Basiloff to Basilova brings relationships between women centre stage, and takes away much of the metaphoric baggage of Judy's budding relationship with Steve Adams. The addition of Basilova is interesting in other ways, as well. As the most explicitly butch female character in any of Arzner's films, it is easy to see a parallel between the dance mistress and Arzner herself, not only in terms of their 'looks', but also as supposedly 'masculinised' figures, attempting to function in a world made to the measure of flesh peddlers. Throughout Arzner's work, contrasts between and among women, whether butch or femme, function productively, not in terms of absolute oppositions.

This, the most successful of Arzner's films, is at once her most personal – personal in the sense that the world of performance, as represented in the film, is broad enough to include Bubbles and Judy and Basilova. Additionally, the film suggests the costs and risks of feminine performance, for when Basilova dons a frilly hat to accompany Judy to her audition with the ballet company, she is immediately killed when she steps out into the street and is hit by a car. In other words, as soon as she assumes a feminine attribute, presumably in order to be more 'presentable', she dies. In *Christopher Strong*, heterosexuality is lethal; in *Dance, Girl, Dance*, femininity is lethal, at least for Basilova.

In the context of 1970s film theory, this kind of assessment of Arzner's work and of the feminist project in film was enormously important. Looking back on that decade, it is as if the primary task was to claim the sexual politics of the look as crucial to any understanding of the classical Hollywood cinema and its alternatives. With the privilege of hindsight, as interpretations of this scene suggest, the understandings of 1970s feminist film theory seem momentarily important, yet limited by two assumptions: of heterosexuality as a master code of meaning and representation, and of visual pleasure as a bad object. Arzner's films in general, and *Dance, Girl, Dance* in particular, suggest both the importance of the theoretical claims of 1970s film theory and their limitations. In its celebration of women and performance, of female friendship, and of a diversity of female representation, *Dance, Girl, Dance* reminds us, always, that there are women on both sides of the stage, and that they take pleasure in looking at each other.

Judith Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner* (Indiana University Press, 1994)