



**RAZOR SHARP: THE FABULOUS WOMEN OF HOWARD HAWKS**

# Ball of Fire

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*Directed by:* Howard Hawks

©: Samuel Goldwyn

*Presented by:* Samuel Goldwyn

*Released through:* RKO Radio Pictures, Inc.

*Produced by:* Samuel Goldwyn

*Assistant Director:* William Tummel

*Screen Play by:* Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder

*From an original story by:* Billy Wilder,

Thomas Monroe

*Photography:* Gregg Toland

*Film Editor:* Daniel Mandell

*Art Direction:* Perry Ferguson

*Associate Art Director:* McClure Capps

*Set Decorations:* Howard Bristol

*Miss Barbara Stanwyck's Costumes:* Edith Head

*Music:* Alfred Newman

*Sound Technician:* Frank Maher

*Sound System:* Western Electric Mirrophonic

### Cast:

Gary Cooper (*Professor Bertram Potts*)

Barbara Stanwyck (*Sugarpuss O'Shea*)

Oscar Homolka (*Professor Gurkakoff*)

Dana Andrews (*Joe Lilac*)

Dan Duryea (*Duke Pastrami*)

Henry Travers (*Professor Jerome*)

S.Z. Sakall (*Professor Magenbruch*)

Tully Marshall (*Professor Robinson*)

Leonid Kinskey (*Professor Quintana*)

Richard Haydn (*Professor Oddly*)

Aubrey Mather (*Professor Peagram*)

Allen Jenkins (*garbage man*)

Gene Krupa and His Orchestra (*themselves*)

Ralph Peters (*Asthma Anderson*)

Kathleen Howard (*Miss Bragg*)

Mary Field (*Miss Totten*)

Charles Lane (*Larsen*)

Charles Arnt (*McNeary*)

Elisha Cook Jr (*waiter*)

Alan Rhein (*'Horseface'*)

Eddie Foster (*pinstripe*)

Aldrich Bowker (*justice of the peace*)

Addison Richards (*district attorney*)

Pat West (*bum*)

Kenneth Howell (*college boy*)

Tommy Ryan (*newsboy*)

Tim Ryan (*motor cop*)

Will Lee (*'Benny, the Creep'*)

### uncredited

Otto Hoffman (*stage doorman*)

Ed Mundy (*spieler*)

Geraldine Fissette (*hula dancer*)

June Horne, Ethelreda Leopold (*nursemaids in park*)

Walter Shumway, George Barton (*garbagemen*)

Merrilee Lannon, Doria Caron (*girls in subway*)

Helen Seamon, Catherine Henderson (*college girls*)

Jack Perry (*fighting bum*)

Lorraine Miller (*girl in cafe*)

Mildred Morris (*chorus girl*)

Francis Sayles (*taxi driver*)

Gerald Pierce (*delivery boy*)

Chet De Vito (*toll keeper*)

Pat Flaherty, George Sherwood (*deputies*)

Del Lawrence (*Irish gardener*)

Eddy Chandler, Lee Phelps, Kenneth Christy,

Dick Rush, Oscar Chalkee Williams (*cops*)

Johnnie Morris (*clerk for justice of peace*)

Edward Clark (*motor court proprietor*)

USA 1941© 112 mins

A BFI National Archive print

Snow White trades purity for one-liners and innuendo in this madcap comedic update. While hiding from the police, Sugarpuss O'Shea educates a group of stuffy professors on the ways of the world while assisting on their encyclopaedia of slang. Barbara Stanwyck's vibrancy lights up the screen as she runs rings around her co-stars, investing warmth and humour in every knowing glance.

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*Ball of Fire* roots its comic impetus more firmly in the richer, older, more affectionate territory of Manhattan folklore. The story, a tightly-knit amalgam of toughness, crackle and exclusively American sentimentality, tells of the impact of a boogie-woogie singer (Barbara Stanwyck) and her gangster lover on eight learned professors – seven likeable character actors and Gary Cooper – engaged in compiling an encyclopaedia. Having dealt with *Saltpetre* and *Sex*, they break their record of nine years' cloistered research by undertaking a first-hand investigation into Slang. The contrast between a confident, cynical, violent underworld and the deferential society of the common-room was never new; but the execution here is sparkling. Inspired by what must have seemed a piquant variation on his theme of the all-male community, Hawks directs with a faultless sense of timing and surprise. The robust, picturesque script by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder assimilates a number of intramural jokes into the plot fabric, notably the roaring machine-gun intervention in Stanwyck's unwilling wedding to her gangster, identical to a shoot-up scene in *Scarface* and here given an extra twist by having the finger of the meekest of the professors on the trigger. The sets, including the *Magnificent Ambersons*-type house where the professors work, are impeccably detailed; the groupings beautifully composed, lit, and shot in depth by Gregg Toland; indeed the whole thing has all the density necessary to carry its superstructure of fantasy.

Peter John Dyer, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1962

How Joe Lilac is outwitted by the academic team makes a magnificent climax to a film which is amusing for two hours on end. The plot is ordinary but not the direction, the dialogue or the acting, all of which are in the first rank. The professors are a joy and Gary Cooper makes Potts as attractive as he is inarticulate, while Barbara Stanwyck scintillates as Sugarpuss. The situations are farcical but the result is great comedy.

*Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1942

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit

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Questions/comments? Email [prognotes@bfi.org.uk](mailto:prognotes@bfi.org.uk)