



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. Bensingler*)

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

The screening on Thu 29 Jun will be introduced by Catherine Wheatley, King's College London

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RAZOR SHARP: THE FABULOUS WOMEN OF HOWARD HAWKS

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.

RAZOR SHARP: THE FABULOUS WOMEN OF HOWARD HAWKS

Razor Sharp:

The Hawksian Woman Revisited

Thu 1 Jun 18:15

Twentieth Century

Thu 1 Jun 20:40; Fri 16 Jun 18:30;

Thu 22 Jun 21:00

Barbary Coast

Fri 2 Jun 18:20; Thu 15 Jun 20:40

Bringing Up Baby

Sat 3 Jun 12:00; Mon 19 Jun 20:40;

Fri 23 Jun 18:20

Only Angels Have Wings

Sat 3 Jun 15:45; Thu 15 Jun 14:30;

Tue 27 Jun 17:50

Ball of Fire

Sat 3 Jun 17:55; Tue 20 Jun 20:30

To Have and Have Not

Sun 4 Jun 19:00; Fri 23 Jun 20:40

I Was a Male War Bride

(aka You Can't Sleep Here)

Wed 7 Jun 20:35; Sun 25 Jun 18:30

Rio Bravo

Mon 12 Jun 17:50; Sun 18 Jun 14:30;

Fri 30 Jun 20:20

His Girl Friday

Wed 14 Jun 20:50; Sat 17 Jun 13:30; Thu 29

Jun 18:20 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley,

King's College London)

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

Thu 15 Jun 18:15; Thu 29 Jun 21:00

The Big Sleep

Wed 21 Jun 18:25; Wed 28 Jun 20:45

The Thing from Another World

Sat 24 Jun 18:30; Fri 30 Jun 18:15

Philosophical Screens:

The Philosophy of Marriage: His Girl Friday

Thu 29 Jun 20:15 BFI Reuben Library

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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 effortless. 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 Ophulsiian 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 and Sound*, March 1997