



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

# Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

## **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 Meyers

*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*)

Howard Wendell (*Watson*)

Steven Geray (*hotel manager*)

*uncredited*

Henri Letondal (*Grotier*)

Leo Mostovoy (*Phillippe*)

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*)

Rolf 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

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

## 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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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