



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

# The Big Sleep

## The Big Sleep

*Directed by:* Howard Hawks

*©/Presented by:* Warner Bros.

*Production Company:* First National  
a Howard Hawks production

*Executive Producer:* Jack L. Warner

*Screen Play by:* William Faulkner,  
Leigh Brackett, Jules Furthman

*From the novel by:* Raymond Chandler

*Director of Photography:* Sid Hickox

*Director Special Effects by:* E. Roy Davidson

*Special Effects by:* Warren E. Lynch

*Film Editor:* Christian Nyby

*Art Director:* Carl Jules Weyl

*Set Decorations by:* Fred M. MacLean

*Wardrobe by:* Leah Rhodes

*Makeup Artist:* Perc Westmore

*Music by:* Max Steiner

*Musical Director:* Leo F. Forbstein

*Sound by:* Robert B. Lee

*Sound System:* RCA Sound System

*uncredited*

*Production Manager:* Eric Stacey

*Assistant Directors:* Chuck Hansen,  
Robert Vreeland

*2nd Camera:* Michael Joyce

*Special Effects:* Robert Burks,

Willard Van Enger, William McGann

*Supervising Art Director:* Max Parker

*Orchestral Arrangements:* Simon Bucharoff

*Music Mixer:* David Forrester

*Re-recording/Effects Mixers:*

Gerald W. Alexander, Robert G. Wayne

*Cast:*

Humphrey Bogart (*Philip Marlowe*)

Lauren Bacall (*Vivian Rutledge*)

John Ridgely (*Eddie Mars*)

Martha Vickers (*Carmen Sternwood*)

Dorothy Malone (*woman at ACME bookstore*)

Peggy Knudsen (*Mona Mars*)

Regis Toomey (*Bernie Ohls*)

Charles Waldron (*General Sternwood*)

Charles D. Brown (*Norris the butler*)

Bob Steele (*Canino*)

Elisha Cook Jr (*Harry Jones*)

Louis Jean Heydt (*Joe Brody*)

*uncredited*

Carole Douglas (*librarian*)

Sonia Darrin (*Agnes Lozelle*)

Forbes Murray (*furtive man at Geiger's*)

Tom Rafferty (*Carol Lundgren*)

Theodore Von Eltz (*Arthur Gwynn Geiger*)

Emmett Vogan (*Ed, a deputy*)

Joseph Crehan (*medical examiner*)

Joy Barlowe (*taxi driver*)

Ben Welden (*Pete*)

Tom Fadden (*Sidney*)

Lorraine Miller (*hatcheck girl*)

Shelby Payne (*cigarette girl*)

Jack Chefe (*croupier*)

Kenneth Gibson (*man at roulette table*)

Paul Webber (*Mars's henchman at car park*)

Tanis Chandler (*counter waitress*)

Jack Perry, Wally Walker

(*Mars's henchmen in the alley*)

Trevor Bardette (*Art Huck*)

USA 1946©

114 mins

As the epitome of a Howard Hawks movie, *The Big Sleep* exhibited all the varied facets of his technical dramatic skill. Scenes are edited sharply and economically, designed to give viewers all the necessary information and no more. Frames are composed with similar efficiency, organised around the action, focusing clearly on the characters and the interaction between them. But above all, *The Big Sleep* shows itself to be the quintessential Hawks film by the colour, precision and richness of its dialogue. The rapid fire delivery that had been the basis of the humour of the screwball comedies is mirrored here with greater subtlety of effect. Building on Raymond Chandler's already meaty, witty exchanges, screenwriters William Faulkner, Leigh Brackett and Jules Furthman further enriched the ore; Hawks and his actors refined it.

Like many of Howard Hawks' films, *The Big Sleep* is almost better to listen to than to watch. Hawks was obsessed with gritty, evocative, ironic dialogue. His favourite novelists were, he says, Hemingway, Hammett and Chandler. More than most directors he sought out and employed the most talented screenwriters, many of whom had had, like Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, considerable stage experience. Hawks has explained many times in interviews that he thinks the scene is the basic unit of filmmaking: do the scene well and audiences won't care about the rest. Talking about *The Big Sleep* he once said, 'We made a picture that worked pretty well... and I never figured out what was going on, but I thought the basic thing had *great scenes in it* and it was good entertainment' (my italics). What made those scenes work (and they are numberless: Marlowe and Sternwood in the hothouse, Marlowe and Vivian in his office, Marlowe and Mars at Geiger's house, for example) was the kind of dialogue that was so multi-layered that it could ring ironical changes on itself, at the same time that it was conveying basic information about necessary details of character and plot.

Hawks was very much involved in this process. He made it a sort of game. He has described how he used to work with Hecht and MacArthur, for example: 'We'd sit in a room and we'd work for two hours and then we'd play backgammon for an hour. Then we'd start again and one of us would be one character and one would be another character. We'd read our lines of dialogue and the whole idea was to try and stump other people, to see if they could think of something crazier than you could. And that is the kind of dialogue we used, and the kind that was fun.' When the script was complete, Hecht and MacArthur thought they were finished. Hawks told them, 'We start again tomorrow.' 'On what?' they asked. 'Different ways of saying things.'

These procedures led to the richness and flavour that mark most of Hawks' great films. *The Big Sleep* is no exception: Marlowe's exchange with Mars when he first meets him, his set speech of introduction for General Sternwood, the recurrent refrain with Vivian – indeed, all Bogart's verbal battles with Bacall – all are distilled rhetoric, the kind of dialogue that gets remembered and repeated. It is all carefully planned and polished material: it is the aesthetic focus of the film and it carries it. Outside of the westerns, very few images from Hawks' films are striking; it is the dialogue we remember. More than anyone else, Hawks made 'talkies'. And that is why a Hawks film is more easily enjoyed by inexperienced audiences. You have to learn to watch films to enjoy

## 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

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to the fullest films as intellectually intriguing as Hitchcock's or as visually impressive as Ford's; but all you need is a minimal appreciation of fast language and smart badinage to like a talkie by Howard Hawks.

But what was all that talk about? Hawks is often noted for concentrating on male friendships and avoiding sexual relationships; certainly the early 'war' and gangster films and the later westerns do so, perforce. But at the height of his career Hawks gave us some of the strongest women characters in American movies and, moreover, he placed them in positions of intellectual equality with their male counterparts. That the films are often comedies in which both the male and female leads are made to appear to some extent ridiculous shouldn't prevent us from noticing the balance Hawks achieved.

That sexual equation was most fascinating (and meaningful) in the Bogart-Bacall films. In fact, Hawks felt that the basic premise of *The Big Sleep* was not the mystery, not the figure of the private eye, but the tense and equal relationship between Humphrey Bogart and his 'discovery', Lauren Bacall. The genius of *The Big Sleep* was going to be the character of a woman 'even more insolent than you', he told Bogart.

It worked. Vivian Sternwood Rutledge is self-confident, sardonic and as cynical as Bogart's Marlowe. And Hawks has surrounded her with women foils who re-emphasise this major theme of *The Big Sleep*. Agnes, the front-woman in Geiger's bookstore, is one of the most active and persistent villains of the piece. Forced to work through men, she picks up and then discards first Joe Brody, then Harry Jones. Never, as she complains, can she find anyone but a 'half-smart guy. That's all I ever draw. Never once a guy who's smart all the way round the course. Never once.' In a better world Agnes would be free to do her own deals, but in this one she is forced to find men to act through.

The woman in the bookstore across the street from Geiger's shop is equally forceful, in a more pleasant way. It is she who takes the initiative in her one gem of a scene with Philip Marlowe. 'I see...' she says, deftly removing her glasses, 'you begin to interest me.' She closes up shop as Marlowe breaks out his bottle of rye, and she enjoys the game every bit as much as he does. Even the taxi driver whom Marlowe hires to tail Geiger's car is a woman, and she is expert at her job.

Finally, Carmen is the closest foil to her sister Vivian; she shows us the darker side of the Sternwood character and she does it with considerable panache, never apologising for her actions, which if they were those of a male character would simply be put down to 'sowing some wild oats'.

Within four years after *The Big Sleep* was released, a violent if unconscious backlash set in, and women's roles in Hollywood films still haven't recovered from what we might call the 'Marilyn Monroe syndrome'. Unless we consider *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as wholly ironic, or seize on Paula Prentiss' role in *Man's Favourite Sport*, we have to admit that Hawks mirrored this destructive development just as accurately as he had reflected the rise in power of women's roles in the late 30s and early 40s. Still, *The Big Sleep* remains a gallery of women who are just as 'insolent', just as competent and often just as sublimely amoral as any of the men in the film, which makes it something of a high-water mark for women's roles in Hollywood.

James Monaco, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1974/75