



## PROGRAM NOTES

Volume 27, No.1  
September 12, 1984

### CHRISTOPHER STRONG (1933)

Director: Dorothy Arzner. Producer: David O. Selznick. Screenplay: Zoe Akins from the novel by Gilbert Frankau. Associate Producer: Pandro S. Berman. Photography by Bert Glennon. Technical Advisor: Sir Gerald Grove. Settings by Van Nest Polglase and Charles Kirk. Music Director: Max Steiner. Recorded by Hugh McDowell, Jr. Film Editor: Arthur Roberts. Special Effects: Vernon Walker. Transitions: Slavko Vorkapich. Recorded by RCA Photophone System. Running time: 77 minutes. (*Distributor of tonight's print: Films Incorporated, 733 Green Bay Road, Wilmette, Illinois 60091.*) CAST: Katharine Hepburn (Lady Cynthia Darrington). Colin Clive (Sir Christopher Strong). Billie Burke (Lady Elaine Strong). Helen Chandler (Monica Strong). Ralph Forbes (Harry Rawlinson). Irene Browne (Carrie Valentin). Jack LaRue (Carlo). Desmond Roberts (Bryce Mercer).

It has long been a source of wonder to me that many women have not seized upon the wonderful opportunities offered to them by the motion picture art to make their way to fame and fortune as directors of photodramas. Of all the arts there is probably none in which they can make such splendid use of talents so much more natural to a woman than to a man and so necessary to its perfection.

--Madame Alice Guy Blache  
Director for Gaumont, circa 1896

The demarcation line between films of the early thirties and those made afterward, between films with satin and Freudian slips and explicit sexuality and films in which sex took cover under veils of metaphor, is particularly important in its effect on women's roles. . . . It is the difference in emphasis between two movie heroines based on the redoubtable Adela Rogers St. John: between Norma Shearer as the straying sybarite of A Free Soul (1931) and Rosalind Russell as the smartly tailored quick-witted reporter in His Girl Friday (1940).

--Molly Haskell, From Reverence To Rape

Isn't it wonderful you've had such a great career when you had no right to have a career at all?

--telegram from Katharine Hepburn to  
Dorothy Arzner, 1975

Europe in the early 1930's, Lubitsch-style. A world of easy, open sexuality, of men and women in all their duplicity and multiplicity of roles. Of wit and casual interaction where, as Molly Haskell puts it, women have the same moral (or immoral) disposition as men, and yet the two sexes are not interchangeable. Where class is all, and the upper class, with its freedom from the drudgery of the middle- and lower-class working world, can indulge itself in a kind of fun that stretches the usual stereotypes of human intercourse to include sexual women, passionate men, and the give-and-take of changing allegiances. For all its light-hearted attitude, the Lubitsch touch gave us, in *TROUBLE IN PARADISE* (1932) and *DESIGN FOR LIVING* (1933), among others, some very real people who are hard to pigeon-hole, and are all the more honest for that.

America of the early 30's loved it. These witty, seemingly frothy, drawing-room comedies not only sustained the good feelings of the 20's, they also created the illusion that things would get better, that the good life was still available somewhere beyond the terror and desperation of the Depression. More than that, the cross-fertilization of Europe's amorous attitudes and Hollywood's pioneer energy helped to create some of the fullest women characters the screen had known.

And yet something was changing in Hollywood's isolated paradise. The Legion of Decency and the Production Code reared their ugly heads in 1933, and by mid-decade, sex was out, violence was out (at least of the early gangster-film kind), and our collective expectations for both women movie stars and women-in-general had changed. Gone were the smoldering sex goddesses--Dietrich, Garbo, Mae West, Harlow. No longer allowed to languish in a satin-lined love nest, women had to go somewhere. Increasingly, their destination was the abyss between home and career, where sexuality was not allowed, where the best women --Katharine Hepburn, Rosalind Russell, Jean Arthur--were those who became "one of the boys."

There has been a good deal of controversy among feminist critics about just what happened during this period, whether it was good or bad, whether sex goddesses are more honest than the working girls in the films of the 1930s and 40s. But the truth is that America has historically been a society which demands, and also expects, women to fill mutually exclusive roles, and then punishes them when they attempt to do it. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the so-called women's films of the 30's and 40's. Often dismissed as lachrymose tripe, this genre just as often ventured into the shadowy territories of the female psyche that the so-called mainstream dramas feared to explore. That they often merely raised issues and then backed off, rather than follow through to their problematic answers, is less the fault of the writers and directors working in the genre than it is the industry's dictum to turn out profitable films that people wanted to see. Specifically, as Haskell points out, it was a reflection of what women wanted to see. After all, most women who were housewives didn't want to be made to feel that there was a whole world of possibilities that they had forsaken through marriage or inertia; rather, they wanted confirmation of the choice they had made. As for the Lubitsch-like idea that affairs of the heart transcend gender, it was quickly relegated to the scrap heap; that was Europe, after all, and this was America, where love is a *woman's* career.

In retrospect, we can see some of these women's films as harbingers of things to come. Dorothy Arzner's *CRAIG'S WIFE* (1936), for example, posits the problem of the demented homemaker, a 1930's Mary Hartman. Women's films, social melodramas, have always been given short shrift critically, and in the classic case of guilt by association, the creative talents involved in producing them have also often been ignored (at best) or condescended to (at worst).

That these creative talents were often women makes it even easier for someone like Andrew Sarris to dismiss women directors altogether. His book, *The American Cinema*, includes only Ida Lupino and lumps all the other American women directors of any era into a footnote.

The hard truth is that women were an active, visible part of the movie machine, represented especially in the ranks of editors and scriptwriters (such as Frances Marion--DINNER AT EIGHT (1933), Anita Loos--SUSAN AND GOD (1940), and Gladys Unger--SYLVIA SCARLETT (1935)). But the only working female director from 1928 to 1949--when Ida Lupino made her appearance--was Dorothy Arzner. Arzner didn't have a brilliant career, in retrospect, but she did have a respectable and busy one. She drew strong performances from many of the era's biggest stars: Clara Bow, Ruth Chatterton, Claudette Colbert, Esther Raiston, Nancy Carroll, Sylvia Sydney, Katharine Hepburn, Rosalind Russell, Joan Crawford, Anna Sten, Lucille Ball, Maureen O'Hara, and Merle Oberon. Her directors of photography included Harry Fischbeck and Gregg Toland, the early masters of deep focus photography. She had a long, happy working relationship with playwright-screenwriter Zoe Akins. And when she finally retired from active directing in the mid-40's, it was by her own choice and not because the studio system simply cut her loose.

The daughter of a famous Hollywood restaurant owner, Arzner grew up in her father's Hoffman Cafe listening to the likes of D.W. Griffith and Hal Roach gather around what was known as the Round Table. Arzner herself went to USC to study medicine but became an ambulance driver and Intelligence Department courier during World War I. Returning to Los Angeles after the war, Arzner conned her way into a typist job in William B. DeMille's story department at Paramount (even though she couldn't type). She was quickly promoted to film cutter, editor, and director's assistant. By the time she edited the famous bull-fight sequence in the Valentino version of BLOOD AND SAND (1922), parts of which she actually shot herself, Arzner was head of the editing department at Realart, a subsidiary of Paramount.

In 1929, she directed Paramount's first talkie, THE WILD PARTY, with Clara Bow and Fredrick March. This high-styled romantic comedy about flappers and emancipated co-eds set the tone for much of Arzner's subsequent work: relationships between women are always explored in depth and with much more understanding than her often cardboard, barren men. Her films are consistently well-photographed and edited; even the slow moments are interesting visually, and her action sequences are fluid and full of life.

Arzner's best film, DANCE, GIRL, DANCE (1940) is a fine study of the problems women face as they pursue careers, a recurrent Arzner theme. In this case, Maureen O'Hara and Lucille Ball battle for vaudeville stardom, the former as a serious ballerina who gets booed off the stage and the latter a provocative and successful burlesque queen. Arzner deals honestly with their complex relationships as roommates and rivals, and has the audacity to make their bitterest feuds not over men but over art and conviction--no mean feat for a woman director in a woman's picture.

Nothing in Arzner's work, however, prepares one for the narrative and thematic complexities of CHRISTOPHER STRONG, in which Hepburn plays a fiercely independent aviatrix who falls in love with a staunchly moralistic married man, gets pregnant by him, and flies herself to her doom because of it. The film begins in a setting much like Lubitsch: an upper-class London whose denizens are involved in sexual trysts and scavenger hunts. When one such hunt turns up a faithful husband and a virgin, particularly when they're brought together

by an unfaithful husband and the faithful husband's non-virginal daughter, the time seems ripe for a little Lubitsch-like drawing-room seduction.

But something odd happens along the way. Sex in this situation becomes, not a liberating journey to individuality and fun, but a trap, and a destructive one at that. Cynthia happily gives up her freedom, her flying, for love. But when duty is about to dictate her future, she feels helpless, choice-less. Her final decision is the only one she knows to make: return to the air, to the realm of her past successes. We know she plans to commit suicide--we've seen the note she leaves Chris--yet the final ripping off of the oxygen mask seems less a positive choice than the result of emotional impotence. As David Thomson sees it, this is "more romantic agony than feminist self-determination."

Yet some feminist critics see Cynthia's dilemma as embodying the natural confusion that a woman feels between her feminine and professional sides, between career, home, and sexuality. Haskell sees it as a problem of energy and time: "The ending is a true reflection of the dynamics of the situation: a woman has only so much energy, so much 'self' to give; is there enough for profession (especially if it is a dangerous or demanding one), lover, and children?"

For Claire Johnston, Arzner's work embodies the idea of feminine discourse (a female world-view) as a disruption in the mainstream patriarchal discourse. From this viewpoint, Cynthia must die to point up the contradictions at work both in the narrative and in the central character's conflict between career and sexuality. Far from resolving these contradictions, CHRISTOPHER STRONG for Johnston is an exercise in narrative excess which is "in fact the continued existence of the woman's discourse." That is, the discourse of the woman exceeds the artificial bounds of the film narrative, and because it can't be confined, it disrupts the traditional male discourse of mainstream Hollywood.

Jacquelyn Suter disagrees; in fact, she says that Cynthia's central role is to re-establish the dominance of male discourse, to repress the independent feminine voice and establish the primacy of monogamous relationships over multiple sexual relationships. Cynthia helps Chris's daughter Monica move from casual affair to marriage and motherhood even while she disrupts Chris and Elaine's monogamous relationship. For Suter, the narrative can be seen moving in this direction:

Cynthia/Chris apart ----->	C/C together ----->	C/C apart
Monica/Harry in plurality ----->	M/H in serialization ----->	M/H in monogamy
Elaine/Chris together ----->	E/C apart ----->	E/C together

The circularity of Cynthia/Chris/Elaine and the change in Monica/Harry forces the viewer to accept monogamy (part of traditional male discourse) as preferable. In this reading, then, Cynthia must die to preserve the narrative structure.

In fact, even the title of the film seems to reinforce Suter's reading: after all, this should be called CYNTHIA DARRINGTON, but then, that would be asking us to identify with the wrong outlook. Still, there's something a bit unsettling about being made to focus on a male character who is a bit of a buffoon, a background figure who mouths the most unbelievable dialogue, and who is outclassed even by his sanctimonious and self-pitying wife.

Finally, one can see CHRISTOPHER STRONG as a reflection of the point where Lubitsch meets

the Production Code. Visually, Hepburn is indeed made to look a bit like Garbo, languishing in her boudoir, waiting for her man. But even though the tentative feminine voice of independence and self-determination is repressed at the film's end, we still feel the beginnings of the fire and individuality of the 30's and 40's working-girl heroines. Like Cynthia Darrington in her silver lame moth body-stocking, the film shows us the chrysalis of the super-woman to come, and thus stands at the crossroads of women's roles: Hepburn as Garbo would soon become Hepburn as Kate.

Why a woman can't play both roles remains an unresolved issue.

Suggestions for further reading:

- Caro, Gary. *Katharine Hepburn: A Biography*. New York: Pocket Books, 1975.
- Dowd, Nancy. "The woman director through the years." *Action* 8,4 (July-August 1972), p.15-18.
- Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. New York: Penguin Books, 1974.
- Henshaw, Richard. "Women directors: 150 filmographies." *Film Comment* 8,4 (Nov-Dec 1972), p.33-45.
- Johnston, Claire. *The work of Dorothy Arzner*. London: The British Film Institute, 1974.
- Kuhn, Annette. *Women's pictures: Feminism and Cinema*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.
- Parker, Francine. "Approaching the art of Arzner." *Action* 8,4 (July-August 1973), p.9-14.
- Suter, Jacquelyn. "Feminine discourse in CHRISTOPHER STRONG." *Camera Obscura*, Summer 1979, p.135-150.

Filmography of Dorothy Arzner:

1927--Fashions for Women; Ten Modern Commandments; Get Your Man. 1928--Manhattan Cocktail. 1929--The Wild Party. 1930--Sarah and Son; Anybody's Woman; Behind the Makeup (co-directed with Robert Milton); an episode from Paramount on Parade. 1931--Honor Among Lovers; Working Girls. 1932--Merrily We Go to Hell. 1933--Christopher Strong. 1934--Nana. 1936--Craig's Wife. 1937--The Bride Wore Red. 1940--Dance, Girl, Dance. 1943--First Comes Courage.

HARD, FAST, AND BEAUTIFUL (1951) Directed by Ida Lupino. Produced by Collier Young. Screenplay by Martha Wilkerson. Based on a novel by John R. Tunis. Director of Photography: Archie Stout, A.S.C. Art Directors: Albert S. D'Agostino and Jack Okey. Music: Roy Webb. Musical Director: C. Bakaleinikoff. Film Editors: George C. Shrader and William Ziegler. Set Decorations: Darnell Silvera and Harley Miller. Sound: Phillip Brigandi and Clem Portman. Technical Advisor: Eleanor Tennant. Associate Producer: Norman Cook. Assistant Producer: Robert Eggenweiler. Distributed by RKO Radio Pictures, Inc. Running time: 79 minutes. (*Distributor of tonight's print: NTA Film Services, 12636 Beatrice St., Los Angeles, California 90066*) Cast: Claire Trevor, Sally Forest, Carleton G. Young, Robert Clarke, Kenneth Patterson, Marcella Cisney, Joseph Kearns, William Hudson, George Fisher, Arthur Little, Jr., Bert Whitley, Edwin Reimers, Don Kent, William Irving, Barbara Brier, Marilyn Mercer.

After an initial viewing of HARD, FAST, AND BEAUTIFUL, elevating Ida Lupino to a feminist cult figure would seem paradoxical. On the one hand, she did cut a directorial path through the brush of the male dominated Hollywood establishment, but the thematic narratives of her films would indicate that path was essentially a dead end. Cinematic narratives exploring the hopeless existence of female passivity hardly creates cause for feminist jubilation.

However, the passivity of her narratives contrasts with the assertiveness of her film production capabilities. Lupino and her producer-husband Collier Young created their own independent production company which turned out low-budget 'problem' pictures dealing with female topics such as rape, illegitimacy, and bigamy. Even though Dorothy Arzner is considered the first woman director of importance, the boundaries of feminization in her movies were marked out by the patriarchal Paramount studio system of which she was a part. But because she didn't have to answer to male studio heads, Lupino's films became the first movies made about women, for women, and by a woman without the bridle of male authority restricting her direction. If for no other reason than this, Ida Lupino deserves recognition as a cinematic pioneer voicing a female consciousness against socio-sexual oppression.

Until the early 1980s when melodrama and soap operas became the focal point for feminist film study, feminist critics appeared to forget how difficult it was (and still is) for a woman director to achieve the amount of freedom that Ida Lupino exhibited in her cinematic vision. Even though that vision was often bleak, it was at the very least truly a woman's perspective. Not only did Lupino direct these 'problem' pictures, she co-scripted most of them. While Lupino's representation of female perspective may not coincide with the idealistic image that feminist ideology strives towards, her films acknowledge that a female perspective exists. In the context of the 1950s, this was a larger step forward than it might appear in retrospect.

In HARD, FAST, AND BEAUTIFUL, the melodrama leans heavily to the tragic. Casting both daughter and mother as tragic heroines, the film confronts the contradictions of being a woman in post-World War II American society. As Thomas Schatz points out in HOLLYWOOD GENRES, the 50s' melodrama encompassed a complex and paradoxical view of America "celebrating and severely questioning the basic values and attitudes of the mass audience." Ida Lupino exposes those tensions through generational conflict between mother and daughter, the exploration of class distinctions, the irreconcilability of female passivity with aggressive social mobility, and the inability to weld familial and occupational responsibilities into a cohesive unit.

Whereas most melodramas from this period attempt to resolve these conflicts with the forced

'happy ending,' Lupino refuses to consolidate the contradictions into a neat bundle. As a defeated Claire Trevor stares aimlessly at wind-tossed trash in the final camera shot, Lupino emphasizes the hollowness of female existence in post-war America. In "Ida Lupino: Auteuress," Ronnie Scheib points out that

Lupino's films denaturalize passivity; it is unwanted, restless, anxious, impotent. Her characters are sleep-walkers, their subjectivity condemned to incompleteness, their faces swept by emotions that happen to them but never belong to them, the image of what they see distorted by nightmare or manifesting a being-there that resists assimilation. Between their subjectivity and the world there is nothing.

Rather than placidly accepting their passivity, Lupino's heroines destroy the desirability of such a social role. She offers no solutions, but presents the problems with a suffocating clarity. In social practice, an alternate ideology which emerges against the dominant culture can gain momentum only after it has defined its conflicts with the status quo. Being able to define the problem of oppressive female social roles had to be the first step in feminist consciousness raising. Whether she realized it or not, Ida Lupino helped to fuel the fire of feminist ideology by exposing the frustration of being a woman in that particular post-war society. Not only should she be recognized as one of the first woman directors, the importance of her films within the feminist hierarchy should increase with a retrospective analysis of their place within the cultural process of emerging feminism.

It has been unfortunate that Lupino's heroines and their shortcomings have been judged in light of mid-1970s' feminist rhetoric, rather than in the social context from which they emerged. Early feminist critics focused on Lupino's presentation of female passivity and the inability to counteract it. Had her heroines been more successful in obtaining their desires or controlling their destinies, they might be more readily accepted as mythical pioneers in the socio-sexual struggle for female equality. If Lupino's films were more 'Hollywood'--that is more mythical and romantically idealistic, her own mythical stature within the feminist movement might have increased. Instead, she chose to recreate a socially realistic portrayal of feminine frustration. Consequently, she received little recognition for her attempts.

Much of mythology as presently defined deals with time-out-of-time, with the upper worlds and the underworlds, with the extraordinary, but not with the present, flux, the everyday, the ordinary. 'Mundos' has been devalued, and 'mythos' exalted as the cherished expression and object of study. Now, a revaluation of the mundane is taking place--in the ethnography of communication, in sociolinguistic studies of conversation and narration, in microsociology, and in the study of legends, rumor, gossip, anecdote and the like in folklore and mythology.

Rather than deal with the mythical, Ida Lupino concentrates on 'mundos'--the realm of the ordinary, the everyday frustrations and contradictions of the post-war American woman. Because she privileges the mundane over the extraordinary, film theorists and critics have had a problem reconciling Lupino's career with their own vested theoretical interests.

Auteurists, marxists, and even genre theorists have, until recently, had this difficulty. Auteurism, the study and canonization of 'great' directors, is itself an extension of the mythical process. The theory was formulated by males about a male-dominated entertainment industry. Not surprisingly, those elevated to 'auteur' status were male. Marxist criticism, in order to validate its cinematic analysis, had to acknowledge a convoluted reverse dependency on a dominant patriarchy. Otherwise, the critiques of subject positioning and audience manipulation would lose political bite without a suitable foil for their ideas. Even genre theory had problems dealing with melodrama. As a cinematic category, melodrama attracted little of the early attention that the western, gangster, detective, or musical genres acquired. It was not mythical enough. The characters didn't aspire to great enough heights of extraordinary behavior.

As Annette Kuhn points out in "Women's Genres," recent feminist work has drawn upon these film theories, but at the same time exposed the limitations of these approaches. The universalism of the theories has been questioned, and more specific historical and cultural context approaches have been sought to supplement their inadequacies. New studies in cultural anthropology concerning women's genres have opened other avenues for the analysis of melodrama. Marta Weigle, cultural anthropologist, asks a very important question: what if women's expressions and experiences are "neither antithetical nor complimentary" to those of men? Perhaps judging Ida Lupino's filmmaking by standards created by males is to misjudge or misrecognize the importance of her work. Such a reassessment of her work within the social and cultural context of 'mundos' rather than 'mythos' is needed in order to fully appreciate both Ida Lupino as a film director and as one of the early practitioners of feminist filmmaking.

Suggestions for further reading:

- Kuhn, Annette. "Women's Genres: Annette Kuhn Considers Melodrama, Soap Opera and Theory." *Screen*, 25, no. 1, January-February 1984. pp. 18-28.
- Schellb, Ronnie. "Ida Lupino: Autueress." *Film Comment*, 16, 1, January-February 1980, pp. 54-64.
- Schatz, Thomas. HOLLYWOOD GENRES: FORMULAS, FILMMAKING, AND THE STUDIO SYSTEM. New York: Random House, 1961.
- Weigle, Marta. SPIDERS AND SPINSTERS: WOMEN AND MYTHOLOGY. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982.

Ida Lupino Filmography:

## Films:

1950--OUTRAGE, NEVER FEAR. 1951--HARD, FAST AND BEAUTIFUL. 1953--THE BIGAMIST, THE HITCH-HIKER. 1966--THE TROUBLE WITH ANGELS.

## Television:

1959--FOUR STAR PLAYHOUSE (multiples). 1960--ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS ("Sybilla," "A Crime for Mothers"), HAVE GUN WILL TRAVEL ("The Trial," "Lady with a Gun"). 1961--HAVE GUN WILL TRAVEL ("The Gold Bar"), DICK POWELL THEATRE (multiples). 1964--BEWITCHED ("A' Is For Aardvark"), THE FUGITIVE ("Glass Tightrope," "Garden House"), GILLIGAN'S ISLAND (multiples). 1965--THE ROGUES ("Huager-Mugger by the Sea," "Bow to a Master"), DUNDEE AND THE CULHANE ("Thy Brother's Keeper Brief"). 1966--THE VIRGINIAN ("Deadeye Dick"), THE BIG VALLEY (multiples).

CinemaTexas Staff:

*Co-director and Editor: Christopher Anderson. Co-director and Business Manager: Mark Alvey. Production Manager: Pamela Peters. Faculty Advisors: George Wead, Thomas Schalz. Researchers and Notewriters: Mark Alvey, Christopher Anderson, Jackie Blain, Rod Buxton, Anne Craig, Gregory Cundiff, Michael Dorsey, Dell Edwards, John Gibson, Cheryl Harris, Don Howard, Jinsook Joo, Stephen Lee, Hilary Radner, Jeff Sconce, Van Watson, Tinky Weisblat. Production Assistants: Freddy Lopez, Merle Bertrand, Linda Rogers. Projectionist: Gene Stroop.*

*(c) Copyright 1984 by CinemaTexas, The Department of Radio-Television-Film, The University of Texas at Austin. All rights reserved. Reasonable quotation to promote cinema studies in a non-profit setting is hereby permitted (appropriate credit for such usage will be appreciated). Use for commercial purposes is expressly prohibited.*

