

Hollywood's Greatest Year

by Michael Canning

In an article written in 1989, Canning describes the cornucopia of motion picture classics that poured forth from Hollywood 50 years before in what is widely regarded as its greatest year. He discusses the legendary productions of 1939 and the reasons for their near-mythical status in cinematic history.

Fifty years ago -- on December 15, 1939 -- spotlights sliced the sky and a crowd of 12,000 twirled around the front of Loews's Grand Theater on Peachtree Street in Atlanta, Georgia. Spectators gawked as movie stars Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable swept into the theater, along with other Hollywood celebrities and local luminaries, to see the premiere of what was to become the most famous American movie of all time: *Gone With the Wind*.

Gone With the Wind was that rarest of rare phenomena in popular art and entertainment: an inordinately anticipated event that came to fulfill and eventually surpass public expectations. *The New York Times* movie critic wrote: "It has arrived at last, and we cannot get over the shock



Gable and Leigh in *Gone With the Wind*
Hollywood's Golden Year — filled with illuminating combinations of all screen genres."

Those genres included such movie staples as the musical, the western, the comedy, the romantic drama, and the action adventure story—mostly fantasies and myths that lifted the spirits of Depression-era audiences. Yet that same Depression had created a shift, too, towards a greater awareness of social issues, an awareness that films mirrored during 1939. It was also a year when the threat of war hovered over Europe and Asia, provoking the U.S. film industry into a defense of American values and traditions, a promotion of a certain "Americanism."

It was not that 1939 production was inordinately high; the roughly 460 films produced that year constituted a fairly typical output for the studio system. And it was not the greatest year for box-office receipts; nor were there earth-shaking changes in the studios or their organization. Rather, the year produced -- accidentally, inexplicably -- the finest one-year line-

up of quality movies ever conceived in Hollywood, using perhaps more fully than ever before the talent and skill the film studios possessed at their peak.

The most expensive, the longest, and the most anticipated motion picture of the time had been show business news ever since 1936, when the film rights to the phenomenally successful novel were purchased by independent producer David O. Selznick for \$50,000.

Speculation about the casting of *Gone With the Wind* continued for years, although most movie fans of the time could see no other Rhett Butler -- the principal male figure -- than Clark Gable, who was duly signed. Selznick then conducted a publicity-laden "search" for the lead character, a Southern belle named Scarlett O'Hara. After some two years of searching, Selznick finally picked Vivien Leigh, a British actress, as his Scarlett. Work on the picture began on January 26, 1939, and the film was shot, edited, and finished in time to be eligible for that year's Academy Award nominations.

The critical reaction was mixed; the public reaction ecstatic. It was soon apparent that Selznick had created what many consider the greatest and most enduring Hollywood film ever made. It easily won 10 Academy Awards, a record at the time. Now, 50 years after its release, it is still drawing fascinated audiences in American theaters, where it is circulating in a newly refurbished print. The grandchildren of Scarlett's first fans are becoming her latest admirers.

At the same time, an inordinate number of other 1939 productions have joined *Gone With the Wind* on moviedom's list of classics. Just as fabled — and as solid in its longevity — is *The Wizard of Oz*, a popular children's book made into an indelible musical film that confirmed the stardom of the then 16-year-old Judy Garland. Garland played young Dorothy, the girl from black-and-white (really a sepia tint) Kansas who is transported to the magical, and color-filled, world of Oz. The film was made at Metro-Goldwyn Mayer (MGM) studios, as was *Gone With the Wind*. It has sustained its repute and gained new audiences over five decades as a perennial holiday entertainment on US. television, and its principal characters--made up of tin men, wicked witches, munchkins. etc.--have become familiar American icons.

In 1939, *The Wizard of Oz's* effervescence and lively music charmed a world hearing ominous war news, as witness the eventual adoption of its recurring theme song, "We're Off to See the Wizard", as Australia's wartime marching song.

Gone With the Wind also served as a comfort to war-conscious audiences, especially in Britain. There, the film, after opening at the Ritz Theatre in London in early 1940, ran continuously for almost four-and-one-half years, right through the city's blitz by German bombers. It was the longest run of any film in history.

Another classic released in 1939 was John Ford's *Stagecoach*. a film that corroborated that great director's fame and also confirmed a great new star, John Wayne. Wayne had been in dozens of low-budget westerns since 1929, but his portrayal of the Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* made him a movie archetype and, thereafter, a favorite of director Ford. Ford, although well-known since silent film days, had not made a western in 13 years. *Stagecoach* renewed his interest in the genre, and it was followed by a series of memorable Ford westerns, most of them at least partially shot, as was *Stagecoach*, in the spectacular Monument Valley of Arizona.

Stagecoach, made for United Artists, also set the standard for Indian clashes and stagecoach dashes that were to figure in literally hundreds of later movies. *The New York Times* critic of the day, Frank Nugent, wrote of a "motion picture that sings a song of camera...a genuine rib-thumper and a beautiful sight to see." The young Orson Welles, who had been hired by RKO Pictures in 1939 to film what eventually became *Citizen Kane*, was said to have screened *Stagecoach* 40 times to learn cinematic technique. One of its featured actors, Thomas

Mitchell, won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor as a gregarious but drunken doctor; the actor appeared later that year as Scarlett O'Hara's Irish father in *Gone With the Wind*.

Mitchell's busy 1939 intersected with another absolute classic of the same year, Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, in which he played a cynical newspaperman. This film, about an idealistic young U.S. Senator valiantly battling corruption, was almost as important to James Stewart, playing Jefferson Smith, as *Stagecoach* was to John Wayne. Already a popular supporting player (he had made 15 other films since 1936), Stewart landed a role that became a persona for him – that of the stalwart, if somewhat starry-eyed, embodiment of American faith. It was a persona that was both ideal for director Capra's ends and the vehicle by which Stewart became a symbol of upright American decency for three decades.



John Wayne as Ringo in *Stagecoach*

More than an expose of sordid politics, the film, released by Columbia Pictures, was a heartfelt reaffirmation of American values. "Naive, simplistic and boyish as it might be," wrote critic Lewis Jacobs at the time, "the film possesses a sincere honesty." Stewart's defense of a youth project on the Senate floor through using a spirited filibuster – the climax of the film -- was a paean to popular democracy.

Giving politics an even more comic lilt was Ernest Lubitsch's 1939 gem *Ninotchka*, the film fabled as the picture where "Garbo laughs." In *Ninotchka*, Greta Garbo, reigning goddess of late silent pictures and 1930s melodrama, played a doggedly doctrinaire Soviet commissar captured by the romance of "decadent" Paris and taken with a witty aristocrat, played by Melvyn Douglas. Garbo laughed, as did the world, when the bright, but proper, Douglas took a pratfall after telling a joke in a Parisian restaurant. From then on, the sober apparatchik eventually learns to adopt Western ways.

It was a triumph for MGM Studios and for Lubitsch, an émigré German noted for his European "touch." The picture, even without Garbo, would have been "one of Lubitsch's best," declared French film critic Georges Sadoul. "The script sparkles and is still irresistibly funny," he added, "Lubitsch's sense of timing is as fine as ever."

The movies were a good place to go to forget about harsh reality in 1939. The news was invariably bad as Axis forces advanced in Europe and Asia. In the first few months of the year, as cameras whirred on *Gone With the Wind*, Franco's rebels captured Madrid, Italy invaded Albania, the Nazis consolidated power in Czechoslovakia, and Japan captured Shanghai. The American public was unnerved, but most Americans wanted to stay out of another war in Europe. To this end, Congress passed one of a series of Neutrality Acts, forbidding the sale or transport of arms to "belligerent" nations and barring American vessels from war zones.

By late summer, the news had worsened. As Americans laughed at Mickey Rooney and cried at *Wuthering Heights*, the Nazi-Soviet pact was signed on August 24, alienating a generation of the American left from socialism. On September 1, Germany mounted its blitzkrieg against Poland, and two days later, Britain declared war on the Nazi regime.

Film historian Lewis Jacobs, writing in his landmark 1939 study *The Rise of the American Film*, detected a film trend: "Under the threat of a spreading fascism, democracy has once again become a rallying point around which national sentiment is consolidated.... This rising tide of Americanism, with its accompanying endorsement of democracy, has brought new vitality to the screen and fresh respect to producers."

Numerous films released in 1939 displayed such Americanism by depicting U.S. history or underlining traditional American values. *Gone With the Wind* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* were exemplars, but several others evidenced it. Grandiose westerns like *Union Pacific* and *Northwest Passage* were prime examples. The former, made by superlative showman Cecil B. DeMille for Paramount Pictures, was a colossal filmic narrative of the building of the American transcontinental railroad, and it stars steam trains as much as actors. Some European critics consider it among the best westerns ever made. *Northwest Passage*, based on a best-selling book about the search for a water link across the North American continent, was a spectacular vehicle for Spencer Tracy and it was directed by one of Hollywood's great veterans, King Vidor.

Besides *Stagecoach*, John Ford made two other works in 1939 reflecting classic American values. *Drums Along the Mohawk* showed an embattled colonial farmer and his family fighting Indians in the years before the Revolutionary War. *Young Mr. Lincoln* sketched the early years of the mythic U.S. president. The latter film, released by 20th Century Fox Studios, was much praised for its effective techniques. Film writer Arthur Knight cited its use of functional editing "at its best--precise, unobtrusive, and sure," while film historian Richard Griffith suggested that it was "the first signal of Hollywood's emergence from the sound stages... Ford took his actors outdoors for many scenes, and audiences saw actual sunlight fall on the faces of favorite stars." The stars of both these Ford films was an actor who became, like John Wayne and Jimmy Stewart, an American archetype: Henry Fonda.

But Hollywood was not only turning out escapism and paeans to America. A combination of forces created a shift towards an awareness of social problems. Griffith outlined some of them: "The influence of the Depression, the leadership of Roosevelt, the controversy over the New Deal (social welfare programs), the rise of documentary journalism -- all the forces of a period of tension made this inevitable."

This shift involved not only filmmakers and audiences but also studio executives. Will Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors, sounded the theme in his annual address in March 1939: "The increasing number of pictures produced by the industry which treat honestly and dramatically many current themes proves that there is nothing incompatible between the best interests of the box office and the kind of entertainment that raises the level of audience appreciation."

One example was a strong and serious version of the John Steinbeck novel and stage play, *Of Mice and Men*, produced by the independent producer Hal Roach and directed by Lewis Milestone. A story of two migrant workers wandering in a rural Depression setting, it was highlighted by the performance of Lon Chaney, Jr. as Lennie. Up to that time, Chaney, whose father had been the great character actor of the silent era, had previously appeared only in undistinguished serials and B pictures. In *Of Mice and Men*, his work, as a mentally slow giant whose love of "smooth things" leads to tragedy, was a revelation. The picture remained true to the novel, including a grim and poignant ending, and it made good use of an effective score by American composer Aaron Copland.

Classic literature could also provide a context for some of Hollywood's romantic dramas during 1939. Samuel Goldwyn, a noted independent producer with a status similar to Selznick's, mounted a version of *Wuthering Heights*, the classic English novel by Emily Bronte. It proved to be a hit for British actor Laurence Olivier (in Hollywood with his fiancé, Vivien Leigh) as the tormented Heathcliff and earned him an Academy Award nomination. At the time, *The New York Times* critic lauded the movie, directed by the studio veteran William Wyler, as a "strong and somber film, poetically written as the novel not always was, sinister and wild as it was meant to be.... "



Oberon and Olivier in *Wuthering Heights*

Goldwyn wanted physical authenticity in his film -- he had acres of heather shipped to Hollywood to give the settings a Yorkshire look — but not too much accuracy, as he eliminated half of the book and added romantic elements that allowed Heathcliff to walk off into the clouds, in the best Hollywood style, with his Cathy, played by Merle Oberon. Sam Goldwyn himself recognized the film's emotional power: his biographer A. Scott Berg wrote that the producer, in his old age, used to watch *Wuthering Heights* in his own screening room—and cry.

Yet another genre of film—the action adventure story—reached a kind of apogee in 1939. *Gunga Din*, which took off from a famous Rudyard Kipling poem, was the most expensive film ever made to that date by its studio, RKO Pictures. This rollicking yarn of three British comrades in the Imperial Indian forces turned out to be a giant success through its lively pace, good humor, and its three co-stars: Cary Grant, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., and Victor McLaglen. Its display of rousing adventure in exotic lands made it a direct precursor of such contemporary yarns as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* as well as a whole chain of Hollywood "hubby" movies, where male camaraderie wins out over more domestic, civilized virtues. *Gunga Din* was directed by the 35-year-old George Stevens, who went on to become one of America's most prestigious film directors in the postwar era.

Throughout the Depression, Hollywood supplied sumptuous, fantastic entertainment that brought American -- and international -- audiences out of their relative deprivation and into worlds of glamorous wealth and refined living. Such films not only took people out of their humdrum lives (escapism), but they also provided a vision of a better, even if often unattainable, future, thus feeding the American idea of progress. Moviegoers flocked to such pictures not because they seethed with resentment at the rich folks on the screen but because they longed for such signs of grace in their own lives. Not for nothing was Hollywood labeled, in those years and after, the "dream factory."

Historical epics provided escape into richer, more romantic pasts. For its part, the western, packed with myths, offered a starker world with simple, dramatic solutions to problems unlike the more intractable, complex concerns confronting moviegoers during the Depression. The dream factory also poured out bouncy musicals, rowdy farces, and screwball comedies to provide some surcease from the daily grind of life and work.

Since sound pictures began, the musical had been a Hollywood staple. In 1939, MGM Studios, with *The Wizard of Oz*, became the leader in this genre. After *The Wizard*, MGM kept Judy Garland busy with what was to become another hit musical, *Babes in Arms*. It co-starred young Mickey Rooney, a triple threat talent then at the height of his singing and dancing career. Rooney was, in fact, the king of the box office in 1939. His pictures brought in more money

than those of any other actor, making him a bigger attraction than such star performers as Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, and others.

Babes in Arms, a sprightly tale of ebullient high school students who put on a Broadway-style musical, began a whole series of such fanciful musicals that lasted through the war years and beyond. The eager cry of "Hey, kids, let's put on a show!" could always be counted on to lead to a rousing musical finale.

RKO ended a great cycle of musical films in 1939 with *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, a biographic picture of a dance team that had been popular earlier in the century. It starred Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in their ninth collaboration for the studio. Years later, dance critic Arlene Croce was to call this effort a "classic that gains poignancy with the years. It was a mating of subject and stars such as movies seldom see, and it was made at a perhaps unguessably right moment." Warner Brothers, which pioneered musical films, meantime, entered the musical competition with *On Your Toes*, a music-and-dance film memorable for a classic motion-picture ballet, "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue," which was choreographed by the great George Balanchine.

While *Stagecoach* was the standout western movie of 1939, several other impressive westerns also were released that year. One of the best was *Jesse James* from 20th Century Fox, a romanticized but effective tale of a famous good/bad outlaw personified by its title character. It starred Tyrone Power as Jesse. Known principally as a matinee idol, Power distinguished himself with his acting in this biography; critic Martin Quigley wrote that "Power made the character real and plausible, creating neither a hero nor a villain but a mixture of both." Another major picture of this type was the elaborate *Dodge City*, in which Warner Brothers adventure star Errol Flynn appeared in his first western.

Even a comedy western emerged from Universal Studios with *Destry Rides Again*, starring Jimmy Stewart as Tom Destry and a sultry Marlene Dietrich as the music hall girl Frenchie. Stewart seemed as naive as his Mr. Smith character but was, it turned out, tougher and funnier. Dietrich introduced what would become a signature song for her, "See What the Boys in the Back Room Will Have" and revitalized a dormant career.

Among notable comedies of 1939, *The Women* was just as sharp and even more sardonic than Lubitsch's *Ninotchka*. Directed by George Cukor from a successful stage play by Clare Boothe, *The Women* had no men at all in a large cast that featured some of the biggest MGM stars of the time, including Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, and Rosalind Russell. It boasted a fast-moving script about the high life and marital infidelities among posh New Yorkers; the pungent stage language had to be toned down somewhat for the screen.

Life imitated art during the production, when Crawford, contending for popularity at the studio with Shearer (and contending for Shearer's husband in the film), began knitting loudly as Shearer said her lines. Crawford was banished from the set—and the two stars never spoke to each other again.

Film comedy, if not always at the level of *Ninotchka* or *The Women*, was still a staple for Hollywood in 1939, and most of the greatest movie comics of the Sound Era were active during the year. The Marx Brothers were *At the Circus* where Groucho sang about "Lydia the Tattooed Lady." W.C. Fields made a typically silly escapade, *You Can't Cheat and Honest Man*, Laurel and Hardy turned out *The Flying Deuces*, and the young Bob Hope appeared in his first starring role in a smart comedy/thriller *The Cat and the Canary*.

Action adventure films in the spirit of *Gunga Din* were also popular. Similar in its spirit and exotic locales, and again featuring a triumvirate of three male comrades was *Beau Geste*, the

story of three brothers -- played by Gary Cooper, Ray Milland, and Robert Preston -- who join the French Foreign Legion. The three actors may not all have been particularly well-cast as British aristocrats, but the film, from Paramount, was a solid hit, overshadowing a famous silent version of the same story.

Tougher and just as exciting was *Only Angels Have Wings*, made for Columbia Pictures by movie legend Howard Hawks -- and one of his best efforts. It depicted the lives and loves of the pilots of a small South American airline with conviction and featured some stunning aerial sequences. Cary Grant and Jean Arthur starred with the ubiquitous Thomas Mitchell in a major supporting role. Years later British critic Peter Cowie would comment: "Hawks' rigorous, purposeful direction allows the characters no spare time for sentimentality, and the screenplay deploys its arbitrary crises to perfection."

Romantic dramas, like *Gone With the Wind* and *Wuthering Heights*, were, of course, another steady theme in Hollywood productions. Honored among them was *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, the saga of a sensitive tutor at an English boys' school. Based on a popular novel of the time, it offered stellar roles for a talented newcomer, Greer Garson, making her film debut, and for British actor Robert Donat as the teacher, Mr. Chipping. Donat's performance garnered him an Academy Award for Best Actor, winning over such stalwarts as Gable, Stewart, Olivier, and Rooney. The film, shot in England, was one of several made by MGM in that country prior to World War II.

A Victor Hugo classic novel was the source of the romantic drama *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, one of the finest films made at RKO Pictures in that studio's best year. The film's triumph was Charles Laughton's towering incarnation of the hunchbacked bell ringer Quasimodo. Unrecognizably grotesque, Laughton made a poignant, occasionally comic figure, physically unappealing but immediately inspiring sympathy. As *Mr. Chips* did for Greer Garson, the film proved a vehicle for another new Irish female star, Maureen O'Hara, making her Hollywood debut as Esmeralda. The film also featured yet again 1939's Everyman: Thomas Mitchell. *Hunchback* opened in the US the same week as *Gone With the Wind* and was thoroughly overshadowed by the latter's triumph. But for that timing, it might have been fully acknowledged as one of the finest motion pictures in Hollywood's finest year.

Meantime, yet another new female star, Ingrid Bergman, then 24, gained fame in this magic movie year. She came to prominence in the role of a young pianist in *Intermezzo*, a weepy but effective Hollywood remake of Bergman's first film made in her native Sweden.

But if 1939 ended up as the year of Scarlett and Vivien Leigh, for most of its duration, the movie colony's biggest acting triumph had gone to Bette Davis, a great film actress then at her peak. Davis made four major films that year for Warner Brothers, including a turn as an effective Queen Elizabeth in the historical recreation *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*. But one of her stand-out roles -- one with which she has been identified ever since -- came in *Dark Victory* (photo at right) which turned out to be one of the all-time great tearjerkers. Davis embodied Judith Traherne, an aristocratic young woman dying of a brain tumor. She nobly accepted her fate (and the love of a good man) while audiences worldwide soaked their handkerchiefs. One of her co-stars was the young Ronald Reagan (27), then making his tenth film.



A significant historical epic of 1939 was *Juarez*, about the founding of modern Mexico. Also produced by Warner Brothers, it climaxed a studio tradition of filmed biographies of great men, usually played by Spencer Tracy, Edward G. Robinson, or Paul Muni. Muni was the iconographic Benito Juarez in this film, directed by William Dieterle and co-written by a rising young, behind-the-camera talent, John Huston. The somber portrayal of Juarez was contrasted with the troubled story of Emperor Maximilian and his wife, Carlotta von Hapsburg, the former touchingly played by Brian Aherne, the latter personified by Bette Davis. Flawed in some aspects of its production, the picture nevertheless stood on the integrity of its performances.

Broadway, as it has often since, fed Hollywood in 1939. Besides *The Women*, another play effectively transferred to the screen was Clifford Odets's *Golden Boy*, the drama from Columbia of a dual-talented young man torn between his love for the violin and his adeptness at boxing. While staunchly sentimental, the film succeeded because of its authentic New York look, the gritty performance of Barbara Stanwyck, and the fresh, energetic presence of William Holden as the fiddler/boxer, making his first screen appearance. British filmmaker and writer Basil Wright extolled its city exteriors and interiors, "presented with stifling accuracy", and "its climatic fight sequence..., painful to a degree in its tragic realism."

Convincing, too, in its portrayal of the urban scene and its commingling of night life, low life, and the law, was *The Roaring Twenties*, a rough-and-ready film from Warners with two of that studio's biggest stars, James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart. Commenting years later, Richard Griffith noted how its director, Raoul Walsh, incorporated the documentary use of newsreels in the film, which, Griffith reported, "revived the gangster cycle but focused on the social sources of crime."

Inevitably, concern about the spread of totalitarianism and the desire for realism intersected. Another Warners production, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, was the first Hollywood film to deal clearly with the incipient threat of Nazism. It showed, in relatively restrained, documentary style, how Nazis were trying to recruit disaffected Americans and sabotage American industry. It was banned in several European countries, and Hollywood producers were nervous. There was fear at the end of 1939 that new restrictions on international distribution of the studios' product would be forthcoming; the Axis countries had begun censoring movies.

Yet, by the end of 1939, all the movie world could talk about was Scarlett, Rhett, and *Gone With the Wind*. It capped a year that would come to be accepted as probably the greatest in Hollywood history. From this high point, whatever the fears of war and anguish about the loss of markets, American movies plunged into the 1940's, a period that, in many ways, would turn out to be as rich for filmmaking as the 1930's.

Against this backdrop, one little-remembered turning point signaled the coming of profound change in American motion pictures and entertainment. In April 1939, at the landmark New York World's Fair, the National Broadcasting Company demonstrated television to fairgoers and sent transmissions to a small group of viewers.

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