

Document Citation

Title	The other side of Midnight
Author(s)	Michael Sragow
Source	<i>Boston Phoenix</i>
Date	1985 Sep 03
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Midnight, Leisen, Mitchell, 1939

Second sight

The other side of *Midnight*

by Michael Sragow

MIDNIGHT. Directed by Mitchell Leisen. Written by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder. With John Barrymore, Claudette Colbert, and Don Ameche. At the Brattle, September 12.

The 1939 romantic farce *Midnight* is one of the brightest, most refined comedies in American film history — equal parts screwball and highball, a Rube Goldberg machine manufactured by Rolls-Royce. It contains as many surprises as a caseful of Cracker Jack, and they build in an uninterrupted, if completely unexpected, chain. But it has a special magic as well: this may be a comic machine, but every joint is lined with velvet.

The heroine is Eve Peabody (Claudette Colbert), a chorine from Kokomo who arrives in Paris with hopes of becoming a café singer. She immediately falls in love with an émigré Hungarian cab driver, Tibor Czerny, and in like with a high-society circle that accepts her as a Hungarian baroness. *Midnight* is the story of a self-made Cinderella — an American version who learns that though money is certainly nice, true lovers need no bank account. As Eve herself says, "Every Cinderella has her midnight," but in this movie, the fateful hour never kicks in. The only pumpkin here is Czerny's cab, and if Don Ameche, as Czerny, isn't exactly princely, he is surprisingly charming.

As directed by Mitchell Leisen from a script by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, this film transports you to a movie era when the rich were acceptable heroes and heroines as long as they were beautiful or silly. And Eve, trying to escape from Tibor's kindness because she's not yet ready to accept the love of a poor man, steps into that world with aplomb. She presents a Monte Carlo pawnshop receipt as a ticket to the smart set's latest party: the usher is so dazzled he doesn't even check it. She hears a sophisticate's complaint — "It always rains when Stephanie gives one of her dull parties; even the heavens weep with boredom"; soon she's caught up in the set's politesse, casual wit, and unending hanky-panky. Settling in for a musical recital, Eve sits down on an insulted lap dog under the gaze of Georges Flammarion — played by John Barrymore in such an eccentric style we can't tell whether he's scowling or leering. Georges follows her when she goes to play bridge with his wife Helene (Mary Astor), his wife's lover, Jacques (Francis Lederer), and their effete scavenger friend, Marcel (Rex O'Malley), and Jacques deals as many double entendres as he does cards. Throughout this sequence Barrymore's entire posture seems to be saying, "H-m-m-m-m-m-m..." Georges resolves to win his wife back by propping up Eve's aristocratic pose and constantly throwing her in Jacques's path. The film is so niftily constructed that this plan works out for everyone — even Tibor Czerny, who becomes a frantic searcher for his own lady Eve.



Hedda Hopper, Francis Lederer, Mary Astor, Don Ameche, Claudette Colbert, John Barrymore, and Elaine Barrie: room to cast shadows

Cowriter Wilder once complained that director Leisen "spent more time with Edith Head worrying about the pleats on a skirt than he did with us on the script." But Leisen's plush textures give this movie a Cinderella feeling to go with its premise. In the best films that Wilder later directed himself, every actor is on his toes and the jokes snap like whips. You know you're being worked over, however pleasurably. *Midnight* is a gentler, lovelier kind of movie. Each character has a signature line, whether it's Tibor's protest, "I'm not poor — I need 40 francs to live and I make 40 francs," or Eve's desire to land in wealth — "in that fat tub of butter." ("We've landed in something, all right," Georges quips later, "but it's not butter.") Leisen's triumph is that the characters never become single-line cartoons, partly because he gives each performer enough room — and enough of the spotlight — to cast shadows.

Contrary to what you might expect, Ameche is no lunk hack: he's dashing and imaginative enough to dress up as royalty himself in order to win Eve back. (When he later shows up in his cabbie's uniform at a country house, the other guests believe he's just gone slumming.) And the rest of the casting is inspired. The French-born, American-bred Claudette Colbert has never looked more fetching than as this American in Paris. Her cheekbones are so high they make her face look triangular, and with those swirls of cloth that '30s women wore for hats, those dresses that set off her classic figure with epauletlike shoulders, she fits into the Art Deco around her. Close-up, her big warm eyes take over; you know why every man in the movie melts for

her. Colbert's an exceptionally deft and sane comedienne who can portray a flirt without coming off as an awful tease. When she steals Francis Lederer's fickle but *galant* Jacques from Mary Astor's painfully romantic Helene, saying, "Don't worry — I'll send him back as good as new," she's naughty rather than bitchy.

As the playful, ever-observant Georges, John Barrymore takes off into his own comic stratosphere. This matinee idol of maturity never seems more delighted than when he's imitating a three-year-old girl. When Eve matches Georges's shrewdness, he tips his hat to her, if not his hand. Yet he has eyes only for Helene. One of the most romantic things about this movie is that though it appreciates the giddy humor of nonstop flirtation, its heart lies with the devoted ones — Georges, Tibor, and, when she comes to her senses, Eve.

Midnight never lets up: the ending alone, in which each character takes a final bow, is enough to make you exit cheering. As a writing team, Brackett and Wilder were known for working out all the possible angles of a script and putting them together like expert draftsmen. Here their craftsmanship had to survive a production history as comically involved as their figure-eight plot, as producer Arthur Hornblow ordered a rewrite from another author and then scrapped it for lacking "the Brackett-Wilder flavor." Subsequently Hornblow and Wilder joined forces to keep the director from cutting and improvising. But as a result of all this fiddle-faddle, *Midnight* has Brackett and Wilder's comic drive and structure — and Mitchell Leisen's special touch of class. It's still the perfect smile for a summer's night. □