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The girl most likely, Leisen, Mitchell, 1957
Remember the night, Leisen, Mitchell, 1940
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Dream girl, Leisen, Mitchell, 1948
Golden earrings, Leisen, Mitchell, 1947
Suddenly it's spring, Leisen, Mitchell, 1947
The lady is willing, Leisen, Mitchell, 1942
I wanted wings, Leisen, Mitchell, 1941
The big broadcast of 1938, Leisen, Mitchell, 1938
Frenchman's creek, Leisen, Mitchell, 1944
The big broadcast of 1937, Leisen, Mitchell, 1936
Four hours to kill, Leisen, Mitchell, 1935
To each his own, Leisen, Mitchell, 1946
Death takes a holiday, Leisen, Mitchell, 1934
Easy living, Leisen, Mitchell, 1937
No time for love, Leisen, Mitchell, 1943

MITCHELL LEISEN

In January the NFT mounted a major retrospective of Lubitsch, arguably the founding father of Paramount studio style, and during the next four months there will be an unprecedented opportunity to trace the Lubitsch legacy through the divergent careers of three younger Paramount directors – Leisen, Sturges and Wilder. To set the scene and introduce the least-known of the three, it's worth quoting Andrew Sarris' laconic entry in *The American Cinema*: 'When Mitchell Leisen began at Paramount, the art was supplied by Lubitsch and Sternberg, and the junk by almost everyone else. Leisen occupied a middle position in the late 30s and early 40s with such stylish productions as *Easy Living*, *Midnight*, *Remember the Night*, *Hold Back the Dawn* and *Lady in the Dark*. The promotion of Preston Sturges and Billy Wilder from writers' cubicles to directors' chairs in the 40s probably contributed to Leisen's decline. He soon found himself in the unenviable position of an expert diamond cutter working with lumpy coal.'

Wilder mischievously claims that Sturges and he started directing their own scripts as revenge for Leisen's cavalier treatment of their material. Whatever the rivalries, Leisen's unusual background was unlikely to endear him to the robust cynics of Paramount. Originally trained in architecture, he had spent over a decade as costume designer, art director and assistant to De Mille before getting the chance to direct under a studio scheme to launch new talent in 1933. Before long he had settled into the role of the

ultra-professional contract director, who boasted: 'there was no story I ever felt I really had to do. They hand you a problem and the question is, how are you going to solve it?'

But from another perspective – seeing his films as a continuous 'text' open to revised readings – there *is* a story, revolving insistently around the contradictions of woman's place. Dynamic representations of women are the rule in Leisen – he worked with such stars as Lombard, Colbert, Dietrich, Stanwyck, Russell, Goddard – yet whether as career girls, female tycoons or adventuresses, their challenge to the patriarchal order is eventually frustrated and punished.

Nothing unusual about this in post-Hays Code Hollywood, except that Leisen's special penchant for role-reversal narratives and dream sequences permits a more open play of female sexuality and questioning of woman's place than usual. Here the Leisen 'text' records the popular impact of psychoanalysis in America, with its distinctive theme of adaptation.

Leisen's women are 'cured' of their subversive desires, but the law of patriarchy is only cursorily enforced – which returns us to speculation about Leisen's own position, as a gay who underwent long-term analysis. Clearly the films yield many and varied pleasures, and it's to be hoped that members will take full advantage of this first-ever Leisen retrospective. –*Ian Christie*. (Thanks are due to David Chierichetti, author of the invaluable book on Leisen, *Hollywood Director*, and to John Gillett for their advice on the selection of films).



Sat 1 Sep
6.15 8.30

Death Takes a Holiday

Leisen's second solo effort (after the unsuccessful *Cradle Song*) was an unusual and ambitious fantasy, scripted by Maxwell Anderson from his own play. Death assumes human form to discover why humans fear him, and during three days as houseguest at a Florentine palazzo he falls in love with a young girl, who returns his love. Despite Sternberg's accusation of plagiarising set designs for *The Scarlet Empress*, the production has an impressive stylistic integrity. USA 1934/With Fredric March, Evelyn Venable, Gail Patrick.



Sun 2 Sep
6.15 8.30

Murder At the Vanities

An abrupt change of pace for this brisk and bawdy musical revue which gradually becomes a murder story as mysterious accidents punctuate the opening night of the Earl Carroll Vanities. Plotted as a 'real time' performance, seen both on-stage and back-stage, Leisen devised a series of plausible though spectacular production numbers, including the notorious 'Sweet Marijuana'. USA 1934/With Carl Brisson, Victor McLaglen, Kitty Carlisle.



Mon 3 Sep
6.00

Four Hours to Kill/Thirteen Hours By Air

The film that boosted Leisen's reputation at Paramount and attracted Carole Lombard's interest in him. Krasna's ingenious script weaves together diverse storylines among a revue audience which includes a detective taking a gangster to jail who has 'four hours to kill'. USA 1935/With Richard Barthelmess. *Thirteen Hours By Air* has Fred MacMurray as the pilot of a coast-to-coast plane which is hi-jacked with heiress Joan Bennett among the passengers. USA 1936/With ZaSu Pitts.



Tue 4 Sep
6.15 8.30

Hands Across the Table

Lubitsch's first film as production chief at Paramount, Lombard's first specially-designed vehicle and the untried MacMurray's big break. Norman Krasna's second script for Leisen used his 'misrecognition' ploy to set Lombard's ambitious manicurist in pursuit of impoverished playboy MacMurray, to the chagrin of her rich suitor. Lombard, radiantly sensual and witty, is the first of Leisen's dominant yet vulnerable women. 'The most amiable of 30s screwball comedies' (Richard Corliss). USA 1935/With Ralph Bellamy.



Wed 5 Sep
6.30

The Big Broadcast of 1937

The *Big Broadcast* series was based on popular radio acts, whose performers re-created their specialities in a loose string of independent numbers. In this third outing, a studio assignment for Leisen, they included Benny Goodman, Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, Martha Raye and other notables of the time, with a slender linking story concerning a radio station manager and his sponsors: Jack Benny and Burns and Allen respectively. USA - 1936/With Ray Milland.



Wed 5 Sep
8.45

Swing High, Swing Low

Until recently a 'lost' film and unseen in Britain for many years, this has the reputation of containing Carole Lombard's greatest performance, as a woman irresistibly attracted to a worthless trumpet-player, who helps him make a career before losing him to another woman. They meet again many years later when he has hit rock bottom. One of Paramount's biggest successes of the period and, in David Chierichetti's view, probably Leisen's finest work. USA 1937/With Fred MacMurray, Dorothy Lamour.

COLLECTION OF
JOY LUDDY



Fri 7 Sep
8.45

Easy Living

'I was getting a little bored with the polite comedies I had been doing, and I decided to cut loose and do a lot of slapstick. It starts right at the beginning when Edward Arnold goes tumbling down the stairs and his butler says, "I see you're down early today, sir"' (Leisen). Based on a brilliant Sturges script, which catapults poor girl Mary Smith into the centre of a stock market intrigue, Leisen compounds coincidence and wreaks havoc in his broadest and most spectacular comedy to date. *USA 1937/With Jean Arthur, Ray Milland, Franklin Pangborn.*



Sat 8 Sep
6.15 8.30

The Big Broadcast of 1938

Last of the *Big Broadcast* series and a particularly arduous task for Leisen. Under the new studio regime (Lubitsch had been replaced by William LeBaron in 1937), W. C. Fields was free to indulge his eccentricity on set, and the strain gave Leisen a heart attack at the end of shooting. But he was proud of having found the song 'Thanks for the Memory' for Bob Hope's feature debut. Among the other attractions: Kirsten Flagstad with an excerpt from *Die Walküre*, and Shep Fields' Rippling Rhythm Orchestra. *USA 1938/With Martha Raye, Dorothy Lamour.*



Sun 9 Sep
6.15 8.30

Midnight

A clockwork fairytale of cynical elegance in which the dominant roles are Colbert's Eve Peabody, living on her wits in Paris, and Mary Astor as the scheming sophisticate who responds to her challenge. The cast, expensively assembled by Arthur Hornblow Jr, was probably the most glittering that Leisen ever commanded; and as Wilder modestly remarked, his and Brackett's script is 'perfect'. Leisen's triumph was the orchestration of decor and dialogue into a coherent hardboiled fantasy. *USA 1939/With Don Ameche, Francis Lederer, John Barrymore.*



Mon 10 Sep
6.15 8.30

Remember the Night

Preston Sturges' second script for Leisen was in sharp contrast to the urban frenzy of *Easy Living*. The screwball device of a New York District Attorney bailing out for Christmas the shoplifter he's prosecuting and taking her to Indiana, first to her mother's home then to his, inaugurates an evocative return to childhood and the family which is ultimately more Freudian than merely folksy – although Leisen and Sturges do conspire effectively to celebrate the homestead virtues. *USA 1940/With Barbara Stanwyck, Fred MacMurray.*



Tue 11 Sep
6.15 8.30

Arise My Love

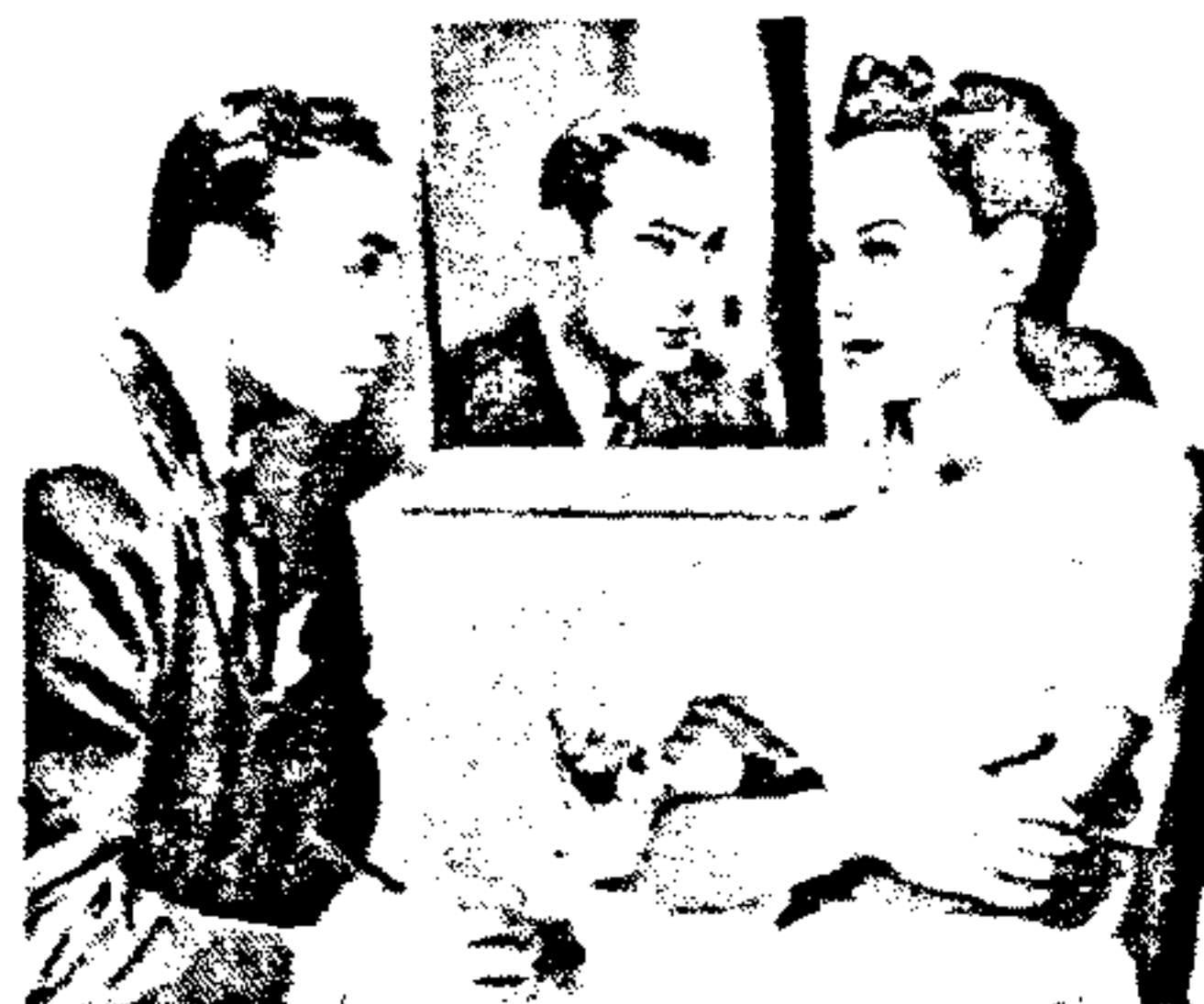
An improbable confusion of genres – part career-girl comedy, part romantic adventure – chronicling the months before and after outbreak of war in Europe. Colbert is a resourceful journalist, determined to escape from fashion to the front page, who rescues an American flyer from a Spanish jail. Despite lip-service to neutrality, the film is blatantly anti-isolationist and strikingly successful in reconciling its journalistic dimension with a complex, adult relationship. Another Brackett/Wilder script with some fine writing and effective set-pieces. *USA 1940/With Ray Milland, Walter Abel.*



Wed 12 Sep
6.00 8.30

I Wanted Wings

Leisen's own flying experience was put to good use when producer Arthur Hornblow asked him to take over at short notice this topical saga of three new recruits in training with the Army Air Corps. The brief was to make the flying sequences more spectacular and clarify a complicated storyline, but Leisen also focused attention on Constance Moore as a photographer and did several remarkable scenes with the newly-discovered Veronica Lake. *USA 1941/With Ray Milland, William Holden, Brian Donlevy.*



Thu 13 Sep
6.15 8.30

Hold Back the Dawn

A focal point in any study of Leisen. Brackett and Wilder's last script for him draws on the actual experience of European refugees waiting in Mexico for their immigration visas, and also employs an ironic narrative trope. The story of how a suave gigolo lures a small-town American schoolteacher into marriage is told to Paramount director 'John Saxon', played by Leisen, seen during the filming of *I Wanted Wings*. Charles Boyer and Olivia de Havilland embody a definitive trans-Atlantic ambivalence. *USA 1941/With Paulette Goddard.*



Sat 15 Sep
6.15 8.30

The Lady Is Willing

On loan to Columbia, though acting as his own producer for the first time, Leisen concentrated on creating outrageously extravagant settings and costumes for this slight, though symptomatic, story of a famous actress who finds an abandoned baby, then needs a 'husband of convenience' so that she can adopt the child. Fred MacMurray plays the convenient paediatrician and Dietrich gives the first of her two brilliantly-judged, knowing performances for Leisen. *USA 1942/With Aline MacMahon, Stanley Ridges.*



Sun 16 Sep
6.15 8.30

Take a Letter, Darling

The start of a cycle which centres on explicit 'role-reversal', with women portrayed as economically and sexually dominant. Former secretary, now advertising executive, Rosalind Russell hires Fred MacMurray as her personal secretary, only to become jealous when he falls for a client's sister. Molly Haskell identifies this as the point in Russell's career where she 'begins pulling her own weight in a man's world, risks making enemies and losing lovers, becomes, that is, a superwoman.' *USA 1942/With Constance Moore, Robert Benchley.*



Mon 17 Sep
6.15 8.30

No Time For Love

A more dramatic setting for the role-reversal debate, even if Colbert presents a less emphatic challenge to MacMurray in this second Claude Binyon script. He's part of a squad excavating a tunnel under the Hudson River, which task she covers as a photographer. When he's fired, she offers him a job as her assistant, but he returns to the tunnel to lead an emergency rescue. Otherwise notable for the first of Leisen's fantasy sequences, in which Colbert dreams of MacMurray as Superman! *USA 1943/With June Havoc.*



Tue 18 Sep
6.30 8.45

Lady in the Dark

Editor Liza Elliott vacillates between three men in her life, and between cover designs for her magazine; meanwhile, on the analyst's couch, she recalls recent dreams and childhood memories. A classic venture into the heartland of American 'Freudianism', adapted from the Moss Hart/Kurt Weill musical, with Ginger Rogers as victim of an outsize 'Electra complex'. Despite studio censorship and evident logistic problems, it remains a triumph of Technicolor fantasy and a bravura contribution to the Leisen canon. *USA 1944/With Ray Milland, Jon Hall, Mischa Auer.*



Wed 19 Sep
6.30

Frenchman's Creek

Another ill-disciplined project which, like *Lady in the Dark*, Leisen undertook reluctantly, and saved from failure only by massive visual compensation. Unable to improve either script (diluted from Daphne du Maurier's original) or casting, he lavished attention on period detail, landscape and daring colour composition. The production soared over budget – and earned him a reputation for extravagance – but paid off handsomely at the box-office and won an Academy Award for art direction. *USA 1944/With Joan Fontaine, Arturo de Cordova, Basil Rathbone.*



Wed 19 Sep
8.45

Kitty

This provided Leisen with a chance to retrench, while employing his particular skills in design and staging to the full. Kitty's rapid rise from street urchin to duchess is cleverly linked to the fortunes of Gainsborough, whose portrait launches her career (the re-creation of a Royal Academy exhibition is a delight). But like other Leisen heroines, Kitty is both stronger and more vulnerable than the men who surround her, and the happy ending is decidedly equivocal. *USA 1945/With Paulette Goddard, Ray Milland, Constance Collier.*



Thu 20 Sep
6.30

To Each His Own

Initially unimpressed by Brackett's script about a woman separated from her illegitimate child, who re-discovers him as a young flier in WW2 London, Leisen helped Olivia de Havilland win an Academy Award for her *tour de force* as the embittered career woman. He also fought with the studio to have John Lund play both lover and son. As a result, 'the film revealingly suggests the degree to which an American woman's feelings for son and lover are identical' (Molly Haskell). *USA 1946/With Roland Culver, Bill Goodwin.*



Fri 21 Sep
6.30

Suddenly It's Spring

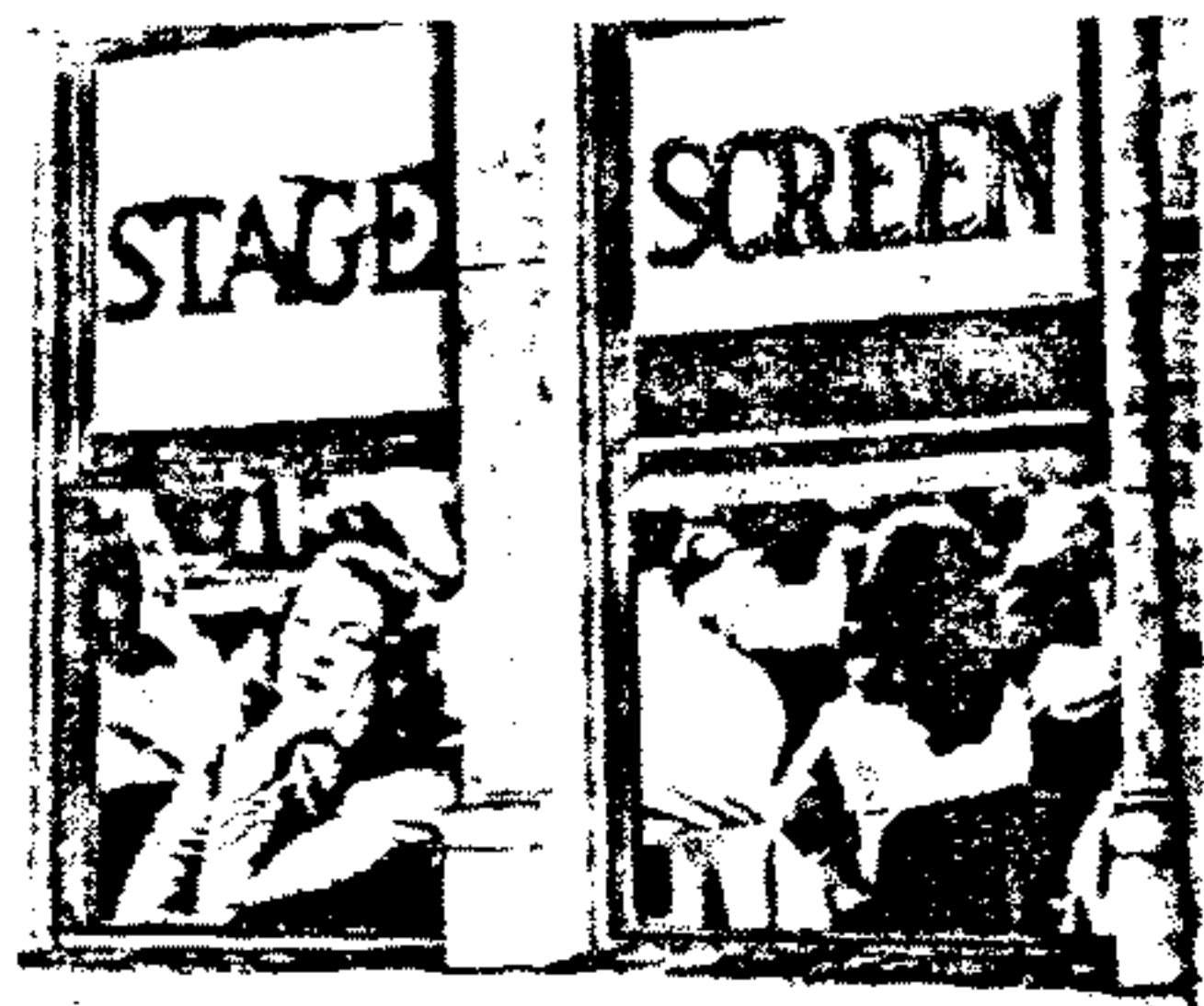
Third and last conjunction of MacMurray, Leisen and writer-turned-producer Claude Binyon, with a further variation on role-reversal. Paulette Goddard returns from war service as an army marriage counsellor to find her own marriage on the rocks and husband MacMurray seeking a divorce to marry someone else. The ensuing battle of wits matches two seasoned campaigners in a witty satire on the problems of adjusting to civilian life. *USA 1947/With Arleen Whelan, Macdonald Carey.*



Fri 21 Sep
8.45

Golden Earrings

The story, told in flashback, of an unlikely liaison between a British officer in wartime Germany and a gypsy woman who helps him complete his mission and escape the Nazis by dressing him as a gypsy. Dietrich, earthy and sensual, taunts the reserved Milland until he is forced to shed his inhibitions and respond in kind. An archaic mixture of fairytale and melodrama, yet surprisingly effective in Leisen's sympathetic hands. *USA 1947/With Reinhold Schünzel, Murvyn Vye.*



Sun 23 Sep
3.45

Dream Girl

A companion-piece to *Lady in the Dark*, and Leisen's only other full-scale use of 'dream counterpoint', with Betty Hutton as a rich girl running a bookstore whose fantasies about her brother-in-law cast her variously as Sadie Thompson and Madame Butterfly in a riotous parody of romantic genres. Macdonald Carey, as a newspaper reporter, represents the reality principle and puts an end to her dream-life by proposing marriage. Based on Elmer Rice's well-known play. *USA 1948/With Patric Knowles, Virginia Field, Walter Abel.*



Sun 23 Sep
5.30

No Man of Her Own

Based on William Irish's (Cornell Woolrich) *I Married a Dead Man*, this bleak melodrama connects the trajectory of Leisen's independent women with mainstream 40s *film noir* to produce a double image of woman as victim and motherhood as sacrifice. Stanwyck has been abandoned by the father of her imminent baby, when she is involved in a train crash and emerges mistaken for another pregnant woman, whom she decides to impersonate to benefit her newly-born son. The deceit, however, leads to blackmail and murder. *USA 1950/With John Lund, Jane Cowl, Lyle Bettger.*



Wed 26 Sep
6.00

The Mating Season

A rising young executive daren't admit that his mother ran a hamburger joint, even when she's mistaken for the new maid by his wealthy wife, an ambassador's daughter. The wife's snobbish mother joins the *ménage* for good measure. Designed partly as a vehicle for Thelma Ritter, who steals the show as the wise-cracking Brooklyn mother, this was Leisen's penultimate film for Paramount and also his last collaboration with Brackett. A sharp and sensitive social comedy. *USA 1951/With Gene Tierney, John Lund, Miriam Hopkins.*



Fri 28 Sep
8.45

The Girl Most Likely

After a long period of inactivity and several disappointments, Leisen was offered a musical re-make of Garson Kanin's *Tom, Dick and Harry*. Perhaps surprisingly, the result is lively and inventive, with Jane Powell trying to choose (once again) between three suitors and imagining life with each in a series of fantasies. Despite an excellent cast and fine choreography by Gower Champion, the film was only released as a second feature; and it had the sad distinction of being Leisen's and RKO's last production. *USA 1957/With Cliff Robertson, Keith Andes, Tommy Noonan, Kaye Ballard.*