

Document Citation

Title	Midnight
Author(s)	David Stewart Hull
Source	<i>Dartmouth Film Society</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Midnight, Leisen, Mitchell, 1939

Dartmouth Film Society

THE FILMS OF ARTHUR HORNBLow, JR. '15: PROGRAM III

MIDNIGHT (1939)

Eve Peabody	Claudette Colbert	Georges Flammarion	John Barrymore
Tibor Czerny	Don Ameche	Helen Flammarion	Mary Astor
Jacques Picot	Francis Lederer	Mme. Simone	Elaine Barrie
Stephanie	Hedda Hopper		

Original story by Edwin Justis Mayer and Franz Schulz. Screenplay by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder. Photographed by Charles Lang. Edited by Doane Harrison. Produced by Arthur Hornblow, Jr. '15 for Paramount Pictures.

Directed by MITCHELL LEISEN

Every once in a very great while, a genuinely great film passes by the critics and audiences without their noticing it. MIDNIGHT is just such a case. It is in many ways the swansong of 'thirties comedy, a last great gasp before the advent of Preston Sturges as a director of a new kind of comedy the following year.

MIDNIGHT is indeed a "brittle and heartless" film as one critic has described it, but it is far more. It has a little bit of everything in it: slapstick, romance, satire, sophisticated innuendos, and a dash of nastiness. Just why this film did not register with the critics or public is a moot question, but it is reasonable to surmise that they had more important things on their minds in that troubled year.

The film succeeds because, really, everything was in its favor from the start. The original story was by Edwin Justis Mayer, an old time writer of comedy and drama who outraged the critics in 1942 with his brilliant satire about the Polish resistance, TO BE OR NOT TO BE, in collaboration with Franz Schulz, who provided some of the best moments in MISSISSIPPI.

The screenplay, which is of course the spine of the film, was by the team of Brackett and Wilder, the latter warming up for his directorial debut in THE MAJOR AND THE MINOR which was made a few years later. Wilder's marvellously inventive mind was at this time fully under control, and his scripts of the MIDNIGHT period are both funny and cruel without the vulgarity which has spoiled most of his work in the last ten years.

Charles Lang was at the time one of the top cameramen on the Paramount lot, in that era when Paramount was really something. Mr. Lang is still going strong, but the rather glossy, bravura technique which distinguishes his 'thirties films has long since passed out of style in favor of the hard and unimaginative lensing which passes for camera-work in the majority of today's Hollywood commercial product.

Add to these technical credits a superb sextet of comic actors: Miss Colbert as the featherbrained but cagey Golddigger; Mr. Ameche as the straight-man; Mr. Lederer as the suave continental Don Juan; Mr. Barrymore simply playing himself; Miss Astor as the nasty-tongued society bitch; Miss Hopper as Hedda Hopper.

The director of the film was Mitchell Leisen (b. 1898), one of Hollywood's least appreciated cinematic craftsmen. He had a long association with Mr. Hornblow on a number of extremely well made films which never received the praise they deserved.

Mr. Leisen studied to be an architect, but made his film debut as a costume designer for the Babylonian sequences of Cecil B. DeMille's MALE AND FEMALE (1919), and stayed with that director for twelve years as an art director, fulfilling that function on THE KING OF KINGS (1927). His first film direction job came in 1933 at Paramount, where he remained for many years. Because of his careful attention to artistic details, his films often seem more European than those of his American contemporaries, recalling Lubitsch or Clair in many instances.

As Andrew Sarris has written about his career: "When Mitchell Leisen began at Paramount, the art was supplied by Lubitsch and Sternberg, and the junk by almost everyone else [a slight over-simplification, perhaps]. Leisen occupied a middle position in the late Thirties and early Forties 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 Forties probably contributed to Leisen's decline. He soon found himself in the inenviable position of an expert diamond-cutter working with lumpy coal. Yet, even the trivialities of KITTY, GOLDEN EARRINGS and THE MATING SEASON are not entirely devoid of directorial niceties."

A recent newspaper item revealed that Mr. Leisen is back in the director's chair after an absence of seven years, making a film in Spain designed as the comeback vehicle of a famous 'forties star.

Films of Mr. Leisen which will be shown in our series this term include ARISE MY LOVE and HOLD BACK THE DAWN.

David Stewart Hull

Filmography of Mitchell Leisen: CRADLE SONG (1933); DEATH TAKES A HOLIDAY, MURDER AT THE VANITIES (1934); BEHOLD MY WIFE, FOUR HOURS TO KILL, HANDS ACROSS THE TABLE (1935); THIRTEEN HOURS BY AIR, BIG BROADCAST OF 1937 (1936); SWING HIGH SWING LOW, EASY LIVING (1937); BIG BROADCAST OF 1938, ARTISTS AND MODELS ABROAD (1938); MIDNIGHT (1939); REMEMBER THE NIGHT, ARISE MY LOVE (1940); I WANTED WINGS, HOLD BACK THE DAWN (1941); THE LADY IS WILLING, TAKE A LETTER, DARLING (1942); NO TIME FOR LOVE (1943); LADY IN THE DARK, FRENCHMAN'S CREEK, PRACTICALLY YOURS (1944); MASQUERADE IN MEXICO (1945); KITTY, TO EACH HIS OWN, SUDDENLY IT'S SPRING (1946); GOLDEN EARRINGS, DREAM GIRL (1947); BRIDE OF VENGEANCE, SONG OF SURRENDER (1949); NO MAN OF HER OWN, CAPTAIN CAREY U.S.A. (1950); THE MATING SEASON, DARLING HOW COULD YOU? (1951); YOUNG MAN WITH IDEAS (1952); TONIGHT WE SING (1953); BEDEVILLED (1955); THE GIRL MOST LIKELY (1957).

We wish to thank Paramount Pictures for the loan of a fine 35mm copy of this film.