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THE LADY EVE

1941

97 Minutes F & W

Directed and written by Preston Sturges. Photography by Victor Milner. With Barbara Stanwyck (Jean-Eve), Henry Fonda (Charles Pike), Charles Coburn ("Colonel" Harrington), Eugene Pallette (Mr. Pike), William Demarest (Muggsy).

Preston Sturges established himself in Hollywood as a screenwriter in the 1930's. Somehow he overcame Hollywood's hard and almost fast rule of strict delineation between production functions and persuaded Paramount to let him direct his own screenplays. The effectiveness of this rare (at the time) integration of the writer-director role surprised the studio moguls and opened the door for other successful screenwriters, Billy Wilder, for one, to direct their own scripts.

The Lady Eve is the third film directed by Sturges and represents his most polished comedy. It concerns the comic encounter of a guileless heir to the Pike Brewery riches (Henry Fonda) and a beguiling fortune-huntress (Barbara Stanwyck), who fully intends to retire from her father's con-artist business just as soon as she strikes gold. The success of this film derives largely from Sturges' intuitive ability to combine high comedy dialogue with low comedy visuals. He knows when his satirical witticisms will sustain a static scene like the one in Stanwyck's stateroom on the ship. He also knows when to resort to purely physical antics, such as Fonda's slapstick buffoonery at the dinner for Eve at the Pike Mansion. A marvelous montage of a moving train and an opening and closing window shade in a pullman car visually punctuates Stanwyck's hilarious post-nuptial confession.

The Lady Eve provides a refreshing challenge to type casting. Barbara Stanwyck's sparkingly comic performance is unexpected from one whose usual roles were harsh and heavily melodramatic. Fonda's normally serious countenance takes on a new dimension as he plays the straight man to Stanwyck's pranks with perfect ingenuousness. Sturges does not abandon typing together, however, The Paramount character actors, many of whom find their ways into Sturges' films, spice up the action in The Lady Eve. Eugene Pallette is particularly effective as brewery magnate and father of Stanwyck's matrimonial prey.