

Born Yesterday

By Ariel Schudson

Originally penned by Garson Kanin with assistance from wife and creative partner Ruth Gordon, "Born Yesterday" began as a successful Broadway play. The original stage cast included such luminaries as Paul Douglas, Jean Arthur, Judy Holliday and even Lon Chaney Junior in one non-Broadway production! Eventually, the play moved towards Hollywood and became the film released by Columbia Pictures, receiving certification in September of 1950.

The screenplay was credited to Albert Mannheimer (who also received an Oscar nomination), but it was not the one that was ultimately used. None of the major players liked it -- not Garson Kanin, not George Cukor, and especially not Columbia studio head Harry Cohn. As a result of this mutual dissatisfaction with the Mannheimer draft, Cohn brought on the Epstein twins, Julius and Philip, to doctor the sick script. The Epsteins may have been credited as final draft authors, but there is cogent evidence that it was Kanin himself who penned the draft that hit the screen (once again, in tandem with perennial partner Ruth Gordon in addition to buddy George Cukor). The regular correspondence that Garson ("Gar" in the letters) Kanin and George Cukor kept throughout the production shows the immense input the writer had in the ways in which the script was edited or transformed. Within the back-and-forth discussions can be seen the minutiae that the two parsed through over each and every script change.

Harry Cohn and Production Code Administration chief Joseph Breen kept Cukor and Kanin busy with their remonstrations and script criticisms. Yet none of the charges made against the film were story-driven. Each demanded alteration was entirely superficial in nature, rarely warranting the legion of requests that Breen issued. The remarks from the Production Code Office primarily focused on ridding the script of the excessive use of terms such as "broad," "lousy" or "louse" or displays of "offensive drinking." These seemingly minor quibbles led to multiple drafts and page rewrites well into shooting. While certainly a frustration to Cukor and Kanin, their ability to utilize a stronger and smarter vocabulary to outwit the censors served them well. While the Production Code believed they were getting their way, Cukor and Kanin worked around the requests. They argued to keep some lines in and relented on others, balancing the work to platform the perfect amount of nuance, innuendo and flat-out comedy.

"Born Yesterday" engages in exciting socio-sexual discourse, but that was not what the censors noticed. Joe Breen was quite concerned that actress Judy Holliday might be getting photographed too suggestively, and Breen suggested downplaying Holliday's sexuality and



*William Holden, Broderick Crawford and Judy Holliday.
Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

any erotic implications in the script. But Cukor's relationship with Columbia (and with Cohn) was strong enough that much of the dialogue remained untouched. Thus, the world was introduced to Billie Dawn, a feminist role model and one of the most vibrant filmic representations of female power, intelligence and strength.

Most of the film's humor can be found in Judy Holliday's magnificent depiction of this loud and bawdy former chorus girl. We laugh at her antics because we are supposed to. Until we realize that maybe we shouldn't be laughing so hard. Billie is the only person clear-eyed enough to say the things that need to be said - to the good guys, the bad guys, the educated guys, all the guys. While other texts might chalk that up to idiot savant behavior, "Born Yesterday" attributes it to Billie's own identity as a smart and independent woman who has been ignited by education and critical thinking. Few films in 1950 allowed a woman to become the unambiguous hero of a film (e.g., in "All About Eve," the title heroine is blackmailed into submission and her dangerous ambition is curbed; in "Sunset Boulevard," an older woman's aggressive sexuality curdles into madness).

This sassy and daring film brought together a cadre of Hollywood talent who, in Cukor's capable directorial hands, flowed perfectly. Harry Cohn had originally desired a more "Hollywood" type to play the lead of Billie Dawn (names like Rita Hayworth were submitted), but after Cukor and Kanin's previous success with Judy Holliday in "Adam's Rib," Cohn was sold on her. Harry Cohn did, however, insist on casting Broderick Crawford in the role Paul Douglas had originated on stage, as he felt Douglas would play the role of Harry Brock "too sympathetically."

In "Born Yesterday," Billie Dawn (Judy Holliday), ex-showgirl and current mistress to junk dealer Harry Brock

(Broderick Crawford) comes to Washington, DC with her loud and lunkish beau. Brock has decided to move to the nation's capital to get "more legit" but he's about as smooth as sandpaper, not realizing that his rough-neck ways are not helping him rise in society. Desperate for status, Harry decides that Billie needs a makeover so that she's not so brassily crass; his own flaws go unexamined. Harry dangles marriage before Billie like a carrot, but simply wants to marry her so she can't testify against him and reveal the horrible things that she knows he's done. Brock hires journalist Paul Verrall (William Holden) to tutor Billie and "smarten her up." This backfires gloriously in a wonderful romance: Billie falls in love -- both with getting an education and with Paul. When Billie realizes that Brock is a moral idiot and a borderline criminal, she refuses to play dumb anymore and Brock's controlling fury explodes; Billie was never supposed to get TOO smart. The revelation and conclusion of "Born Yesterday" is a pre-feminist text in its depiction of female empowerment through education and the assertion of personal identity.

Cukor's films feature the evolution of the central female character through male influence, e.g. "My Fair Lady," "A Star Is Born" and (arguably) "The Women." The singularity of "Born Yesterday" is that Billie Dawn's evolution is not solely due to a man. The plot may read akin to Shaw's Pygmalion, but Billie Dawn is no Eliza Doolittle; her ability to be candid about her wants and desires gives Billie more agency and power than either Verrall or Brock suspected she contained. Her *inherent* honesty and strong identity allows her to power through the final confrontation of her abusive relationship. What Billie lacks is mere knowledge; her strength of character is innate.

Harry Brock seeks to overpower and infantilize Billie. He controls her with money, manipulation and emotional mistreatment, the trademarks of abusive relationships today as they were in 1950. This exceptional work shows the process by which Billie recognizes and disengages from this abuse. It was risky to do something like this, place this dark content within a romantic comedy. But Cukor had the engaging talents of Judy Holliday, Broderick Crawford and William Holden to assist in front of the camera and it was a smooth and successful run. In fact, it continues to be one of the more striking commentaries on women's independence and domestic abuse in classic cinema today.

One of the lovely aspects of Cukor's film is the set of tours that Billie takes with Verrall through the government buildings. These tours resemble a travelogue, as the audience learns and sees as Billie learns and sees. The homage to the Library of Congress is a strong part of the narrative and is told within a highly romantic context, placing the couple's tender moments within its walls and on its steps. While these images work as visual documents of our national monuments circa 1950, they also become part and parcel of the relationship

that unfolds between Billie and Paul. As the two bop through the Library of Congress, the National Gallery, the Jefferson Memorial and more, they become attached to one another, comfortable with one another. It is at this point that Billie imagines her thwarted ability to be an educated woman and chooses emancipation from ignorance. As she learns about the Declaration of Independence, Billie realizes that she can make free choices without emotional / financial dependence on her own petulant King.

There was more exploration of our National Buildings in earlier drafts of the script. Paul and Billie visit the National Archives and discuss the idea of archival importance; there's also a highly emotional episode in the balcony of the Library of Congress, where Billie begins to cry because she is overwhelmed by the number of books contained within the building. These scenes never made it to the final draft, but they certainly showcase the desire that Cukor and Kanin had to platform the importance of the Library of Congress and archival worth within the cinematic vision of "Born Yesterday."

A central theme of "Born Yesterday" is the demystification of academic work, cultural events, and political affairs for Billie. Verrall spends a great deal of time underscoring the fact that while these subjects may seem intimidating to the uninitiated, they are designed for public access and participation (in contrast with Brock's cartel, a shadowy private racket that can't stand the light of exposure). It could be argued that Cukor was "playing Verrall" for cinema audiences by showcasing the National Gallery and the Library of Congress within the visual text of the film.

This celebration of our museums, archival institutions and cultural preservation stations is essential. The film reveals (both narratively and visually) the kind of access and engagement with America's heritage that is every citizen's right, allowing the audience its own Billie Dawn-like epiphany.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Born and raised in Hollywood, CA, Ariel Schudson is a writer, cinephile, moving image archivist and cultural preservationist. Her career in the film community includes programming a lucrative film series for the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) at the New Beverly Cinema, writing regular film columns for online publications, and serving as the first Nancy Mysel Legacy Scholar for the Film Noir Foundation. Current projects include television commercial preservation and the study of educational films as a genre. Ariel is happiest when discussing preservation, restoration, looking through a 16mm print, or hanging out with cats.