

Pillow Talk

By Matthew Kennedy

Ross Hunter, the most lucrative producer at Universal in the 1950s, treated escapist Hollywood glamour as a religious calling. He believed Doris Day (nee Doris Mary Ann Kappelhoff of Cincinnati) had been mishandled and was too closely associated with hayseed roles like "Calamity Jane." "I analyzed her previous pictures, and discovered she was doing things on the screen I was opposed to in a woman," he said. "I redid her hair, got rid of her freckles, and gave her sophistication and glamour." In Doris, he did not see the lush sexuality of another Ava Gardner or Sophia Loren. Instead, he saw a woman to be desired but with an obtainable beauty for a vast female audience.

Rock Hudson (ne Roy Scherer of Winnetka) had his own career limitations to surmount. With his large hunky frame and chiseled good looks, Rock began at Universal in a succession of bland hero roles in westerns and war movies. "I never could see him on a horse," said Hunter. "He's just too big for those poor horses. Rock is certainly one of the screen's most handsome men and blessed with lots of charm. He belongs in a drawing room, not a cornfield."

In 1958, Rock, Doris, and her manager-husband Marty Melcher conferred in Hunter's office to discuss "Pillow Talk," an original comedy about an interior designer and a songwriter romantically clashing over a telephone party line in Manhattan. Doris knew something magical was going on in that first meeting. "I felt he was shy and very sweet," she remembered. "We looked good together, we looked like a couple should look." By the time production began in early 1959, their chemistry was positively supernatural. "The very first day on the set, I discovered we had a performing rapport that was remarkable," said Rock. "We played our scenes together as if we had once lived them."



Doris Day and Rock Hudson engage in dinner talk instead of pillow talk. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

Director Michael Gordon was hired at considerable risk of failure. Not only was he known primarily for pulpy film noirs, he had been blacklisted in 1951 by the House Un-American Activities Committee and was just beginning to get credited work again after giving friendly testimony. When Hudson expressed trepidation at playing bubbly romantic comedy, Gordon told him to treat it as the most tragic story ever told. "No matter how absurd the situations may appear to the viewer, to the people involved, it's a matter of life and death," Gordon told him. "Comedy is no laughing matter."

Everything and everyone gelled in "Pillow Talk." Hunter's eye for on screen conspicuous consumption was never more finely displayed, while Rock and Doris received stellar support from reliable wisecracker Thelma Ritter and urbane Tony Randall in a loser-at-love role modeled on Ralph Bellamy in "The Awful Truth" and "His Girl Friday." The set was genial and efficient, with Doris and Rock becoming fast friends off camera. Quite by design, furniture, props, lights, and costumes in "Pillow Talk" were a little bigger, brighter, and more colorful than anything found in life. Doris was sheathed in original Jean Louis gowns, bejeweled for \$500,000, and draped in furs she would later decry after becoming a fierce animal activist.

With a broad and filtered light, we see in "Pillow Talk" an American film tippy-toeing into a frank conversation about the changing rituals, trends,

and customs of dating, sex, and gender roles. It would be many years before "Pillow Talk"'s commentary on homosexual stereotypes would be negatively reviewed, with Rock's character at one point playing gay for laughs right down to an extended pinky finger. As for heterosexuality, "Pillow Talk" had a script dripping with sexual innuendo foretelling cinematic freedoms waiting to explode on screens in the 1960s.

Though "Women's Liberation" was coined with the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" in 1949, there were few specific events or legislation advancing feminism in the Eisenhower era. Film narratives of career women were increasingly common, but gaping pay inequities lingered alongside the post-War imperative to get married, move to the suburbs, and have children. Doris playing an independent urban professional in 1959, one year before the pill went on the market, was more progressive than we might realize today.

Ailing from an audience distracted by television, Universal was bought by Music Corporation of America (MCA) just before production started. "Pillow Talk" was such a massive hit it became the exception to an anemic box office, turned Rock and Doris into the world's most popular movie stars, and revitalized the studio's filmmaking wing. It earned five Academy Award nominations, a rare feat for a comedy, with the script by Stanley Shapiro, Maurice Richlin, Clarence Greene, and Russell Rouse nabbing the prize for best story and screenplay written directly for the screen. (In a sterling example of the Academy's persistent apples and oranges problem, "Pillow Talk" bested scripts for François Truffaut's "The 400 Blows" and Ingmar Bergman's "Wild Strawberries.") Its

charms rest primarily on the interactions of its above-the-title stars. Rock speaks his lines with seductive ease, his bedroom eyes fixing their gaze on one or another conquest. Doris' millisecond comic timing has some primal connection to her musicianship, and her grasp of rhythm, tone, and pitch. For "Pillow Talk" to work, we have to believe an inveterate Casanova and a reluctant, suspicious career woman will fall irrevocably in love, and by golly, we do.

Doris and Rock were reunited twice again at Universal, in "Lover, Come Back" and "Send Me No Flowers," while "Pillow Talk" ushered in a spate of imitators with such leering titles as "If a Man Answers," "Promise Her Anything," and "Strange Bedfellows." None of them achieved the buoyant entertainment value of "Pillow Talk." Soon the sub-genre exhausted itself by running out of jokes and story inspirations. It would be decades before "Pillow Talk" was reexamined not as a naive relic of pre-liberation, but as a revelatory cultural, commercial, and artistic creation heralding immense social changes.

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

Matthew Kennedy is the author of four books on Hollywood history: Marie Dressler: A Biography, Edmund Goulding's Dark Victory: Hollywood's Genius Bad Boy, Joan Blondell: A Life Between Takes, and Roadshow! The Fall of Film Musicals in the 1960s. He has contributed articles to The San Francisco Silent Film Festival and Turner Classic Movies Film Festival program books. He has also hosted film retrospectives based on his books at the Museum of Modern Art and Pacific Film Archive.