

Twentieth Century

By Michael Schlesinger

Film buffs often debate—oh, hell, they *argue*—over what the first “anything” is. I’ve come to the realization that there’s often an actual first and a “real” first. For example, there were several “proto” Bugs Bunny cartoons, but “A Wild Hare” was the one that hit. “Goldfinger” was the third 007 movie, but it created the template that almost all the others have followed. (As for film noir—forget it. We’ll never solve that one.)

Which brings us to the screwball comedy. One might argue that all comedies are by definition at least a little screwy, but the classic screwball concept is that the funny stuff is handled by the romantic leads and not necessarily the second bananas, that at least one of the leads is a little crazy (“acting like damn fools,” as director Howard Hawks put it), and that the situation itself would not become a “situation” if everyone behaved like normal, mature people. Some people believe that “It Happened One Night” was the first, but it doesn’t really fit the profile. (A better case might be made for “Three-Cornered Moon,” which Claudette Colbert had made the previous year.) But if you’re looking for the *echt*, *emmis*, 100% gen-you-wine “first screwball comedy,” you will eventually have to concede that it’s pretty much this one.

“Twentieth Century” (the title refers to the famous luxury train that ran between Chicago and New York, aboard which the action takes place) had its origins in an unproduced Charles Bruce Millholland play, “Napoleon of Broadway,” based largely on his experiences working for the famously egocentric David Belasco. Producer Jed Harris suggested letting Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur rework the material into presentable shape, and he agreed. The revised play, directed by George Abbott, opened on Broadway in 1932 and ran for five months—not bad in the depths of the Depression. Columbia czar Harry Cohn, always on the lookout for classy material that could be had inexpensively, snapped up the movie rights.

Cohn had already gone through several writers (including Preston Sturges, Herman Mankiewicz and Gene Fowler) before he finally wised up and went back to the team he called “Hector MacArthur.” Having had a number of directors pass on the project, he was pleased when Hawks expressed interest. Notably discontented by the rigid machinery of MGM,



Publicity still featuring stars John Barrymore and Carole Lombard.
Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

Hawks happily found himself suddenly at liberty after the infamous Lee Tracy fiasco on “Viva Villa!” (look it up). In exchange for a free hand, Hawks worked for half his usual fee and promised to shoot it in one month; he then went to work with the duo to hammer out the script, which notably devoted the first four reels to showing us what had only been discussed onstage as exposition: Illustrious impresario Oscar Jaffe sets out to turn a pretty sales clerk into a Broadway star. Despite overwhelming odds, he succeeds, and they begin a three-year affair and a string of hits. But his jealousy is smothering, and she finally leaves him for Hollywood, where she becomes bigger than ever. Unable to create a new star, he loses all his money and credibility. At this point, we join the play: Both are coincidentally riding the train to New York, and he becomes convinced that if he can get her to return—at least professionally—he’ll be back on top. Easier said than done, as the rest of the odyssey proves.

To play the world’s biggest ham, Hawks approached the man he felt was the world’s biggest ham: John Barrymore. The Great Profile loved the idea and readily agreed, though he too would be taking a step down from mighty MGM to lowly Columbia. For the female lead, Hawks borrowed his second cousin from Paramount—Carole Lombard, who’d toiled for several years in mostly supporting roles. He perceived that her earthy sense of humor would be perfect for a shopgirl-turned-diva. But the idea of working with the legendary actor terrified her, and she was turning in a performance of solid oak (ironically mirroring the plot itself). Hawks finally ordered her to

stop acting and just be herself; she complied, and the change was remarkable. Barrymore was so startled by the transformation that he gasped, "Have you been kidding us all this time?"

As Jaffe's beleaguered sidekicks, Hawks wisely cast Columbia mainstay Walter Connolly (in a rare break from his usual pompous roles) and another Paramount player, ace smartass Roscoe Karns, who steals whatever's left on the table as a boozy, garrulous press agent. As a religious fanatic who plasters the train with "Repent!" stickers, the wizened Etienne Girardot was the only carry-over from Broadway; the ubiquitous Charles Lane (still using his real name, Levison) had one of his best roles as Jaffe's assistant-turned-rival, and the cherry on top was the inimitable Edgar Kennedy as a private eye hired by Barrymore to spy on Lombard.

Hawks directed with what would become his usual blistering pace for comedies—the near-constant movement of the train helps with this—and the two stars often seem to be competing for who can be the most over-the-top. Barrymore is having the time of his life, flapping his arms, mugging, shrieking, holding exaggerated poses, picking his nose, tossing paint cans, and demonstrating that only an exceptionally great actor can do something as ridiculous as imitating a camel and make us believe it's business as usual. When he yells at Connolly, "*STAY WHERE YOU ARE, JU-DAS IS-CARI-OT!!*" he savors every single syllable of the name as if it were a bite of caviar.

The two scribes give the cast a trainload of wonderfully colorful dialogue, and Jaffe's oft-uttered "I close the Iron Door on you!" has become part of the lexicon of knowledgeable film lovers. And there are even gags that reference other recent films: Lombard hollers "I'm no Trilby!" (Barrymore had previously starred in "Svengali"), for his fake death scene Barrymore rearranges the furniture a la his similar scene in "Dinner at Eight," and a reference to "Rain" gives him an opportunity to mimic brother Lionel (who appeared in the 1928 version "Sadie Thompson").

The film isn't perfect. Cohn had decreed that no picture could run more than 90"—though he eventually relaxed that edict for Capra—and cuts leave obvious gaps in the plot. And then there's the bizarre decision by Hawks to "violate the axis." Traditionally, travel from west to east is shown onscreen as left to right, but here the train is moving right to left, as if Hawks had placed the camera north of the train and was shooting south. It's not exactly an error, but it does seem a weird choice for a train that's moving eastward. (Alas, one problem is beyond help: Jaffe is repeatedly addressed as "O.J.," which now inevitably

brings to mind a certain former football player.)

Despite solid reviews, it tanked at the box office. Even though it wasn't a musical, the plethora of early sound "backstage" tuners had soured people on most theatre pictures (Busby Berkeley's epics were a notable exception). And then there was the film itself. Romantic leads screaming at each other and acting like spoiled children? This simply wasn't done. But within the industry the picture was admired, and the tamer clowning of more successful films like "It Happened..." and "The Thin Man" showed there was indeed an audience for these kinds of antics—as long as they didn't go *too* far. As for the stars, it finally lifted Lombard to true stardom and she never looked back. Sadly, what many (including himself) consider Barrymore's finest film performance was also his last lead in an A movie; the combination of age, booze and hypoglycemia reduced him to mostly Bs thereafter, though he remained entertaining, even in a knock-off titled "World Premiere." And Hawks? He moved on, as he always did, to his next picture.

Fortunately, the film was rediscovered and newly appreciated when the auteur theory took hold and lifted him to the pantheon. (And in 1978, Comden & Green and Cy Coleman turned it into a Tony-winning musical, "On The 20th Century," which brought renewed attention to the movie.) Hawks, however, was little help in restoring its reputation. Known not only as a spinner of tall tales but also prone to change his mind on a whim, he cited it as one of his three favorites in one interview, only to dismiss it in another: "It didn't work at all. Everyone was too crazy." Indeed, to this day, there are still people who share that opinion. They prefer their romantic comedies to be all neat and tidy, thank you very much—and there's nothing wrong with that. But every once in a while, you need to have a leopard running loose in the house, to borrow an image from another Hawks comedy. And "Twentieth Century" is that ideal combination of smart and silly, of romantic and feral, of subtle and maniacal. Watching our gods getting down into the mud with the rest of us? What could possibly be sweeter?

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

Michael Schlesinger is widely acknowledged as the dean of classic film distributors, having spent more than 25 years at MGM, Paramount and Sony, keeping hundreds of vintage movies in theatrical release (and later DVD). He oversaw the completion of Orson Welles' "It's All True," wrote and produced the American version of "Godzilla 2000," co-produced such Larry Blamire parodies as "The Lost Skeleton Returns Again" and "Dark and Stormy Night," and has written, produced and directed several shorts featuring the faux-1930's comedy team of Biffie & Shooster.