



*Elaine May and Walter Matthau star in "A New Leaf."  
The film was added to the National Film Registry in 2019.*

## **A New Leaf (1971)** **By Carrie Courogen**

While the 1960s progressed across America, Hollywood was dealing with a PR problem. An industry never well known for moving fast and staying on top of trends, it was quickly losing its relevance with the youth of the day. At Paramount, two new heads—*young* heads, for a change, *hip* heads—of production, Robert Evans and Peter Bart, set out in 1968 with an ambitious plan to turn the woefully out-of-touch ship around. Gone were the formulaic star vehicles, where celebrity was of more importance than story. In was a new kind of film making ethos, one where the writers and directors were the true talent, and stars could be relative unknowns.

Finding her name among the mix of Paramount's slate of newly contracted star screenwriters was Elaine May, and her appointment came with an added bonus. Not only would she have a screenwriting deal with Paramount; she would direct her film, too. The 1968 deal was a landmark, one that gave May access to a small, exclusive (for all the wrong reasons) club of women who had helmed a studio film in the twentieth century; she was only the fourth admitted into the Directors Guild of America. The thing was, May didn't really want any part of that. In an interview with Leonard Probst in 1975, she explained:

"I never wanted to be a director. I happen to be directing movies because I wrote this movie script [for "A New Leaf"] that I wanted to sell for a lot of money so that I could be richer. Hilly Elkins, who was my manager at the time, set a \$200,000 price on the script and was negotiating for approvals. He came back and said, 'I've got a wonderful deal. I produce, you write and direct, and you get \$50,000.' I said, 'What happened to the other \$150,000?' and he said 'You can't expect that much the first time you direct.'"

May had made a name for herself as part of one of the country's preeminent comedy duos with Mike Nichols. But when they split in 1961, he achieved success far more quickly, while May stumbled through a succession of flop plays and forgettable acting roles. By and large, the public was beginning to wonder, as one "Life" profile asked: Whatever happened to Elaine May?

She couldn't deny that she needed the work, and here she thought she had found the perfect solution in a short story optioned from Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine*, "The Green Heart." May was delighted by the story of a lazy bachelor who depletes his trust fund and, rather than stoop to something normal or logical (like, say, get a job) to solve his problem, he creates an absurd scenario for himself (find a rich woman with no family, marry her within weeks, then promptly murder her) instead. There seemed to be so much potential—for love, for comedy, for mystery, for drama—that she couldn't see how she could possibly mess it up.

But the stumbles came soon after Paramount acquired what would become 1971's "A New Leaf." There was the added, unasked for, directing job, for one, then there was the problem with casting. When May asked for star approval—the suits wanted Carol Channing, whom she insisted was wrong for the lead—Paramount countered. She couldn't have star approval, but she could play the role herself. Suddenly, she found herself spread across three positions in front of and behind the camera on the first film she'd ever make—and all for the same amount of money.



*Elaine May became the first woman to write, direct and star in a major American studio feature with "A New Leaf."*

From the start, the production of the film was riddled with struggles, though ones that would befall many first-time screenwriters or directors with only half as much on their plates. The script was far too long—brevity was never May's strong suit—and its revisions delayed the start of production and drove up the budget. Coming from a theater background, May knew how to direct actors, but she lacked the technical knowledge film required. She had no idea what camera placement she wanted—she wasn't even sure what a camera *looked* like that first day—didn't know what coverage was, didn't even know how to yell "Action." "There's no way to know unless someone teaches you or you screw up," May later recalled in a 2006 conversation

with Mike Nichols. “And when you start a movie by someone saying, ‘You can’t pick a director, but you can direct it,’ you really start knowing nothing.”

The screw-ups earned May a reputation among studio executives for being difficult to corral, and their relationship only grew more strained as the film entered post-production. Just as filming had been erratic and over schedule, the editing process was a prolonged affair, stretching—well past the contractually agreed upon sixteen weeks—through nearly ten months. Only then did May turn in her cut—all three and a half murder-filled hours of it. Deemed unacceptable at that length, the “May Cut” would spark a months-long back and forth battle between the woman who wrote and directed it and the studio executives who funded it. Paramount seized control and recut it to their liking; May sued to remove her name from the film, arguing the one they were going to release was *theirs* and not hers. She lost. The judge had asked to see a screening of it himself. As producer Howard Koch recalled:

“The lights went down, and the judge sat there and he screamed and laughed and screamed and laughed, and the lights go up and he says, ‘It’s the funniest picture in years. You guys win.’”

Though the version of “A New Leaf” we are familiar with is perhaps not the version May wanted us to see, it’s difficult to see how it could possibly be improved upon. Despite all of her fears that it would be watered down, “A New Leaf” is an incredibly funny picture, and a dark twist on the screwball comedy. Its script at once brilliantly skewers the ultrawealthy and deceptively humanizes the absurdity of romantic relationships. May is a riotous delight as the excruciatingly awkward botanist Henrietta, twisting herself into one act of physical comedy after the other: limp wrists dropping teacups and spilling glasses of wine, arms akimbo getting caught up in a Grecian style nightgown, body sprawled out clumsily over a cliff to dig up a fern. And Matthau transforms a role that was initially written for Cary Grant into one that is more smarmy than suave. His wealthy, arrogant Henry is played with an air of disdain and disgust that still somehow endears himself both to Henrietta and the audience. In her first writing and directing job, May already had a knack for what became one of her greatest strengths in the role: the ability to make an audience care about characters whose behavior is often despicable.



*Elaine May and Walter Matthau in “A New Leaf”*

Even with all the mishaps and chaos that surrounded the production, May turned out an assured and confident debut film, sharp and witty and with her distinct viewpoint on betrayal and the human condition. It was a hit, grossing \$5 million and winning two nominations from the Golden Globes and one from the Writers Guild of America. Had the trying production of the film prompted May to quit after making it, "A New Leaf" alone would be enough to cement her in the canon of great twentieth century American film directors. It is our great good fortune that she didn't.

May would go on to direct three more films, and pen the screenplays for two others, not to mention her countless uncredited work on films throughout the years. Few were without the same production headaches as "A New Leaf," but each left an indelible, and deeply funny, mark on our culture.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Library of Congress. "A New Leaf" was added to the National Film Registry in 2019*

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