

Dance, Girl, Dance

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The A List: The National Society of Film Critics' 100 Essential Films, 2002

We speak of “seminal” films such as “Citizen Kane,” “Casablanca,” and “Spartacus.” Let us now praise an “ovular” film: Dorothy Arzner’s “Dance, Girl, Dance,” a 1940 movie as subversive and unconventional as the woman who made it. Arzner’s picture is a peppy little number that bounces, along with stars Lucille Ball and Maureen O’Hara, from burlesque to ballet, settling finally on a type of dance — and of woman — that need not undress itself to express itself.

The lone female studio director during Hollywood’s golden era, Arzner was along with George Cukor and Mitchell Leisen one of a handful of feminists who not only directed movies about women but did so expressly from the heroine’s point-of-view. Alas, Arzner’s “Dance, Girl, Dance” — released the same year as “The Grapes of Wrath,” “Rebecca” and Cukor’s own “The Philadelphia Story” — initially met with critical drubbing and commercial disdain, losing RKO Studios some \$400,000.

But like “It’s a Wonderful Life,” a humiliating critical and commercial failure in its own time, “Dance, Girl, Dance” was rediscovered in the 1970s. Disgruntled that contemporary Hollywood did not reflect the aspirations of the emerging woman’s movement, 1970s feminists found a foremother in Arzner, all of whose films challenge the implicit assumption that the spectator of films is male and sexual spectacle female. A sequence on the burlesque stage, in which O’Hara confronts leering men salivating at her dishabille, expressly challenges and critiques standard Hollywood practice.

The O’Hara character, aspiring ballerina Judy, keeps body and soul together by pirouetting daintily on the boards to whet audience appetite for the provocative bumps and grinds of Bubbles, the burlesque queen played not just to the hilt, but to the cleavage, by Ball.

One night, the strap on Judy’s bodice snaps — and so does she. Exasperated by being Bubbles stooge — on stage as well as in her romantic life — Judy steps out of performance and confronts the spectators in the vaudeville house — and, by extension, the movie theater — with a forthrightness brash as Manet’s “Olympia.” “Go ahead and stare,” she chides the drooling men in the audience perceiving her merely as a sexual object. “I know you want me to tear my clothes off so you can get



Dorothy Arzner on set directing a film a few years prior to “Dance, Girl, Dance”. Photo courtesy Library of Congress

your 50 cents’ worth. Fifty cents for the privilege of looking at a girl the way your wives won’t let you? ... What’s it for? So you can go home when the show is over ... and play at being the stronger sex for a minute. I’m sure [your wives] see through you just like we do.”

For the 1970s generation galvanized by theories advanced by John Berger and Laura Mulvey about classical arts and cinema’s presumption of the active, powerful male observer, and passive, powerless female observed, “Dance, Girl, Dance” was an object lesson in resisting objectification, a revelation, revolutionary. Just as it was also a kick, in every meaning of the word.

Contract director Roy Del Ruth was originally slated to make the unassuming B movie based on a story by Vicki Baum of “Grand Hotel” fame. Disappointed with Del Ruth’s footage, producer Erich Pommer replaced him with Arzner. She was a twenty-year Hollywood veteran who had worked her way from studio typist to become a much-admired editor of the silent classics “The Covered Wagon” and “Blood and Sand” to become the one “femme megger” (so dubbed because directors wielded megaphones) in the studio system. (Though in its infancy the movies had almost as many female directors as

male, by the time of the industry consolidations of 1920, most of the founding mothers had been marginalized.)

Arzner made one immediate, and crucial, change to the script. She replaced the dance teacher, in the Del Ruth version a male mentor named Basiloff, with Maria Osspenskaya as Basilova, a female mentor more sensitive to the ideals and necessities of her charges. She explicitly modeled Basilova, with her man-tailored suits and ties, on herself and Bubbles on the popular entertainer “Texas” Guinan. (On the basis of Arzner’s butch manner of dress and her longtime companion, choreographer Marion Morgan, most observers assume that she was lesbian.)

With Arzner behind the camera, “Dance, Girl, Dance” was re-choreographed as a study in conflicts, most of them neatly mediated by the finale. We have the struggle between high culture (ballet) and low (burlesque), that between innocence (O’Hara’s Judy) and experience (Ball’s Bubbles), that between working class (Judy and Bubbles) and leisure class (Jimmie, the millionaire fancied by both, played by Louis Hayward), and finally that between the romantic (Judy) and the pragmatist (Bubbles). Arzner comes not to judge but celebrate this diversity of women, work, and art.

In a sly subversion of the Hollywood Production Code — commandments prescribing that promiscuity be punished by the final reel and virtue rewarded — Arzner’s movie suggests two ideas transgressive for female characters of the time. One is that Judy’s sexual inhibitions inhibit her progress as a dancer and compound her powerlessness. The other is that Bubbles’s sexual appetite and shamelessness gives her power over men, whether potential employers or lovers. As Arzner’s most eloquent analyst, film scholar Judith Mayne, observes, “Women may be objectified through performance, but they are also empowered.”

Only when Judy, erotically charged by her crush on Jimmie and sick of prostituting her talent in burlesque, challenges the audience with her analysis of the power dynamic between spectator and spectacle, does she find her own power. It earns her the admiration of the modern dance impresario, Steve Adams (Ralph Bellamy), who admires Judy for her fluency both in the formal ballet and vernacular burlesque. It moreover earns her the admiration of Adams’s female assistant, who applauds Judy’s outburst and reminds us that there are women on both sides of the stage, and that — as Mayne notes — “they take pleasure in looking at each other.”

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