

Gilda

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There are some movies that sizzle no matter how often you see them and this is true of "Gilda." Charles Vidor's 1946 *film noir* is set in Argentina at the end of World War II, and centers on a woman caught in a love triangle with a gambler who was her lover (Glenn Ford) and his boss who is now her husband (George Macready). The characters in "Gilda" are so taut with tension that there's something exceptional to experience each and every time. Let's start with the obvious reason why: Rita Hayworth. This role of a *femme fatale* seems custom-made for her. Though she crept into our consciousness in "Only Angels Have Wings" and established her dancing in movies like "Cover Girl" with Gene Kelly, it was "Gilda" that secured Rita's star in the heavens.

Rita was always talented, but success only came after some confidence-building and other changes over the years. Born Margarita Cansino, she and her father were professional dancers. Though used to performing, she was not immediately loved on screen. In fact, she was so lackluster that 20th Century Fox, her first studio, decided to drop her after only a few pictures. Her first husband, also her manager, encouraged painful electrolysis to change her hairline and hair color to change her image. And change it did--"Margarita Cansino" came back as "Rita Hayworth" and signed a contract with Columbia.

Much was in alignment with the making of "Gilda" and its team could not have been stronger. Two of its great talents were cinematographer Rudolph Maté and costume designer Jean Louis. These men, more than any other, allowed Rita to shine. Maté is a star in his own right, known for lush cinematography in and out of *film noir*, such as "The Lady from Shanghai" and "To Be or Not to Be." He even directed some of the best in *noir* like "D.O.A." There is a depth to Maté's black-and-white that is unmatched by most in film. Interestingly, he was behind Rita's screen test at Columbia and largely responsible for head Harry Cohn seeing her potential. And of course he was a perfect partner on "Gilda" with director Vidor and his unique and often intimate framing.

But perhaps the greatest contributions came from head costume designer Jean Louis. He was responsible for the wardrobes of Columbia's biggest stars,



Rita Hayworth models the infamous "Put the Blame on Mame" gown.

such as Kim Novak, as well as Doris Day and Lana Turner once he moved to Universal. He is also famous for designs off screen, such as the nude gown Marilyn Monroe wore to sing "Happy Birthday, Mr. President." Like many costume designers, he began his career in fashion and worked at two of the best *couturiers* in the world--Agnes-Drecol and Hattie Carnegie. Louis brought an elegance to Columbia that elevated the studio's image from its origins as "Poverty Row." Even in the fabric-rationed years of World War II, you could count on Jean's costumes to be glamorous.

"Gilda" is known for its glamour and is one of the greatest movie wardrobes of all time. Rita was growing in popularity, so the studio invested thousands of dollars to dress its "Love Goddess" for this film; just two of her furs cost \$100,000. Though her 29 costumes included tailored suits that were *de rigueur* for the 1940s, the film is best known for its gowns. One, in particular, is now iconic--the strapless black satin dress she wears to sing "Put the Blame on Mame." Inspired by John Singer Sargent's famous painting "Madame X," Louis captured the mood and mystery of the portrait for the character of Gilda. The gown was also a marvel of engineering in addition to its beauty. Audiences were in awe because it defied gravity. As Jean recalled,

Inside there was a harness like you put on a horse. Then we molded plastic softened over a gas flame and shaped around the top of the dress. No matter how she moved, the dress did not fall down.

With this costume, as well as others, Jean did what great costume designers do--he made the star look her absolute best. It may seem hard to believe, but even Rita Hayworth had her flaws. "It wasn't difficult to dress her," Louis later said. "She was very thin-limbed...but [her] body was thick. She also had a belly then [due to a recent pregnancy], but we could hide that." To do so, Louis included a faux side tie in her "Mame" gown that helped conceal her mid-section. Another gown in the film had ruching around the middle that offered much the same effect. Still other dresses were accessorized with wide belts to define her waist.

The Hays Code was also in effect during this time and designers were restricted in many ways. Nothing could hint at nudity, and those enforcing the Code could censor any costume they found too revealing. Cleavage was objectionable as was the sight of a woman's belly button. Yet, even with the Code attempting to dictate design, Jean's gowns are still sublimely sensual. The "Amado Mio" gown in "Gilda" is another perfect illustration of him working around the Code. The two-piece design is backless and bares much of Rita's midriff (without exposing her navel, of course), but its long sleeves and floor length make her seem much more covered than she really is. Also, like the gown for "Mame," Louis included side slits that are largely hidden until Rita dances.

With so many talents coming together to create the character of Gilda, it's no wonder that the movie became a phenomenon. As a result, Rita became one of the top glamour girls of the 1940s and beloved all over the world. Co-star Glenn Ford confessed his own affection years later, which explains their strong on-screen chemistry. But Rita understood all the pieces that made "Gilda" possible, and believed that precious few had to do with the real (and painfully shy) Margarita Cansino. She once famously said, "Men fell in love with Gilda, but they wake up with me." It's hard to believe that anyone was complaining.

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