

It

By Dino Everett

The film "It" (Clarence Badger, 1927) starring Clara Bow has become the quintessential vehicle representing the stars' overall legacy. It is as if the story (originally written by Elinor Glyn) was specifically tailored for her personality both on and off the screen. In part this can be accredited with Bow's manager Ben Schulberg cleverly working a deal between Glyn, Paramount and Bow to have Glyn come out publicly and declare that Bow was the girl in Hollywood, that had "It". Obviously this was in conjunction with Paramount purchasing the rights to the book, so they could turn it into a film for Bow. It was a perfect fit since Bow at this point had risen to the top of popularity representing the modern 1920's flapper lifestyle, and for all practical purposes was indeed the current starlet embodying Hollywood's "it" girl.

The narrative of the film revolves around a simple working class shop girl named Betty Lou Spence (played by Clara Bow) who develops a crush on the new manager of Waltham's department store, Cyrus Waltham (played by Antonio Moreno). Two people from different classes of life trying to develop common ground for a relationship. As with most cinematic class struggles, the differences will usually bring them together initially and then at some point split them apart. The third act always being the defining one that determines whether the audience is left with a happy or sad ending when they learn whether the characters wind up together or not together.

The film was directed by the veteran Clarence Badger who had plenty of experience with comedy having come up through the ranks as a gag writer at Mack Sennett studios in the teens to ultimately directing features starring Will Rogers and Raymond Griffith throughout the 1920's. With "It," Badger was able to easily highlight Bow's natural comedic talent throughout the film, while also providing the actress moments of dramatic impact such as the scene when Betty Lou thinks that Waltham was trying to reduce her to nothing but a kept woman. It was said that Bow as an actress was able to cry on cue, and she exhibits this during the scene which takes her characters' emotions from complete exuberance when she thinks Waltham has expressed his love, to desperate sadness when she learns the truth of his intentions to keep their romance hidden, based on his internal belief that she is an unwed mother.

It is hard not to watch the film and draw parallels between Bow's character, Betty Lou, and the real life



Advertisement for "It" in a 1927 edition of "Motion Picture News." Courtesy Media History Digital Library.

persona of Clara Bow. Coming from a lower class Brooklyn upbringing one can't help but imagine that many of Betty Lou's actions mirror that of what Bow might do off the screen. One particular scene occurs when Betty Lou gets invited to dinner at the Ritz by Waltham's friend Monty (William Austin) because he has recognized that Bow's character has "It". When Betty Lou discovers that she does not have an evening dress of quality to wear, she takes the scissors to the outfit she just wore all day at work and turns it into her very own little black dress.

Sometimes movies from the 1920's take a certain level of cultural understanding in order to fully comprehend the action that unfolds. This can come in the form of terms like "flivver" or "four flusher" that are simply no longer part of the vernacular, but thankfully the concept of having "IT" has remained. In the movie, the term comes from a story of which the character of Monty had read, and is described in person by

Elinor Glyn during the Ritz dinner scene as, “Self-confidence and indifference as to whether you are pleasing or not – and something in you that gives the impression that you are not all cold.” Those words definitely described Clara Bow in 1927, as she was clearly a box office success but was still living a somewhat simple unassuming existence with her father in Hollywood.

One very important thing that the movie solidified was Clara Bow’s importance as a sex symbol in a culture that had been growing its interest in the expanding moral revolution, thanks to jazz music, partying teenagers, and flappers. The culture was transforming, money was flowing, and women were finally celebrating their sexuality after years’ of repression. The modern woman of the 1920’s was unapologetic about dressing up, dancing and having a good time just like her male counterparts, and Bow’s reputation (just like Betty Lou in the film) exemplified this. In many ways the success of “It” even over-exemplified it, causing Bow to now have an image to live up to where as previously she was simply able to be herself.

The film was so successful it is still looked upon to this day as one of the best Clara Bow films, and often the first place a new fan will begin. Likewise it is often referenced as an excellent example of the 1920’s in general between the scene’s at the Ritz, or the boardwalk, or even the moral struggles being

dealt with due to Betty Lou’s roommate Molly (portrayed by Pricilla Bonner) being a struggling unwed mother. Sexuality, Morality, Class differences, fashion and lifestyles of the 1920’s are all equally represented in the film and done so in a way that the viewer gets the feeling that the time was a changing one of great excitement.

For the studio of Paramount who made the film, they followed it up with two more Bow/Badger/Glyn collaborations with “Red Hair” released later that same year, and “Three Weekends” released the following year. Unfortunately neither of those films exists outside of a few fragments, so it is impossible to tell if the partnership was a winner each time out. For the next few years Bow continued riding a wave of popularity that would ultimately wear her out and cause her to retire from Hollywood before she was even 30 years old.

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

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