

# Midnight

By Kyle Westphal

Long-standing critical consensus and the marketing prowess of Turner Classic Movies have declared 1939 to be “Hollywood’s Greatest Year”—a judgment made on the basis of a handful of popular classics like “Gone with the Wind,” “The Wizard of Oz,” “Stagecoach,” and “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,” and a rather large stable of films that represent studio craftsmen at its most competent and unpretentious. There is no finer product of that collaborative ethos than *Midnight*—a shimmering comedy that exemplifies the weary cosmopolitan style of its studio, Paramount Pictures. It received no Academy Award nominations, but it can go toe-to-toe with any ’39 warhorse.

Film critic Dave Kehr has affectionately described Paramount’s ’30s output as an earnest examination of an imagined “Uptown Depression,” positing an economic calamity that “seemed to have its greatest effect not on switchboard operators and taxi drivers, but on Park Avenue socialites, Broadway stars and well-heeled bootleggers.” Coming late in the cycle, “*Midnight*” represents a *bon vivant* Parisian variation on the formula, with proletarian conscience taking a back seat to shopping, sex, and an exhausting roundelay of mistaken, fabricated identities. (As if to test Kehr’s thesis, one of the central characters is a taxi driver, though he too has a claim to aristocratic blood.)

For a film with a significant contingent of European émigrés among its crew, “*Midnight*” is a disarmingly airy fantasy of Paris, without the intimations of political tumult that intrude upon Ernst Lubitsch’s “*Angel*” (1937) and “*Ninotchka*” (1939). Indeed, “*Midnight*” is an unapologetic fairy tale—and Paramount encouraged such an interpretation. The theatrical trailer promised audiences Claudette Colbert as a “modern, streamlined Cinderella,” with a Rolls Royce instead of a pumpkin, a pair of Prince Charmings, and John Barrymore as a boisterously inebriated, none-too-altruistic “fairy godfather.”



Two-page advertisement from May 1939 edition of Photoplay.  
Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

The plot, such as it is, is pure screwball. Colbert stars as Bronx-bred but lately itinerant showgirl Eve Peabody, who awakes on a train and disembarks in Paris with nothing but the gold lamé dress on her back. She winds up in the taxi of Tibor Czerny (Don Ameche), who willingly drives her from nightclub to nightclub in search of a gig. Recognizing the futility of this plan, Colbert sneaks away from Ameche and uses her Monte Carlo municipal pawn ticket as entrée to a society soirée hosted by society matron Hedda Hopper. Once there, she meets a quartet of disaffected swells: John Barrymore, his wife Mary Astor, her lover Francis Lederer, and her confidante Rex O’Malley. Engineering an impromptu backstory as the Baroness Czerny to establish her aristocratic bona fides, Colbert wins over the idle rich, especially Lederer—a fact not lost on cuckolded husband Barrymore. Perhaps, Barrymore suggests, she can continue to torment his wife by seducing her lover, a man whose family “makes a very superior income from a very inferior champagne.” Meanwhile, Ameche has organized Paris’s cabbies in city-wide manhunt for Colbert. Enconced at the Ritz, empowered to buy whatever she likes on her patron’s credit, Cinderella awaits her inevitable midnight—a weekend at Barrymore and Astor’s chateau where everything is destined to unravel.

For a romantic comedy, “*Midnight*” is disarmingly light on romantic fantasy. Though we recognize almost immediately that Colbert and Ameche will form

a madcap couple sooner or later, acquiring a mate is a decidedly second-order concern for Colbert, well below seeking shelter, securing stability, and buying new hats and riding boots. In this respect, Colbert exemplifies the kind of heroine preferred by director Mitchell Leisen. “Leisen’s films question woman’s emotional tutelage to man,” observed the critic Yann Tobin. “The heroine, even if revealed to herself through man’s influence, aspires to independence.”

Leisen is neglected today because many of his major films were written by men who subsequently became directors themselves. Thus, “Easy Living” and “Remember the Night” are retroactively treated as Preston Sturges films and “Midnight” and “Hold Back the Dawn” are read back into the Billy Wilder canon. (“Midnight” plays today like one of the better early Wilder films,” concedes filmmaker and Wilder worshipper Cameron Crowe. “Only one problem: Wilder did not direct it.”) The critic’s *auteur* impulse diminishes Leisen, especially because Sturges and Wilder later complained that Leisen thoughtlessly altered their deathless prose. (In the case of “Midnight,” Leisen was hardly the only one who tweaked Wilder and Charles Brackett’s script. A “Life” profile of the writing duo claimed that the nervous studio assigned re-writes so casually that Wilder and Brackett were eventually tasked with overhauling their own script; they turned in the first draft again, with minimal revision, and received high marks.)

Leisen was a director, not a writer, and he took that distinction more seriously than most. His responsibility was to the overall picture, assuring that the actors could actually interpret and deliver their lines, not just muddle through them. A rare talent who climbed up the Hollywood ladder after stints designing sets and costumes for Cecil B. DeMille, Leisen possessed an instinctively collaborative nature that was prized so highly by the studios in 1939. Under his supervision, the work of cinematographer Charles Lang, art director Hans Dreier, and editor Doane Harrison are given room to shine.

The acting ensemble is likewise accorded an unparalleled showcase. Note particularly the performance of Rex O’Malley, a character actor frequently type-cast in effeminate “pansy” roles—the 1930s short-

hand for gay male desire that was otherwise proscribed from Hollywood’s screens. Playing Astor’s best friend and co-conspirator, O’Malley deepens and dignifies his stereotype. He’s a genuine, fully-formed character, nonchalantly comfortable with his (unspoken) sexuality. (“I made Rex play his part in “Midnight” as straight as he could,” reminisced Leisen, himself a cosmopolitan, “out” bisexual. “It’s about the straightest part he ever did,” per Leisen, which isn’t saying very much.)

It’s hard to name another screen comedy where so many actors are given so much latitude to develop emotionally complex characters, who all remain sympathetic despite their irreconcilable interests. “Everyone has their reasons,” the motto of Jean Renoir’s “La règle du jeu” (1939), could apply equally to “Midnight”—and the parallels scarcely end there. The second half of “Midnight” is effectively a home-grown spin on Renoir’s seriocomic chateau masquerade, replete with sexual entanglements, forbidden assignations, romantic declarations, outrageous costumes, and outbursts of lower-class rage incomprehensible to their aristocratic betters. Renoir’s film is frequently interpreted as a farce with a critical message, a twilight dispatch from an unsustainable society. Perhaps “Midnight,” too, is no fairy tale at all.

*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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