

**THE**

*Hollywood*

**ART**



**1930-1939**

# 1930-1939 THE GREATEST YEARS IN SHOW BIZ

by *Nick Zegarac*

***“Hollywood makes you pay attention to the pictorial world, not the means by which it brings it to you.”***

- Richard Sylbert

The year 1939 is today frequently cited as the single most influential in Hollywood’s history. In many ways, 1939 was not only the obvious end to the decade but also its zenith; the studios flourishing in their new found technical prowess (i.e. sound, Technicolor) and awash in a Mecca of palpably memorable star talent. Yet, it is important to recognize that neither Hollywood nor the critics of the time regarded the 1930s as such, or even 1939 for that matter with as much affection or appreciation. In fact, throughout the decade there had been a growing concern about film as art applied liberally by the critics, religious groups and moral intellectuals - all against what had increasingly become a ritualistic part of the American lifestyle and culture: ‘going to the movies.’

If films were regarded at all outside of that Mecca that produced them, then the stories Hollywood told were inferred to as incendiary and needlessly flamboyant by the Catholic League of Decency; thinly disguised subversive propaganda made by the most liberal of cultural mandarins. The movies were dangerous; mildly addictive and cathartic aphrodisiacs imposed on the unsuspecting viewer. Where they entertaining and indoctrinating the masses with some quietly devious political agenda?

True to the bottom line, Hollywood dismissed these critiques as outright misperceptions, clearly out of touch with what the general public wanted, expected, and by its own limited understanding of art as put forth by largely uneducated studio moguls, desperately needed to anesthetize them from the horrors of the Great Depression and looming prospects of another world war.

(Right top: a scrawny Daryl F. Zanuck, left poses with Jack and Harry Warner and the studio’s most profitable star on four legs – Rin-Tin-Tin in this 1931 publicity photo. Bottom: Ronald Colman, one of the few silent stars whose success translated effortlessly to the talkies, seen here in a publicity still from *A Tale of Two Cities* 1935, an MGM prestige picture.)





(Above: The 3 Marx Bros., Groucho, Chico and Harpo in their most celebrated moment on film, the 'state room' from *A Night At The Opera* 1935. It was largely due to Thalberg's faith in their talents that MGM acquired the brother's contracts from Paramount after a string of films at that studio had proved less than stellar in their performance at the box office. Thalberg's approach to the Marx Bros. was to feather in lavish production numbers and a solid back story on which to pin their hilarious routines.

Right top: Victor Jory as Oberon looks on as Bottom (James Cagney) and Titania (Anita Louise) take *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Under Max Reinhardt's direction, Warner Bros. adaptation of Shakespeare's classic comedy of errors was both piquant and overflowing with superb production values. That it was a box office dud speaks more to the general public's disinterest in the subject matter rather than the quality of the production itself which contained many finely wrought performances.

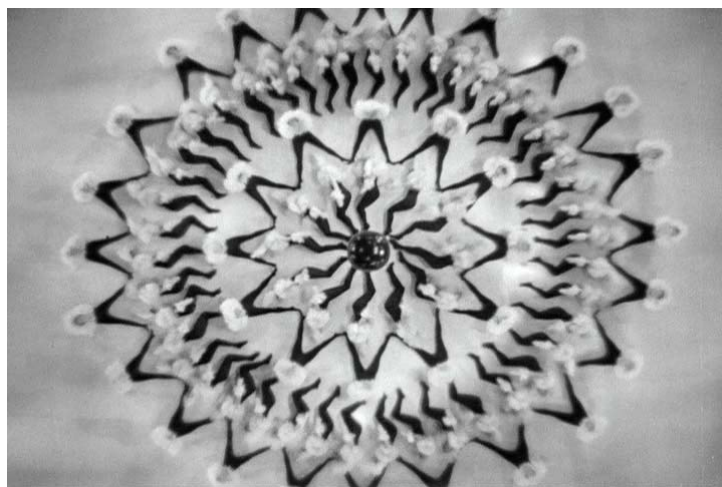


Universal's winsome soprano, Deanna Durbin – a child protégé with few equals, here conducted by no less an authority in classical music that Leopold Stowkowski in *Henry Koster's 100 Men and A Girl* 1937. Durbin's popularity remained in tact throughout the 30s, but was slowly eroded in the 40s by the arrival of Jane Powell at MGM and that studio's series of splashy Technicolor musicals featuring light opera and pop favorites.)

Where else but in the movies, as example, could a meager farmer living in Omaha Nebraska get the opportunity to witness the French court in all its audacious decadence except in a film like **Marie Antoinette** (1938)?

The studio system that had scarcely been just a fledgling neophyte a decade earlier was now the industry leader in mass entertainment. With





(Above: the 1930s a la Busby Berkeley. Left: chorine Ginger Rogers rejoices that 'We're in the Money' from Gold Diggers of 1933, a rather bizarre declaration, considering most of the country was still in the grips of the Great Depression. Top right: Ruby Keeler and a bevy of Keeler look-a-likes parade around the art deco set in 'I Only Have Eyes For You' from the same film. Bottom right: Berkeley's trademark overhead shot, used periodically throughout his films to create a human kaleidoscope, here with a bevy of beauties from the film Dames 1934.

Critics of his day and today remain divided on Berkeley's talents as a choreographer, perhaps because he knew very little about dance steps and viewed the human body largely as part of a greater whole rather than from an individualist perspective as a solo performer. Berkeley's style had an unwanted admirer in Adolph Hitler who appointed his filmmaker, Leni Riefenstahl to stage and capture his Nuremberg parades on film utilizing the same staging techniques. )

their factory-like precision cranking out an average of 52 movies a year, the Hollywood studios were producing and releasing approximately one movie per week – an unprecedented feat. The Louie B. Mayers of these respective factories wielded autonomous scrutiny and control over both their stars and the public's insatiable appetite for more movies.

There was no television, no competing foreign markets to intervene in these halcyon days. If anything Hollywood had monopolized its foreign market – circling and saturating the globe with the celluloid likenesses of Gable, Tracy, Crawford and Shearer until both they and the system were the envy of film production throughout the world.

Perhaps in part because the studios were mass entertainment personified, those seated behind imposing desks inside the front offices were more nuanced at generating diverseness in their product, marking their territory with distinction in costume, lighting and set design; undeniably distinct from its' competition. And if these same moguls began the decade with only an abundance of faith, pride and blind ambition to guide them in their new-fangled transference from Nickelodeon to movie palace, by the end of the decade that faith and ambition produced enduring and emblematic masterworks; two since touchstones

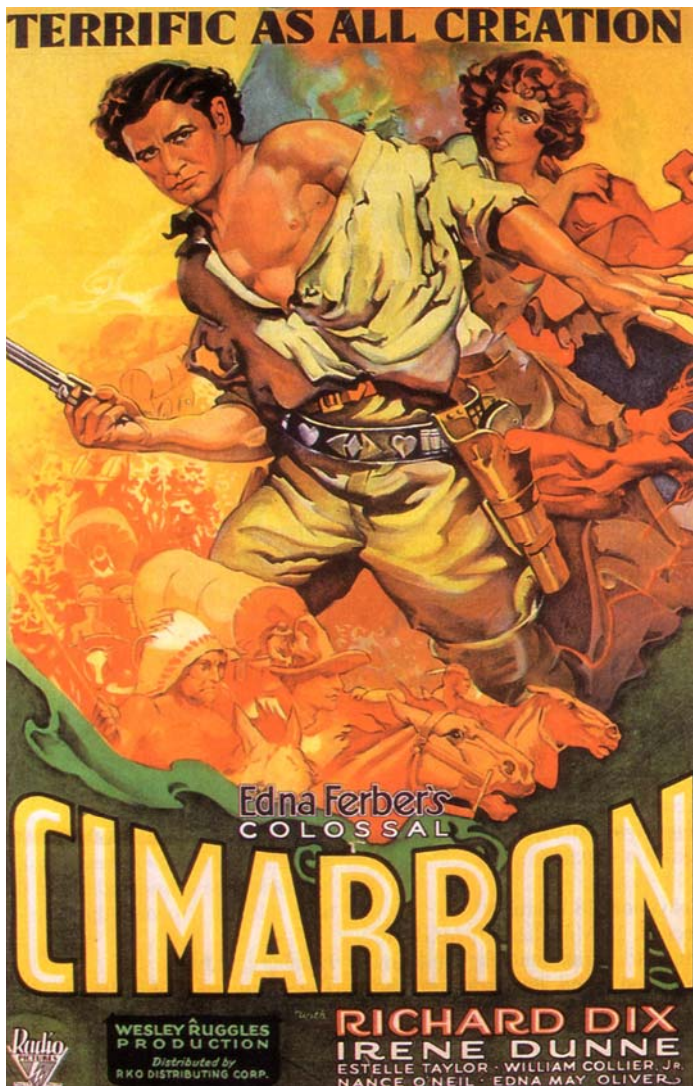
of our collective consciousness (**The Wizard of Oz**, **Gone With The Wind** – 1939), each a definitive example of what the Hollywood of yesteryear exemplified: resplendent escapism.

They were, of course, working from extraordinary material and from a seemingly untapped infinite wealth of contract talent unequaled in Hollywood since. Though the moguls had always been suckers for pretty faces, in the nineteen-thirties at least, good looks and youth were not everything. In retrospect, one of the most endearing aspects about the filmic 1930s is its affinity for grandfatherly/motherly and parental types, helmed by old hands (Will Rogers, Lionel Barrymore, Charles Grapewin) and hams (Marie Dressler, Edna May Oliver, Charles Winninger et al). These seasoned performers both looked and behaved according their years. Theirs' was a celebration of the twilight of life that Hollywood sought, if not to place at the forefront of their narratives, then, at least as solid backup to anchor stories in a sort of generational cultural permanence strangely absent from today's movie culture.

The spectrum of talent acquired and fostered by the studios throughout the thirties ran the gamut in maturity from child star Shirley Temple to aged George Arliss; from teenage Judy Garland to Geritol poster child, Flora Robson; from dashing twenty-something Robert Taylor to wily boulevardier Frank Morgan. Diversity was also reflected in the background actors possessed before becoming stars; from the seemingly overnight discovery of sweater girl Lana Turner to the dedicated athletic professionalism of ice skater Sonja Henie; or from champion Olympic swimmer Johnny Weissmueller to radio personality Bing Crosby – each new star became a total original in this burgeoning firmament.

If American talent was in higher demand than the sultry Europeans who had virtually dominated the silent movie landscape of the 20s, a new surge of intercontinental charmers also held their own; Maurice Chevalier, Ingrid Bergman, Charles Boyer, and of course, the ever-mysterious and illusive Garbo. Talent was where one found it, and Hollywood of the 1930s illustrated Dorothy's adage that there indeed was no place like home.

(Top: poster art for RKO's Cimarron – an epic western that won the Best Picture Oscar but lost so much money at the box office that it almost bankrupted the studio. Right: stars of the 30s – radio crooner Bing Crosby – top left; Broadway dancer, Alice Faye – top right; gifted comedian Constance Bennett and director/star Charlie Chaplin sans his trademark 'little tramp' makeup. Only Chaplin was a hold over from the 1920s – refusing to incorporate dialogue into his early 30s features.)





(Bone chilling entertainments. The public's fascination with the grotesque fueled Universal Studio's first cycle of horror classics typified by the supernatural. Top left: Bela Lugosi's Dracula takes a bite out of one of his many 'children of the night' in Tod Browning's 1931 film. Based on Braum Stoker's immortal tale of the macabre, the film deviated from Stoker's original version in many ways, creating a curiously seductive and sexual creature of the Count who sucks the blood of his victims by nibbling on their necks. In the book, Dracula's point of entry is at the feet.

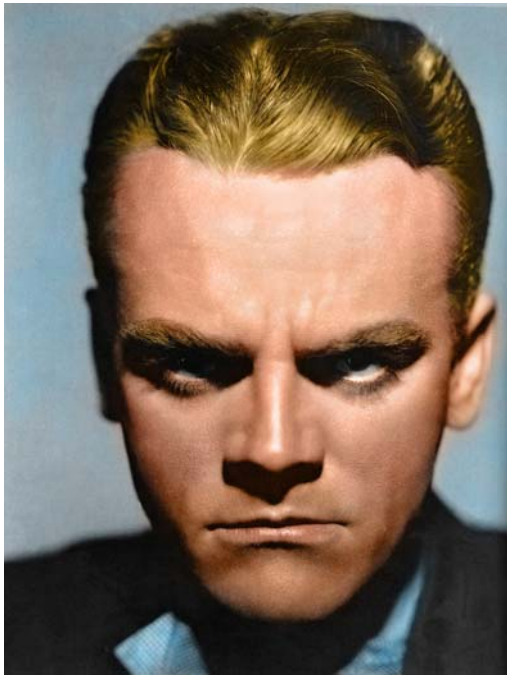
Middle: Elizabeth (Mae Clarke) is about to get the fright of her life on her wedding day as the Frankenstein monster enters her boudoir. Boris Karloff's monster makeup took six hours to apply and consisted of heavy weights in his shoes and numerous plaster applications to his face. The monster is a classic film creation sharing none of the traits only briefly described in Mary Shelley's book. Director James Whale's horror film was so popular it necessitated a sequel; *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) that many critics today believe is even better than the original.

Right top: one of the few monsters not created at Universal, but at Paramount Studios – Fredric March as Dr. Henry Jekyll pre-transformation into the diabolical Mr. Hyde in Rouben Mamoulian's 1931 retelling of Robert Lewis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Reportedly Stevenson wrote the book after having a nightmare.

Right: March as Mr. Hyde with a thoroughly frightened Ivy Pearson (Miriam Hopkins). The makeup applications used for Hyde nearly scarred the handsome leading man's profile for life. March won the Best Actor Oscar for his performance. His Hyde is a prehistoric animal-like beast. Following installation of the Production Code in 1934, all subsequent prints of the film were edited, depriving viewers of the more sexually explicit scenes between Hyde and Ivy and one very dramatic partial nude scene in which Ivy tempts Jekyll with her exposed swinging leg. Thankfully all of these cuts were restored to the film in 1999, allowing March's performance to live on as the most sadistic and chilling of the many Hyde filmic incarnations. )

Except for the occasional trek 'on location' to a handful of privately owned and appropriately rustic 'ranches' in the general vicinity, Hollywood's film empires chose to remain on their own back lots or inside any number of cavernous sound stages. Whatever the mood or background of a particular movie the studios relied on their armies behind the scenes; craftsmen in set design and construction, draftsmen, engineers and electricians - all pulling together a formidable art department to evoke any continent, city





or historical period from the history of mankind. If what was depicted on screen was not entirely historically 'accurate' then it represented a fair approximation of places that most of the paying public would be unlikely to witness first hand in their own lifetimes.

By late 1929, necessity and healthy competition had expedited Hollywood's progression from one reel silent shorts to feature films. By the mid-30s, Hollywood also added Technicolor to the equation. Yet these transitions had not been smooth. For example, few sitting inside those mausoleum-like early sound recording booths, fretting over the heartbeat of an actress overpowering her dialogue, could have predicted how efficiently movies graduated from the early stilted complexities of **The Jazz Singer** (1929) to the swirling camera fluidity showcased in **The Great Waltz** (1938). Nor could anyone have forecast that the cumbersome two strip Technicolor process used to photograph key sequences in **Ben-Hur** (1929) would eventually eclipse the artistry of black and white photography.



In part due to the self-regulating 'code' of ethics that precluded movies from offering anything but life-affirming, sexless, 'justice will overcome' edicts sanctioned by the Breen office by mid-decade, film art of the thirties still managed to tweak conservative sensibilities by presenting an alternative universe to the world at large; wondrous and full of extraordinary possibilities; a luminous manufactured dreamscape that one quickly became disillusioned not to find elsewhere in daily life.

The early days of the gritty gangster, typified by **The Public Enemy** and **Little Caesar** (both in 1931) eventually gave way to more glamorous – if sanitized – film fare. But more to the point, such explorations into general corruption and other filmic excursions that investigated innate human fear – perhaps best exemplified by Universal's first string of monster movies (**Dracula**, **Frankenstein**, **The Mummy** et al) - were increasingly being replaced in audience popularity by the more fanciful Astaire/Rogers and Busby Berkeley musicals, sumptuous costume dramas (**Anna Karenina** 1935, **Maytime** 1937) and light-hearted all-star comedies (**Dinner At Eight** 1933, **The Women** 1939) after 1935.



Most noteworthy about the decade as a whole then, is the variety that thirties cinema allowed for; all of its loveable nonsense culminating in the last year of that ancient flowering – 1939; with the heady gaudy excess of star-studded premieres masking a growing unrest on the European horizon, even as the world braced for impending atrocities made more foreboding after Hitler's invasion of Poland that same year.

(The Warner Bros. in-house style, with its 'ripped from the headlines' attention to contemporary stories, lent itself to the crime drama that, at least in the early 30s, made gangsters a glamorous part of America's movie landscape. Known as Murderer's Row, Warner Bros. would continue to cultivate male stars in the same vein until the Production Code reinforced that crime could not go unpunished, thereby defusing much of the allure of these films. Right top: James Cagney, Warner's most popular heavy; alias The Public Enemy. Middle: Edward G. Robinson, alias Rico – Little Caesar. Paul Muni alias Scarface.)



(One of the most versatile actresses of the decade, Claudette Colbert. Despite her idiosyncratic behavior which forced directors to shoot her only from the side she considered her best – her left, and a temperament that some costars referred to as irksome, Colbert was a multifaceted performer, equally at home in screwball comedy or historical epics. Above left: posing for a still from *Midnight* (1939) the classic screwball comedy about a penniless gold digger who falls in love with a Parisian cabby while pursuing a millionaire playboy.

Middle: as the Queen of the Nile in Cecil B. DeMille's *Cleopatra* 1934, a film made infamous three decades later with Elizabeth Taylor in the lead.

Top right: as the sympathetic Bea Pullman in John M. Stahl's *Imitation of Life* 1934 with the gifted Louise Beavers (left) in support. Beaver's is Delilah, a struggling single mother whose pancake recipe launches Bea as a successful business woman. The two mothers share the wealth of this new found prosperity equally and raise their children together until Delilah's Peola (Fredi Washington) decides she can pass as white – thereby breaking her mother's heart. The film was remade in 1959 starring Lana Turner as syrupy melodrama a la the garish 'over the top' direction by Douglas Sirk.

Right: poster art from Capra's *It Happened One Night* 1932, the film Colbert described as "her worst" and the only performance to win her a Best Actress Academy Award.

Colbert and Capra did not get on, on the set. In fact, owing to some promised vacation time in Sun Valley by Columbia's studio boss, Harry Cohn - that was revoked at the last minute so that Colbert could do the film - Colbert treated Capra with general disdain throughout the shoot and stormed off the set on several occasions. On Oscar night however, she thought better of her initial rudeness, openly telling the Academy in her acceptance speech that, "I owe this to Frank Capra.")

Not surprising then, the alternative view point of the world that Hollywood cultivated for patrons in 1939 was, in essence, regressive and systematically ignored the forward looming motion of world events. 1939 films celebrated imaginary realms like the Emerald City. It deified history or looked back to simpler times all revisited through







(Luminous and, for once, not tragic. Garbo as the Russian commissar, Nina Yoshenko in Rouben Mamoulian's *Ninotchka* 1939, seen here succumbing to the pleasures of Paris. The film would be Garbo's last memorable performance. Following the disastrous public reception to *Two-Faced Woman* the following year, Garbo left MGM for what was then described as 'an extended leave of absence.' She never returned, preferring instead to live obscurely in her fashionable apartment in New York until her death on April 15 1990. Below: poster art for Jean Harlow's debut in Howard Hughe's *Hell's Angels* 1931. Harlow was painfully inept throughout the film, a shortcoming she quickly rectified to become one of the most popular stars of the decade.)

increasingly rose-colored glasses. The civil war, as example, in **Gone With The Wind** is merely backdrop for what is essentially a woman's melodrama. The film is therefore not about war but about enduring the hardship of it and coming out on top in the end.

If domesticity was being threatened at home with the advancing call from Europe for American troops overseas, then on screen Hollywood chose instead to superficially exemplify that loss as, say, losing one's husband or sweetheart - not to war - but to a mantrap. As example, George Cukor's masterful 1939 classic, **The Women** has unassuming housewife Mary Haines (Norma Shearer) discover that her husband is having an affair with ruthless, Crystal Allen (Joan Crawford). Despite, separation and divorce she forgives his infidelities in the final reel, thus restoring the family unit to its proper place without excessive or open-ended consternation.

On celluloid, history was sufficiently cleansed of its more unpleasant aspects. Henry Fonda's portrayal of Lincoln, for example in John Ford's **Young Mr. Lincoln** only deals with Abraham's ascendance from country attorney to aspiring politico. The film does not conclude with Lincoln's assassination but with his blind-optimism reserved for 'marching onward' without acknowledging the bitter end yet to come. **The Adventures of**





**Huckleberry Finn** marks a quaint snapshot of the old south that is absent of lynch mobs and carpetbaggers. **Calling Dr. Kildare** extols the virtues of modern medicine without investigating the mortality rate or early operations. **Destry Rides Again** and **Dodge City** celebrate the old west as a lusty battalion of virtuous prostitutes, playful codgers, rough-neck men wearing black and simpleton 'injuns' (Indians) who accessorize the plains. What became of the bloody carnage that evicted most of the First Nations peoples from their land remains a question better answered by text books than the likes of Errol Flynn or John Wayne.



As a rule of thumb, minorities were almost entirely excluded from this '30s white paradise. Those actors of foreign extraction who had made modest inroads into the Hollywood community during the '20s, like Anna May Wong gave way to more atypical stereotypes like Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto. Native Americans were perennially depicted as blood-thirsty cutthroat savages; Orientals generally not to be trusted. Italians and Mexicans were quaint, though often idiotic comic relief. African Americans, arguably the most highly profiled minority of the decade were made inconsequential as butlers, valets, maids or other menial labor.



However, in 1939 it would be a maid who would take home the Best Supporting Actress Oscar (Hattie McDaniel as Mammie in **Gone With The Wind**), perhaps not a telling sign of where black talent was headed – for there was little to change in these stereotypes in films of the early 1940s – but it did at least seem to cap off the decade that had spawned such stereotypes with a polite gesture of acknowledgement and a gentle nod.

(Conflict and resolution, top: muscular John Hall and sultry Dorothy Lamour prepare to defend themselves against the fury of John Ford's *The Hurricane* 1937. Hall played a escaped convict who is reunited with his lover moments before the epic south sea storm hits. Center: Spencer Tracy and Clark Gable mill through a sea of extras following the epic earthquake in San Francisco 1936. Gable played Blackie Norton, a no account nightclub owner who falls for a Puritan pure heart played by Jeanette MacDonald. Schmaltzy and fun, the film was a colossal box office smash. Bottom: Gable as Fletcher Christian in a tense moment with costar Franchot Tone in *Mutiny on the Bounty* 1935 – the Oscar-winning Best Picture of that year. MGM remade the movie in the mid-60s: longer, more expensive and with lesser accolades and financial returns than herein. Marlon Brando was a more subtly nuanced Fletcher Christian.)



(Above: Garbo with Charles Boyer in *Conquest* 1937 – a Kodachrome still from a B&W movie. Garbo was a trapped Countess caught in the maelstrom of Napoleon's crumbling empire. However, before the demise there was plenty of opportunity for MGM's trademark opulence beyond all expectation. Left: the most enduring and emblematic of MGM's 30s movies; 1939's *The Wizard of Oz*. In Baum's book, Dorothy's slippers are silver. The film went for a more glitzy 'Ruby' red – brilliantly realized in Technicolor.



Yet, in hindsight it seems grossly unfair to offer any sort of intellectual critical backlash against these aforementioned exclusions, oversights, omissions and stereotypes. Perhaps better than any other cultural artifact of its period, film serves as a time capsule of what was – both in front of and beyond the screen. To point to these shortcomings is to acknowledge rather than accept them as part of the American tapestry of life circa 1930-39. Rather than stand in judgment and condemn the cultural mindset that went into crafting these works of art, the Hollywood product of the decade should be embraced as uniquely American for that period in the country's history.



(Above: Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) takes a walk with her father, Gerald (Thomas Mitchell) on the Selznick studio back lot, standing in for the farmlands of Tara. Leigh had relentlessly campaigned for the role, sending numerous head shots and her resume to Selznick from England. There was no reply. By the Spring of 1938 Selznick was embroiled in a nationwide search for Scarlett that would see virtually every major actress in Hollywood screen test for the role. Paulette Goddard was Selznick's personal favorite, though he still had his doubts about casting her. As luck would have it, Leigh's lover, Lawrence Olivier was contracted for American film work by David O. Selznick's brother: free agent Myron Selznick. With no Scarlett cast and a deadline fast approaching, David Selznick opted to shoot the burning of Atlanta sequence first, using stunt doubles in the carriage. Leigh arrived on Myron's arm for this session, at which point Myron told his brother, "Hey genius...meet your Scarlett O'Hara!")

Much has been made of Hollywood's general need for a happy ending. Certainly, it became the single most prominent criteria for most 30s cinema. True enough; an overwhelming number of movies from the decade tend to wrap on a high note, restoring self-worth and optimism; whether it is Scarlett's pronounced declaration that "Tomorrow is another day," at the end of **Gone With The Wind** or Dorothy's affirmation that "there's no place like home" before the final fade out of **The Wizard of Oz**. And while current cinema logic no longer subscribes to such unbridled innocence, it cannot argue with the public's continued embracement of such principles from the 1930s; revered, revived and celebrated since. Perhaps, the public love for these shimmering creations is as easy to comprehend as 'hope endures' – despite the hiccup of 60s and 70s film fare almost wholly vacant of such simplistic designs for living.

The best American films from the 1930s are therefore quite unique in that they have retained their ability to entertain long after the death of the individual craftsmen and women and the studio system.



Hollywood's best loved and most fondly remembered films from this period endure, are readily appreciated and admired and continue to inspire new generations of artists.

In the final analysis, cinema of the '30s has provided audiences with a unique gift: a chance to see the world - not as it was - but as we might have wished it to have been, and continue, at least on some base subliminal level, to draw inspiration from in the hopes that it can someday be. Film art from the thirties offers glimpses into imperfect moments in our history, yet always with the most idyllic framework of reference. We are entertained, not indoctrinated, and led to no finite conclusions – apolitical or otherwise – other than in coming to a realization that we have been made a little bit better for the experience they have provided. The recent pop-compost that is our movie-going experience is perhaps more culturally realistic, though perhaps far from being more culturally advanced.

What the thirties represent on the screen therefore is a level of craftsmanship and artistry that can never be equaled. True, its' world of construction is a world of cliché, but presented to the paying public at a time before 'cliché' itself could be applied with any degree of skepticism. To assuage the cultural mistakes made in the execution of these films does not debase their timeless allure into the often bastardized labeling and need for incremental nostalgia.

In fact, it only serves to reinforce the resiliency of the movies as celluloid art. The year 1939 remains that decade's microcosm for all that the movies had been aspiring toward until then. Never again in the history of American films would any one year be so entrenched and embraced as the star-gazing hallmark of our collective cultural consciousness. We continue to leave the '30s celluloid confections with a smile – an enduring emotional response that is both heart-warming and life-affirming. In the immortal words of George Gershwin, ***“Who could ask for anything more?”***

(W.C. Fields as Macawber in *David Copperfield* 1935. Katharine Hepburn, May Robson and Cary Grant, who's gone 'gay, all of a sudden' in *Bringing Up Baby* 1938.)

