



By Randy Carter

When David Selznick replaced George Cukor as Director during his production of *Gone With The Wind* in 1939 it ruptured a relationship that had produced a string of hit films for RKO and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. At RKO, Cukor directed Constance Bennett in *What Price Hollywood* (1932) a drama about a broken down director (supposedly based on director Marshall Neilan) that suggested the story line fleshed out in *A Star is Born* (1937). That same year he took a very young actress with a thin, bony physique and placed her opposite film legend John Barrymore in a screen version of Clemence Dane's play *A Bill of Divorcement*. Awkward and even strange in her manner and film presence, audiences were intrigued by the young woman who immediately charmed them again in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1933).

Moving to M-G-M in 1933, Cukor and Selznick made themselves at home with the elegant art direction and polished productions that only Louis B. Mayer's operation could support. A child of the theatre, Cukor was right at home with the witty dialogue and acerbic

humor of Broadway's *Dinner At Eight* (1933). The pair followed this blockbuster with the glossy but quite sincere production of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1935). When Charles Laughton lost faith in his ability to portray Micawber, Cukor went to Paramount and got W.C. Fields, who invested a world of experience in bringing the insolvent rogue to life.

It was during the thirties that Cukor acquired the reputation of being a woman's director. Several biographers point out that he was equally at home with leading men and point to performances by Ronald Coleman (*A Double Life* 1947), Charles Boyer (*Gaslight* 1944) and James Mason (*A Star is Born* 1954) to answer the conventional wisdom. But there is no denying that his direction of Greta Garbo in *Camille* (1937) brought out a performance that most concede was her best work and brought new life to this oft told tale of the dying heroine.

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George Cukor



The Women: (l to r) Florence Nash, Phyllis Povah, Rosalind Russell, Joan Crawford, Cukor, Norma Shear, Paulette Goddard, Mary Boland, Joan Fontaine.

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The next two years from '37 to '39, Cukor devoted himself to the coming production of Margaret Mitchell's best selling tale of the Confederacy. He visited the author in Georgia and charmed her with his vision of the project. While most directors hated doing screen tests, Cukor would make tests for productions he never worked on. He meticulously staged the scenes for dozens of actresses, known and unknown, who were up for the part of Scarlett O'Hara. He discovered Susan Hayward and her test for Scarlett became the basis for her first motion picture contract. His direction of Vivien Leigh's love scene test with Ashley Wilkes is purported to be far superior to the final cut that is included in the film.

The story goes that Clark Gable, still smarting from his failure in *Parnell* (1937) a lackluster biography

of the fiery Irish nationalist, was leery of period wardrobe and accents. He feared doing GWTW and perceived that Cukor was more interested in telling the women's story. When Cukor suggested that he



Hepburn & Cukor on the set of The Philadelphia Story.

at least try an accent, the call went out to bring in M-G-M contract director Victor Fleming. However it really went down, Selznick was certainly a constant and sometimes interfering presence on the set and there is ample evidence that he resented Cukor's handsome salary commitment.

Producer Hunt Stromberg immediately signed Cukor to direct Clare Luce's comedy *The Women* (1939). The "Woman's Director" now had a cast that included Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, Rosalind Russell, Paulette Goddard, Joan Fontaine, Ruth Hussey and Hedda Hopper. He would team up with Joan Crawford the next year in *Susan and*

God (1940) before going to work with Katharine Hepburn on *The Philadelphia Story* (1940).

Cukor and Hepburn had a partnership that produced ten films over a period of forty-seven years. *The Philadelphia Story* was Hepburn's property. After being scorned as "box office poison", she had retreated to Broadway, scored a major success in the Phillip Barry play which ran for 416 performances, optioned the screen rights (with an assist from Howard Hughes) and secured the lead role of Traci Lord. This was their second Barry comedy, having produced *Holiday* in 1938 for RKO. Hepburn's contract called for two high profile leading men to costar. Hoping for Gable and Tracy, they got James Stewart and Cary Grant.

Cukor's camera work is stylish and elegant and the performances

CONTINUED NEXT COLUMN



Cukor and cast on the set of The Philadelphia Story.



Louis B. Mayer, Paulette Goddard, Cukor and Joan Crawford in 1939.

Cukor acquired the reputation of being a woman's director.

of all his principals are legendary. Ruth Hussey would be nominated for a Best Supporting Oscar® for her role as the wisecracking photojournalist. She is quoted describing Cukor standing behind the camera mouthing her part: "If I was supposed to be smiling, he was smiling. If I was frowning, he was frowning. He just acted the whole thing. He was the only director I ever knew who did that."

The Philadelphia Story was completed on August 14, 1940 and opened on Christmas Day at Radio City Music Hall. A perfect holiday show for the 6,000 seat movie showcase, it quickly broke the all time attendance record that was held by Walt Disney's *Snow White* (1937). Only a commitment to exhibit Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) ended the run after six weeks, but until then, every performance was sold out and 850, 000 patrons saw the movie during the New York opening. ■

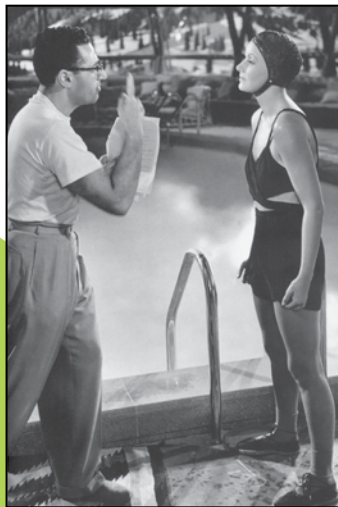
The following books provided background for this article: GEORGE CUKOR Master of Elegance, Eugene Levy (William Morrow and Company), ON CUKOR, Gavin Lambert (Putnam), GEORGE CUKOR, A Double Life, Patrick McGilligan (St. Martins Press). Randy Carter is the President of the Alex Film Society.



Rex Harrison, Audrey Hepburn, and Cukor, *My Fair Lady* (1964)



Jean Harlow, on the set of *Dinner at Eight* (1933).



Directing Greta Garbo while making *Two-Faced Woman* (1941)



The Philadelphia Story

GEORGE CUKOR
(1899-1983)



A partial list of feature films he directed in the course of a fifty year Hollywood career.

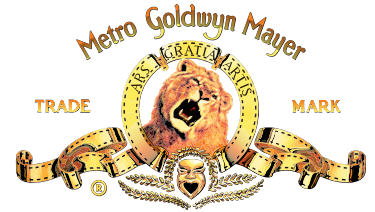
Rich and Famous (1981), *The Blue Bird* (1976), *Travels with My Aunt* (1972), *Justine* (1969), *My Fair Lady* (1964), *The Chapman Report* (1962), *Something's Got to Give* (1962), *Let's Make Love* (1960), *Heller in Pink Tights* (1960), *Wild is the Wind* (1958), *Les Girls* (1957), *Bhowani Junction* (1956), *A Star Is Born* (1954), *The Actress* (1953), *Pat and Mike* (1952), *The Marrying Kind* (1952), *Born Yesterday* (1950), *Adam's Rib* (1949), *A Double Life* (1947), *Gaslight* (1944), *Two-Faced Woman* (1941), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *Susan and God* (1940), *The Women* (1939), *Holiday* (1938), *Camille* (1936), *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935), *Little Women* (1933), *Dinner at Eight* (1933), *A Bill of Divorcement* (1932), *What Price Hollywood?* (1932), *The Royal Family of Broadway* (1930)

These actors received Academy Award Nominations under the direction of George Cukor:

Basil Rathbone, Norma Shearer, Greta Garbo, James Stewart(*), Katherine Hepburn, Ruth Hussey, Ingrid Bergman(*), Charles Boyer, Angela Lansbury, Ronald Coleman(*), Deborah Kerr, Judy Holliday(*), James Mason, Judy Garland, Anthony Quinn, Anna Magnani, Rex Harrison (*), Stanley Holloway, Gladys Cooper, and Maggie Smith. (*won)

George Cukor's

The Philadelphia Story



Black and White – 1940 – 112 minutes
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Presents
A Loew's Incorporated Production
Print Courtesy of Warner Bros Distributing Inc.

Cast

Cary Grant.....C.K. Dexter Haven
Katharine HepburnTracy Lord
James Stewart.....Macaulay Connor
Ruth Hussey.....Elizabeth Imbrie
John Howard.....George Kittredge
Roland YoungUncle Willie
John Halliday.....Seth Lord
Mary Nash.....Margaret Lord
Virginia WeidlerDinah Lord
Henry Daniell.....Sidney Kidd
Lionel Pape.....Edward
Rex EvansThomas

* Uncredited

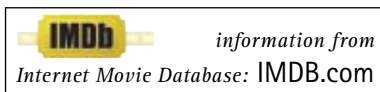
Directed by..... George Cukor

Screenplay by **Donald Ogden Stewart**
From a Play by..... Philip Barry & Waldo Salt*

Produced by Joseph L. Mankiewicz

Original Music by..... Franz Waxman
Director Of Photography..... Joseph Ruttenberg
Edited by..... Frank Sullivan
Art Director..... Cedric Gibbons
Associate Art Director Wade B. Rubottom
Set Decorator Edwin B. Willis
Costume Designer..... Adrian (gowns)
Hair Stylist Sydney Guilaroff
Makeup Artist..... Jack Dawn*
Assistant Director..... Edward Woehler*
Recording Director..... Douglas Shearer
Re-Recording Mixer Tom Gunn*

Oscar® nominations in **bold**, winners in **color**.



Including Short Subjects

A WILD HARE

Hearst Movietone News Parade of 1940

Leon Schlesinger Studios/Warner Bros, Technicolor – 1940 – 7 minutes



Be vewy, vewy qwiet, as Elmer's hunting rabbits. This short establishes many standards we expect in a Bugs Bunny cartoon right from the start. Examples: pushing a gun down a rabbit hole, Bugs inquiring, "What's up, Doc?" This is the first official Bugs Bunny cartoon, although there are some very Bugs-like characters that precede this cartoon. Oscar® nominated for short subject (cartoon).

Directed by..... Fred 'Tex' Avery
Written by..... Rich Hogan
Produced by Leon Schlesinger
Animation by..... Virgil Ross, Charles McKimson*, Robert McKimson*, Rod Scribner*
Voices Mel Blanc (Bugs Bunny), Arthur Q. Bryan (Elmer Fudd)
Original Music by..... Carl W. Stalling

* uncredited

Photo Gallery



The Alex Film Society relies on membership support and tax deductible donations to present our classic film events. Our volunteer Board, and members make it possible. Please join us as members and donors. Information can be found on page 8 of this program.

Stills from www.drmacro.com, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, and private collections.



Director George Cukor cast Ruth Hussey in *The Women* (1939) and hired her for the role of Liz Imbrie in *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). She portrays the scandal-magazine's saucy photographer who, with writing partner James Stewart, is sent to cover the wedding of haughty socialite, Katharine Hepburn. Donald Ogden Stewart's script provided snappy dialogue to all the characters such as Liz's crack to James Stewart after he's been neatly put in his place by Cary Grant: "Here's a handkerchief. There's spit in your eye and it shows."

The role earned her an Oscar® nod for Best Supporting Actress, but she lost to Jane Darwell's Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Her Oscar® nomination led to several leading roles. Among them were turns as the aloof wife of a Boston blue blood (Robert Young) in *H.M. Pelham, Esq.* (1941); and the sister of Ray Milland in the ghost story *The Uninvited* (1944), about siblings who buy a haunted house on the Cornish coastline.

Ruth Carol Hussey was born Oct. 30, 1911, in Providence, Rhode Island. Her ancestor, Christopher Hussey, was one of the original purchasers

of Nantucket Island, Mass. After studying acting at the University of Michigan, she moved to New York in 1936 where she modeled and eventually joined the touring company of the hit drama, *Dead End*. "Discovered" by a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer casting agent when *Dead End* came to Los Angeles, she was signed to a contract in 1937. Apparently, she was hired as a threat to keep stars Myrna Loy and Norma Shearer from becoming too demanding. Her ascent was expeditious. A bit player opposite Spencer Tracy in the drama *Big City* (1937), she became his co-star three years later in the frontier drama *Northwest Passage* (1940).



Spencer Tracy & Ruth Hussey
in *Northwest Passage* (1940).

In *Flight Command* (1940), opposite Robert Taylor, she impressed talent scout C. Robert Longenecker, who told friends he would marry the actress. They met through mutual friends at Hollywood's Brown Derby restaurant two years later and were married after a seven-week courtship. They had three children including Oscar® winning filmmaker, John Longenecker (*The Resurrection of Bronco Billy*). Robert Longenecker died in 2002.

In 1945, she starred opposite Ralph Bellamy in the Broadway production of *State of the Union*. Her later movies included *I, Jane Doe* (1948), the 1949 remake of *The Great Gatsby*, and *Stars and Stripes Forever* (1952). Her last feature film role was in 1960 in *The Facts of Life*, playing Bob Hope's wife.

In the 1950's, Hussey moved into television, including guest appearances in dozens of television series including *Lux Video Theatre* which garnered her a Emmy® nomination.

While still acting, Hussey focused on raising her children. She painted watercolors and designed her family's weekend home in Lake Arrowhead, CA. The three-story house was a mere 28 feet in diameter, conforming to her husband's request for a round home. "It was a unique design based on clock face mathematics," her son John told Michelle Vogel for her book *CHILDREN OF HOLLYWOOD* (2005). "It was practical, yet different."

After a long absence from television, Robert Young, her old M-G-M crony, coaxed her back to TV as a guest star on a 1972 episode of his ABC series *Marcus Welby, M.D.* and also as his love interest in the TV-movie *My Darling Daughters' Anniversary* (ABC, 1973), which marked her last screen appearance. Ruth Hussey passed away on April 19, 2005 in Newbury Park, California at the age of 93. ■

1940 (13th) Academy Awards Selected Categories

ACTOR

Charles Chaplin
Henry Fonda
Raymond Massey
Laurence Olivier
James Stewart

The Great Dictator
The Grapes of Wrath
Abe Lincoln in Illinois
Rebecca
The Philadelphia Story

**All three were nominated but
went home empty handed...**

ACTOR IN A SUPPORTING ROLE

Albert Basserman
Walter Brennan
William Gargan
Jack Oakie
James Stephenson

Foreign Correspondent
The Westerner
They Knew What They Wanted
The Great Dictator
The Letter

ACTRESS

Bette Davis
Joan Fontaine
Katharine Hepburn
Ginger Rogers
Martha Scott

The Letter
Rebecca
The Philadelphia Story
Kitty Foyle
Our Town



Charles Chaplin, The Great Dictator

ACTRESS IN A SUPPORTING ROLE

Judith Anderson
Jane Darwell
Ruth Hussey
Barbara O'Neil
Marjorie Rambeau

Rebecca
The Grapes of Wrath
The Philadelphia Story
All This, and Heaven Too
Primrose Path



*Joan Fontaine, Judith Anderson
Rebecca*

DIRECTING

The Grapes of Wrath
Kitty Foyle
The Letter
The Philadelphia Story
Rebecca

John Ford
Sam Wood
William Wyler
George Cukor
Alfred Hitchcock

OUTSTANDING PRODUCTION

All This, and Heaven Too
Foreign Correspondent
The Grapes of Wrath
The Great Dictator
Kitty Foyle
The Letter
The Long Voyage Home
Our Town
The Philadelphia Story
Rebecca

Warner Bros.
Walter Wanger
20th Century-Fox
Charles Chaplin Productions
RKO Radio
Warner Bros.
Argosy-Wanger
Sol Lesser (production company)
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Selznick International Pictures

WRITING (Screenplay)

The Grapes of Wrath
Kitty Foyle
The Long Voyage Home
The Philadelphia Story
Rebecca

Nunnally Johnson
Dalton Trumbo
Dudley Nichols
Donald Ogden Stewart
Robert E. Sherwood, Joan Harrison

Winner



Bette Davis, The Letter

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Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant and James Stewart in

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