



Cukor, George (1899-1983)

by Gary Morris

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George Cukor, the preeminent "woman's director" and gay auteur of Hollywood's classical era, was born July 7, 1899 in New York. Cukor evinced an early interest in the theater, becoming a stage manager for a stock company and, then, on Broadway while still in his teens (1919-1924). From there he graduated to being a stage director of some renown, working with top female stars of the period, including Jeanne Eagels and Ethel Barrymore, from 1925 to 1929.

In 1929, Cukor was part of the wave of Broadway talent that migrated to Hollywood, where he worked as a dialogue coach on other people's films before co-directing one of his own, *Grumpy*, in 1930. Following two more codirecting efforts (with Cukor working with the actors and dialogue and more experienced directors handling the action), he made his first film, *Tarnished Lady* (1931), with Tallulah Bankhead. By 1933, with *Dinner at Eight* and *Little Women*, he was firmly established as a major talent.

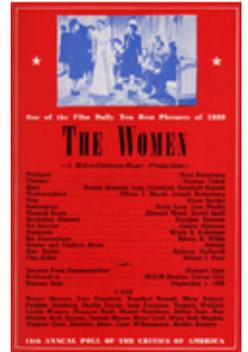
Throughout his long career, he worked on prestige, often stage-derived productions with the most important stars of the day.

Cukor was responsible for many of the most popular and critically praised films of Hollywood's golden age, including *Camille* (1935), *The Women* (1939), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *Born Yesterday* (1950), *A Star Is Born* (1954), and *My Fair Lady* (1964). So skilled was he with actors, but particularly female stars, that he became typed as a "woman's director," a provocative phrase that also spoke obliquely of Cukor's homosexuality.

Many female stars adored Cukor, whom they eagerly sought to work with and counted as a friend. Joan Crawford, for example, who gave her best performances under his demanding eye, insisted on working with him as often as possible. They responded not only to his oft-remarked personal charisma and wit, but also to his ability repeatedly to elicit Oscar-winning performances from them.

However, the director's reputation as a "woman's director" (and homosexual) may have gotten him kicked off the set of *Gone with the Wind* (1939), when star Clark Gable allegedly said, "I won't be directed by a fairy." (Another version of this story has Gable's refusal to work with Cukor motivated by his belief that the director knew of the actor's own earlier same-sex escapades.) Typical of the loyalty Cukor could generate, however, Vivien Leigh continued to be coached by him despite the objections of Gable and Victor Fleming, who replaced him as director.

Cukor always denied the "charge" of being a "woman's director." He correctly pointed out that in spite of his legendary collaborations with such talents as Crawford, Jean Harlow, Katharine Hepburn, Judy Garland, and Judy Holliday, more men than women had won Oscars for their work in his films.



Top: A portrait of George Cukor by Stathis Orphanos. Above: A promotional advertisement for George Cukor's *The Women* (1939). The portrait of George Cukor courtesy Stathis Orphanos. Image copyright © Stathis Orphanos. All Rights Reserved.

Cukor's private life was well known within the limits of Hollywood. His Sunday afternoon pool parties are legendary in queer circles, having been described at lurid length in recent Cukor biographies and published remarks by some of the attendees, such as novelist John Rechy.

These events were studies in egalitarianism, with Cukor and his sophisticated friends socializing with their boyfriends, who were often hustlers, rough trade, would-be actors, or ambitious artists and writers who saw these parties as entries into the high life.

Cukor's personal reputation has suffered somewhat from these accounts, with Rechy (quoted in David Ehrenstein's *Open Secret*), for example, portraying the "gentleman director" as a catty, sometimes cruel queen who was as gifted at separating his private and public personas as he was at making films.

Not surprising for a semi-closeted gay artist in Hollywood, one of Cukor's constant themes was how to reconcile a schizoid existence, particularly that of an outsider or artist figure constantly at war with his or her own demons and the limits imposed by relationships and humdrum reality. Sometimes this conflict ends in a break with reality, as in *A Double Life* (1948), where the Ronald Colman character is eventually driven to madness while playing Othello.

In other cases, there is a merging of two artistic temperaments that, for Cukor, represents a transcendent state. This happens tellingly in, for example, *Holiday* (1938), where free spirit Johnny Case (Cary Grant) rejects his rich, stuffy fiancée in favor of her spinster sister (Katharine Hepburn) who turns out to be a dreamer like himself.

In spite of his devotion to the dream and the dreamer, Cukor was realist enough to know that such liaisons are rare and fleeting. In *A Star Is Born*, the relationship of two larger-than-life actors--here played by James Mason and Judy Garland, in her best performance--begins in triumph but ends in abuse and finally suicide.

Cukor's reputation as the pioneer maker of divas does not take into account his brilliance in exploring the artistic temperament and the struggle for self-expression in subtle variations throughout his career. Moreover, this reputation fails to acknowledge the grittiness of his 1950s films, which despite strong performances by actresses cannot be consigned to the ghetto of the "woman's picture."

Particularly in his collaborations with Garson Kanin and Ruth Gordon, such as *The Marrying Kind* (1952), shot on location, there is an almost neo-realist feeling in the unflinching treatment of the sometimes squalid reality of people's daily lives.

Cukor died on January 24, 1983, two years after his last film, *Rich and Famous*. This film, which revisits Cukor's theme of the artistic temperament at odds with society and itself, was an update of the Bette Davis-Miriam Hopkins vehicle *Old Acquaintance* (1943). As such, it is a suitable coda for the career of one of America's great gay artists in or out of cinema.

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About the Author

Gary Morris is the editor and publisher of *Bright Lights Film Journal*, now online as brightlightsfilm.com. Author of *Roger Corman*, he writes on film regularly for the *Bay Area Reporter* and the *San Francisco Weekly*. He serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtq.com.