



Eric Blore (1887-1959), one of several male actors famous for playing sissy roles.

## Film Sissies

by Gary Morris

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"I *liked* the sissy," Harvey Fierstein said in an interview for the documentary *The Celluloid Closet*. This simple sentiment, though rendered apologetically, is hardly surprising coming from an actor who has played his share of such characters over the years.

What is surprising is that mainstream audiences, and sometimes queer viewers who have more at stake in such imagery, have mostly agreed with him, judging from the sheer staying power of the sissy archetype, which can be found everywhere from the earliest silent films (*Celluloid Closet* includes a sighting from 1895) to recent action movies (*Rush Hour 2*, 2001).

What is it about the sissy that has assured his appeal through world wars and major societal shifts?

As a distorted mirror of masculinity, the sissy fascinates as both a challenge to rigid masculine norms and a reinforcement of them. His mere presence in close proximity to the heterosexual male (or female)--often as a valet, decorator, faithful friend, or later, in the confusion that erupted around the image, romantic rival---subtly reminds the audience that there are other, perhaps more satisfying ways of being than conventional heterosexuality.

The often riotous humor of character actors such as Eric Blore, Edward Everett Horton, Franklin Pangborn, et al.--beloved fixtures in their films, always eagerly awaited--hints at a carefree world of foolish fun that represents a kind of ideal.

This is especially evident in the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers films, which always feature at least one, and sometimes several sissies who, as much as the "satin and platinum" décor, indicate a desirable world of sophistication and pleasure far from the boring status quo.

### The 1930s: The Heyday of the Sissy

The 1930s were the sissy's heyday, and the portrayals are more diverse than might be thought at first glance. Most of director Gregory La Cava's films from that era feature the enchanting Franklin Pangborn, whose roles offer a tidy précis of the possibilities of the 1930s sissy.

In *Bed of Roses* (1933), he is a pure figure of fun, whimsically associated with women's underwear as the fussy, commanding head of a ladies' department in a clothing store. In *Fifth Avenue Girl* (1939), he is unexpectedly pleased with his outsider status, confessing to his surprised wealthy boss: "We servants have all of the luxuries of the rich and none of their problems."

*My Man Godfrey* (1936) shows the sissy as morally upright arbiter, as Pangborn presides over an absurd scavenger hunt by cheating wealthy "nitwits." *Godfrey* breaks one of the cardinal rules of sissydomy by having Pangborn lovingly touch the hero (William Powell), provocatively stroking the latter's face ("Do you mind?" he says seductively) to see if his beard is real.

Despite their outsider status, sissies were not above public service to the culture's needs, sometimes taking on the burden of bringing together a warring heterosexual couple, which not coincidentally usually was part of the process of denying their own sexuality (expressions of homosexuality were forbidden by the 1934 Hays Code, though sissies were not).

In the 1933 *Female*, Ferdinand Gottschalk plays a mincing, homunculus-like secretary to a powerful female executive. While he mostly fawns over "Miss D," he ends up advising both her and her intransigent male love interest on how they can come together. Anxieties around the sissy character are also apparent in his role, as *Female* inexplicably has him courting one of the other secretaries, a woman, though it is treated as more campy than serious.

Other kinds of 1930s sissies were strictly exotic window dressing, brought in as novelties to liven up the "real" characters' lives or a stage show. Two examples are the lewd, prancing queens in the gay bar scene in Clara Bow's *Call Her Savage* (1932), or the Rocky Twins, professional drag entertainers in real life, frolicking onstage in the Marion Davies vehicle *Blondie of the Follies* (1932).

### **The 1940s: The Sissy as Threat**

By the 1940s, the sissy took off his gloves and shrugged off some of his comic and self-sacrificing impulses. In that era of war and noir, he could turn against the kind of man he once served obsequiously.

Clifton Webb's Waldo Lydecker in *Laura* (1944) shows this scary new sissy, one whose threat to heterosexual norms becomes palpable. Lydecker is treated sympathetically in subtext even as the text shows him as a deranged killer; this is partly because the film endorses the values he imparts to Laura through their apparently sexless relationship--sophistication, deep friendship, an appreciation of beauty--even as it shows that relationship as hopeless.

The nominal hero, the stolid policeman Mark (Dana Andrews), is portrayed as thuggish, dismissive, cold; and for once (but not the last time) the sissy moves from background decoration to the starring role. Webb, unlike the simpering, sometimes frail, or just plain weird sissies of the prior decade, is an attractive, charismatic creature. The title is misleading; *Laura* is really Webb's film, and thus the sissy's.

### **1950s Sissies**

For some observers, the sissy's golden age ended in the 1940s, but the character remained a minor but persistent force.

Vincente Minnelli's *Tea and Sympathy* (1956) was a major postwar text on sissydomy, wringing its hands in the manner of the liberal problem picture over the troubling effeminacy of the character dubbed "Sissy Boy" by cruel schoolmates. In the play he was homosexual, in the movie he is "sensitive"--and rescued from sissydomy by a sympathetic woman.

Also during this decade, Jerry Lewis perfected what Parker Tyler called the "sissy-boy clown," but Lewis's schtick, derived from vaudeville, was more manic than queer.

### **1960s Sissies**

In two of his 1960s movies, *Lover Come Back* (1961) and *A Very Special Favor* (1965), Rock Hudson pretends to be a sissy in order to win over a woman, a dizzying collision of reality and fiction in the case of a gay actor such as Hudson.

More adventurous sissies arrived with the late 1960s counterculture. William Friedkin's *The Boys in the Band*

(1969, based on a play by Mart Crowley), for example, featured a slew of sissies brimming with superb dish and self-hate, dancing, smoking dope, making out, discussing Maria Montez.

For some sissy-watchers this was the ultimate treat, a rare film made up *entirely* of sissies with only a single disturbed heterosexual to spoil the fun. (And he's soon relegated to the background where sissies once dwelt.)

More politically minded queers dismissed *Boys* as an unappetizing tableau of self-loathing homosexuals that pandered to heterosexist morality. (Critic Vito Russo called it "a homosexual period piece just as *Green Pastures* was a Negro period piece.")

### **The 1970s and Beyond**

In the gay-inflected prison drama *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (1971), audiences were treated to a previously unthinkable image: the sissy unclothed. The film's Queenie (professional drag entertainer Michael Greer) is in some respects the apotheosis of the threatening effeminate queer, reordering the prison as a kind of personal fiefdom for his own pleasure and, in a startling sequence, entertaining the prisoners, guards, and their families by doing a lewd drag number that ends with him exposing himself and verbally lacerating the audience. Queenie shows the intransigent sissy's resilience, surviving a brutal beating to reclaim his place.

Queenie's legacy of the out-of-control sissy did not last, however, and, aside from the curious conflation of queer and killer that made a popular subgenre in films such as *Silence of the Lambs*, and an occasional perverse-powerful sissy such as Louis XIII in Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971), mainstream post-1970s films mostly featured more subdued sissies.

From Harvey Fierstein cowering under a desk in *Independence Day* (1996) to the drag queens of *To Wong Foo* (1995) who sacrifice their sexuality and transform the lives of small-town heterosexuals, from neurotic Nathan Lane in *The Birdcage* (1996) to Jeremy Piven as a Versace salesman flirting wildly with Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker in *Rush Hour 2*, the modern sissy has returned to more familiar and culturally reassuring territory: a minor but provocative diversion in the comic-decorative mode that he played so memorably in the 1930s.

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