



Leisen, Mitchell (1898-1972)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Mitchell Leisen was a noted director during Hollywood's Golden Age. He is credited with more than 40 feature films, which are celebrated for their stylishness and visual elegance. He excelled at witty, romantic comedies that are often tinged with a touch of melancholy, such as the classic "screwball" comedy *Easy Living* (1937) and the clever, cosmopolitan farce *Midnight* (1939).

Leisen has also been hailed for his "gender role-reversal" films, where the male lead is cast as the sex object and the female lead as the aggressor. Not surprising for a bisexual director working in Hollywood, Leisen's other thematic obsessions included mistaken identity, role-playing, and deception.

Leisen returned to the same performers film after film, developing strong working partnerships. Although he was instrumental in shaping the careers of such actors as Fred MacMurray and Ray Milland, Leisen became typed as a "woman's director" for the fastidious, detailed attention he paid to the costuming and art direction of his productions, as well as for the nuanced, spontaneous performances he coaxed from such actresses as Carole Lombard, Claudette Colbert, and Olivia de Havilland.

Among many film historians, Leisen's artistic reputation has been tarnished somewhat by the stormy relationships he became embroiled in with some of his screenwriters, most notably Preston Sturges and Billy Wilder. After working on several films with Leisen, both writers demanded to be allowed to direct their own scripts, in part because they objected to the sophisticated veneer of Leisen's directorial style and to the changes he frequently made to their screenplays.

Sturges considered Leisen an "interior decorator" and a "bloated phony," while Wilder famously complained that Leisen spent more time "counting the pleats in the skirts of the stars instead of looking for the jokes in the script."

Wilder went on to assert contentiously (and offensively) that "Leisen was too goddam fey. I don't knock fairies. Let him be a fairy. Leisen's problem was that he was a stupid fairy."

Although he was married and reportedly had affairs with several women, Leisen was considered to be conspicuously open about his (homo)sexuality, especially in the conservative Hollywood of the 1940s and 1950s.

Leisen was married for fifteen years to the mezzo-soprano Sondra Gahle (née Stella Yeager), but their marriage seems to have been in name only, as she spent most of her time in Paris pursuing an opera career.

Leisen's sexual relationships with men were well known and a topic of conversation among many of his colleagues. He was rumored to have had liaisons with the silent-film idol Ramon Navarro, the singer and actor Ivor Novello, and the cinematographer Ted Tetzlaff.

In 1938, Leisen embarked on a long-term relationship with Billy Daniels, a dancer and choreographer;

during most of their time together, the two men shared a home.

According to his biographer, "Being bisexual was part of Leisen's unhappiness. Life would have been easier for him if his desires had been wholly one way or the other. . . . The side most people saw was wild and promiscuous, but another side wanted to settle down."

Born James Mitchell Leisen on October 6, 1898, into a prosperous Midwestern family in Menominee, Michigan, he relocated to St. Louis, Missouri while still a child, after his parents divorced and his mother remarried.

Much of Leisen's boyhood was spent in isolation. He was a sickly child who was often bedridden and underwent surgery when he was five years old to correct a club foot, which left him with a slight but permanent limp.

To entertain himself during his boyhood, Leisen built models of buildings, arranged flowers, and designed sets for his toy theater. His mother and stepfather found such diversions inappropriate for a boy and promptly sent him to military school.

After military school, Leisen attended Washington University, in his hometown of St. Louis, where he studied architecture. Following graduation, he moved to Chicago to work for an architecture firm. In his spare time, he acted in productions at several local Chicago theater companies.

Around 1918, at the age of 20, Leisen moved to Hollywood to further pursue his acting career. While he found little luck in landing acting roles in movies, he successfully parlayed his architecture experience into a job designing stage sets for the Hollywood Community Theatre.

His theater work in turn led to an introduction to the noted film director Cecil B. DeMille, who promptly hired Leisen to design gowns for the actress Gloria Swanson for a Babylonian sequence in his new movie *Male and Female* (1919). Although Leisen had never designed clothing before, both the director and his female star were delighted with his work, and DeMille offered the young man a full-time contract.

Leisen spent the next two years working for DeMille, beginning in the costume department and working up to set decorator and art director. However, due to constant disagreements with DeMille over design decisions, Leisen resigned in 1922 and joined United Artists, a studio founded several years earlier by the director D.W. Griffith, and the film stars Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks.

While at United Artists, Leisen designed the costumes for Fairbanks' swashbuckling epics *Robin Hood* (1922) and *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) and was entrusted to design the period costumes Pickford wore in her film *Rosita* (1923).

However, Leisen grew tired of designing costumes and yearned for greater creative responsibilities. Consequently, in 1925, when DeMille established his own production company, Leisen rejoined him, despite their past antagonisms, as an art director.

Leisen worked for DeMille over the next seven years. Later in his life, he often credited DeMille with teaching him everything he knew about making motion pictures.

Leisen designed the meticulously detailed sets for such DeMille productions as *The Volga Boatman* (1926), *The King of Kings* (1927), and *Dynamite* (1929). He earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Art Direction for *Dynamite*, but perhaps more importantly for Leisen's subsequent career, he also served as assistant director to DeMille on the film.

Thereafter, Leisen functioned as both art director and assistant director (while occasionally designing the costumes as well) for DeMille's films including *Madam Satan* (1930), *The Squaw Man* (1931), and the infamous *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), a film replete with opulent Roman orgies, body-baring outfits, and same-sex seductions.

Word of Leisen's talents as a director quickly spread throughout Hollywood. Paramount Pictures offered him a chance to co-direct a film with Stuart Walker, a Broadway stage director the studio had under contract. Leisen and Walker ultimately directed two films together (with Leisen receiving credit as "associate director" on both): *Tonight Is Ours* (1933), a comic romance based on a play by Noël Coward, and *The Eagle and the Hawk* (1933), about World War I fighter pilots. Leisen later claimed full credit for both films, asserting that "Stuart Walker had no idea what a camera was for, or about, or anything else."

Both films were critically and commercially successful, and Leisen's career as one of Paramount's foremost directors began. His first solo directing effort was *Cradle Song* (1933), an unconventional drama about a lovelorn nun who "adopts" a young orphan girl, which starred Dorothea Wieck, known for her work in the classic German lesbian drama *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931).

Other early successes for Leisen were the elegant allegory *Death Takes a Holiday* (1934); the eccentric hybrid of musical and thriller *Murder at the Vanities* (1934); *Hands Across the Table* (1935), the first of his "gender role-reversal" films, with Carole Lombard as a tough-talking manicurist and Fred MacMurray as a frivolous, bankrupt playboy; and *Swing High, Swing Low* (1937), another darkly comic love story, again starring Lombard and MacMurray.

In 1937, Leisen also directed the critically acclaimed "screwball" comedy *Easy Living*, with a script by Preston Sturges. The film revolves around a mink coat thrown out of a window by a wealthy financier during an argument with his wife that lands on the head of a penniless working girl as she passes underneath; she in turn is mistakenly believed to be the millionaire's mistress.

The film fluently encompasses the themes and issues that Leisen returned to again and again throughout his career: mistaken identity, role-playing, and deception.

At the end of filming *Easy Living* in November 1937, Leisen suffered a heart attack.

He recuperated quickly, however, and returned to the studio the next year to direct the musical-comedy *The Big Broadcast of 1938*. Set aboard a conspicuously phallic-looking luxury liner named the S.S. Gigantic and staffed entirely by muscular sailors in tight white uniforms, the film is highly theatrical and keenly suggestive.

One of the sailors in that film was a dancer named Billy Daniels (1912-1962). Leisen promptly embarked on a long-term, and open, relationship with Daniels; for much of their time together the two men lived in the same house. Subsequently, Daniels performed in several other of Leisen's films and served as choreographer for the musicals he directed.

Their relationship ended in the late 1940s.

Daniels continued to work in Hollywood as a choreographer on other directors' films before moving to Berlin, where he choreographed dance sequences for several German musicals. He died of a heart attack in 1962.

A year after meeting Daniels, Leisen directed what many critics and film historians consider to be his

masterpiece, *Midnight* (1939). This was the first of three Leisen films scripted by Billy Wilder (and his co-writer Charles Brackett); the other two are *Arise My Love* (1940) and *Hold Back the Dawn* (1941).

Midnight is a vivacious, quick-witted comedy of mistaken identities, set within a rather louche Parisian setting, and involving a group of greedy deceivers and double-dealers. Yet, as directed by Leisen, the characters always remain sympathetic; he refuses to judge any of them.

As Leisen once observed in an interview, "Nobody's all good, or all bad, not in my movies at least. There's a little bad in the best of us, and a little good in the worst of us."

In the early 1940s, Leisen undertook a series of films focused on ambitious, glamorous women who fall in love with men (all played by Fred MacMurray) of a lower social status.

The Lady is Willing (1942) stars Marlene Dietrich as a theater luminary who marries a small-town pediatrician. In *Take a Letter, Darling* (1942), a high-powered advertising executive, played by Rosalind Russell, falls for her male secretary. *No Time for Love* (1943) features Claudette Colbert as a sophisticated fashion magazine photographer attracted to a laborer digging a tunnel under the Hudson River. In one scene of note, as Colbert descends the tunnel Leisen's camera lingers on the workmen's sweaty, semi-naked, muscular torsos.

In 1944, Leisen crafted one of his most notorious films, the musical *Lady in the Dark*. Based on Moss Hart's Broadway show, which featured music by Kurt Weill and lyrics by Ira Gershwin, *Lady in the Dark* showcases Ginger Rogers as a fashion magazine editor undergoing psychoanalysis. Her sessions with the analyst, and the dream sequences they prompt, serve as the material for the film's lush, colorful, unrestrained production numbers.

Inasmuch as the Broadway version of *Lady in the Dark* reflects Hart's own psychoanalysis and his struggle with bisexuality, Leisen may have had a particular interest in the subject matter even as the bisexual elements are obscured in the film version.

In his assessment of the film, the critic Richard Barrios observed, "Leisen concentrated on the visuals and almost completely neglected sense or sensitivity. . . . The result is insulated gay sensibility run riot, a shopping spree trying so hard to be chic that it forgets about providing cohesive entertainment." Nonetheless, the film remains a perennial favorite among connoisseurs of high camp.

Leisen's notable later films include the period dramas *Frenchman's Creek* (1944) and *Kitty* (1945) and the melodramas *To Each His Own* (1946), with an Academy Award-winning performance by Olivia de Havilland, and *No Man of Her Own* (1950).

In 1954, Leisen was fired for allegedly propositioning several men on the set of the crime drama *Bedevilled* (1955); the film was ultimately completed by another, uncredited, director.

With Hollywood studios ostensibly closed to him, Leisen found employment on television instead, directing episodes for *Shirley Temple Theatre* (1958), *Twilight Zone* (1959-1960), *Wagon Train* (1961), and *The Girl from U.N.C.L.E.* (1966-1967).

In addition to his film and television work, Leisen also ran a high-end fashion studio, served as an interior decorator for the luxury homes of his Hollywood cohorts, and designed and staged opulent nightclub revues.

As his friend actor Ray Milland remarked, "[Leisen] could direct; he could write; he did marvelous interior decoration; he could dress people beautifully, both male and female; he staged nightclub acts; he painted, sketched, and sculpted. He never stopped."

Leisen's health gradually declined after a series of several more heart attacks. He spent his final years in the Motion Picture and Television Country Home, a residential community for members of the motion picture and television industry, in Woodland Hills, California.

He died of coronary disease on October 28, 1972.

Leisen was one of the most prolific and commercially successful directors of the 1930s and 1940s. As the critic Geoff Andrew summarized, "[Leisen's] best work may have depended on good writers, but the gentle romanticism, the silvery visual elegance, and the relaxed performances in those films are proof of his own light touch. He was expert at combining comedy, melodrama, and a touch of social comment . . . and, as a former costume designer and art director, alert to the importance of décor."

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.