

# Bringing Up Baby (1938)

By Michael Schlesinger

In 1938, a self-appointed arbiter of public taste named Harry Brandt wrote a notorious article in the “Independent Film Journal” listing a group of stars he deemed “box-office poison.” It included some of the biggest names in history: Garbo, Astaire, Crawford, Dietrich, Mae West (who laughed it off) and most famously, the woman many consider the finest actress of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Katharine Hepburn. In Kate’s instance, it wasn’t unjustified: She did have a string of duds, some good (“Alice Adams,” “Sylvia Scarlett”), some not so much (“Break of Hearts,” “A Woman Rebels”), with only the ensemble comedy “Stage Door” edging into the black. So when RKO asked her to try a slapstick farce, she felt it was a leap worth taking.

Certainly the circumstances couldn’t be better. Screwball comedies were still popular, she’d be reteamed with Cary Grant, given crack support from expert farceurs and a script co-written by Dudley Nichols, and riding herd over the madness would be Howard Hawks. It couldn’t miss.

It did. Though reviews were mostly positive and it did fine business in a few cities, many more, notably New York, gave “Bringing Up Baby” the cold shoulder. (It didn’t help that Hawks allowed the cost to balloon to over a million—an absurd amount for a comedy.) Kate sadly decided she *was* the problem. She bought out her contract for \$220,000, and after one more picture at Columbia (“Holiday,” again with Cary), she returned to Broadway and starred in a little play called “The Philadelphia Story.” But that’s another story.

So how did a flop somehow redeem itself as one of the greatest comedies of all time? Hard to say. History is full of movies that

tanked on first release that were later recognized as classics (and sometimes the opposite is true as well). Perhaps it *was* Hepburn. Possibly people thought it was some sort of kiddie film (the titular “Baby” is a pet leopard.) Or maybe Hawks repeated his “mistake” from “Twentieth Century”—“Everybody was crazy. There was nobody normal to identify with.” Of course, years later, that became an asset rather than a liability, but it didn’t help in 1938. Not until it hit TV in the late 1950s did people truly notice what a damn funny movie it is, even without the benefit of a theatre full of laughing people. And after Hawks was “discovered” in the 1960s by the French and their American counterparts Peter Bogdanovich and Andrew Sarris, its reputation finally began to soar.

Briefly: Grant is a timid zoologist with an iceberg fiancée and a brontosaurus skeleton one bone shy of completion. Hepburn is a madcap heiress who crosses his path; instantly love-struck, she promptly begins turning his life into a symphony of catastrophes (including arrest). Throw in that leopard—which can only be calmed by the song “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love, Baby”—a nasty little dog (played by Asta), an assortment of other crazy people and a missing dinosaur bone, and soon his very sanity is on the line.

“Baby” forms a loose trilogy with two other Hawks comedies: “Monkey Business”—which also starred Grant as a distracted scientist—and a sort-of remake, “Man’s Favorite Sport?” (It was intended for Grant, but he felt he’d gotten too old for that sort of thing, and so Rock Hudson stepped in.) All three feature dominant women—a Hawks trademark, of course—and easily manipulated men, as well as animals as key plot devices;

respectively, a leopard and a dog; chimpanzees, and fish. But “Baby” broke new ground; women had pushed guys around before, but never as vigorously as Hepburn does here. Moreover, unlike such genuinely tough broads as Rosalind Russell in “His Girl Friday” or Lauren Bacall in “The Big Sleep,” Hepburn is an innocent free spirit, almost a predecessor to the modern Manic Pixie Dream Girl. When she drives off in other people’s cars, it never occurs to her that she’s doing anything wrong; she’s simply acting on impulse. Try as one might, it’s difficult to be angry at someone incapable of fathoming the harm she’s doing.

The stars were initially unsure of what the deal was. Grant was used to playing suave, knowing characters, so Hawks told him to think Harold Lloyd (and gave him Lloyd-like glasses) and it snapped into place. Hepburn had a tougher road; this kind of zaniness was way outside her zone. Hawks finally suggested she get some tips from Walter Catlett, who went back to the Ziegfeld days. A quick study, she promptly understood what was needed, giving the blithest performance of her career. (The rest of the actors were cast strictly to type and had no problem doing their things.) In their second of four films together, the stars play off each other superbly, with the ease that can only come from that singular personal chemistry truly remarkable actors have, and their interactions with Charlie Ruggles (befuddled big game hunter), May Robson (imperious dowager), Barry Fitzgerald (boozy gardener), Catlett (flummoxed constable) and Fritz Feld (dotty psychiatrist) are sheer poetry.

Hawks encouraged improvising; Hepburn’s reference to Grant as “Jerry the Nipper” came from his previous film, “The Awful Truth.” Grant himself suggested the famed torn dress/hat-over-ass gag, noting it had actually happened to him years earlier. When Hepburn accidentally broke a heel, he whispered “born on the side of a hill,” and she immediately went into the bit. And the most famous ad-lib, which was definitely *not*

in the script, came when Robson asked why he was wearing a negligee. He leapt in the air and shouted, “Because I just went *gay* all of a sudden!” As that word was most commonly understood at the time to mean “happy,” it slipped by the Breen Office’s hypersensitive nostrils.

Of course, anytime you’re dealing with animals, it’s going to be less-than-smooth sailing, and having two leopards on set just made it worse. With Grant in particular understandably nervous about being so close to not-entirely-tame animals, Hawks resorted to a wide variety of special effects, matte work and other tricks to minimize their exposure, most of them created by an uncredited Linwood Dunn. (There’s a swell demonstration of how they were done on YouTube.) And speaking of Dunn, some leftover props from “King Kong” can be spotted in the background of the museum scenes.

“Baby’s disappointing grosses had their ramifications. Good: Nichols and Hagar Wilde (who wrote the original story and worked on the screenplay) fell in love. Bad: RKO, furious at the budget overrun, yanked Hawks off his next film, “Gunga Din,” and replaced him with George Stevens—who ended up going even more over schedule and budget than Hawks probably would have. But good: He and Cary went to Columbia and made the incomparable “Only Angels Have Wings” and “His Girl Friday.” And we’ve already noted Kate’s fate—though it was happily short-lived.

Moreover, its influence continued far beyond the two follow-ups, and in 1972, Bogdanovich did his own quasi-remake, “What’s Up, Doc?,” even repeating some of the same gags. (The two films have something else in common: no underscoring.) Though unlike “Baby,” it was an instant smash. And while all four pictures remain prized by movie lovers, it’s “Baby” that earns pride of place, all the elements coming together in an almost alchemic way to create true comedy magic. At one point, Grant observes that

with Hepburn, there aren't any quiet moments. That's also true of this masterpiece—and that goes double for audiences watching it.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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