

To Be or Not to Be

By David L. Smith

"None of us thought we were making anything but entertainment for the moment. Only Ernst Lubitsch knew we were making art."

These words by John Ford reflect what came to be known as "The Lubitsch touch." The sophisticated comedies of this former garment worker were carefully tailored by a man who was a perfectionist. Lubitsch's mantra was, "It's good, but not good enough." However in October, 1941 he began to shoot a film that many thought was unworthy of his talent and could be a disastrous turning point in his career.

The film was an unusual blend of comedy with stark terror. Many critics of that day, including the New York Times Bosley Crowther, thought the film was "callous and macabre." Others thought it to be tasteless and inappropriate. How could he cast Jack Benny, a radio comedian, as a Nazi fighter? How could he set the plot of the movie in occupied Warsaw? How could there be jokes about concentration camps? How can he portray the Nazi's as "harmless clowns?" Many thought the film was nothing but Nazified slapstick.

Jack Benny had just finished filming "Charlie's Aunt," one of his funniest movies. Lubitsch thought Benny would be perfect as the leader of a group of ham actors that would somehow defeat the Nazi's attempt to track down a list of members of the Polish underground. Miriam Hopkins, one of Lubitsch's favorite actresses, was set to play opposite Benny. When Hopkins discovered her part was nothing other than playing a straight man for Benny, she became disenchanted with the role.

Carole Lombard heard that Lubitsch was casting about for an actress to take the Hopkins part. Lombard had always wanted to do a Lubitsch film. She approached Lubitsch. He was thrilled that she was interested in playing Benny's wife but told Lombard the role was not showy and was virtually a supporting one. Lombard knew Lubitsch was having problems financing the film. She also knew that with her name in the cast, financing would be assured. Lubitsch told Lombard he would build up her role and Benny agreed to give up his top billing.

Lubitsch later acknowledged that Lombard had become a sort of unofficial co-director of the picture.



A young flyer (Robert Stack) ducks out of a performance of Hamlet, much to the dismay of its leading man (Jack Benny).

She obviously made an important cerebral contribution both as on-camera performer and sidelines observer. She even helped cast the film. She had been helping young Robert Stack, who was a family friend, pursue an acting career. Stack had known Lombard since he was fifteen. According to Stack, Clark Gable was like a surrogate father to him. Lombard told Lubitsch she thought Stack had an aptitude for comedy. Lubitsch cast him as a young bomber pilot who becomes involved in a flirtatious affair with Lombard.

When Lubitsch was asked what kind of film he was working on, he replied, "One might call it a tragical farce or a farcical tragedy...I do not care and neither will the audiences." The group of hand-picked actors who make this farce work are portrayed as egotists and grumblers who needle one another even in the midst of danger. The buffoonish Nazi Colonel Ehrhardt is played by Sig Rumann who Lubitsch had cast as a bumbling Russian in "Ninotchka." Rumann had come to the United States before the Hitler takeover in Germany as did Lubitsch. Rumann's portrayal of Ehrhardt was the best role he ever had in his long film career.

Lubitsch had a habit of using familiar collaborators in script writing. But for this screenplay he chose Edwin Justus Mayer, a respected Broadway playwright. If

"To be or Not to Be" is a film the likes of which startled Lubitsch lovers, then Mayer must be credited with an important role in shaping the film. The original story was written by Melchior Lengyel and Lubitsch. Virtually no line is without a second meaning. As a result, the jokes come so rapidly a second viewing is usually necessary. In one scene, Lombard speaks of how her husband is always trying to take credit for everything. She concludes, "If we should ever have a baby, I'm not sure I'd be the mother." Benny's reply (which is usually lost by the laughter) is, "I'm satisfied to be the father."

However lines that caused Lubitsch the most trouble were those that some felt had crossed the line of "good taste." Benny as Josef Tura has a giant ego that causes him to probe Nazi Colonel Ehrhardt to see if he had ever seen Tura, that "great, great Polish actor" on stage. Ehrhardt replies, "Oh, yes. As a matter of fact I saw him on the stage when I was in Warsaw once before the war." Benny says, "Really?" Ehrhardt continues, "What he did to Shakespeare we are doing now to Poland." Almost all of Lubitsch's inner circle urged him to delete this line. Lubitsch stood firm, saying the laughter is not at the expense of the Polish people. The audience..." laughs at actors, they are amused by the antics of 'hams,' they laugh at something that is in no way typically Polish but universal."

Lubitsch said that some people liked the film but didn't seem quite sure if they did the right thing in enjoying it. He said, "It reminds me of the patient who took the wrong pill and got well." Carole Lombard never made another film. Three weeks after production wrapped, Lombard and her mother died in a plane crash coming home to Los Angeles from Indianapolis where she sold a record number of war

bonds. While "To Be or Not to Be" was essentially Jack Benny's movie, Lombard's generosity in setting up Benny perfectly time and time again was a major factor in the success of the film.

"To Be or Not to Be" is a black comedy before there were black comedies. Today many say it is the funniest movie they ever saw. Lubitsch said, "It seemed to me that the only way to get people to hear about the miseries of Poland was to make a comedy. Audiences would feel sympathy and admiration for people who could still laugh in their tragedy." Lubitsch, who died in 1947 at age 55, influenced many directors. Billy Wilder was one. For many years Wilder had a sign in his office that said, "What would Lubitsch have done?" In his later years Jack Benny said he only liked three of his movies..."Charley's Aunt," "George Washington Slept Here," and "The Meanest Man in the World." He went on to say, he only loved one..."To Be or Not to Be."

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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