

## Only Angels Have Wings (1939)

Director: Howard Hawks



This is recognised by film fans as one of the greats, awarded 100% by Rotten Tomatoes. The story was written by Hawks himself, as a short story entitled 'Plane No. 4' It is set in a remote part of S. America, depicted here as Barranca, a fictional town. The original inspiration was Hawks fascination with flyers as depicted they are here, Hawks having witnessed and met their originals in Mexico a few years before. It is generally judged as one of his outstanding films in a long and impressive career. The film was the third highest grossing film of 1939.

Hawks was born in 1896, and died in 1977, his life spanning a culturally very significant period in the shaping of what some have called 'The American Century'. He was one of five children born to a very wealthy family who moved between Wisconsin and California in his early years. At 17 he was flying as a 'barn-storming' pilot, a form of dare-devil flying depicted in 'The Great Waldo Pepper' coming soon in this present season. In his youth he was fond of shooting craps, drinking and devouring novels of all kinds. Indeed he fraternised with writers throughout his life.

A look at his record as a director confirms the film critic Leonard Maltin's assertion that Hawks is 'the greatest director who is not a household name including as it does comedies, dramas, gangster films, science fiction, film noir and indeed Westerns.

Here are a few titles to illustrate. 'Scarface', 'Bringing Up Baby', 'His Girl Friday', 'The Big Sleep', 'Red River', 'The Thing from Another World', 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes' and 'Rio Bravo'.

Hawks here was not only the director but also a main script writer; it was revised many times by Hawks himself and three other writers. He wrote many scripts for many films, not all of them his own, and often without scripting credit. Hawks was determined that the depictions of the pilots in the film reflected the stoicism, professionalism and the hard-edged glamour of the originals. The film is indeed an attractive combination of romance, humour and action, the central ingredients of many of his films.

The casting itself is a salute to Columbia's producer Harry Cohn's skill in developing movie talent. It serves as the 'introduction' to the fabulous Rita Hayworth, brought in at Columbia's insistence to launch her career. She had in fact acted in a dozen Columbia pictures already but despite her obvious physical beauty had not previously created much of an impression

for whatever reason. She plays the wife of Bat; in a somewhat improbable twist she is also apparently the one-time girl-friend of Cary Grant's Geoff. Jean Arthur plays the successful love interest for Cary Grant, who many years later admitted to the sensual pleasures of leaning into Grant's chest, (no acting chops required) but was not Hawks first choice. The two quarrelled on set, Arthur not seeing her character as being as independent as Hawks wished (Hawks famously liked his female stars to depict what came to be known as 'The Hawksian Woman', tough-talking, independent, yet alluring. Years later she apologised to Hawks, apparently recognising in the performance of Lauren Bacall in Hawk's 'To Have and To Have Not' what the director had been encouraging in her, and indeed what he eventually received as he was to acknowledge when he praised her performance whenever he asked about it in following years.

Richard Bartholomew as 'Bat' was originally a star of the silent era and thus was now ageing somewhat. Perhaps as a consequence he was an early victim of a plastic surgery mishap, when he attempted to have the bags under his eyes reduced. This left him with an X shaped scar under each eye. Normally he wore a significant amount of make-up as a consequence but Hawks insisted that he wanted the scarred look for this picture.

Cary Grant as Geoff was already an established star. It was his second film with Hawks having made 'Bringing Up Baby' the year previously. Imitators of Grant often quote his line as 'Judy, Judy, Judy', but as you will note impressionists have added a third Judy, one unuttered by Grant.

Grant here wears some impressive outfits, not all of them likely given the circumstances that the flying company are undergoing, financially and in terms of proximity to fashionable watering holes.

The other stars here are the planes themselves, all of which were models that would have been so employed in work of the kind outlined here, all dating from the 1920's. The planes were various but were all-metal, single engine, high-winged planes capable of carrying up to six passengers or mail as the story describes. The film received an Oscar for best special effects that year. This despite the evident use of studio sets for some of the filming, and the obvious use of models in some of the shots. Hawks himself never received an Oscar for any of the many films he directed, despite their popularity overall.

The film is noted for the effectiveness of its flying sequences, and is thus a favourite of flying buffs throughout the world. It was filmed chronologically whenever possible. Hawks made many films, but this is considered by many of his enthusiastic followers as one of his best. The spectacular aerial sequences and the barroom machismo depicted by the script, along with the very sound casting made this one of Hawks more successful films, and its reputation only has increased over time. This, despite its arguably somewhat unlikely story line.

Hawks own estimation of a successful movie was 'three great scenes, no bad ones'. Take this opportunity to judge for yourselves as we screen this example of Howard Hawks many, many 'classics'.