

Eden Court Cinema

Tuesday, 27 January
2015 at 7.15pm

ICONIC COUPLES
season

Classic comedy, USA,
B&W, 101 mins.

Director:
George Cukor

Cast:
Spencer Tracy,
Katharine Hepburn,
Judy Holliday



Adam's Rib

Notes compiled by Ewan Birse

Originally called *Man and Wife*, the script for *Adam's Rib* was completed on February 27, 1949, and Cukor began principal photography on May 31. At one level, it is a situation comedy about married lawyers, who find themselves on opposite sides of a court battle.

On a deeper level, though, the film provides a serious meditation on a modern marriage. Cukor's funny but poignant portrait of the Bonner alliance distinguishes *Adam's Rib* from other sit-coms. A commercial 'feminist' film, with arguments about law and order, *Adam's Rib* was ahead of its time. In 1949, the film provoked more comment about its marital than legal issues.

Cukor gave the script the verisimilitude of actual observation. The opening sequence – Judy Holliday tracking down her husband – was done in the cinema vérité style. The sequence shows realistically the rush and crush of a New York office district at 5 p.m.

The courtroom scenes were especially authentic and fresh. Just before shooting began, there was a murder trial for Betty Ferreri, a woman who stabbed a man in L.A. Attending the Ferreri trial for a solid week, Cukor took pictures of the woman, from the very first time she was brought into the court to the very end, to show how the evolution of the trial was reflected in her looks. At first, Ferreri looked tough and was heavily made-up, but gradually she appeared more discreet and more modestly dressed. Cukor used this idea for the transformation of the Judy Holliday character.

Cukor's two favourite stars, Tracy and Hepburn, were given freedom to experiment with their roles, which functioned

as extension to their natural off-screen interaction. Tracy played Adam, the stern prosecuting attorney, and Hepburn his wife-lawyer, who defends Holliday's accused woman and strikes a blow for equal treatment of her gender.

There was also a “documentary” feel about the way that Tracy and Hepburn played together. Intimate in real life, their onscreen rapport had an extra dimension of authenticity. Indeed, the dialogue seemed, but was not, improvised, due to the actors' affinity off screen.

In Adam's Rib, Hepburn identified with her character, which reflected the way she felt about sexism. Ambitious and intelligent, Amanda scrapes the nerves of male authority and challenges male supremacy. Knowing that a man in Dorris's position will be legally acquitted and vindicated, she is determined to show evidence of women's accomplishments to prove their equality with men. But Amanda

stoops to unscrupulous methods; her antics with the absurd characters she introduces turn the court into a circus. A lady wrestler (a great turn by Hope Emerson) lifts Tracy onto her shoulders, making him a laughing stock.

Throughout, Adam remains a solid citizen who maintains his honour and decorum. He argues that though one may be against the law, one still has to respect it. At the end, Adam loses the trial, but he is restored to male dominance when he is asked by the Republicans to run for judge. Still, a note of ambiguity is inserted at the very last shot, when Amanda poses the question, “Have the Democrats chosen a candidate yet?”

Cukor introduced four promising stage actors: Judy Holliday from *Born Yesterday*, Tom Ewell from *John Loves Mary*, Jean Hagen from *The Traitors*, and David Wayne from *Mr Roberts*. Given their first chance, all four established themselves in the next couple of years.

Cukor cast Tom Ewell and David Wayne as two different sides of masculinity. Ewell played Doris's creepy and loutish husband, and Wayne Amanda's gay sidekick Kip. As a composer-neighbour, a Cole Porter type, Kip is Amanda's ally, a character who possibly stands for Cukor himself. Kip sympathizes with Hepburn and, in marital feuds, takes her side against Tracy's virile "straight" man. At the end, Adam resorts to he-man tactics, beating up Kip.

The latent homosexual character, one of the few in Cukor's oeuvre, is a comic plot element that neither the Kanins nor Cukor bothered to develop. It could be that they were restricted by the Code's demand - "There should not be even the slightest indication that Kip is a pansy." It is also possible that Cukor's realization, that Kip was based on himself and his friend Cole Porter, made him uncomfortable even talking about the character with the



Of the nine films that legendary screen couple Tracy and Hepburn made together between 1942 and 1967, *Adam's Rib* is arguably their best. Sparkling performances, cracking dialogue and the dynamic relationship between the two leads make *Adam's Rib* an "impeccably crafted and scripted classic".

Kanins. It was the only element in the script he remained silent about.

The film reconciles the tension between certain "male" qualities - stability and stoicism - and certain "female" qualities - volatility and intuition. But, under the right circumstances, each gender can exchange these qualities; Adam demonstrates that he can fake tears. That each can do almost everything the other can do is established pointedly during the courtroom session, when the faces of Dorris and Warren are transposed, each becoming the other.

But *Adam's Rib* also shows that Adam and Amanda's qualities are not interchangeable. The success of their marriage derives from their individuality, its stability based on a fluctuating balance of power. Adam can be humiliated, and still rebound without loss of male ego. Amanda can be deferent to Adam and still not lose her identity. Based on their willingness to listen to each other, their marriage celebrates accommodation and compromise.

As a comedy, *Adam's Rib* was weak cinematically, but the witty battle of the sexes was well-written,

overcoming the technical shortcomings and uninventive visuals. Hepburn's intense, high-strung performance is nicely balanced with Tracy's usual solid acting.

Blending comic and melodramatic elements, the overall quality of Adam's Rib is uneven. Lively and ingenious, the script contained many easy laughs. The narrative follows its logical progression to a neat, but weak, resolution. The coy "happy" ending testifies, as Molly Haskell noted, that the film strikes deeper into the question of sexual roles than its comic surface would indicate, and that Cukor raises more questions than he can possibly answer.

Cukor's direction was commercially clever, down to title



cards announcing the changes in scenes ("later that night"). Adam's Rib, a film in which some parts are brilliant, doesn't add up to a coherent film, because of its blend of different styles.

The only part that was badly performed was Amanda's secretary, played by Hepburn's friend Eve March. They sometimes stubbed their toes casting chums, the resentful Cukor told Garson Kanin. The film was so perfectly cast,

that March stood out like a "sore toenail."

The other sour note was Cole Porter's dismal song, "Farewell Amanda," which Time magazine suspected the composer wrote "while waiting for a bus."

Porter did write the song on a cruise and originally called it, "Bye, Bye Samoa." Cukor was disappointed: It was the first Porter song to be used in a film he directed; neither man ever mentioned the song again.

Emanuel Levy



Eden Court Cinema
Tuesday 10th February
at 8.15pm

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Based on Noel Coward's play *Still Life* and beautifully evocative of the period, *Brief Encounter* remains a timeless classic of British Cinema with superb performances from Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard in his first leading role. Nominated for 3 Academy Awards, this is one of the finest Romantic Dramas ever made.