Second-Billed but not Second-Rate: A Reappraisal of Three Character Actors From Hollywood's Golden Age

Candace M. Graham, University of the Incarnate Word

Date of Degree
12-2015

Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
Master of Arts (MA)

Program
Communication Arts

Advisor
Hsin-I (Steve) Liu

Advisor
Robert Darden

Advisor
Valerie Greenberg

Advisor
Sharon Welkey

Abstract
Seventy-six years ago Hollywood experienced something never before nor since seen. The year, 1939, was Hollywood's "Dream Year" for production of some of the most memorable films of all time. Today, the term used to describe films of this success level is blockbuster. Film scholars and fans call them classics. It was the culmination of films of Hollywood's Golden Age starring every one of Hollywood's A-listers of this Golden Age of film, from Don Ameche to Loretta Young. However, lost in this maze of the top-billed or leading actors were the character actors who were also known as supporting cast members or B-stars. What the performances of these character actors communicate to the world is the focus of this thesis. First, a reappraisal of three character actors, Eve Arden, Charles Coburn, and Thomas Mitchell was conducted through research of existing literature. Second, interviews were conducted with classic film experts, publicists, and those possessing unique knowledge and/or experience on the topic, to establish grounded theory. Analysis and findings of these interview responses provided insight into the contributions of classic film character actors – these three and at-large – as second-billed but not second-rate. Finally, findings supported the hypothesis of the deficiency in scholarly literature on this research topic and how character actors contributed to the overall and lasting success of their films.

Recommended Citation
https://athenaeum.uiw.edu/uiw_etds/70
When sound arrived, Hollywood panicked. Stars like John Gilbert who had mediocre voices had their careers ruined almost overnight. And the moguls searched the Broadway stage for actors who had decent voices. This brought in new talent such as William Powell (who played Nick Charles in The Thin Man series). While I love Bill Powell it is Carol Lombard who steals this picture with her portrayal of a ditzy heiress who is part of one of the world's most dysfunctional rich families ever on screen. All this against the social backdrop of the Hooverville-studded Great Depression, exemplified by Powell who is actually a refined person down on his luck. My second favorite screwball comedy is the 1938 film Bringing Up Baby.