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

Classical Hollywood cinema, classical Hollywood narrative, the Golden Age of Hollywood, Old Hollywood, and classical continuity are terms used in film criticism which designate both a narrative and visual style of film-making which developed in and characterized American cinema between the 1910s and the 1960s, and eventually became the most powerful and pervasive style of film-making worldwide.