Hats off for George Cukor

William Rothman

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Abstract

In the fall of 1981, George Cukor spent several days at Harvard to help promote Rich and Famous, which turned out to be his last-and perhaps most vastly underrated-film. In preparation for his visit to the class I was teaching on film directors, I screened for my students several of his enduring classics. After our viewing of The Philadelphia Story (1940), one of his greatest films, Cukor arrived to answer questions. Thirty years later my recollection of this occasion has grown hazy, but there are two moments that stand out vividly in my memory. The first was Cukor's answer to a question a bright, mischievous student put to him. "If you were to cast Professor Rothman in a film," my student asked, "in what role would you cast him?" Looking at me appraisingly, the director, celebrated for his shrewd eye for casting; answered with perfect comic timing-what else would one expect from the director of The Philadelphia Story, Adam's Rib (1948), and Born Yesterday (1950)?-"A mad violinist." Three of the films the class had watched prior to Cukor's arrival were A Bill of Divorcement (1932), Camille (1936), and A Woman's Face (1941). Each has a memorable scene in which a musician becomes so swept away by his ever more frenzied piano playing that his eyes burn with maniacal glee. In A Bill of Divorcement, the musician (John Barrymore), escaped from the asylum, is a poignant figure as he shows his daughter how the ending of his piano sonata should be played. In the others, the musician is a dastardly villain (Henry Daniell and Conrad Veidt, respectively). I realized that Cukor was being witty when he answered my student's question. I was not about to give up my day job to wait by the phone for his casting call. Nonetheless, I took him at his word. I found myself quite moved that he could see in me-that he could see that the camera could see in me-such a capacity for wild abandon, or even the capacity to be startled, amused, and flattered by the idea that the camera could see this in me. In this entirely unexpected way, I gained a firsthand glimpse of Cukor's genius as a director. I have never held a violin in my hands, much less played one. I was a writer nearing completion of my first book, Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze, and I was a Harvard Professor teaching film studies. My two instruments were the IBM Selectric II typewriter and the Athena projector (which made it possible to stop a film in its tracks with the touch of a button, freezing the projected image without burning the frame so that those in the room could speak about a film moment even as its spell was lingering). I can well imagine that the camera would have discerned in my eye the maniacal gleam that is the sine qua non of a mad violinist had Cukor been filming me while I was in the act of composing my book's chapter on Psycho (1960), or when I excitedly hit the Athena projector's pause button and began to think out loud in the classroom the first time I noticed that Norman Bates's hand hesitates before he chooses, fatefuly, to give Marion Crane the key to Cabin 1. In short, Cukor was right. To be sure, if I were an actor I would wish to be at least considered for the kind of role Cary Grant plays in The Philadelphia Story, but I am confident that a mad violinist is a role I could play convincingly. If I were auditioning for the role of a mad violinist, I believe that I would play second fiddle to no one-at least, if the film had a director who possessed Cukor's ability to envision in me such a capacity for imaginative existence. And yet, if my student had asked me, not Cukor, what role I could imagine playing in one of the director's films, I would have been at a loss. I would have had no idea what Cukor believed the camera would be able to see in me. What he had discerned was a part of me I had never consciously recognized in myself. No doubt, the mad violinist in me was-is-only a fictional or mythical part of myself. But this does not mean it is only illusory, not real. The camera is a catalyst that has the power to provoke human beings to reveal fictional or mythical parts of themselves that, as Jean Rouch never tired of reminding us, can be the most real, the most human. Andrew Sarris writes, in The American Cinema: "It is no accident that many of Cukor's characters are thespians of one form or another. . . . Even when Cukor's characters don't appear formally behind the footlights, they project an imaginative existence. . . . Cukor is committed to the dreamer, if not to the content of the dream" (90). It still delights me to think that George Cukor could see the dreamer in me. Throughout his brief stay at Harvard, Cukor's demeanor bespoke the elegance, refinement, and civilized wit for which he was renowned. But it is clear from his films-and not only from his affinity for musicians who play their instruments with wild abandon-that he harbored within himself a mad musician of his own. The camera was his instrument. In saying, however jokingly, that he could see me as a mad violinist, Cukor was neither looking down on me nor (God knows) looking up to me. The part of me he believed the camera had the power to see was also a part of himself, one that he recognized. With those three little words, "a mad violinist," Cukor had won my trust. Thanks to this brief exchange, to which I do not imagine he ever gave another thought, I have become aware that the principle "It takes one to know one" was a key to his unsurpassed ability to get the best from performers. Seemingly effortlessly, he convinced them that he knew the characters they were called upon to play, and that he knew them, better than they knew themselves, and that what gave him such power was the fact that he knew himself so well that he could recognize in them a part of himself. If, knowing them, such a man had faith in them, who were they not to have faith in themselves? I feel I have an inkling of what Judy Holliday meant when she observed, about working with Cukor, "He didn't maintain my illusion of myself, he gave me an illusion of myself. Before I met him, I never thought of myself as an actress. Boy, he sidetracked me in a great way!" (BrainyQuote.com). The second moment of Cukor's visit that I remember vividly after all these years occurred when, at the end of the class, another bright student, eager to tell the director how much he admired his films, and wearing a fedora on his head, pushed his way past several of his...
But before this student had a chance to open his mouth, Cukor took him down a peg or two by saying, "Take off your hat, young man!" In truth, I was not unhappy to see this happen. While I knew that this student was sincere in his admiration for Cukor's films, I also knew he hadn't even considered the possibility that the elderly director would consider it rude to wear a hat in a classroom, much less when paying respects to a man of Cukor's age and stature—this, even though he had just watched The Philadelphia Story, in which Dexter (Cary Grant) answers Mike's (James Stewart) question about Tracy's (Katharine Hepburn) "leading characteristics" by saying that she has "a horror of men who wear their hats in the house." (In Born Yesterday, it might also be noted, Harry Brock [Broderick Crawford] manifests his uncouth manners, both in the early sequence in which he and his entourage are shown around their hotel suite and in much of the long scene that follows, by keeping his hat on the whole time, while his educated associate, Jim Dewery [Howard St. John], takes his off the moment he arrives.) Both Patrick McGilligan and Emanuel Levy, authors of the only biographies of Cukor published to date, comment repeatedly on what they take to be a conflict or tension between the respect for humanity, without regard to class or station, that is ingrained in his films and in his everyday life, and what they call his "elitism" or "snobbism," his preference for being in the company of elegant and tasteful objects and people. Was he behaving as an elitist or as a snob when he reacted to my pushy young student the way he did? I do not think so. If he really judged people by the degree to which they conform to the rules of etiquette, that would, indeed, give unfair advantage to the privileged. In Born Yesterday, Paul Verrall (William Holden) is hired by Harry to teach Billie (Judy Holliday) how to behave in elite circles so as not to embarrass herself or him.
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