

## Heaven Can Wait (1943) Ernst Lubitsch

Paul Michell, 2015.

Note – lots of Lubitsch stuff under last year's film's notes of 'To Be or Not to Be' in 'Archive' section of this website.

Synopsis with Cast:

by Dennis Schwartz

The only film made in Technicolor by Ernst Lubitsch ("To Be or Not to Be"/"Trouble in Paradise"/"The Merry Widow") looks terrific and plays well, offering the noted Lubitsch Touch. It's based on the play *Birthday* by Lazlo Bus-Fekete; Samson Raphaelson is the writer. It's a sophisticated witty fantasy comedy that tells about a dandy named Henry Van Cleve (Don Ameche) who wants to enter Hell but first has to convince the Devil, who is addressed as His Excellency (Laird Cregar), that he belongs. Henry begins his tale at his birth in 1892 to a wealthy New York banking family living in a greystone house on prestigious Fifth Avenue. He's spoiled by his doting mother Bertha (Spring Byington) and stern father Randolph (Louis Calhern), while encouraged to rebel by his spirited grandfather (Charles Coburn) and treated with affection by his grandmother (Clara Blandick). It traces how he got drunk as a teenager with his maid and French tutor (Signe Hasso), which resulted in her dismissal, and how he was a rake during the Gay Nineties. The story picks up to when Henry is 26 and steals the fiancée, Martha Strabel (Gene Tierney), of his refined goody-goody corporate lawyer cousin Albert (Allyn Joslyn). They settle into a happy marriage and Henry has a son Jack (Tod Andrews), whom he spoils just as he was. When Jack becomes a young man, dad worries over his son's involvement with chorus girl Peggy Nash (Helene Reynolds). He visits her and offers \$25,000 to leave Jack alone, and she accepts. Later Jack mentions that he has tired of her and has a new girlfriend from Philadelphia. The happy marriage has its rough moments due to his philandering but it lasts for 25 years, until Martha suddenly dies and Henry goes into a funk over his loss. At 70, Henry dies peacefully in his sleep remembering being attended to that night by a beautiful nurse. After he finishes his story, His Excellency deems Henry unfit for Hell and sends the man who made so many women happy up to Heaven to be with his loved ones.

Paul's additional notes:

Ah the Internet is so wonderful and we are so lucky!

A recently (2015) restored print. What colour!

Outstanding cast (all), direction, cinematography and script. A perfect 'Lubitsch' end to the year.

Lubitsch left his home studio of Paramount to make this at Fox.

Lost out in 1944 for academy awards. Nominated for: Best picture. Director & cinematography. Lost out to *Casablanca*! (Guess that was an ok loss.)

1943 significant Movies:

Casablanca (Curtiz) duh!  
The Outlaw with Jane Russell produced by Howard Hughes.  
Journey into Fear (Welles)  
Cabin in the Sky (Minnelli first film)  
Five Graves to Cairo with Von Stroheim (Wilder)  
Obsessione (Visconti) retelling of James M Cain's Postman Always Rings Twice.  
In Which We Serve (Noel Coward director)  
Life & Death of Col Blimp (Powell & Pressburger masterpiece. Over 3 hours long!)  
The Raven (H G Clouzot)  
Ox-Bow Incident (Wellman)  
Girl Crazy (Berkeley/Taurog)  
I Walked with a Zombie (Tourneur)  
Jane Eyre (Stevenson)  
Madam Curie (Mervyn Le Roy)  
Shadow of a Doubt (Hitchcock)  
Forever and a Day – 'Lost' film about a British stately home. With oodles of directors and writers. All working for nix for war effort. (Hitchcock wrote and Rene Clair directed a sequence.)

Trivia:

[Gene Tierney](#) recalled that during production, "Lubitsch was a tyrant on the set, the most demanding of directors. After one scene, which took from noon until five to get, I was almost in tears from listening to Lubitsch shout at me. The next day I sought him out, looked him in the eye, and said, 'Mr. Lubitsch, I'm willing to do my best but I just can't go on working on this picture if you're going to keep shouting at me.' 'I'm paid to shout at you', he bellowed. 'Yes', I said, 'and I'm paid to take it - but not enough.' After a tense pause, Lubitsch broke out laughing. From then on we got along famously." (From Gene Tierney's autobiography 'Self-Portrait'.)

In an early example of product placement, the principals meet in Brentano's, a famous New York bookstore chain.

The film takes place on October 25, 1872, in 1881, in 1887, from October 25 to October 26, 1898, in October 1908, in October 1923, in October 1932 and on October 26, 1942.

As Henry Van Cleve passes away, he hears the "Merry Widow Waltz" by Franz Lehar. Director [Ernst Lubitsch](#) also directed the 1934 film version of [The Merry Widow](#) (1934), with [Maurice Chevalier](#) and [Jeanette MacDonald](#).

Links:

Lovely examination with replies.

<http://selfstyledsiren.blogspot.com.au/2006/08/how-would-lubitsch-do-it.html>

## Reviews:

Ernst Lubitsch's first colour film was regarded by the director as one of his most personal creations. A charming, deceptively light comedy-fantasy, *Heaven Can Wait* begins in the anteroom of Hell, where recently deceased playboy Henry Van Cleve (Don Ameche) calmly awaits what he believes will be a sure condemnation to perdition for his earthly sins. But as the resigned Van Cleve recounts his amorous adventures to a bemused Satan (Laird Cregar), what emerges from his long history of woman-chasing is his devout and enduring love for his patient wife (Gene Tierney). Nominated for Oscars for Best Picture and Best Director (Lubitsch's first nomination since *The Love Parade* in 1929), *Heaven Can Wait* "brilliantly maintains the exquisite balance between tragic and comic impulses, between shifting views of man as an individual and man as an element of society, that marks Lubitsch's best work" (William Paul).

## Elegance ....and E.F.Strabel?

### [theowinthrop](#)

This lovely film is an example of the movie style called "the Lubitsch touch". Ernst Lubitsch made a long series of delightfully light and funny but human comedies from the silent period into the 1940s. His films usually deal with sexual matters, but touch upon the follies and foibles of the human race in other respects (including culture, business, politics). In this film there is a classic comic section dealing with Marjorie Main and Eugene Palette, the parents of Gene Tierney (the film's heroine). Palette has made a huge fortune in the meat packing business (his symbol is a cow named "Mabel" who is the subject of an asinine jingle that leaves Charles Coburn almost in a state of shock). Main and Palette are pretty rough characters, and have disowned Tierney for abandoning her original fiancé (ALLEN JOSLYN) to run off with the far more human and likable Don Ameche. But they are not exactly the type of parents one would like to return home to visit. Indeed, most of the time they are battling each other. In *CITIZEN KANE*, Ruth Warwick and Orson Welles took two minutes of interconnected scenes to show how a good marriage soured. Those scenes were around the breakfast table, over a period of years. But here there is only one scene - Palette wanted to read the comic section first in the newspaper while having breakfast. But Main insists that she read it first because she got the paper first. When Palette starts protesting, Main (in retaliation) starts reading the *Katzenjammer Kids* (Palette's favorite comic strip) to explain how the Captain got out of a barrel with the aid of a snake. Main tells enough to get Palette to protest out loud that she's spoiling it by telling him the solution. There is a break in the action because Tierney returns to her home with Joslyn. Shortly afterward we see Palette reading the newspaper in the parlor. He looks up and says, "Why that snake did get him out of the barrel." Seldom have comic strips been used to illustrate a miserable

marriage.

The film is not a guffaw fest, but has extremely funny moments, many centered on comments by Ameche's wise old grandfather (Coburn). Tierney makes a fine marriage partner and lover for Ameche, who is a turn of the century ladies' man, but not as awful a person as he thinks he is, or as many of his contemporaries have made him feel he is. Laird Cregar plays the Devil as a gentleman of discernment and understanding (as Lubitsch could imagine him). He has one marvelous moment when he sees something that momentarily diverts him from listening to Ameche, but which he reacts to with ruthlessness but understandably good taste. All I say is that it is unfortunate for the lady involved.

Not as politically satiric as NINOTCHKA but more in the nature of the simple sweetness of THE SHOP AROUND THE CORNER, HEAVEN CAN WAIT is a sweet valentine to an elegant, lost New York City of 1890 - 1932.