

The Shop Around the Corner (1940) Lubitsch

P Michell, 2022

Synopsis:

The 1940 film The Shop Around the Corner, about a pair of bickering store clerks who are secret pen pals, is one of old Hollywood's timeless romantic comedies. The great director Ernst Lubitsch transformed an obscure Hungarian play into a profound statement on the nature of love filled with sparkling dialogue and unbeatable chemistry between co-stars James Stewart and Margaret Sullavan.

The Shop Around the Corner fittingly concludes on Christmas Eve, a traditional time to gather with loved ones that's also a typical financial windfall for retail stores. The delicate imbrication of professional and personal intimacies that the film charts so well find their logical conclusion in these last moments: the triumph of teamwork; the bonds of time and labor; the gradual dissipation of the group as each one says their goodnights and heads home to spouses and children, or parents, or friends, or an empty house or apartment. We are finally left with our two would-be lovers, chatting as they close up shop for the hundredth (or thousandth) time. It's just another day of work—a prospect within which *The Shop Around the Corner* finds both the most prosaic of pleasures and the most precious of possibilities.

<https://cinema.wisc.edu/blog/2015/12/11/matt-conolly-shop-around-corner>

Historical Reference:

The film takes place over a six-month period (Alfred complains late in the film how Klara has antagonized him for "the last six months") from summer (Klara remarks about the store's "summer sale") to Christmas Eve (the film's concluding scenes). When Alfred first enters Mr. Matuschek's office (after Klara asked for a job), the calendar on the wall next to the door (later replaced by a waterfall painting) displays the year 1939, when filming at MGM Studios occurred. At the end of that summer, Nazi Germany invaded Poland. While Hungary was neutral, it bordered both belligerents, refused Germany's demand to use Hungarian territory for the invasion and admitted Polish refugees, all of which would hardly have gone unnoticed in the last half of 1939 Budapest. There is no mention of the war in the film, which would likely have been a needless distraction. The film is based on the 1937 Hungarian play *Parfumerie*, when events took place in a more tranquil period.

Shop is justly famous for its comedy. Building joke upon joke. Such as:

Woman Customer: *How much is that belt in the window, the one that says "2.95?"*

Alfred Kralik: \$2.95

Woman Customer: *Oh, no!*

[walks away]

Klara Novak (Miss Novak): *All my knowledge came from books, and I'd just finished a novel about a glamorous French actress from the Comedie Francaise. That's the theater in France. When she wanted to arouse a man's interest, she treated him like a dog.*

Alfred Kralik: *Yes, well, you treated me like a dog.*

Klara Novak (Miss Novak): *Yes, but instead of licking my hand, you barked.*

Hugo Matuschek: Don't let me influence you. I want your opinion, your honest opinion.

Loads of Talent!

Ernst Lubitsch – Director (75 credits)

It has been stated many times that Hollywood would not be the same without Lubitsch. Left school at 16 to work as an actor eventually working with Max Reinhardt in Berlin. Parents ran a retail store in Berlin. Invited to America by Mary Pickford. Famous for *The Merry Widow* (1935), *Ninotchka* (1939), *To Be or Not to Be* (1942). Justly famous for his satirical comedies, of which *Shop* is arguably jointly the best with *To Be*. One of the founders of the Screwball Comedy genre. Disciples include Billy Wilder and Otto Preminger.

Soon after wrapping principal photography, Ernst Lubitsch talked to the *New York Sun* in January 1940. "It's not a big picture, just a quiet little story that seemed to have some charm. It didn't cost very much, for such a cast, under \$500,000. It was made in twenty-eight days. I hope it has some charm."

The Lubitsch Touch

Wilder famously had a sign in his office – *How Would Lubitsch do it?*

"The Lubitsch Touch" is a phrase that has long been used to describe the unique style and cinematic trademarks of director Ernst Lubitsch. But what exactly is "The Lubitsch Touch?" According to film historian/critic Scott Marks, "The Lubitsch Touch" was a phrase concocted by studio PR men eager to turn a great director, Ernst Lubitsch, into a brand name. As Marks points out, "the label adhered, and to this day, critics still bandy it about, ever hoping to unlock the mysteries of its meaning."

"The Lubitsch Touch" is a brief description that embraces a long list of virtues: sophistication, style, subtlety, wit, charm, elegance, suavity, polished nonchalance and audacious sexual nuance." -- **Richard Christiansen**

"The subtle humor and virtuoso visual wit in the films of Ernst Lubitsch. The style was characterized by a parsimonious compression of ideas and situations into single shots or brief scenes that provided an ironic key to the characters and to the meaning of the entire film." -- **Ephraim Katz**

"It was the elegant use of the Superjoke. You had a joke, and you felt satisfied, and then there was one more big joke on top of it. The joke you didn't expect. That was the Lubitsch Touch...." -- **Billy Wilder**

Much, much more including Wilder's lovely description to students at AFI:
<http://lubitsch.com/the-lubitsch-touch.html>

A practical joker here are some of his many quotes

- *At least twice a day the most dignified human being is ridiculous.*
- *I let the audience use their imaginations. Can I help it if they misconstrue my suggestions?*
- *There is Paramount Paris and Metro Paris, and of course the real Paris. Paramount's is the most Parisian of all.*
- *I don't believe in reproducing a play on the screen exactly as it was done on the stage. Anyone can make a carbon copy. Carbons are always dull.*

- *I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I write and I understand.*
- *I sometimes make pictures which are not up to my standard, but then it can only be said of a mediocrity that all his work is up to his standard.*
- *Nobody should try to play comedy unless they have a circus going on inside.*
- *There are a thousand ways to point a camera, but really only one.*

Samson Raphaelson – Screenplay (50 credits)

Ben Hecht – uncredited, Lubitsch - uncredited

Famous for working with [Ernst Lubitsch](#) and [Alfred Hitchcock](#). [The Shop Around the Corner](#) (1940) is his most famous work with Lubitsch. He worked with Hitchcock in [Suspicion](#) (1941).

James Stewart - Alfred Kralik (102 credits)

Studied architecture at Princeton. Followed friend Henry Fonda to Hollywood. His famous collaborations with [Frank Capra](#), in [You Can't Take It with You](#) (1938), [Mr. Smith Goes to Washington](#) (1939), and, after World War II, [It's a Wonderful Life](#) (1946) helped to launch his career as a star and to establish his screen persona as the likable everyman. Was a Colonel in the army during the war and as an airman flew combat missions. In 1959, he was promoted to brigadier general, becoming the highest-ranking actor in U.S. military history.

After 1950, he often played tough, cynical and frequently ruthless characters.

There has been much discussion of Stewart's work pre and post this period, which included his wartime flying. After he made many great films which made him justly famous inc [Man Who Shot Liberty Valence](#) (1962), Hitch films inc [Man Who Knew too Much](#) (1956), [Rear Window](#) (1954) and [Vertigo](#) (1958). Other notables inc [Glenn Miller Story](#) (1954), [Bell Book and Candle](#) (1958), [Anatomy of a Murder](#) (1959), [Greatest Show on Earth](#) (1952) – playing a clown, [It's a Wonderful Life](#) (1946).

[James Stewart](#) and [Margaret Sullavan](#) had known each other a long time before making this film. Both were in a summer stock company called the University Players. It was there that Stewart realized his potential as an actor, so he followed Sullavan and fellow player [Henry Fonda](#) to New York to begin an acting career in earnest.

In September 1999 he was named Best Classic Actor of the 20th Century in an "Entertainment Weekly" on-line poll.

Margaret Sullavan – Klara Novak (22 credits, 4 with Stewart)

An early Hollywood feminist. Careful with her movie contracts and selective on choice of films so she could work on Broadway. First film [Only Yesterday](#) (1933) a big hit. Seems that Margaret pushed for Stewart to be in their first film together next [Time We Love](#) (1936) and rumoured to have coached him in film acting. They were 'close' for many years. Living nearby also.

Unfortunately a great talent who made less movies than she could have. Deafness was an ongoing issue which she never really dealt with until quite late. Sullavan had a reputation for being both temperamental and straightforward.

While attending Harvard University, she performed with the University Players opposite future stars like [James Stewart](#), [Henry Fonda](#) and [Kent Smith](#). Around this time her parents cut her allowance as she was studying dance and drama. She got a job working in the University's Coop bookshop!

Sullivan's co-starring roles with [James Stewart](#) are among the highlights of their early careers. She took a break from films from 1943 to 1950 – raising children. Throughout her career, Sullivan seemed to prefer the stage to the movies. She felt that only on the stage could she improve her skills as an actor. "When I really learn to act, I may take what I have learned back to Hollywood and display it on the screen," she said in an interview in October 1936 (when she was doing *Stage Door* on Broadway between movies).

Film career ended in 1954. In the late 1950s, Sullivan's hearing and depression were getting worse.

Marriages included Henry Fonda, William Wyler and Leland Hayward. Two of her three children, Bridget and Bill, would spend some time in mental institutions, and commit suicide. Friends noted that the collapse of her family life led to her breakdown. Her condition worsened over time, until she was discovered unconscious from barbiturate poisoning in a hotel room. Her death was ruled accidental.

Peter Fonda named his daughter Bridget after Margaert's daughter, whom he had a crush on.

"Perhaps I'll get used to this bizarre place called Hollywood, but I doubt it."

Sullivan's eldest daughter, actress [Brooke Hayward](#), wrote *Haywire*, a best-selling memoir about her family,^[54] that was adapted into the miniseries starring [Lee Remick](#) as Margaret Sullivan and [Jason Robards](#) as Leland Hayward.

Frank Morgan – Mr Matsuchek (100 credits)

Born Francis Wupperman. [W.C. Fields](#) was originally considered for Morgan's role in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). However, Fields haggled endlessly over salary, and the role was given to Morgan.

Felix Bressart - Piovitch (68 credits inc 30 in Germany)

Like Lubitsch worked with Max Reinhardt in Berlin. The influential German community in Hollywood helped to establish Bressart in America, as his earliest American movies were directed by Ernst Lubitsch, Henry Koster, and Wilhelm Thiele. Hitler grudgingly admitted he was his favourite despite being Jewish. To bridge the lean time till he was able to gain a foothold in the US film industry he was busy as a non-medical practitioner with his own practice in Beverly Hills.

Joseph Schildkraut - Vadas (87 credits)

Another Reinhardt trained actor. Son of famed European/Yiddish stage actor [Rudolph Schildkraut](#) who was nicknamed Pepi. Note the young delivery clerk is called Pepi. First non- American to win a supporting Oscar for Capra's *Life of Emile Zola*, playing Capt Alfred Dreyfus. (1937).

Trivia

To make sure his film was stripped of the glamour usually associated with him, [Ernst Lubitsch](#) went to such lengths as ordering that a dress [Margaret Sullivan](#) had purchased off the rack for \$1.98 be left in the sun to bleach and altered to fit poorly.

Ernst Lubitsch delayed the start of the movie until both James Stewart and Margaret Sullavan were available. In the meantime, he filmed *Ninotchka* (1939).

In *You've Got Mail* (1998), which is based on this film, Meg Ryan's character owns a bookstore named The Shop Around The Corner.

According to Bright Lights Film Journal website, When Kralik mentions "You read Zola's Madame Bovary," Klara immediately corrects him: "Madame Bovary is not by Zola," she snipes. The joke here is that though Klara knows who wrote Madame Bovary, she doesn't understand that she herself is living exclusively in Emma Bovary's world of impossible ideals.

Reviews

The Shop Around the Corner

<http://www.oldhollywoodfilms.com/2015/10/the-shop-around-corner-and-its-remakes.html>
on *October 09, 2015*

By 1940, Lubitsch was renowned throughout Hollywood for his popular movies that combined romance and wit. Lubitsch had made his name with sophisticated fare like *Design for Living* (1933) and *Ninotchka* (1939), but his dream project was adapting Miklos Laszlo's 1937 play *Parfumerie* for the big screen. Lubitsch had bought the rights to this simple story about an anonymous correspondence between a pair of perfume shop employees shortly after its debut, but he sat on the property for a few years until he got the right studio (MGM with its luxe production values) and the right stars (Lubitsch never wanted anyone other than Stewart for the male lead, but several actresses, including Janet Gaynor, were considered before Lubitsch settled on Sullavan).

The Shop Around the Corner tells the story of the assorted employees of a notions shop in Budapest. The main characters are head clerk Alfred Kralik (Stewart) and new employee Klara Novak (Sullavan), but the film is really an ensemble piece that focuses on each employee in turn, including the curmudgeonly boss, Matuschek (the Wizard of Oz himself, Frank Morgan), a kindly family man, Pirovitch (Felix Bressart), and a handsome, but vain salesman, Vadas (Joseph Schildkraut).

Lubitsch, who helped write the screenplay with Samson Raphaelson, based *The Shop Around the Corner* on his childhood memories. Lubitsch's father was a tailor, and he grew up helping out in the family's shop. "I have known just such a little shop in Budapest," he said at the film's Radio City Music Hall debut. "The feeling between the boss and those who work for him is pretty much the same the world over."

It is those universal feelings that make *The Shop Around the Corner* a great work of art. The relationship between Klara and Alfred is well-drawn -- they get off on the wrong foot and things go downhill from there -- and Sullavan and Stewart have great chemistry, but the film's central theme expands to fit everyone at the shop.

Lubitsch's great theme was love, whether it was the amorous con artists in *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) or Greta Garbo and Melvyn Douglas' ideology shattering love affair in *Ninotchka*. However, in *The Shop Around the Corner*, Lubitsch moves beyond romantic love to encompass the universal desire for love in all its forms from the warm relationship that Pirovitch has with his wife and children to the smug self-love of Vadas who has an affair with the boss's wife.

One scene in particular always stand out for me. Matuschek, having lost the love of his wife and attempted suicide, is all alone on Christmas Eve. He is a decent employer, but he is also a stern man who has always maintained a certain distance from his employees. Faced with spending the holiday alone, his facade crumbles. One by one each employee declines his invitation to a fancy restaurant until just he and a lowly delivery boy (Charles Smith) are left alone on the snowy streets. Matuschek swallows his pride and asks the boy to Christmas dinner with all the trimmings, and as they banter back and forth about their favorite dishes (stuffed goose, cucumber salad with sour cream) Matuschek's face lights up with the joy of finding a true friend for the first time in many years.

JAMES BOWMAN

Published June 25, 2008

<https://eppc.org/publication/the-shop-around-the-corner/>

Last week I spoke of the long history of Western romance that culminated in what I called the “domestic romance” – or what a more politically oriented critic than I am might call the bourgeois romance – of the golden age of Hollywood and the popular culture in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. *It Happened One Night* was such a romance, but there was also a strong class element to it, a looking beyond the middle class audience it was intended for and towards a quasi-aristocratic world which would once have been seen as the natural home for romance. The domestic romance is inevitably about property – the setting up of a new home – and so the happiness which it portends is naturally enhanced by the presence, even though it may be (as in *It Happened One Night*) only in the offing, of a large sum of money. Where would Cinderella be, after all, without the prince?

But tonight's movie, *The Shop Around the Corner* of 1940, an adaptation of a play by the Hungarian playwright, Miklós László by the German-Jewish director, Ernst Lubitsch, is in this sense at least, a much more austere example of domestic romance. Alfred Kralik, played by James Stewart, is not a prince and Klara Novak, played by Margaret Sullavan, is not, even potentially, a princess. Both are humble assistants in the luggage and gift shop in Budapest owned by Hugo Matuschek (Frank Morgan). Neither seems remotely capable of the kind of extravagant, princely gesture that was our first introduction to Clark Gable in *It Happened One Night*, where he told off the boss while drunk as a sort of glorious declaration of independence. And yet Kralik shows that he is prepared to resign on a point of principle, as well as to tell the boss things that he doesn't want to hear.

In spite of their emphatically lower-middle-class origins, both Mr Kralik and Miss Novak – I love how they are so formal with each other – do have one window into the world of their social betters from whence the idea of romance has descended to them. This is in their love of literature, which is the subject of their anonymous correspondence. Indeed, it appears that

they themselves become poets, inspired by each other, and fall in love with a world of generous spiritedness and sensitivity that both of them harbor within them but that both must keep carefully out of sight while attending to their duties at Mr Matuschek's shop. They profess not to be interested in "the vulgar details of how we earn our daily bread" or even in any close inquiry into what they pretend to regard as the superficial question of each other's physical attractiveness. "What does it matter as long as our minds meet?" says Klara in the letter Kralik reads reverently to his confidant, Mr Pirovich (Felix Bressart).

At this distance of time we are able to note the irony by which nothing that they do so clearly marks them out as members of the lower middle class as this lust for "culture" and self-improvement, this earnest belief in the purity and disinterestedness of motive in any love worthy of the name, and this belief in the vulgarity of mere material considerations. The token, along with the red carnation, by which they are to recognize each other is Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, an example of what would have been thought to be "advanced" literature a generation or two before their time – the self-improving bourgeoisie come to these things a bit late – because it dealt with adultery. To them the novel must have been a fatal and tragic but beautiful love story resulting from the principals' disregard of merely prudential considerations. It was also, in case anyone was interested, a token of their high-mindedness and their claim to belong to an aristocracy of taste which is part of their entitlement to engage in the old aristocratic pastime of romance.

It is important to recognize that Lubitsch, throughout the film, makes relentless fun of all these pretentious delusions without for a moment allowing us to lose our affection for the two deluded lovers. In realizing that they love each other, they also have to realize that they are as susceptible as anyone else to the superficial and material side of love. And when Kralik realizes this a little sooner than Miss Novak, he gives her a lesson in reality with his fable about his alter ego, Mathias Popkin, the short, bald, unemployed man who proposes to live on her salary, which so alarms her just before she learns the truth. But it takes them the whole movie to get to this point. When the chastened Alfred Kralik first realizes that he has been wrong about Miss Novak, he says gently to her, "You know, people seldom go to the trouble of scratching the surface of things to find the inner truth."

Her reply is scathing. "Well I really wouldn't care to scratch your surface, Mr. Kralik, because I know exactly what I'd find. Instead of a heart, a hand-bag. Instead of a soul, a suitcase. And instead of an intellect, a cigarette lighter – which doesn't work." Her scorn for her lover's workaday self as head salesman for Matuschek and Company is really scorn for herself and for the reality of her own life. It is something she has to be purged of in order to be able to understand what love really means.

In general, *The Shop Around the Corner* explores the gap between the ideal and the real in love – not only in terms of the images that James Stewart and Margaret Sullavan have of each other from their correspondence as opposed to those that they have in the shop but also in terms of Mr Matuschek's obviously failing marriage. The reality of adultery turns out to be nothing like the romance of *Anna Karenina*. There's another way, too, in which the ideal and the real come into conflict. It's pretty obvious that Klara Novak has been the victim of what we would call sexual harassment at one or more of her previous places of employment, and she has had recourse to the only remedy for it that was available to many another young woman of the time – if she were brave and determined enough – which was to leave and find another job. If she could. For, as in the other two pre-war films we're showing this summer,

the looming presence of the Depression is always there in the background, though seldom brought out into the open. This is why Miss Novak is so desperate to get a job at Matuschek and Company when she first comes into the shop.

Under the circumstances it is hardly surprising that she should attempt to escape from the sordid reality of being groped by her employer in an idealized love-affair carried on by anonymous correspondence. And yet there is an ambiguity about this as well. On the one hand, even when she is at her most hostile to Mr Kralik, she feels for him a grudging respect and pays him the compliment of saying that he is her idea of a gentleman since, as she puts it, “When you say, Miss Novak, I want you to come into the stock room and put some bags away, you really mean you want to put some bags away.” Later, however, just at the point where she thinks she is about to find happiness with somebody else and therefore is safe from the attraction that she feels, she confesses to him that “there were some days in the stockroom when you could have swept me off my feet.” The so-called “psychological confusion” that both of them confess to at this point is one way of describing the vertiginous consciousness that welcome and unwelcome sexual advances are sometimes a little hard to tell apart – though today it would be all but impossible even to suggest such a thing.

This brings up a final point that follows on from something that was said in our discussion last week of *It Happened One Night*. Amy Kass and one or two others who were here then made the point that the marriage between Clark Gable’s Peter Warne and Claudette Colbert’s Ellie Andrews would have been doomed from the start, so little did they seem to have in common. By explaining why I think that is the wrong way to look at that film, I hope I can also explain something about tonight’s, although I expect Amy and others will want to challenge this view of the matter in the discussion that will follow our screening.

Every romance is a highly wrought time sculpture, and plot is as essential to it as it is to a spy thriller. This is the story of how two people met and fell in love, and every detail of that story is of significance because if the story had not happened just as it did, and the events had not taken place in precisely the order that they did, an event of life-changing importance for the principal characters would not have happened. Another way to put this is to say that the classic romance is as much about fate or destiny as it is about the characters, and that fate or destiny is, by definition, something not in their control. Looked at in this way, then, to judge not just *It Happened One Night* but any romance in the way that we would judge a real-life relationship if we were called in for pre-marital counseling is to miss the point. It’s just *because* your couple are in one way or another improbable – either through being temperamentally unlike or some other incompatibility – that that sense of fate or destiny is conveyed to us by the story teller.

In a way, therefore, the more unsuited or otherwise unlikely a couple show themselves to be, the more random and therefore fated seems their meeting. To say, in effect, that the events of the drama almost didn’t happen is one way to convey this sense of fatedness. Shakespeare’s romantic comedies as well as the tragedies of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* are like this. Another is to say, in effect, that no one could have expected it to happen, given how unlike and antagonistic the couple are on first meeting. Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, which came up in last week’s discussion, achieves its effect in this way, as does both *It Happened One Night* and *The Shop Around the Corner*. One of the things that makes the romance, either comic or tragic, what it is is this sense that, somehow and for good or for ill, the lovers were meant by something bigger and more powerful than themselves to be together.

In the earliest versions of the legend of Tristan and Isolde, the lovers were said to have been so much in the grip of forces larger than themselves that they couldn't resist them even though they did not really like each other. This same theme survives in the idea of the love potion which was a part of the legend from its earliest redactions. In the lovers' attempt to resist their fate, they were just like Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* or Peter Warne and Ellie Andrews in *It Happened One Night* or Mr Kralik and Miss Novak in *The Shop Around the Corner*: powerless and overmastered. I think that the need in so many romances for this resistance of the principals against being made into a romance lies in the generic quality of human sexual congress. Everybody knows that, physiologically speaking, this is a pretty simple matter. Rod A goes into Slot B. Any two representatives of the two sexes in a fertile state can accomplish the biological purpose of the thing without all that narrative superstructure and sense of fatality getting involved. We are always aware of this ordinariness on the material level even as we delight in the multiple particularities of romance. This, this, and this made it happen. And that makes it all seem like fate.

In other words, what we delight in when we delight in "love triumphant" (once again to cite the newspaper headline from *It Happened One Night*) is our own individuality and having a story to tell like no other. All of life is a battle against generality, the generic and the genetic, and for particularity and individuality: that is, for the chance to have a story of our own that makes us different from everyone else. That fate should have taken an interest in matching our surrogates up with each other in spite of all that mere circumstance, or mere compatibility considerations, could do to keep them apart is a reassurance that what would otherwise be sordid or practical or generic actually has a transcendent and perhaps even divine element in it.

The absurdity of so many of Shakespeare's happy endings creates the same effect. Don't try this at home, folks! Having, like Viola in *Twelfth Night*, your identical twin brother turn up at the last moment to take an unwanted same-sex lover off your hands and open the way for you to match up with the guy you really care about – who only *thinks* that you yourself are a potential same-sex lover – that's not the sort of thing that most of us can count on in real life. There we would be better advised to concern ourselves with how much we have in common. And yet so many of the stories we delight in about love stress not commonality but difference. Like *Twelfth Night* or *Pride and Prejudice* or *The Shop Around the Corner* they have this sort of wild improbability built into them to remind us that there is always something reckless, irresponsible, *unofficial* about love.

My friend and former colleague, Ferdinand Mount, once wrote a fascinating book called *The Subversive Family*, which made what I think is the unanswerable point that the cornerstone of cultural resistance to all political and utopian scheming through the ages has been the family. But in many ways what is most subversive about the family is its formation on a wave of overmastering passion and in defiance of all rational and prudential considerations – just as Mr Kralik and Miss Novak must shyly imagine it in the full flush of their initial naïveté. This paradox in which are united innocence and experience, passion and practicality, love and hate, individuality and destiny, the generic and the gloriously particular is something that we can find in all the greatest romances – of which, I hope you'll agree, *The Shop Around the Corner* is one.