



Film Programs

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Ball of Fire: Barbara Stanwyck Centennial

July 6, 2007 - July 31, 2007



Ladies They Talk About, July 31

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"Thank God I wasn't an ingenue. That would have killed me," Barbara Stanwyck said, reflecting late in life on her early career in Hollywood. Anything but ingenuous, Stanwyck (1907-1990) was the screen archetype of the independent woman with her wits about her, alert and often on the make. Born Ruby Stevens in Flatbush and orphaned early, she started working as a chorus girl at age fifteen; by 1930 she had embarked on a film career that ran from scandalous pre-Code sagas and "women's weepies" through noirs, smart-mouthed comedies, and whip-cracking Westerns (after retiring from the big screen, she was the memorable matriarch of TV's *Big Valley*). The movies made the most of her tough-broad-from-Brooklyn persona, but her performances also convey a certain reserve and a private tenderness, her vigor and slangy vivacity tempered by the ambivalence that comes with knowledge. Douglas Sirk, with whom she made a devastating pair of 1950s melodramas, called her "more expressive than any actress I ever worked with. . . . She had depth as a person.

There is this amazing tragic stillness about her, and there is nothing the least bit phony. She isn't capable of phony." Our centennial tribute showcases the very real qualities of this extraordinary actress: the knowing precision of glance and gesture, the husky voice that deepened with time and smoke—and then there were those legs. . . . But why try to itemize her attributes? As Stanwyck said, "What the hell. Whatever I had, it worked, didn't it?"

Juliet Clark
Editor

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Friday, July 6, 2007

7:00 p.m. **Night Nurse**

William A. Wellman (U.S., 1931)

"Rules *mean* something," a stern hospital matron admonishes would-be nurse Stanwyck at the outset of her apprenticeship. The distinction between "professional ethics" and real moral values is central to this very pre-Code movie, which delivers a sharp critique of Hippocratic hypocrisy while also providing plenty of occasions for Stanwyck and fellow nurse Joan Blondell to appear in dishy dishabille. The plot swiftly moves from the hospital with its lustful interns and bedpan jokes to a seriously dysfunctional household where Stanwyck is charged with the care of two girls suffering from a mysterious illness, at the

mercy of their dipsomaniac mother, a dubious doctor, and a menacing chauffeur (Clark Gable). With the help of the most upstanding guy in the picture—a bootlegger who sees no difference between his racket and the doctors'—the deeply moral but streetwise Stanwyck proves that some rules mean more than others.

—Juliet Clark

• Written by Oliver H. P. Garrett, Charles Kenyon, from a story by Dora Macy.
Photographed by Barney McGill. With Barbara Stanwyck, Ben Lyon, Joan Blondell, Clark Gable. (73 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Library of Congress, permission Warner Bros.)

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Friday, July 6, 2007

8:40 p.m. **Stella Dallas**

King Vidor (U.S., 1937)

"I don't want to be like me," says millhand's daughter Stella (Stanwyck) to the wealthy man who will marry and soon turn against her in this quintessential weepie. She'd rather be like "people in a movie, well-bred and refined." But in this particular movie, breeding and refinement are reserved for other people, like

her daughter, for whom Stella is both too vulgar and too good. A slattern and a fashion tragedy, Stella is also a model of maternal self-abnegation, ready to sacrifice everything to give her child a shot at respectability. For all its mother-worship, the story's attitude toward Stella, driven by class horror, teeters between awe and contempt. But Stanwyck is spirited and unafraid of ugliness; made up as a caricature, she plays a human being. The ending, with the heroine bedraggled and triumphant, saying it all in the way she chews at her handkerchief, will have you reaching for yours.

—Juliet Clark

• Written by Sarah Y. Mason, Victor Heerman, from a novel by Olive Higgins Prouty.
Photographed by Rudolph Maté. With Barbara Stanwyck, John Boles, Anne Shirley, Barbara O'Neil. (108 mins, B&W, 16mm, From MGM)



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Sunday, July 8, 2007

7:15 p.m. **Forty Guns**

Samuel Fuller (U.S., 1957)

Jessica Drummond (Stanwyck) sweeps into the picture astride a white stallion, leading her forty dragoons: no ladylike sidesaddle-sitter, this rancher and boss of Cochise County is a "high-ridin' woman with a whip," as the theme song goes. When marshal Griff (Barry Sullivan) arrives with a warrant for one of her deputies, the imperious Jessica says, talking about his gun and all it stands for, "it's not you I'm interested in, it's your trademark. May I feel it?" And later, "I need a strong man to carry out my orders." Meanwhile, another romance blooms between Griff's brother and a girl gunsmith, with much mutual fondling of rifles, and the gaze of love framed down a shotgun barrel. Sam Fuller was never one to beat around the tumbleweed, and *Forty Guns* is brilliantly blatant in its conflation of sex, violence, and power, and its "perversion" of the Western's usual treatment of all three.

—Juliet Clark

- Written by Fuller. Photographed by Joseph Biroc. With Barbara Stanwyck, Barry Sullivan, Dean Jagger, Gene Barry. (77 mins, B&W, 'Scope, 35mm, From Criterion/20th Century Fox)

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Thursday, July 12, 2007

7:00 p.m. *There's Always Tomorrow*
Douglas Sirk (U.S., 1956)

"Once upon a time, in sunny California," a title card announces while it rains, lives toy manufacturer Fred MacMurray with his perfect fairy-tale family: bustling wife Joan Bennett (see also *The Reckless Moment*) and three busy children. Left home alone one evening, he answers the doorbell in an apron, and there

stands Stanwyck after twenty years, carrying memories and a carefully hidden torch. "Sure I'm happy," MacMurray says haltingly, and shows her his latest creation, Rex the Walkie-Talkie Robot; she shows him a brave face shadowed with loneliness. While MacMurray indulges in fantasies of youth regained, Stanwyck beautifully conveys the ambivalence of an ethical person who wants what she can't have. (She'd never get it anyway, with those nightmarish Sirkian children spying around corners.) Sirk's brilliance is to recognize both the horror and the wisdom of accepting one's lot. When MacMurray finally claims "I'm all right now," it's either one of the most devastating lies in all of cinema or, even worse, maybe true.

—Juliet Clark

• Written by Bernard C. Schoenfeld. Photographed by Russell Metty. With Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Bennett, Pat Crowley. (84 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Universal)

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Thursday, July 12, 2007

8:50 p.m. **All I Desire**

Douglas Sirk (U.S., 1953)

A period piece that resolutely refuses nostalgia, *All I Desire* stars Stanwyck as a washed-up actress facing one of her most challenging roles: playing the successful lady on a return visit to the husband and children she abandoned years ago, in 1900. Following her back to Riverdale, Wisconsin, we quickly see why she

left in the first place; as Sirk put it, "she comes back from an imitated life . . . with all her dreams—and she finds nothing but this rotten, decrepit middle-class American family." Yet the dream of home and family is as powerful as the dream of escape, and the deeply conflicted Stanwyck finds herself inexorably drawn toward a "happy ending" that, in Sirk's hands, is anything but. As the door swings shut on the family home and the camera pulls back from the bars of the banisters, the chains of the old porch swing, we can only feel relieved to be on the outside looking in.

—Juliet Clark

- Written by James Gunn, Robert Blees. Photographed by Carl Guthrie. With Barbara Stanwyck, Richard Carlson, Lyle Bettger, Maureen O'Sullivan. (79 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Universal)

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Tuesday, July 17, 2007

7:00 p.m. **Baby Face**

Alfred E. Green (U.S., 1933)

This defining example of pre-Code depravity also establishes femme fatalism as both an economic and a philosophical position. "I'm a tramp and who's to blame? My father!" Thus spake Lily Powers (Stanwyck), who starts as sweetheart of the night shift at her dad's mangy mill-town speakeasy—"Pay When Served,"

reads the sign on the wall—and soon sleeps her way to the top of the Gotham Trust Company, one floor at a time. (Among her victims there is a very young John Wayne). The movie was trimmed before its release to appease horrified censors; this print, preserved from the uncut negative, contains plenty of jaw-dropping moments, but probably the most surprising are the repeated references to Nietzsche. A philosophical cobbler sends Lily *Thoughts out of Season* as a Christmas gift: "Crush out all sentiment." Sly, glittering, and opaque, Stanwyck's Lily hardly needs the advice.

—Juliet Clark

- Written by Gene Markey, Kathryn Scola, Mark Canfield. Photographed by James Van Trees. With Barbara Stanwyck, George Brent, Donald Cook, Margaret Lindsay. (76 mins plus outtakes, B&W, 35mm, From Warner Bros.)

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Tuesday, July 17, 2007

8:35 p.m. **Remember the Night**

Mitchell Leisen (U.S., 1940)

With the smart talk and screwball cynicism of a Preston Sturges screenplay burnished to a mellow sheen by Mitchell Leisen's direction, *Remember the Night* makes a rich setting for Stanwyck's sparkle and subtle depth. Caught for shoplifting a bracelet just before Christmas,

Stanwyck falls on the irritable mercy of D.A. Fred MacMurray, who bails her out and ends up offering her a ride home to Indiana for the holidays. Spurned by her own family in a brief scene that sums up a lifetime of too-convincing horror, she ends up with his folks, in an Americana idyll of warmth and kindness that brings an undercurrent of sentiment welling to the surface. When this self-possessed woman is overcome, the emotion means something. For a Sturges-scripted comedy, *Remember the Night* has a lot of melancholy in it; Stanwyck shifts between wisecracks and tears with grace.

—Juliet Clark

- Written by Preston Sturges. Photographed by Ted Tetzlaff. With Barbara Stanwyck, Fred MacMurray, Beulah Bondi, Elizabeth Patterson. (94 mins, B&W, 35mm, From UCLA Film and Television Archive, permission Universal)

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Thursday, July 26, 2007

7:00 p.m. **Double Indemnity**
Billy Wilder (U.S., 1944)

If there's an archetype of the noir femme fatale, Stanwyck's Phyllis Dietrichson is it: she wears her platinum wig like a steel helmet, and her anklet like the tag on a half-wild animal. When insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) arrives at her Los Feliz bungalow,

Phyllis greets him in a towel, not fully covered but fully in control. As their relationship of lopsided lust and mutual opportunism proceeds, though, it becomes clear that nobody—not cunning Phyllis, and for sure not glib and clueless Walter—can control what happens down the line. The movie has been accused of misogyny, perhaps rightly. But loathsome as Phyllis is, her willing victim Walter earns equal contempt, and who wouldn't want to off the awful Mr. Dietrichson? Wilder takes such cynical delight in these characters that it starts to feel like affection. The gap between tragedy and comedy, between Phyllis Dietrichson and Preston Sturges's *Lady Eve*, may be no wider than an anklet.

—Juliet Clark

- Written by Wilder, Raymond Chandler, from the novel by James M. Cain. Photographed by John F. Seitz. With Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck, Edward G. Robinson, Porter Hall. (106 mins, B&W, 35mm, From UCLA Film and Television Archive, permission Universal)

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Tuesday, July 31, 2007

7:00 p.m. **Ladies They Talk About**
William Keighley, Howard Bretherton (U.S., 1932)

Ladies They Talk About has everything you could want in a women-in-prison picture—catfights, fast talk, escape attempts, skin—plus Stanwyck swaggering around like she owns the place. She plays a gang moll who decides to be honest with a childhood friend, prosecutor and radio evangelist Preston Foster, and is rewarded with two to five at San Quentin. "This is a penitentiary, not a pink tea," says the matron, but you'd hardly know it: the inmates seem to spend most of their time gossiping, primping, and decorating their cells with pictures from fan magazines. (In a bizarre musical interlude, convict Lillian Roth serenades a pinup of Joe E. Brown.) True to the great early-thirties tradition, the movie packs an impressive amount of unlikely plot into its

sixty-nine minutes, and its gestures toward morality are happily desultory—Stanwyck might be redeemed by the love of a good man, but she has to try to kill him first.

—Juliet Clark

- Written by Brown Holmes, William McGrath, Sidney Sutherland, from a play by Dorothy Mackaye, Carlton Miles. Photographed by John Seitz. With Barbara Stanwyck, Preston Foster, Dorothy Burgess, Lillian Roth. (69 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Warner Bros.)

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Tuesday, July 31, 2007

8:30 p.m. **The Lady Eve**

Preston Sturges (U.S., 1941)

"The Stanwyck temperament and style are at the heart of that tension between experience and innocence which so much preoccupies Sturges," James Harvey wrote; this tale of innocence seduced by experience, and vice versa, is a comic pinnacle for both director and actress. From the moment cardsharp Jean

Harrington (Stanwyck) clunks him on the head with an apple, virginal ale heir and ophiologist Charles Poncefort Pike (Henry Fonda) is headed for a fall. "You're a funny girl for anybody to meet who's just been up the Amazon for a year," he tells her, paralyzed with lust. The funny thing is that, setting out to play him, she falls for him too. When Charles gets wise to her identity, the outraged Jean invents a new one, and, as the Lady Eve Sidwich, determines to finish the game. In Stanwyck's universe, love may be a con, but it's a privilege to get taken by her, time after exhilarating time.

—Juliet Clark

• Written by Sturges, from a story by Monckton Hoffe. Photographed by Victor Milner. With Barbara Stanwyck, Henry Fonda, Charles Coburn, Eugene Palette. (94 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Universal)