

12/67

Screwball!



Ring in the New Year at **BFI Southbank** with **Screwball**, a season that's guaranteed to banish the January blues. Expect love, laughter and fast-talking dames in a month long dedication to Hollywood Screwball comedies of the 30s and 40s. 1934 is generally thought of as the first year of the screwball with the release of **It Happened One Night** (Dir. Frank Capra) and **Twentieth Century** (Dir. Howard Hawks) and for the next ten years Hollywood produced a dazzling succession of screwball comedies. This season screens 21 of them (plus a 1952 coda in Hawks' **Monkey Business**), including familiar titles such as **Bringing Up Baby** (Dir. Howard Hawks, 1938), **His Girl Friday** (1939, Dir. Howard Hawks) and **The Philadelphia Story** (1940, Dir. George Cukor), as well as lesser known gems including **Theodora Goes Wild** (1936, Dir. Richard Boleslawski) and **Bluebeard's Eighth Wife** (1938, Dir. Ernst Lubitsch). Season curator Peter Swaab will also give an illustrated talk about the politics hidden behind the comic fizz, the radical ideas embedded within narratives of wealth and poverty, and how these spiky battles of the sexes ushered in a new kind of independent, fast-talking woman.

This bold, modern genre which emerged out of the gloom of depression-era America possesses a series of instantly recognisable traits. Stories often crossed wealth divides, splicing a millionaire with a working girl or guy. Take for example **My Man Godfrey** (1936, Dir. Gregory La Cava) in which a beautiful neurotic socialite invites a Jeevian tramp to become the butler for her family or **Easy Living** (1937,

Dir. Mitchell Leisen) in which a working girl finds herself the recipient of numerous gifts from rich men, complicating her burgeoning relationship with a millionaire.

Screwball women are seldom ladylike. They often talk as fast as Groucho Marx and the scripts are laced with barbed dialogue, insults and wordplay. Perhaps the best example of this is **His Girl Friday** (1939, Dir. Howard Hawks). Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell star as an editor and his star reporter Hildy, and are divorced when the film starts. The astonishingly rapid dialogue has been estimated at 250 words per minute against an industry average of 100-150 words. Other 'unladylike' screwball women include **Roxie Hart** (1942, Dir. William Wellman), a forerunner to Bob Fosse's 1975 musical; while rapid fire dialogue helped Frank Capra win his third Best Director Oscar for **You Can't Take It With You** (1938).

A case of mistaken identity or masquerade is frequent in screwball, such as in the rarely seen **Theodora Goes Wild** (1936, Dir Richard Boleslawski) or the audacious **Bachelor Mother** (1939, Dir. Garson Kanin). Characters also often have their lives turned topsy-turvy through hectic chases, pratfalls and ludicrous scenarios. **Bringing Up Baby** (1938, Dir. Howard Hawks) is a brilliantly farcical tale of an heiress on the hunt for her escaped leopard while **Monkey Business** (1952, Dir. Howard Hawks) sees Cary Grant working on a youth formula which results in him spiralling back to his wild teens and beyond.

A season of screwball comedies would not be complete without a few of the greatest comedies of remarriage. **The Awful Truth** (1937, Dir. Leo McCarey) stars Cary Grant and Irene Dunn as a divorcing couple who, despite not being able to be happy together, seem even less able to be happy apart; Cary Grant also at the heart of **The Philadelphia Story** (1940, Dir. George Cukor) – along with Katharine Hepburn and James Stewart he stars as one suitor in a love triangle of hilarious consequence. Finally **The Palm Beach Story** (1942, Dir. Preston Sturges) immediately plunges us into a word of absurdity through name alone – Tom and Gerry are down on their luck, and their marriage is in trouble from the off.

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Screenings taking place in the season:

Screwball! Season Introduction

To introduce our season of the first generation of Screwball, Peter Swaab – author of the BFI Classic on *Bringing Up Baby* – gives an illustrated talk charting the emergence of this bold, modern genre out of the gloom of Depression-era America. Discover the politics hidden behind the comic fizz, the radical ideas embedded within narratives of wealth and poverty, and how these spiky battles of the sexes ushered in a new kind of independent, fast-talking woman.

Tickets £5

Thu 3 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Twentieth Century

USA 1934. Dir Howard Hawks. With John Barrymore, Carole Lombard, Roscoe Karns. 91min. U
‘They didn’t have leading men and leading women make damn fools of themselves like they did in that picture’, said Hawks of this seminal screwball, played by John Barrymore and Carole Lombard with the brakes off and no holds barred. Oscar Jaffe (Barrymore) is a Svengali-ish actor-manager, Mildred Plotka (Lombard) his protégée. A paean to the mettle of theatricality and the vitality of frauds, brilliantly adapted from their own play by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur.

Tue 1 Jan 16:15 NFT1

Fri 4 Jan 20:40 NFT2

My Man Godfrey

USA 1936. Dir Gregory La Cava. With William Powell, Carole Lombard, Gail Patrick, Mischa Auer. 96min. U

One of the greatest screwballs, with an astonishing first scene in the New York city dumps. The gorgeous neurotic socialite Irene (Lombard) invites William Powell’s magically serene Jeevesian tramp to become butler for her family. La Cava depicts the rich as a wild tribe, appalling and endearing by turns (as if Waugh crossed with Wodehouse), and gives a genuinely disturbing though finally affirmative picture of true love. Amid the mayhem the film is a moving meditation on personal and civic responsibility.

Tue 1 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Thu 3 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Theodora Goes Wild

USA 1936. Dir Richard Boleslawski. With Irene Dunne, Melvyn Douglas, Thomas Mitchell. 94min. U
Mary McCarthy wrote the story for this fascinating, underrated and very funny film. Theodora (Dunne) is a pillar of the community in rural Lynnfield, a matriarchal hotbed of wild and hysterical puritanical disapproval. But she has a secret double life and is threatened with exposure by Melvyn Douglas, a scion of New York wealth. But he has his secrets too, and the tables soon turn in an equal-opportunities ripping down of inherited repressions.

Tue 1 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Mon 7 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Mr Deeds Goes to Town

USA 1936. Dir Frank Capra. With Gary Cooper, Jean Arthur. 115min. U

Capra’s influential fable combines folksy optimism with powerful noir undercurrents. Mr Deeds, ‘a fine fellow, very democratic’, is the rural innocent confronted by city life and by an undercover reporter with professional and personal designs on him (Arthur). Jean Arthur’s unease at what she’s doing and Cooper’s descent into traumatised mutism give depth to the story, as does the Kafkaesque scenario in which corrupt and greedy men conspire to indict social altruism as madness.

Wed 2 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Thu 10 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Nothing Sacred

USA 1937. Dir William Wellman. With Carole Lombard, Fredric March, Walter Connolly. 75min. U
A savagely exuberant exposure of media hypocrisy and cant, as telling today as it was in 1937. Fredric March’s newspaperman looks to boost his career with an extended story about the fatal illness of Hazel Flagg (who in fact has a clean bill of health). ‘You mean they’ll like me just because I’m dying?’, asks Hazel (Lombard). Ben Hecht’s scenario is packed with pretenders and fakes, and the love story has to make its way in a world of fraudulence.

Fri 4 Jan 18:10 NFT3

Sat 5 Jan 20:30 NFT3

Easy Living

USA 1937. Dir Mitchell Leisen. With Jean Arthur, Ray Milland, Edward Arnold. 91min. PG

A fur coat falls from the sky onto a working girl sitting on the upper deck of a Fifth Avenue bus (Arthur). 'Kismet', opines the turbaned passenger behind her, as the plot begins to whirl its millionaires and the un-moneyed into a warm but uneasy embrace. *Easy Living* was Preston Sturges' first major comic script, ably filmed by the still underrated Mitchell Leisen, with an eye for the beauties of opulence and havoc alike. 'I decided to cut loose', said Leisen.

Sat 5 Jan 15:50 NFT3

Thu 10 Jan 20:30 NFT3

The Awful Truth

USA 1937. Dir Leo McCarey. With Irene Dunne, Cary Grant, Ralph Bellamy. 91min. U

One of the enduring comedies of remarriage, with Irene Dunne and Cary Grant as the divorcing couple who, if they couldn't be happy together, find they even more can't be happy apart. Given the poise and sharpness of the dialogue it's remarkable that much of it was improvised (Bellamy recalled McCarey telling him that 'we'd have lots of fun but there wasn't any script'). McCarey won the best director Oscar and the film was nominated in five other categories.

Sat 5 Jan 18:10 NFT3

Mon 7 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Bringing Up Baby

USA 1938. Dir Howard Hawks. With Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, Charles Ruggles. 102min. U

The human cast are joined by the dog George ('a perfect fiend') and the leopard Baby (plus an evil leopard doppelganger) in this great comedy about letting the animal get into the best-laid plans of human lives. The heiress (Hepburn) stalks the paleontologist (Grant) all the way to what Hawks called 'quite a happy ending', with love triumphant over the wreckage of a toppled world.

Sun 6 Jan 16:15 NFT1

Mon 14 Jan 18:30 NFT1

Holiday

USA 1938. Dir George Cukor. With Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, Doris Nolan, Lew Ayres. 95min. U

Philip Barry's 1928 play was first filmed in 1930 by Edward H Griffith, and updated here by Cukor and screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart to include some cautioning against fascism. Freethinking Johnny Case (Grant) has to choose between the rich respectable sister (Nolan) and the unconventional fun one (Hepburn). Alongside its screwball elements the film is a seriously-played family drama about personal and social renewal in a changing world.

Sun 6 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Sat 12 Jan 18:30 NFT1

Bluebeard's Eighth Wife

USA 1938. Dir Ernst Lubitsch. With Claudette Colbert, Gary Cooper, David Niven, Herman Bing. 85min. PG

A little-known Lubitsch, scripted by Billy Wilder and Leigh Brackett from a French play. US multi-millionaire Michael Barndon (Cooper) marries his eighth wife, Nicole (Colbert), the daughter of a penniless French Marquis. Barndon deploys marital techniques from *The Taming of the Shrew* before himself becoming *The Tamer Tamed*. The film flopped on its first release; its mood may not have been right for 1938 but it is ripe for reappraisal now.

Sun 6 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Wed 9 Jan 18:10 NFT3

You Can't Take It With You

USA 1938. Dir Frank Capra. With James Stewart, Jean Arthur, Lionel Barrymore, Edward Arnold. 127min. U

Another of Capra's successful collaborations with the screenwriter Robert Riskin, the film was based on a popular stage play by George S Kaufman and Moss Hart, and won Capra his

third Oscar for Best Director. When a girl from a family of eccentric freethinkers (Arthur) falls for the son of a conservative banker (Stewart), the stage is set for a meet-the-in-laws dinner across a social divide. Wrestling, ballet, fireworks and police raids ensue.

Wed 9 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Wed 16 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Destry Rides Again

USA 1939. Dir George Marshall. With James Stewart, Marlene Dietrich, Mischa Auer. 94min. PG
Destry is several kinds of film – a comedy, a Western, a musical, and a screwball too, touched by the visual extravagance of the films Dietrich made with von Sternberg, and strikingly modern in its merging of the fantastical and moralistic. A gleefully anarchic and unusually multi-racial version of the Old West, with Dietrich's Frenchy, 'the real boss of Bottleneck', meeting her match in the 'gun-shy lady-fingered deputy', Tom Destry (Stewart).

Sat 12 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Fri 18 Jan 18:20 NFT2

His Girl Friday

USA 1939. Dir Howard Hawks. With Cary Grant, Rosalind Russell, Ralph Bellamy. 92min. U
Perhaps the greatest screwball comedy of them all, combining a shockingly dark depiction of the public world with one of the most unconventionally and compellingly imagined couples in film history (Grant as the editor Walter Burns, Russell as the star reporter Hildy Johnson, divorced when the film starts). The astonishingly rapid dialogue has been estimated at 250 words per minute against an industry average of 100-150 words. A remake of Lewis Milestone's *The Front Page*, giving the previously male Hildy an inspired sex-change.

Sun 13 Jan 16:15 NFT1

Fri 18 Jan 20:45 NFT1

Bachelor Mother

USA 1939. Dir Garson Kanin. With Ginger Rogers, David Niven, Charles Coburn. 62min. U
Kanin's best-known film on his topsy-turvy route from director to screenwriter (especially as one half of a husband and wife team with Ruth Gordon). This is one of several screwballs to take place in department stores, as settings for social experiment and the upsetting of respectable applegarts. Here Polly Parrish (Rogers) gets mistaken for an unmarried mother, and the wider world – in an audacious plotline – likes her quite a lot for it.

+ Roxie Hart

USA 1942. Dir William Wellman. With Ginger Rogers, Adolphe Menjou. 75min. PG
'The prettiest woman ever tried for murder in Cook County', Roxie (Rogers) confesses to a murder she didn't commit because she thinks (rightly) it will bring her plenty of valuable publicity, and women tend not to be convicted in Cook County, especially with Billy Flynn as defence lawyer. One of Ginger Rogers's greatest successes, and the forerunner of Bob Fosse's 1975 musical and Rob Marshall's 2002 film of *Chicago*.

Sun 20 Jan 16:00 NFT2

Wed 23 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Midnight

USA 1939. Dir Mitchell Leisen. With Claudette Colbert, Don Ameche, John Barrymore, Mary Astor. 94min

The second screenplay by Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett is a fairytale, set in Paris, of sexual schemers rewarded by chance. The plot is very elaborate, and features a penniless adventuress (Colbert), a taxi-driver (Ameche), a millionaire (Barrymore), his wife (Astor) and her gigolo (Francis Lederer). Wilder always disliked Leisen ('That fag who ruined my scripts'), but *Midnight* is an increasingly celebrated comedy, and it is even possible to prefer Leisen's generosity and sensuality to Wilder's Viennese cynicism.

Sun 20 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Wed 30 Jan 18:20 NFT2

The Philadelphia Story

USA 1940. Dir George Cukor. With Katharine Hepburn, James Stewart, Cary Grant, Ruth Hussey. 112min. U

The film that more than any other rescued Katharine Hepburn's declining screen career, *The Philadelphia Story* is a blissful triangulation of Grant, Stewart and Hepburn in a glamorous setting which makes the upper classes seem classy and wears its opulence as emotional *savoir-faire*. 'We all go haywire at times, and if we don't maybe we ought to', as Liz says. The film fashions magical occasions for people to find their senses and their spouses when slightly off their heads.

Mon 21 Jan 18:30 NFT1

Sun 27 Jan 20:45 NFT1

Sullivan's Travels

USA 1941. Dir Preston Sturges. With Joel McCrea, Veronica Lake. 91min. PG

Comedy film director John Sullivan (McCrea) decides to go on the road to research a film about the poor. The adventures that follow are by turns farcical, uproarious, touching and shocking. Sturges said that *Sullivan's Travels* committed 'some horrible crimes against juxtaposition', but it's hard to object to its being episodic when the episodes are all so brilliant. The film's romance is so understated that Veronica Lake is known only as 'The Girl', but is none the less sweet for that.

Sun 20 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Mon 21 Jan 20:45 NFT1

The Lady Eve

USA 1941. Dir Preston Sturges. With Barbara Stanwyck, Henry Fonda, Charles Coburn. 97min. U

'You're certainly a funny girl for anybody to meet who's just been up the Amazon for a year', Henry Fonda's ingenuous young millionaire Charles Pike says to Jean Harrington (Stanwyck). He's right. The two are on a luxury liner returning from South America, and Jean is a con artist, though he may encounter her again more happily in other guises. 'Very funny, strangely erotic, utterly endearing, this may be the Sturges film that outlasts all others' (David Thomson).

Tue 22 Jan 18:30 NFT1

Mon 28 Jan 20:45 NFT1

The Palm Beach Story

USA 1942. Dir Preston Sturges. With Joel McCrea, Claudette Colbert, Mary Astor, Rudy Vallee. 90min. U

Tom and Gerry Jeffers (McCrea and Colbert), whose names plunge us into a world of absurdity, need some luck. Tom is an inventor but skint, and Gerry decides to leave him and hunt for money to set him up again. Probably the wildest and most picaresque of all Sturges' films, much enlivened by Rudy Vallee's JD Hackensacker, Mary Astor's Princess Centimillia, and Sturges' regulars reveling on board a train as the members of the Ale and Quail Club.

Wed 23 Jan 20:45 NFT1

Tue 29 Jan 18:30 NFT1

To Be or Not to Be

USA 1942. Dir Ernst Lubitsch. With Jack Benny, Carole Lombard, Robert Stack. 99min. PG

Eight years after Hawks' *Twentieth Century*, Carole Lombard returns to the world of heroic high hamming, this time in an amazingly audacious farce alongside Jack Benny. They play Maria and Joseph Tura, who run a theatre troupe in Nazi-occupied Poland and find that patriotism forces them into unlikely roles, Joseph as SS Colonel 'Concentration Camp' Ehrhardt, Maria as seductress of a Nazi spy. 'What I have satirised in this picture are the Nazis and their ridiculous ideology', said Lubitsch.

Thu 24 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Thu 31 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Once Upon a Honeymoon

USA 1942. Dir Leo McCarey. With Cary Grant, Ginger Rogers, Walter Slezak. 115min. PG

Like *To Be or Not to Be*, a screwball amid Nazi Europe, with Grant's journalist Pat O'Toole attempting to break up a Yankee-Nazi marital alliance between social-climbing Brooklyn girl Katie (Rogers) and Baron Von Luber (Slezak), one of Hitler's personal undercover operators. 'A very strange and stark lark', according to *The New York Times*, the film mingles farce, romance, newsreel footage and lucid propaganda, and is held together by the comic rapport of Grant and Rogers

Fri 25 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Sun 27 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Monkey Business

USA 1952. Dir Howard Hawks. With Ginger Rogers, Cary Grant, Charles Coburn, Marilyn Monroe. 97min. U

Ginger Rogers and Cary Grant reunited, in a film which looks back to screwball's heyday and especially to *Bringing Up Baby*. Barnaby Fulton (Grant) is working on a youth formula for a chemical company, but lab monkeys monkey around with the potion. The resulting elixir sends Barnaby and his wife Edwina (Rogers) spiraling back to their wild teens and beyond, with Marilyn Monroe's curvaceous secretary Miss Laurel causing a certain amount of bad blood between them.

Sun 27 Jan 16:15 NFT1

Tue 29 Jan 20:45 NFT1

City Lit Course: The Hollywood Screwball Comedy

Long before rom-coms there existed fast-talking comedies of real wit and style. It happened one night in the early 30s, with audiences desperate for a laugh, that screwball dared to show the Great Depression's class conflict, courtship on-the-run, and marriage as fun. Tutor: John Wischmeyer.

To enrol on the course, call The City Lit on 020 7831 7831

Wed 16 Jan - 20 Mar

18:30-20:30 Studio (10 sessions)

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- Preserving and restoring the most significant film collection in the world for today and future generations
- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

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There's more to discover about film and television through the BFI. Our world-renowned archival collections, cinemas, festivals, films, publications and learning resources are here to inspire you.

***** PICTURE DESK *****

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