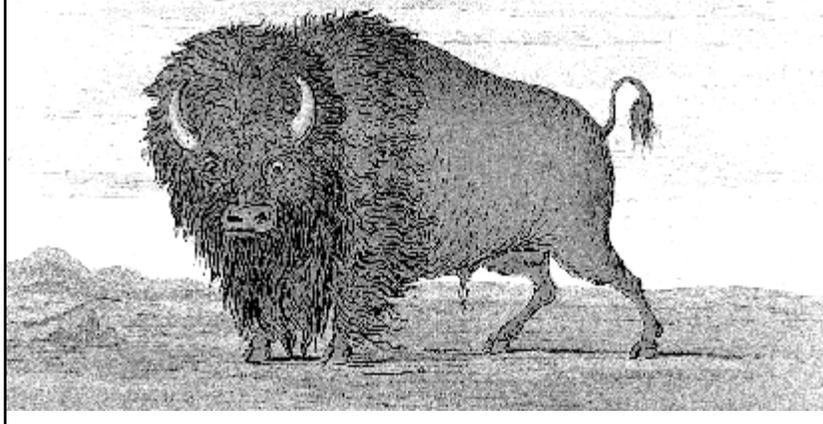


## The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films with Diane Christian & Bruce Jackson

**W.S. VAN DYKE** (Woodbridge Strong Van Dyke II, 21 March 1889, San Diego, California, 5 February 1943, Brentwood, California, suicide) was a child actor, writer, adventurer-miner, electrician, sailor, singer in vaudeville, mercenary in Mexico, explorer and gold prospector in Alaska. He worked with Griffith on *Intolerance*, worked for Essanay in 1917 directing 10 five-reelers in 1917—westerns, melodramas and action thrillers. In all, he directed nearly ninety films, beginning with *The Land of Long Shadows* (1917) and ending with *Journey for Margaret* (1942). He directed three other Thin Man films: *Shadow of the Thin Man* (1941), *Another Thin Man* (1939), *After the Thin Man* (1936). He got studio assignments for segments in the major series, such as *Dr. Kildare's Victory* (1941) and *Andy Hardy Gets Spring Fever* (1939). He also directed *San Francisco* (1936), *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934), *Eskimo* (1933) and *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932). He also directed the fencing sequences in *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1937).

**DASHIELL HAMMETT** (Samuel Dashiell Hammett, 27 May 1894, St. Mary's County, Maryland—10 January 1961, New York, throat cancer) was the best of the hard-boiled school of detective fiction writers who were published in pulp magazines and then in novels from the 1920s through the 1950s. Much of his work, sometimes credited and sometimes not, was filmed, such as *No Good Deed* (2002, from a short story), *Last Man Standing* (1996, based on Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* which was based on Hammett's *Red Harvest*), *Miller's Crossing* (1990 uncredited, based on the novels *Red Harvest* and *Glass Key*), *The Wizard of Malta* (1981, based on *The Maltese Falcon*), "The Dain Curse" (1978, tv miniseries, based on his novel), *Yojimbo* (1961, based on *Red Harvest*, uncredited), *The Glass Key* (1942, based on the novel), *The Maltese Falcon* (1941, based on the novel), *Satan Met a Lady* (1936, based on *The Maltese Falcon*), *The Glass Key* (1935, based on the novel), six other Thin Man films, *Roadhouse Nights* (1930, based on *Red Harvest*), and more.

**WILLIAM POWELL** (William Horatio Powell, 29 July 1892, Pittsburgh—5 March 1984, Palm Springs, California, cardiac arrest) acted in five other Thin Man films. He played George Wilson in the first film made of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1926). His first film was *When Knighthood Was in Flower* (1922); the last was *Mister Roberts* (1955). There were 98 in all, among them *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953), *Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid* (1948), *The Senator Was Indiscreet* (1947), *Life with Father* (1947), *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946), *My Man Godfrey* (1936), *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936), *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934), and *The Four Feathers* (1929).

**MYRNA LOY** (Myrna Adele Williams, 2 August 1905, Raidersburg, Montana—14 December 1993, New York, complications during surgery) appeared in about 130 films and was given an honorary Oscar in 1991. She was in five other Thin Man Films and, among others, *Just Tell Me What You Want* (1980), *Airport 1975* (1974), *Lonelyhearts* (1959), *Cheaper by the Dozen* (1950), *The Red Pony* (1949), *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936), *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934), *Night Flight* (1933), *The Wet Parade* (1932), *Vanity Fair* (1932), *Emma* (1932), *Arrowsmith* (1931), *The Jazz Singer* (1927), and *Pretty Ladies* (1925).

**MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN** (17 May 1911, Boyle, County Roscommon, Ireland—23 June 1998, Scottsdale, Arizona, heart attack) first appeared in film in *So This Is London* (1930). At the end of her career she did a good deal of tv series work. She is perhaps best known for her performances as Jane in six Tarzan films, including the first, *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932). Some of her other films are: *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), *Bonzo Goes to College* (1952), *Pride and Prejudice* (1940), *A Day at the Races* (1937), *Anna Karenina* (1935), *Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934), and *Tugboat Annie* (1933).



**CEDRIC GIBBONS** (Austin Cedric Gibbons, 23 March 1893, Dublin, Ireland—26 July 1960, Hollywood) was art director or production designer on some eleven hundred films. The last was *Diane* (1956). Some of the others are *The Fastest Gun Alive* (1956), *Lust for Life* (1956), *The Rack* (1956), *High Society* (1956), *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), *I'll Cry Tomorrow* (1955), *Kismet* (1955), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955), *The Student Prince* (1954), *Brigadoon* (1954), *Kiss Me Kate* (1953), *Bad and the Beautiful*, *The* (1952), *Million Dollar*

Mermaid (1952), Singin' in the Rain (1952), American in Paris, An (1951), Red Badge of Courage, The (1951), King Solomon's Mines (1950), Father of the Bride (1950), Asphalt Jungle, The (1950), Adam's Rib (1949), Madame Bovary (1949), Ziegfeld Follies (1946), They Were Expendable (1945), Anchors Aweigh (1945), Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo (1944), National Velvet (1944), Meet Me in St. Louis (1944), Mrs. Parkington (1944), Kismet (1944), Seventh Cross, The (1944), Bathing Beauty (1944), Gaslight (1944), Mrs. Miniver (1942), Tortilla Flat (1942), Ninotchka (1939), Wizard of Oz, The (1939), San Francisco (1936), Great Ziegfeld, The (1936), Manhattan Melodrama (1934), Tarzan the Ape Man (1932), Susan Lenox (Her Fall and Rise) (1931), Anna Christie (1930/II), Big Parade, The (1925), Unwritten Code, The (1919).

**JAMES WONG HOWE** (Wong Tung Jim, 28 August 1899, Canton, China—12 July 1976, Hollywood cancer) was nominated for 10 and won 2 Best Cinematography Academy Awards: *Funny Lady* (1975), *Seconds* (1966), *Hud* (1963, won), *The Old Man and the Sea* (1958), *The Rose Tattoo* (1955, won), *Air Force* (1943), *The North Star* (1943), *Kings Row* (1942), *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940), and *Algiers* (1938). Some of his other films were: *Funny Lady* (1975), *Molly Maguire, The* (1970), *Hombre* (1967), *This Property Is Condemned* (1966), *The Last Angry Man* (1959), *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), *Picnic* (1955), *Body and Soul* (1947), *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940), *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1937), *Fire Over England* (1937), *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934) and *Drums of Fate* (1923).

**from Magill's American Film Guide, v.5, "The Thin Man (by Nick Roddick). Edited by Frank Magill. Salem Press, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1980**

When, as studio legend has it, W.S. Van Dyke—"one-take Woody," the studio's star director who could be relied upon to bring anything in on time, under budget, and looking highly marketable—came to Louis B. Mayer with Dashiell Hammett's novel, *The Thin Man*, the reaction was true to form: not another private-eye movie! Things looked even bleaker when Van Dyke announced that he wanted William Powell to play Nick Charles. Powell was too strongly associated in the public mind with detective Philo Vance, a character whom he had played in a string of films. He had been playing the part so long, claimed one producer, "that the theater managers have been putting the name Philo Vance on the marquees instead of William Powell." But Van Dyke persevered, and, with the aid of his usual associate, the veteran producer Hunt Stromberg, *The Thin Man* was shot in a mere sixteen days—about average as far as Van Dyke was concerned—with a good deal of improvisation on the set, a style perfectly suited to Powell and Myrna Loy.

**Powell and Loy made an ideal screen couple, one which was to from Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood. Mick LaSalle, St. Martin's Press, NY, 2000**

Near the end of the era came a rare example of a strong marriage. It was in *The Thin Man* (1934), with William Powell as private detective Nick Charles and Myrna Loy as his rich wife, Nora. . .

To describe *The Thin Man* as a mystery story is to describe the plot, not the appeal. Hollywood had already made its share of detective stories—some of them had even starred William Powell. What made *The Thin Man* special was the playful and affectionately insulting relationship between Powell and Loy. Theirs was not just a happy marriage, but a

indeed, a movie about marriage. The initial murder and all subsequent murders come as the result of marital unhappiness. All the murder suspects are connected either by adultery or bigamy. Nick and Nora are just one of the four marriages in the film—the other three are wretched. With marriage only batting one for four, the movie's point is hardly that marriage is wonderful. But it does show that it can be, if the partners are smart. (And if they have money, too, it doesn't hurt.) When Nick stands in the doorway and calls Nora "the little woman," he is as much mocking the notion of "the little woman," as he is trying to joke her out of her fear. He is also making an amused comparison between their original kind of relationship and everybody else's miserable one.

*The Thin Man* offered one solution to the marriage problem—make it more equal, make it more fun.

It may be pointless to argue which film, of all the many made between 1929 and 1934, is the most "pre-Code" of the pre-

survive for many other films: they brought to the screen something almost unique among the platinum blondes and juvenile romances of the 1930s—a mature, happy, and clearly physical married relationship.

*The Thin Man* opened in New York at the end of June, 1934. It was reasonable to expect that it would do brisk business, since Hammett's novel had been a nationwide best seller, serialized in a number of coast-to-coast newspapers and described by Alexander Wollcott as "the best detective story written in America." But public response to the movie exceeded all expectations.

*The Thin Man* is, in its way, a piece of social history, a sweet and sour image of the 1930s with a hero who is almost always drunk, shoots the ornaments off the Christmas tree with a toy air gun, and never goes without his trusty but spectacularly cowardly dog Asta. . . *The Thin Man* is never for a moment a movie to take itself more seriously than is absolutely needed.

modern one, a union of equals.

Wisecracks and banter dot the film, but the solidity of the marriage is always clear. In one scene, Nick is comforting a young woman whose father is missing. He has his arms around her when Nora walks in. In any other movie, the wife would misunderstand the situation. Instead, Nick makes a face at Nora: she makes a face back, and she enters the room completely unruffled, as only Loy could. Later, before Nick goes off to snoop around an abandoned warehouse, Nora is worried. "I do believe the little woman cares," he teases. Codes. A handful exist at the outer reaches of outrageousness or daring, for varying reasons: *A Free Soul*, *The Sign of the Cross*, *The Scarlet Empress*, Garbo's *Queen Christina*.

Most Americans in the thirties agreed that films influences the behavior of young people. Not everyone considered that a bad thing. "In order to be sophisticated, fledglings turn to their primer, the movies," Dorothy Mackaill said.

Who has the good times, the swell clothes, the boyfriends, the jewels, the excitements, all the breaks? Why who but the Connie Bennetts. . .the Crawfords, even the Mackaills. And why? . . .Not because we are portrayed as "nice girls" sitting at home with the old folks or practicing



the piano. No, because. . . we are smoking, drinking, dancing, being made love to, getting into and usually out of . . . passionate situations.

Thanks to the movies, said Mackaill, “to be called a nice girl is to be blasphemed and socially undone.”

Censorship put a stop to that. When censorship came, it came fast and irrevocably. Movies changed completely and the changed overnight. The newly-formed Production Code Administration took control of motion picture content on July 1, 1934, a cataclysmic event that divided one year—and two eras—with the abruptness of an ax coming down.

There are two myths about Hollywood censorship, both the result of wishful thinking. The first is that the censors were predominantly concerned with the *way* things were expressed; therefore, all one had to do to circumvent censorship was to come up with subtle ways of saying the same things one might have expressed overtly. Some have even suggested that censorship made filmmakers sharper. The second myth is that the censors were stupid, that their witlessness made it easy for shrewd filmmakers to slip things by them.

Neither could be farther from the truth. Though the Production Code administrators brooked no lewdness or nudity, their main goal was to censor ideas. The censors were absolutely fixated on the *messages* movies transmitted. For example, crime had to be punished—period. There was no leaving it unpunished *subtly*. If you wanted to make a movie in which crime *did* pay, you were out of luck. You either had to give up your idea, or you had to compromise. The result: a movie in which crime didn’t pay. Guaranteed.

Women got the worst of it. Under the Code, it wasn’t only crime that didn’t pay. Sex outside of marriage didn’t pay. Adultery didn’t pay. Divorce didn’t pay. Leaving your husband didn’t pay. Getting pregnant out of wedlock didn’t pay. Even having a job often didn’t pay. Nothing paid. The Production Code ensured a miserable fate—or at least a rueful, chastened one—for any woman who stepped out of line.

Accordingly, every female character in movies got her virginity back. If she lost it again, she was in big trouble. The price for non-conjugal relations was either death, permanent loneliness, or a profuse, protracted and degrading apology. At the same time, women became the humble protectors of marriage. If a husband strayed and wanted to return, a wife not only had to take him back, she had to smile as she did it.

The censors were true believers. They agreed with Dorothy Mackaill that movies influenced people, and they wanted to make sure that movies put out the right messages. That is, ones that they agreed with. They were nostalgia buffs with an optimistic faith that they could turn the clock back to the 1890s—anything to stem the growing influence of the cities and city morality on American culture. They believed in the impossible. They believed they could close the barn door after the horse had run away, and that the horse would somehow be there in the morning. Like many who believe in the impossible, they had enormous success.

The truest of the true believers was Joseph Breen, who became head of the Studio Relations Committee in December 1933 and ran the Production Code Administration from its inception in June 1934. In the history of film censorship, Breen is the one indispensable man. Without Breen, it is likely that the Code would never have been enforced and that movies of the late thirties, forties, fifties and early sixties would have gone on in their merry pre-Code way. Will Hays, the name most often associated with censorship, was a mere functionary. Breen was the real power, and a genuine crusader.

Breen was a lay Catholic with a priest for a brother and strong ties to powerful players in the church. He was also a political reactionary and an anti-Semite of the first order. Born in 1888, he started his career as a journalist. By 1926, he was the head of public relations for the Peabody Coal Company in Chicago, where he came into contact with publisher Martin

Quigley, Father FitzGeorge Dinneer of the Chicago Board of Censorship, and others in the Catholic hierarchy. In 1929, Breen was part of the cabal that helped create the Production Code, and he participated in the February 1930 conference that led to its adoption. Following the conference, he took on the job of enlisting support for the Code among editors of Catholic publications. He won the endorsement of most of them, including the Vatican newspaper.

Breen was driven. He wanted to save America from the movies and movies from the Jews. His private correspondence is loaded with anti-Semitic invective. In 1932, while working as a public relations man for Will Hays, he wrote:

These lousy Jews. . . are simply a vile bunch of people with no respect for anything but the making of money. . . . These Jews seem to think of nothing but money-making and sexual indulgence. The vilest kind of sin is commonplace hereabouts and the men and women who engage in this sort of business are the men and women who decide what the film fare of the nation is to be. . . . Ninety-five percent of these folks are Jews of Eastern European lineage. They are, probably, the sum of the earth.

Breen continued to amass power. On May 22, he wrote to Daniel Lord about his desire to work with a national organization “to get after the Jews in this business.” The following day. Also to Lord, he wrote, “The Jews are clannish. They are almost entirely without morality of any kind.” That same day Cardinal Dougherty of Philadelphia took Breen’s advice about a boycott, but went him one better: Instead of threatening a boycott, he went ahead and announced one. All Catholics in his diocese were thereby forbidden to patronize any movie house, by “positive command, binding all in conscience under pain of sin.” The result was an immediate fifteen to twenty percent drop in movie attendance.

Breen may have been a bigot—and, in private, a foul-mouthed thug—but he was shrewd. By June 1934, he was strong enough to dictate terms. The Catholic hierarchy had begun to organize along the lines Breen and others had envisioned. The Catholic Legion of Decency was formed, an organization that rated movies according to morals and permitted or forbade Catholics from seeing them. The studios, shaken by the Philadelphia boycott, were terrified of the Legion, which threatened to deny them twenty million Catholic customers.

Breen presented himself to Hays as the one man capable of maneuvering between the studios and the Legion. He demanded a new arrangement, and Hays caved in, giving Breen everything he wanted. The Studio Relations Committee was transformed into the Production Code Administration, with Breen in the driver’s seat. From now on, all scripts would have to be funneled through the PCA, and starting on July 1, 1934, no film could be released without the PCA seal of approval. There would be no jury of appeal (the provision that had saved *Queen Christina*). Breen, heading a staff of nine, would hereafter have the last word on motion picture content. He would maintain that control for nineteen of the next twenty years.

Ironically, Hays and the studios may have overreacted. That summer, Hays dispatched an investigator to locations up and down the country to gauge the effect of the Legion, which had already condemned a number of films, among them *Dr. Monica* (Kay Francis), *The Life of Vergie Winters* (Ann Harding), *Design for Living* (Miriam Hopkins), *Men in White*, and *Riptide*. The investigation found that the Legion had less power than the studios feared. In fact, whenever the Legion banned a film, attendance increased. A Legion condemnation meant good box office. These findings were never publicized, however, and Hays kept them to himself. After all, thanks to Breen and the Legion, Hays finally had a way to keep the

studios in line.

At a press conference announcing his appointment, Breen reveled in his image as a pugnacious Irishman. "I come from a long race of people who have a long history of

committing suicide—on the other guy," he said. Like the man himself, the statement blazed with confidence, hostility, and obtuseness. Thus began the reign of the man *Film Weekly* was soon calling "the Hitler of Hollywood."

**from *World Film Directors v.1* Edited by John Wakeman, H.W.Wilson & Co. NY 1987 "Van Dyke" John A. Gallagher**

They taught Van Dyke how to shoot economically and fast, and he began in his first year as a director to establish the reputation that later earned him the nickname "One-Take Woody."

The Buck Jones movies were very profitable, and when MGM decided to follow the trend with a series of Westerns starring Colonel Tim McCoy, they hired Van Dyke to direct them....Tim McCoy, a former Wyoming Indian Agent, was an authority on Indian customs and dialects. Her and Van Dyke shared a concern for historical accuracy and (for the period) an unusually enlightened attitude towards the Indians.

The movie [*The Thin Man*] works extremely well both as a

thriller and as a witty comedy, but what gave it its unique character was the relationship between Nick and Nora Charles—the fact that this husband and wife are quite evidently and unsentimentally in love. As a contemporary reviewer wrote in the *London Times* "the two of them suggest in a peculiarly personal and intimate way, assisted by an apt and economic dialogue, an affection which has its counterpart in many homes but seldom finds its reflection on the screen."

This film, which it has been said, revitalized the institution of marriage for thousands of Depression moviegoers, won Oscar nominations for best picture, best direction, best actor, and best adaptation (by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hacker). One of MGM's greatest successes of the 1930s, it earned over \$2 million.

**Join us next week, Tuesday, September 17 for Greta Garbo in Rouben Mamoulian's**

## **Queen Christina** (1933).

Check out the other films, past films, and all the goldenrod handouts at <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>.

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Movie bonus next Monday night right here at the Market Arcade at 7:00 p.m.: we'll be introducing, screening and then discussing the restored version of Elia Kazan's film of Tennessee Williams's **A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE**, starring Marlon Brando, Vivien Leigh, Kim Hunter and Karl Malden.