

A conversation with Joseph McBride about his study of Hollywood film director George Cukor: “There are many flawed people in his films, but Cukor understands human imperfection”—Part 1

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The WSWWS recently spoke to film historian, critic and biographer Joseph McBride in a video call about his new book *George Cukor's People: Acting for a Master Director*, a study of the Hollywood director whose career in feature films lasted half a century, from 1930 to 1981.

We are posting today as well a comment on McBride's book and introduction to this interview.

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David Walsh: I think it's a remarkable book. I read it with genuine fascination and enjoyment.

George Cukor is someone with an extraordinary range. The moment you think you have a handle on his films, you realize, oh, he also made *Gaslight*, or *The Women*. *Camille* with Garbo, the Katharine Hepburn-Cary Grant films, the Hepburn-Spencer Tracy films and all the way to the 1970s and beyond. *Travels with My Aunt* [1972], *Love Among the Ruins* [1975].

It's a book that abounds with opinions and issues, and it stands out in an ocean of essentially noncommittal, postmodern rubbish. You stick your neck out and offer a critical opinion about decisive issues.

I think in these film studies and biographies you are keeping certain artistic traditions and standards alive at a time of a real cultural regression. When there is a cultural revival, and there will be, although on a different basis, I think your books will be part of the education of a younger generation oriented to serious filmmaking, serious writing and serious artistic commitment, and that's no small thing.

Can I ask you to begin with, what's the history of your interactions with George Cukor?

Joseph McBride: I've been writing about Cukor since 1971. When I was still in Madison, Wisconsin, I was a reporter on the *Wisconsin State Journal*. I'd been writing film criticism for a number of years already, and I wrote a review of a book on Cukor for *Film Quarterly*. I pointed out that “Cukor's work is more difficult to evoke or analyze than that of almost any other major director. ... The critic can describe the way Cukor gets from *this* to *this* to *this*, but how can he freeze each frame and tell you what *this* is?” I suggested, frankly, that I didn't quite know how to do that.

In 1973, I wrote an essay for *Film Comment* on Lowell Sherman's performance in Cukor's *What Price Hollywood?* [1932]. The magazine had a series called Film Favorites, and I wrote a detailed analysis of this wonderful performance. Sherman is a forgotten figure today, but he was a good actor, onstage and in film. He played the cad who seduces Lillian

Gish in D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East* in 1920, for example. He specialized in that kind of roguish character. He grew tired of acting and started directing films. He made 13 films, and some of them are quite good, such as *She Done Him Wrong* [1933] with Mae West and Cary Grant and, the same year, *Morning Glory*, the film that won Katharine Hepburn her first Oscar.

Sherman was directing *Becky Sharp* [1935, based on Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, eventually credited to Rouben Mamoulian], the first three-strip Technicolor feature, when he died of a heart attack at the age of 46.

But Cukor put him in the role of an alcoholic director in *What Price Hollywood?*, the first rough draft for the *Star Is Born* cycle. David O. Selznick produced it, and it was remade for the first time, unofficially, as *A Star Is Born* in 1937. Cukor was offered the job of directing that one, but he felt it was too close to *What Price Hollywood?* But he wound up directing the 1954 version, which I think is his best film.

In my 1973 piece on Sherman's work for Cukor, I wrote a granular study of his body language and way of speaking, and his authoritative manner of playing a director on screen. It was inspired casting to have a real director play a director. It gives a lot of weight to the film in terms of authenticity.

I felt that I had done a pretty good job of that. But over the years, I tried at times to write about Cukor overall, and I was still stymied by not quite knowing the vocabulary with which to describe what he does.

Over the course of years, I interviewed him three times. I would see him around at Hollywood events, because I was working on *Daily Variety* at the time. In 1975, I interviewed him for *Action*, the Directors Guild of America magazine, about *The Blue Bird* [1976], a disastrous film he made in the Soviet Union, his worst film, with the possible exception of his first, *Grumpy*, a deadly 1930 play adaptation he co-directed with Cyril Gardner.

But Cukor was a tough survivor, and he'd had some bad setbacks in the past, most notably being fired from *Gone With the Wind* [1939], which he didn't exactly take in stride, it was humiliating, but he recovered. Whenever another director was fired from a film, Cukor would pick up the phone and tell him, “Well, you know, it's tough, but you'll get over it, and your career will go on,” which was kind of him. He was generous to other directors. Usually in Hollywood, if you have a setback like that, people shun you. It's like you have the plague.

I asked him in 1975 what it was like to be fired from a film, and I was

actually thinking of a film called *Desire Me* [1947], an MGM film from which he was fired. It had four directors, none of whom would take credit. It may have been the only Hollywood film released without a directing credit. But Cukor leaned over to his publicist and put his hand on my forearm, and said, "Notice with what finesse he avoids mentioning the title *Gone With the Wind*." I thought that was so charming and funny. He had a great sense of humor, so I easily related to him.

Cukor said something to me in that conversation that was a shrewd analysis of my character. This impressed me and endeared him to me. He said, "You're a very determined young man but deceptively mild-mannered. Keep that." And I thought he had seen a level of my personality that other people didn't notice.

When I first went to Hollywood, I asked for advice from a Hollywood person, a recovering screenwriter. He said one word, "Chutzpah!" That was great advice. So I tried, when I went to Hollywood, to be aggressive and bold, and I charged up to people at parties and called people I wanted to interview. I was able to interview almost all the directors that I admired, and many other people, actors, writers, producers.

Then I interviewed Cukor with Todd McCarthy for *Film Comment* in 1981, when he directed his last film, *Rich and Famous* [1981]. We did a long career interview. It was mostly about his later work, which has been neglected. Cukor gave us a lively and thoughtful and revealing interview. We also went on the set of *Rich and Famous*. I spent a day on the set.

When I was on *Daily Variety* back in that period, the studios would let you go on sets of films. Now, in the more corporate Hollywood, they don't like the press being on the set and giving the press unrestricted access to the filmmakers. I found that even in 1989 to 1992, when I went back to *Daily Variety* and I would ask to go on the set of a film, it was almost impossible. But back in the '70s and '80s, I got to see many directors working with many actors, and that was great preparation for this book. Also, I not only reviewed films, but I reviewed a lot of plays, I was a second-string theater reviewer for *Daily Variety*. I reviewed Chekhov's *Three Sisters* five times, for example, and that was a good education.

I acted for Orson Welles for five years on *The Other Side of the Wind*, which was probably my best preparation for this book, because I saw Welles directing a very diverse cast, including John Huston, who was his peer, and Oscar winners Edmond O'Brien and Mercedes McCambridge, and some good younger actors, and some non-actors like me.

Being on the set of *Rich and Famous* was a bit frustrating, though. As I write in the book,

Unlike most directors I watched at work, Cukor couldn't be heard much if at all, since he spoke so quietly and intently to his actresses, Jacqueline Bisset and Candice Bergen. I understood and appreciated his sense of discretion but found it frustrating for my observational process. About all I could hear him saying was, often, "Come on, let's get on with it," and when the camera rolled, "At a brisk clip, ladies." Those exhortations were characteristic of Cukor's fondness for brisk pacing and impatience with actors he thought were dawdling.

And one time I did hear him give a more specific and significant scene direction. Bergen, in the scene of her New Year's Eve party, was supposed to be lost in thought because she was considering slipping away and going to the country to see her old friend, played by Bisset. Bergen was having trouble with the focus of the scene and wanted to know where to look. Cukor said, "Look inside yourself." The result in the penultimate scene of the film is one of her character's most moving moments of introspection, the high point of Bergen's uneven performance.

After Todd and I did the interview with Cukor and I edited the piece for publication, I realized he hadn't said anything much that was positive about Bisset's performance, and I thought she is quite good in the film. I knew he didn't get along with her. He was heaping praise on Bergen, who gives quite a campy performance. Bisset plays a rather erotically charged, complex single woman who's engaging in pick-ups, one-night stands. She's supposed to be a serious writer, although there's no evidence of that in the movie.

Rich and Famous—based on the play *Old Acquaintance* by John Van Druten, which had been filmed under that title in 1943 with Bette Davis and Miriam Hopkins—was Bisset's project, along with producer William Allyn, for about 10 years. She hired Cukor, and he felt that she was trying to control him. He chafed at that.

I said that Garbo and other stars in the '30s had a similar kind of power, didn't they? And he said, "Yes, but there was also good manners. You deferred; she deferred. It was very civilized. I would find it very difficult to be under the thumb of the actress." I spent half an hour on the phone trying to get one good word from him about Bisset, and he would not cooperate. I got a sense of just how stubborn he could be.

I saw him at various events, such as when he showed *Little Women* [1933], which was one of his favorite films, the Katharine Hepburn version. A fine film, a feminist film about a young woman writer with a strong streak of independence and drive but also a pull toward her rather strict family back home in Massachusetts. He showed it at the Academy Theater, and some people were hooting at it, as happened in those days in response to so-called women's pictures. They may have felt it was sentimental, but actually it's quite ambivalent toward New England family life and that culture of repression and shame.

But Cukor got angry. He was a feisty guy, and he came out afterward and criticized the people who laughed at the film. He said they had "a bum's laugh." I love that expression. So I was fond of him as a person. I thought he was so insightful about human nature, which comes across in his films.

When I wrote this book, I thought, well, the way to do it is not the orthodox way of simply writing a film-by-film essay, which I'm tired of anyway. In my Billy Wilder book [*Billy Wilder: Dancing on the Edge*], I deviated from that and didn't go chronologically through his Hollywood directing career, I went thematically instead. So with Cukor, I thought why not write about his actors, provide portraits of his actors? I have about 65 essayistic portraits of not only stars but also character actors in his films. He saw himself as somebody who expressed himself through actors primarily, and he was rather self-effacing as a director.

But if you study his work, you can see his personal preoccupations and his style. He also had another quality that was unusual. He respected what he called the "text." He always made a big point of that. I'm a member of the Writers Guild of America, West, and around 1980, we gave Cukor an award for respecting writers, which I think is unique in the history of the Writers Guild.

Cukor never tried to say he was a writer, as many directors like to do. He never claimed credit for writing. But he worked intensively with the screenwriters and, if the script wasn't working, he'd demand new writers until he got what he wanted. He worked with some of the best screenwriters, Donald Ogden Stewart, Anita Loos, Zoë Akins, who was a playwright and screenwriter. And the team of Ruth Gordon and Garson Kanin.

I thought the best way to approach Cukor was to look at what he does with actors. It was an experiment in film criticism. I enjoyed writing the book, and I think that comes across.

DW: I realize this isn't a biography, but just for the sake of our readers, could you say a few words about Cukor's background and his early life?

JM: Yes, he was born in 1899, in New York City, he grew up on the Upper East Side, and he was the son of an assistant district attorney.

Spencer Tracy plays an assistant district attorney in New York in Cukor's *Adam's Rib* [1949]. Courtrooms are a form of theater. Cukor was a man of the theater. He was a son of Hungarian-Jewish immigrants. He was, as a young man, fascinated by the theater. And his parents were supportive of that. They didn't much mind that he would cut school and go to plays. He would be in the second balcony, like Jean Simmons in his film *The Actress* [1953], which has some wonderful close-ups of her watching a play from the cheap seats.

Cukor saw most of the finest actors and productions in that period, a great period in the American theater, the 1910s and '20s. He eventually became a theater director. In the '20s he ran a stock company in Rochester, New York, which was great training for him. Then he came to Broadway and directed a few Broadway plays. He was not a particularly successful Broadway director, but he directed a stage adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and he directed the great actress Laurette Taylor a couple of times. He admired her tremendously, and even wanted to make a biopic about her in his later life.

When sound came to Hollywood in the late 1920s, they were importing theater directors. Sometimes co-directors were assigned to silent movie directors, even to John Ford. Ford got stuck with a couple of theater directors as co-directors, and they were a drag on his films. But some of the great directors quickly adapted well from silents to sound, such as Lubitsch, Ford, Hawks, Capra. Their work was even better with the addition of sound. They understood how to do sound films, but the studios were wary of silent film directors—did they know how to help actors talk? So they brought in theater directors they called dialogue directors, and George Cukor was one of those.

He did two films as a dialogue director, and he didn't receive a credit, I don't know why exactly. The main directors may have felt that that took away some of their luster. He worked on a bad movie called *River of Romance* [1929], a Booth Tarkington play adaptation, a cheesy melodrama set in the South. He was supposed to help the actors with Southern accents, but he didn't know authentic Southern accents.

But then he worked on *All Quiet on the Western Front* [1930], the great antiwar movie Lewis Milestone directed for Universal, a big production, a classic. That film holds up well. A few flaws, but a stunning piece of work and a major success, the Oscar winner for best picture. The recent German version [2022] is pretty good. Erich Maria Remarque wrote the novel in German, of course, and it's fitting to hear the actors speaking that language. But in today's cinema, they stress action more than dialogue. So the characters don't have the chance to talk in the most recent version as much as they do in the Milestone version. The battle scenes in the new one are impressive, but you're frustrated, you want to know more about the characters. The young guy who plays the lead is pretty good, but you don't get to know him well.

In the Milestone film, Lew Ayres, who was only 20 at the time, gives a marvelous performance as the young man who is swept into the German army on a wave of jingoism but becomes disillusioned with the war. Cukor worked for six months with the young actors. He screen-tested these actors; he said he probably did more screen tests in his career than any other director. By doing so he came to know actors he later worked with in his films.

He also rehearsed the cast of *All Quiet* throughout the shoot, and he argued that Ayres be chosen for the lead. He was a relatively unknown actor. He had been in only three films, including as the young male lead opposite Garbo in her final silent film, *The Kiss*. He was marvelous in *All Quiet*, and Cukor helped Milestone direct him, although Milestone did a fine job with him too. But Cukor and Ayres didn't get along well. Cukor would talk a lot with actors. He was garrulous and voluble. He liked to fill the actors with thoughts about the scenes.

Before shooting a scene, he would tell them the plot up to that point. One of the problems a director faces in films is that they are often shot out

of sequence. The director is the person who has to keep the tone and continuity together in his or her head, Cukor was great at that. He kept the tone of his films beautifully and smoothly modulated. He was a master at changing from a serious tone to a comedic one, tragedy to laughter, etc.

He did that on *All Quiet*, talking a lot, and Ayres felt Cukor was giving him too many line readings and telling him too much about what to do. He was a young, rebellious guy, Cukor may have been overdoing it at that point, but the results turned out well. He directed Ayres again in *Holiday* [1938], in a wonderful performance as a wealthy young alcoholic. This time Cukor and Ayres got along. Ayres had become a star, but he was doing mostly B-movies at that point, and Cukor kind of rescued him. It's an indelible, moving and funny performance, funny and heartbreaking at the same time.

Cukor, because he did such a good job helping Milestone on *All Quiet*, got to direct films in 1930. But he suffered from co-directors in his first three films, and the films are clunky visually. It took him about three films to figure out how to use the camera. He admitted that he realized that film had to have a lot more movement of the camera, and the actors, in an organic fashion. Cukor's camera was much more mobile than people realize. But it's done in a subtle way.

One of the first films he directed is *The Royal Family of Broadway* [1930], based on a 1927 play by Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufman called *The Royal Family*. It's a spoof on the Barrymore clan, a witty play about an acting family. He made that film with a co-director [Cyril Gardner], and it's terrific work in many ways, although it looks like a sitcom because the cameras were still in booths, since the machinery was noisy before they invented blimps. And it was hard to move the cameras, and Cukor still didn't quite have the suppleness of visual style that he had later.

Very soon he started making films that were highly cinematic, not merely filmed plays.

DW: What do you think were some of his most pressing themes and concerns from these earliest days?

JM: Life as theater is one. Many of his characters throughout his career are in show business, or actors or singers, or lawyers or other kinds of people on the public stage. And he was ahead of his time in understanding issues that we now talk about a lot, such as the idea that gender is a construct, that people are taught how to act in a masculine or feminine manner by their culture, and how that changes over time. Gender is performative. What does it mean to be masculine? What does it mean to be feminine?

Cukor felt that those aspects of human nature are fluid and they blur. Gender fluidity was not a term they used back then, but it's present in his films, especially *Sylvia Scarlett* [1935], an amazing film I recommend to anybody who hasn't seen it. It's sheer delight, a highly poetic film. Katharine Hepburn plays a boy throughout most of it. Her father [Edmund Gwenn] is a criminal, and they escape from France to England. It's a blend of comedy and drama, Shakespearean in that sense, because Shakespeare also played around with gender roles, and Hepburn later did *As You Like It* onstage. *Sylvia Scarlett* has an *As You Like It* quality.

Hepburn's quite a handsome boy in *Sylvia Scarlett*, and when she's a boy, both men and women are hitting on her, and she's not quite sure who she is. Hepburn, during the shooting, wrote in her diary, "This picture makes no sense at all, and I wonder whether George Cukor is aware of the fact, because I certainly don't know what the hell I'm doing." But the behavior comes across beautifully, controlled by the director. When she decides to be a girl again, she's very pretty as a girl. I think Hepburn's as good-looking in that film as she ever was.

What's especially charming is that when she's a girl, she's quite awkward. She doesn't know how to perform being a girl. And that's full of wit and humor. A bohemian artist, played by the English actor Brian Aherne, a handsome guy, develops a crush on her when she's a boy.

When he sees her as a girl, he says, “I know what it is that gives me a queer feeling when I look at you.” The film’s quite open about its gender-fluid sensibility.

Sylvia Scarlett was brutally rejected by critics and reviewers. Audiences didn’t know what to make of the film. It was considered a notorious flop. This is when Hepburn started being labeled “box office poison.” There was an exhibitor who put out an ad listing various stars as box office poison, including Hepburn, Marlene Dietrich, Kay Francis and others.

So Hepburn had to reinvent her persona. She made 10 films for Cukor, who directed her first film, *A Bill of Divorcement* [1932]. She was unlike anyone who had been seen in movies before. She was this odd-looking, androgynous person, who spoke in a peculiar, distinctive way. She had angular features. And Cukor took a chance with her.

Another of Cukor’s preoccupations is the Pygmalion-Galatea theme. Pygmalion is a rather ambivalent character in mythology, and in Cukor films the mentor [Pygmalion] figure is mostly positive. But in *My Fair Lady* [1964], for example, which is based on *Pygmalion*, the 1913 George Bernard Shaw play, Henry Higgins is a misogynist and he’s quite tyrannical.

Nevertheless, when Cukor directs Rex Harrison, who played the Higgins role onstage for a long time, he makes him more human and more likable. In the screenplay by Alan Jay Lerner, who wrote the book and lyrics for *My Fair Lady*, Lerner observes that Higgins, despite all his bad behavior, remains likeable because he has a sense of humor. That’s true of many Cukor characters. He said, “I choose my actors well and get to know the quirks of their personalities—and, most of all, I share humor with them. That’s how to effect the best collaborations.”

Cukor explores the complexity of personality. Identity is a major theme of his. That relates, I think, at a deep level, to the complexities of his life and background. He’s the son of immigrants, and immigrants have to masquerade. When you’re an immigrant, you have to adapt to a new society, a new language. You have new clothes, you have new styles, new mores, a new government to deal with, etc., etc., and you learn to play a role, whether you like it or not.

Some people play it more successfully than others. Assimilation is a very complicated and fraught process. Cukor deals with that in many different ways, metaphorically and otherwise. Also being Jewish, in that era, even though Hollywood was welcoming to Jewish filmmakers, you were still an outsider in American society.

And being gay. He preferred the word “queer,” he told the *Advocate*, the gay publication, in an interview in 1982. Toward the end of his life this was the closest he came to coming out. He didn’t quite say I am queer, but he talked about the subject openly and was candid about his feelings and orientation.

He had to be discreet during his career, and “discreet” was a word he used a great deal in regard to both his life and his films. He didn’t approve of flamboyant, in-your-face gay behavior. Cukor felt that James Whale, the great British director who came to Hollywood [*Frankenstein*, 1931; *Bride of Frankenstein*, 1935], pushed it too far. You had to be subtle about it, in Cukor’s opinion. Hollywood was accepting of gay people, but they weren’t particularly accepting of Whale. I think because he had a male companion, a producer, he went around with, and it was quite obvious. Cukor would go to premieres with women, for example, with female stars. They all knew he was gay and they mostly didn’t mind. He was friendly with so many Hollywood people.

But being queer did cause him problems occasionally. With *Gone With the Wind* [1939], for instance. Pat McGilligan, in *George Cukor: A Double Life: A Biography of the Gentleman Director*, a title borrowed from the Cukor film *A Double Life* [1947], reports an ugly homophobic incident. During the making of *Gone With the Wind*, Clark Gable reportedly said, “I can’t go on with this picture! I won’t be directed by a fairy! I have to work with a *real man*!”

That was hurtful to Cukor, but publicly Cukor claimed that Gable was polite to him, and so there was this tension.

One of the myths about Cukor is that he was a “woman’s director.” That was an albatross around his neck. He would get more and more irritated as he grew older about that label, because he directed so many men in great performances, from John Barrymore to Cary Grant to Spencer Tracy, Rex Harrison, James Mason in *A Star Is Born*.

Victor Fleming, who replaced Cukor on *Gone With the Wind*, said, “It’s bullshit that he’s just a woman’s director. He’s not. He can direct anybody.”

But he was great with women, too. One simple reason was that the actresses knew he wouldn’t hit on them, as a lot of those macho directors would do. He was friendly, and they felt comfortable and relaxed.

DW: You have that impression in the performances he gets. I watched *Camille* the other night, and Garbo has that relaxed, almost casual and informal quality in her acting.

JM: I think good film acting is almost like catching people unawares, when they don’t even realize they’re acting.

There’s a great story that Jack Lemmon told. He made his film debut in *It Should Happen to You* [1954], a Cukor film with Judy Holliday. Lemmon had been in many plays and television shows. He was acting “large,” playing to the balcony.

Cukor kept trying to tone him down, and he kept saying, “Less, less, do less.” And Lemmon, who was a very amiable fellow, responded, uncharacteristically, when Cukor said at one point, “Oh, that was it, that’s perfect, that’s wonderful, but I’d like to do one more, and, Jack—” Lemmon said with some testiness, “Are you going to say *less*?” And Cukor said, “Yes, yeah, just a little less.” Lemmon replied, “Are you trying to tell me *not to act at all*?” And Cukor said, “Oh, yes, *God, yes, yes!*” Lemmon said it was the best lesson he ever received in the film business and made his whole career possible.

Cukor said, “In films, it’s what you *are* rather than what you *act*.” A revealing comment. His films are known for marvelous technique, but I cite the comment of Jean Renoir, “Technique, that’s a terrible word in art! You have to have it, but so completely that you know how to disguise it.”

Cukor had great long takes in his films, two, three or five minutes, even an eight-minute take in *Love Among the Ruins* [1975], with Hepburn and Laurence Olivier. I asked him about that, and he said, “It depends on if the actor has the capability of doing it. ... Olivier and Kate Hepburn can do long, sustained scenes and do them perfectly naturally. It’s not only that the scenes are long, but you make them more real, more truthful, less *acted*. Good film acting is often quiet and restrained.

I quote an instructive comment from John Ford. He was asked how to watch a movie and he said, “Look at the eyes. The secret is people’s faces, their eye expression, their movements.” He told an actress named Priscilla Bonner, whom I interviewed, a smart lady who was in Ford’s silent *3 Bad Men* [1926], “The camera photographs your innermost thoughts and picks them up. If you concentrate, the camera can look into your innermost feelings.” Cukor felt that too. That’s why, I think, you reacted to Garbo that way. She seems casual, but there’s a lot going on in her expressive face. She is the most subtle facial actor in film history.

To be continued



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