

**All About Eve-1950:** When art imitates life, where does reality end?

Maybe, stretching a point, this movie could have been called ‘All About Actors’?

There’ve been a number of films that explore the passion for success on the stage: Stage Door (1937) and A Star Is Born (first made in 1937 and made several times thereafter) being two of the most notable. And, other films have also taken an introspective look at the machinations of the acting profession – Sunset Boulevard (1950), The Player (1992), even the goofy, but entertaining, Get Shorty (1995) and, most recently, David Lynch’s nightmare, Mulholland Drive (2001).

This one, however, is the definitive voyeuristic analysis of why actors will do anything to get to the top, for three reasons. First, it has a script that is flawless in its construction, logic and plot development; to use a hackneyed phrase – it all hangs together seamlessly, showing and telling – with three different voice-overs – the depths to which some go to reach the heights of narcissistic glory.

Second, such a film required a strong hand to keep the actors in check, to prevent it from descending into farce, and that’s why Joe Mankiewicz was needed; well, it was his script, anyway – so who better to direct, with his fine record of films?

And, third, the main protagonists: never before, I think, has a script followed so closely the juxtaposition of a true star (Bette Davis) in her waning years, playing an actress in her waning years, and being challenged by a relative newcomer (Anne Baxter), playing a newcomer challenging the aging star. Such delicious irony, I think, is rare to see on screen. Add to that, a collection of actors (George Sanders, Gary Merrill, Hugh Marlowe, Celeste Holm, the irrepressible Thelma Ritter) of the time who ably and professionally flesh out a drama about the reality of life in fiction.

Perhaps even more interesting than the actual film would have been a documentary filming the action on the sets, as the film was made... One can only dream, I guess, to have been a fly on the wall.

A word about the dialog: checking the above link for Quotes, I see that all of the lines I rate as some of the best I’ve heard, all show up in the list – which is, also, one of the longest list of quotable film quotes I’ve seen. If you’re hesitating about seeing this film, just scan through those quotes to get a sense of what is in store.

As implied, the direction from Mankiewicz and the acting – particularly Davis, Baxter and Sanders – are riveting. Bette Davis is the personification of diminishing self-confidence as the onset of age dominates and depresses; Baxter is almost sociopathic in her portrayal of naked ambition disguised as sycophantic concern for one and all, but particularly for those who will advance her ambitions; and George Sanders does give the performance of his career and deservedly received the award for Best Supporting Actor.

Other actors (Dick Powell or Claude Rains, for example) could have played that role, for sure; Sanders, however, does such a good job, it's a though the character of Addison DeWitt (what a play on word sound – Addison, the wit and critic, given a name that sounds like a New Yorker's disparaging putdown. Was Mankiewicz having a bit of fun at New York's expense?) morphs into George Sanders completely; and, vice-versa....

So, treat yourself to a filmic experience that you'll never see repeated – for obvious and sad reasons. But also, this type of narrative is long gone from the Hollywood scene: talky movies are box-office death these days, as we all know – unless you're in a Phone Booth (2002) or on a Cellular (2004).

One can only hope that nobody attempts a remake of this masterpiece. Highest recommendation...

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Rating: 9/10

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