

Review #18 : *The Lady Eve* (1941)

Henry Fonda and Barbara Stanwyck

TRAILER

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZeVAJre7PWU>

If I were asked to name the single scene in all of romantic comedy that was sexiest and funniest at the same time, I would advise beginning at six seconds past the 20 minute mark in **Preston Sturges'** *The Lady Eve*, as Barbara Stanwyck teases and flirts with Henry Fonda, almost paralyzed with shyness and self-consciousness. And at some point during this process, she falls for him. But that isn't part of her plan...

Here is the storyline. Stanwyck plays Jean Harrington, a con woman who travels first class with her father and their valet, fleecing rich travellers in card games.



Jean sets her sights on Charles Pike – played by Henry Fonda –, heir to a brewery fortune, as he comes aboard after a snake-hunting expedition in South America. What is delightful about Stanwyck's performance is how she has it both ways. She is a crook, and yet can be

trusted. A seductress, and yet a pushover for romance. A gold digger, and yet she wants nothing from him. And he is a naive innocent who knows only that her perfume smells mighty good to someone who has been up the Amazon for a year. She falls for him so quickly and so thoroughly that she's even tempted to be frank with him.

Henry Fonda remains vulnerable and sincere throughout the picture because, like all young men who are truly and badly in love, his consciousness is focused on one thing: the void in his heart that only she can fill. That frees Stanwyck for one of her greatest performances, a flight of romance and comedy so graceful and effortless that she is somehow able to play different notes at the same time. The movie establishes Jean Harrington in an inspired early scene, as she joins her father, a phony colonel, in the ship's lounge. Using the mirror in her compact, she spies on Charlie Pike as he sits alone and reads a book. Sturges cuts to the view reflected in the mirror, and Jean provides a tart voice-over narration for her father, describing the attempts of every woman in the room to catch the handsome bachelor's eye. Then, as Charlie leaves the room, she simply sticks out a foot and trips him; as he picks himself up she blames him for breaking off the heel of her shoe.



The plot then unfolds with much wit and invention, except that after Charlie meets Jean and loses her, he wins what he only thinks is another girl. Jean, hurt by the way he has not trusted her, gets herself invited to a dinner at his father's palatial mansion by posing as Lady Eve Sidwich. Charlie is struck by how much Eve resembles Jean. *'It's the same dame!'* says his faithful valet Muggsy. But Charlie can't believe it, and follows her moon-eyed through a series of pratfalls. Sturges says in his memoirs that the studios were always trying to get him to limit his pratfalls, and at the sneak previews he crossed his fingers as Demarest fell into the bushes and Fonda tripped over a couch and a curtain before getting a roast beef in his lap. But they all worked +++

Although the movie would be inconceivable without Henry Fonda, *The Lady Eve* is all Stanwyck's. The love, the hurt and the anger of her character provide the motivation for nearly every scene, and what is surprising is how much genuine feeling she finds in the comedy. Watch her eyes as she regards Fonda, in all of their quiet scenes together, and you will see a woman who is amused by a man's boyish shyness and yet aroused by his physical presence. At first she loves the game of seduction, and you can sense her enjoyment of her own powers. Then she is somehow caught up in her own seduction. There has rarely been a woman in a movie who more convincingly desired a man.

Her father is played by Charles Coburn – sort of a toned-down Charles Laughton. Their relationship is established in a quiet scene the morning after Jean first meets Charlie. She is in her stateroom, still in bed. Her father enters in dressing gown, sits on her bed, and plays with a deck of cards while questioning her. At this point we have a good notion, but no hard evidence, that he is a fraud. The scene establishes him as a shark, makes it clear they're confederates, and underlines, by the way she calls him Harry, that they're two adults and not locked into a narrow daddy-daughter relationship.

Preston Sturges does a kind of breathless balancing act here, involving romance, deception, comedy and even masquerade. Sturges indeed did an intelligently witty script both perfect in timing and in emotional harmony with its simple plot, yet so profoundly rich in effect. If this was the archetype of the Rom-Com, then I regret to say that Hollywood is in STONE AGE today compared to the 40s ! In movies today you usually breed contempt for even likable characters...