

Review #50 : *Vacation from Marriage* (1945)

Robert Donat and Deborah Kerr

TRAILER

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5qpwZhhXqg>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=462sMdsbGXI>

Alexander Korda's *Perfect Strangers* features Robert Donat, opposite three ambitious English actresses : Deborah Kerr, (age 23) Ann Todd (36) and Glynis Johns (21). The story hangs on the very real situation of married couples being separated by the war, a very deep and tough subject although the American release MGM gave it a title that sounds more like a screwball comedy, *Vacation from Marriage*. Just the same, the show earned an Oscar for its original story by Clemence Dane.



SYNOPSIS



The opening scene shows us two **emotionally numb people** living a life of astonishing dullness, as each day proceeds according to an **unvarying routine** : conventional married couple Robert and Catherine Wilson (**Robert Donat** and **Deborah Kerr**) mope along through life until Robert is called up for Navy service.

The **separation changes the Wilsons' lives completely**. Robert loses his moustache, makes friends, and eventually becomes an efficient Petty Officer with a more assertive attitude. Against her Robert's wishes, Catherine joins the Wrens (WRNS, Women's Royal Naval Service) and goes into civil defence. As their brief furloughs never coincide, husband and wife can only communicate through letters. Both Robert and Cathy also experience a brush with romance that awakens in them an emotional passion that was completely lacking in the repressed, lifeless couple we were first introduced to.

Robert's ship is sunk in the Mediterranean, and as he spends time in a military hospital in Tunis with burned hands, he has a flirtation with a beautiful nurse, Elena (Ann Todd), who listens to his self-pitying talk about his pre-war life.

Catherine is part of a crew that carries messages for the Navy. She makes fast friends with Dizzy Clayton (**Glynis Johns**), a practical Wren whose fiancé is unaccounted for in the Far East. Catherine also takes greater pride in her appearance, uses lipstick and cigarettes (which her husband always forbade in the past) and **develops a stronger self-identity and self-confidence**. Dizzy's cousin, handsome naval engineer Richard (Roland Culver), who has definitely none of the **timidity and limpness** of Robert, spends time with her and even asks her to leave her husband for him.

By the time the Wilsons finally get a chance to see each other, **three years** have passed. Each assumes that the other has remained the same, while they have **become a different person**.

When Robert and Cathy finally come face to face, each has **undergone such a radical psychological and physical transformation** that they literally don't recognize each other. The '*helpless kitten*' Robert saw in Cathy, and the '*clockwork mouse*' Cathy saw in Robert, no longer exist. Now that each is confronted with a radically altered spouse, *will these strangers learn to accept the changes in each other, or will their newfound strength of will lead to incompatibility and divorce ?*



REVIEW

If it weren't for the **acting and directing talent** involved, *Vacation from Marriage* might be little more than a schematic story concocted to address a social problem. The drastic **changes in living exacted by the war** broke up many, many marriages. The pre-war Wilsons are purposely drawn as losers. He mumbles and remains passive about everything, while she wanders around her flat in a dowdy dress, singing to herself the catchy romance tune *These Foolish Things*. War service shows them **blossoming as personalities**. Forced into positions of **responsibility and interacting with a variety of people energizes them** mentally and physically : *War has made them better people*. Korda's sensitive direction makes the film seem intimate and **important yet funny**. The big reunion takes up the final third of the picture, and makes for some very good scenes. Dizzy can't believe that dashing Naval Officer Robert is the loser that Catherine has been describing for so long, and Robert's friend feels the same way about Catherine. *Will Catherine and Robert wake up and appreciate each other ?*

The art direction is very good, with painted backdrops sketching in a bombed London, its skies dotted with barrage balloons. That extended final scene is quite satisfying, so much so that we wish that the script were more skillful with the opening. Robert and Catherine are initially a bit too much like lost souls. They of course will **spring to life again**.

The movie's most **clever concept** is a detail about a **wall that blocked the view** from the Wilsons' window, making their apartment a depressing place. When Catherine opens the blackout curtains at the end, they discover that the neighbouring building is gone, knocked down by German bombs. They suddenly have a grand new view of the future...

Deborah Kerr is delightful, Glynis Johns is both wild and charming as Cathy's best friend, role model and mentor, encouraging her to break out of her meek, drab pre-war personality, and Ann Todd brings a **gentleness and wistful sadness** to the small part of the war widow – although Todd has always seemed too cold for me. Future 007 Roger Moore is said to have been in this picture – as his first appearance. Well, I didn't spot him !

It's undeniable that *Vacation from Marriage* has something special due to its wonderful stars, Robert Donat and Deborah Kerr. In playing Robert and Cathy, each must portray a person who **undergoes a metamorphosis**, someone who emerges transformed by varied experiences into someone essentially different from the person they started out as. This kind of acting must be extraordinarily difficult to do yet they both totally succeed in making it wholly convincing.

Technical skill aside, both Donat and Kerr, as always, have **screen charisma to spare**. Donat, who was nearly 40 years old when the film was made, was more than fifteen years older than Kerr, but that actually works to the film's advantage. In the early scenes he looks prematurely middle-aged, which suits his stolid character perfectly. In later scenes he looks, and acts, positively rejuvenated. Kerr, in the early scenes playing without makeup and in frumpy outfits, seems almost like a plain schoolgirl. After her transformation she seems to have matured and ripened, with an unmistakable femininity and a newly independent, assertive personality that makes it plain she won't be willing to go back to being the obedient '*little woman*' Robert is accustomed to.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Vacation from Marriage focuses on the battle of the sexes between Robert with his conservative view of a woman's place and Cathy with her war-liberated feminist outlook. To watch these two consummate performers act out the conflict that this charming film has so **cleverly and entertainingly** set up is nothing short of pure pleasure...