

# Review #83 : *Vivacious Lady* (1938)

James Stewart and Ginger Rogers

## TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IG4IRC8MgiA>

**Ginger Rogers** requested and received the perfect man for the job when she was paired with Jimmy for this riotous romance between a sizzling nightclub singer and a shy botany professor.



## SYNOPSIS

Sent into town to retrieve an errant sibling (**James Ellison**), Prof. Peter Morgan (**James Stewart**) meets and marries show-stopping chanteuse Francey (**Ginger Rogers**) over the course of a single evening. But the stars start crossing against the newlyweds when they travel to Morgan's moss-backed college town to break the news to Morgan's Mater and Pater

(**Beulah Bondi** and **Charles Coburn**) and two soon finds themselves conducting a marriage *incognito style*. With Francey stuck posing as his brother's girl, a fiancée (**Frances Mercer**) left behind, a prim and proper college dean father and a mother with a heart condition arrayed against them, their marriage might be sunk before they can even announce it ! Director **George Steven**'s first outing as a producer is a delight !

## REVIEW

### 1) **Ginger**

The real star of this film is **Ginger Rogers**. I believe this is the last time James Stewart took second billing, though I may be wrong about that. Ginger, however, really deserved top billing. She dazzles with her singing to start the proceedings, but even more so when she dukes it out with her rival for her beau's affections toward the end of film. Make no mistake, this showcases her talents and appears tailor-made for her. She well deserved the Academy Award she won a few years later for *Kitty Foyle*.

**Some scenes just have to be seen to be appreciated**, describing them doesn't do them justice. A brawl between Rogers and Mercer starts with awesome catty dialog : *'I might just give you a piece of my mind.'* *'Oh, no, I wouldn't take the last piece.'* and continues with Rogers shushing Mercer every time she smacks her, and winds up with Rogers finally losing patience and telling Mercer to *'Put 'em up.'* After a hilarious brewing, the cat fight !

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-2r3zzZYgA>

Astaire was the better dancer, and not just by a little bit. He would do solo dances and excelled at them, whereas she almost never did... and wasn't even close. But Ginger was better at just about everything else : singing, acting,. and fighting !

I bring that up because Ginger does have a ridiculous dance here : *'The Big Apple.'* It is done for laughs of course, and **Charles Coburn** walks in on it and drops his monocle not once, but twice ! It indeed is a coy and embarrassing moment, with a humorous outcome of sorts, but it is nothing like a Fred and Ginger dance. It is more of an **extension of acting**. Comic dancing.

## 2 – Jimmy

James Stewart is a **timid college professor** who somehow finds and woos vivacious nightclub singer Ginger Rogers, marrying her out from under the nose of his predatory cousin, played by play-boy **James Ellison**. Returning to Stewart's small hometown with Ellison, they face the formidable task of easing the news to **Stewart's conservative father, fainting mother and Stewart's thuggish fiancé (Frances Mercer)**. Steeped in as much sexual tension as the Hays Code would allow – Ginger and Jimmy strive to consummate their marriage, but are constantly interrupted – this is a light screwball romantic comedy well worth watching !

## 3 – A women's flick

The real stars of this film are the women, and no doubt this was characterized disparagingly as a 'women's picture' at the time. It also requires a certain **suspension of disbelief**, such as seeing the radiant Rogers fall for the bumbling Stewart, Stewart being so spineless as to be unable to tell his parents and fiancé he's married, and so forth. However, there are so many **great comedy bits and full-blown comic set pieces** that it's impossible not to love this if you are any kind of fan of classic screwball comedies.

**Hattie McDaniel** is even around with her usual bubbly charm. There is a wonderful scene on the train back to New York, when Rogers and Bondi are in adjoining compartments crying their eyes out, and she has a meaty role to bring the couples back together. **It's the supporting roles like this that make this such a wonderful film.** There are also many corny 30s touches that fans will appreciate, such as, after all the men have done wolf whistles at Rogers, an owl does the same, and a recurring bit with Murphy beds falling at inopportune (and ultimately opportune) moments.

The whole film ultimately revolves around Stewart working up the courage to **finally stand up to his old man**, which he does in a wonderful drunk scene with Ellison and Coburn. I didn't like this *cliché* representation of the dysfunctional family with an overly authoritative *pater familias*, a sickly absent mother, and the duality of the good son and the dissolute play-boy. But Rogers is the reason to watch – she really startled me with how lovely and earthly she looks and acts ! Any fan of old films needs to see this forgotten gem more than once ! ++

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5DI311\\_es0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5DI311_es0)