

Review #87 : *The Palm Beach Story* (1942)

Claudette Colbert and Joel Mc Crea

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IovYPrzT8Vk>



SYNOPSIS

Tom and Gerry Jeffers (**Joel McCrea** and **Claudette Colbert**), a married couple in New York City, are **down on their luck financially**, which is pushing the marriage to an end. But there is another, deeper problem with their relationship, one that is hinted at in the prologue of the movie as the opening credits roll and then explained near the movie's end. In the prologue Claudette Colbert appears bound and gagged in a closet, but then a second later in a wedding dress, seen by a maid who faints at every disturbance. The movie reveals much later that

Claudette Colbert is playing **identical twins, both of whom are in love with the intended groom** played by Joel McCrea. The sister of the bride has just tied her up in an attempt to steal the wedding for herself. The pantomime is cross-cut with action showing McCrea hurriedly changing from one formal suit to another in the car as he rushes to church. Joel McCrea also is playing twins and the sibling is likewise in love with the tied up sister. He too is trying to steal the wedding. The end result is that the two siblings, not the original bride or groom, are married, and those two were not in love with each other.

The two remain married from 1937 until 1942 where the film resumes. Gerry decides that Tom would be **better off if they split up**. She packs her bags, takes some money offered to her by the Wienie King (**Robert Dudley**), a strange but rich little man who is thinking of renting the Jeffers' apartment, and boards a train for **Palm Beach, Florida**. There she plans to get a divorce and meet a wealthy second husband. On the train, she meets the eccentric John D. Hackensacker III (**Rudy Vallée**), one of the richest men in the world.



Because of an encounter with the wild and drunken millionaire members of the *Ale and Quail* hunting club, **Gerry loses all her luggage** ; after making do with clothing scrounged from other passengers, she is forced to accept Hackensacker's extravagant charity. They leave the train and go on a shopping spree for everything from lingerie to jewellery – Hackensacker minutely noting the cost of everything in a little notebook – and make the remainder of the trip to Palm Beach on Hackensacker's yacht named *The Erl King*.

Tom follows Gerry to Palm Beach. When Tom meets Hackensacker, Gerry introduces him as her brother, Captain McGlue. Soon, Hackensacker falls for Gerry, while his often-married, man-hungry sister, Princess Centimillia (**Mary Astor**), chases Tom, although her last lover, Toto (**Sig Arno**), is still following her around...

REVIEW

The Palm Beach Story is one of the best screwball comedies ever made by **Preston Sturges**. **The type that appeals to adult sensibilities.** Like most screwball comedies it's a story of two **slightly mismatched lovers**, here caught in the fourth year of their marriage, with one comic shock and delight after another, and hilarious performances by a pitch-perfect cast.

Underrated **Joel McCrea** simmers and stews with virile magnetism and ace comic timing as big, strong, handsome and hunky **Tom Jeffers**, an inventor and builder who is actually having difficulties making a go of it. His wife, Gerry, is beautiful and pragmatic but can't cook or sew and by now feels she's become a bit of a 'milestone' to her husband. Sparkling **Claudette Colbert** plays both sides of her calculating and refreshingly cool-headed personality with great talent.

Throw in stellar supporting turns from **Mary Astor**, perfect as a chatterbox heiress, and **Rude Vallee**, a revelation as the pernicky Snooty (whose rendition of 'Goodnight, Sweetheart' sparks the film's finale), the *usual suspects wrecking a train* as the hilarious *Ale and Quail* Club, and the unforgettable **Wienie King**, my nominee for most endearing supporting performance in any classic movie, *and you have a winner !* I burst out laughing with his scenes as the rich deaf hitting on Claudette. And the drunken Gun Club scene on the train isn't bad either. Watch this movie a zillion times, and you will still find it **highly amusing, entertaining and just perfectly crafted**. It is quite amazing that the standards this film shows are hardly ever – if at all – found in productions these days.

This overlooked gem is packed with rapid fire dialogue, double entendres and just plain lunacy. It has **priceless entanglements, fused satire**, it's alternately funny (with some breezy comic seriousness too) and romantic. Look at the scene when Tom is trying to unzip the back of Jerry's dress for her as it is stuck, and it ends as one of the most innocent yet swooniest love scenes it has ever been my pleasure to witness. Or listen to Claudette Colbert talking about **the power of a woman to divert a man**, it's all too sweet and surreal...

The Palm Beach Story must have been very adult for the time – because however twisted this wonderful madcap may be, it still **tickles in the right places**. Colbert's costumes are stunning and she is just one of my favourite actresses. This DVD is a real bargain. Spring for it ! +++

'Chivalry is not only dead, it's decomposed.'

