

## Barbara Stanwyck movies:

a treasure trove

Barbara Stanwyck movies are all over 50 years old. In the recent retrospective of her films at the BFI Southbank season, half were over 80 years old. Yet what stands out from this body of work is how modern the films are, not in their plots or settings but in the characters she played and how she played them.

Stanwyck was never meek, decorative, or incidental to the plot. Whether a young woman sleeping her way to the top in *Baby Face* (in 1933, before the Hays code), a preacher in Capra's *The Miracle Woman*, or an eroticised missionary's wife in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, she chose a range of parts in which strong-minded women made a difference to how the story turned out. In her 82 films she had top billing in all but three.

She held out against the studio system in which stars on long-term contracts could be told what to do and was unusual in working for several studios, often in quick succession. She was prepared not to work if the right script did not appear. That she was able to do this is perhaps explained by the average gross income of a Stanwyck film — \$87 million. She became rich and in 1944, having made 10 films in 4 years, was the highest-earning woman in America.

Born Ruby Stevens of Scots-Irish descent in Brooklyn, New York, in 1907, she was orphaned at 4, when her mother died and her father deserted his four daughters. Brought up with relatives and in foster homes, she learned to be resilient, making her name as a dancer and then an actress in Broadway shows. With her first husband Frank Fay, a greater Broadway star, she moved to Hollywood, both trying for movie

careers. When hers eclipsed his, he fell into alcoholism and wife beating. Later, their story became the plot of a movie, *A Star is Born*.

Her co-stars were a roll call of stars on the rise including Clark Gable (*Night Nurse*), John Wayne (*Baby Face*), Kirk Douglas (*The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*), Burt Lancaster (*Sorry, Wrong Number*), Henry Fonda (*The Mad Miss Manton*), James Mason, Cyd Charisse, and Ava Gardner (*East Side, West Side*), Humphrey Bogart (*The Two Mrs. Carrrolls*), David Niven (*The Other Love*), Marilyn Monroe (*Clash by Night*), and even Elvis Presley (*Roustabout*). She had more regular partners in Gary Cooper (*Meet John Doe*, *Ball of Fire*), William Holden (*Golden Boy*, *Executive Suite*), Joel McCrea (*The Great Man's Lady*, *Banjo on my Knee*), and Fred MacMurray (*Remember the Night*, *There's Always Tomorrow*, *Double Indemnity*). All worth a watch.

She was Oscar-nominated four times as leading actress, losing out on each occasion, the studios backing their in-house stars. But she got an honorary Oscar aged 75 and then an AFI lifetime achievement award. Walter Matthau said in 1981:

*'She has played five gun molls, two burlesque queens, half a dozen adulteresses, and twice as many murderers. When she was good, she was very, very good. And when she was bad, she was terrific.'*

Phyllis Dietrichson, the cold-hearted femme fatale and murderess in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* was her most famous role, but she could also do comedy, as in *Christmas in Connecticut*, and especially in the Preston Sturges classic *The Lady Eve* (re-released in 2019) running rings round Henry Fonda, and with a closing line that the critic Roger Ebert judged equal to 'Nobody's perfect' in *Some Like it Hot*.

In her 40s and 50s she starred in Westerns, showing off her skill as a horsewoman and her willingness to do stunts, acquiring not only injuries in the process but also the admiration of stuntmen and honorary admission to their hall of fame. As film work



Barbara Stanwyck. Courtesy of the BFI.

dried up she moved to TV, winning three Emmys, including for *The Big Valley* (one of 19 TV Western series in 1950s and 1960s America but the only one starring a woman).

Stanwyck was self-effacing about her looks ('average nice-looking' she said). When her hair turned grey in her 40s she kept it that way. *The Lady Eve*, with 25 costume changes, was the first of 20 films in which she was dressed by Edith Head, the legendary eight-Oscar-winning costume designer. Stanwyck credited Head with changing her image and in gratitude hauled the designer off to her dentist to have her teeth fixed. It was the sort of thing Stanwyck did quietly with her wealth, often helping former colleagues in hard times.

From her first movie, a silent, in 1927, to *The Thorn Birds* on TV in 1982, she had a remarkably long career. A private person, she was happiest working and wanted no memorial or funeral. All she left when she died in 1990, aged 82, was a treasure trove of work, almost of all of which is still available on YouTube, TV movie channels, or Amazon's secondary marketplace, sometimes only in region 1 format (but compatible DVD players have never been cheaper), and often in foreign-language packaging, but always watchable in English without subtitles. Enjoy.

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***The Lady Eve*, 1941. A female con artist falls in love with her target in Preston Sturges's comedy, starring Barbara Stanwyck and Henry Fonda. Image courtesy of the BFI.**

