

The Actress

ART AND REALITY

By RICHARD LIPPE

George Cukor's *The Actress* (1953) is a consistently overlooked film. In part this reaction may stem from the fact that the work, in scale and subject matter, suggests a modest project. Additionally, *The Actress*, which is based on Ruth Gordon's autobiographical play, *Years Ago*, has been eclipsed by the critical successes of the four Ruth Gordon/Garson Kanin/George Cukor collaborations. The film, in fact, is treated often as the least significant of the various projects that involved Gordon and/or Kanin with Cukor. Yet, *The Actress*, in addition to embodying Cukor's thematic concerns, admirably illustrates again his ability to respond to a project with original and fresh approach.

The Actress belongs to the small town domestic comedy genre and, given that it is a period film, it is a piece of Americana in the tradition of Minnelli's classic *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Preminger's *Centennial Summer* and Sirk's *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* As is often the case with such films, the critical response is to perceive the work as frivolous, sentimental and nostalgic, with the filmmakers being seen as treating the past as a time of innocence and comfort for the contemporary viewer. In effect, the film(s) is regarded as politically conservative, reinforcing the dominant ideological values, but (as Andrew Britton argues in his piece on *Meet Me in St. Louis*¹) this isn't necessarily the case. In Britton's intelligent and persuasive reading, Minnelli's film provides a critique of the ideological values it purportedly celebrates. Similarly, Cukor's film also functions to undercut the ideological expectations of a generic construct that seems to exist primarily to reaffirm patriarchal/bourgeois/capitalist ideology.

There are, of course, significant differences between Minnelli's film and *The Actress*, not the least being that *Meet Me in St. Louis* is a Technicolor musical, privileging spectacle, excess and stylization. Also, it is centred on a teenage heroine, Esther Smith/Judy Garland, who aspires to nothing more ambitious than convincing herself and the boy-next-door that he is her ideal and, consequently, future husband. The Smiths' are fairly affluent, living in a huge, plushly furnished house. In contrast, *The Actress*, which is photographed in black and white, deals with the low income Jones family, who live in a house which, as Cukor's mise-en-scene stresses, is cramped, characterized by constricting spaces and affords no privacy. The film is also grounded in a realist aesthetic that reinforces the 'ordinary', day-to-day aspects of the characters' lives. Nevertheless, Ruth Jones/Jean Simmons, like Esther Smith, is not a totally unfamiliar figure of the small town-domestic comedy. Ruth, who is seventeen, imaginative but a bit naive, wants to be an actress. But, in addition to having no professional theatrical experience, she

must face the disapproval of her commonsensical father, Clinton/Spencer Tracy, a man of little formal education who barely supports his family, holding a low-paying, menial job. The most extravagant aspect of Ruth's life and image is her clothing that her mother sews. Ruth's clothes are inspired by the costumes she sees in theatre magazines and reflect her wish to be a part of that world of daring and glamour. *The Actress*, in foregrounding that the Joneses are an impoverished family, makes Ruth's desire to be an actress, which she thinks will make her rich and famous, both understandable and seemingly foolish.

Not only do *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *The Actress* take opposite visual approaches, the films differ in their respective handling of familiar conventions of the small town domestic comedy. In particular, I am thinking of the use of the patriarchal figure, the head of the family. In Minnelli's film, Mr. Smith conforms to the demands of the genre: he is associated with the business world and has little actual power within the household, which is controlled by his wife and children. Mr. Smith is impotent whenever he tries to assert himself on family matters, making him a comic figure for the viewer. Although Clinton Jones is sometimes an amusing figure and the film places him in several farcical situations in which he embarrasses himself, as when he loses his gym suit pants during a public callisthenics performance, the character cannot be read as an emasculated figure. Rather, he presents a genuine challenge to the daughter and her goals. Ruth, in wanting an actress, is breaking with the expectations her father has for her. Jones, insisting his daughter have a profession, thinks she should be a gymnastics teacher, and makes no attempt to find out what she really wants. As the film progresses, Ruth becomes increasingly involved in surreptitiously enacting a plan to go to New York City and try her hand at a career in the theatre and, ultimately, confronts her father on the issue. Ruth stands up to the patriarchal authority Jones embodies and, in doing so, gains his respect and help. In *The Actress*, the daughter's movement into adulthood is aligned to her gaining the freedom to determine her own identity and, with it, independence.

By making Jones a potent male figure, the film intriguingly pushes its thematic concerns into the area of the Western genre. Jones gained the authority he holds in the household through his past experience as a sailor. From his initial appearance in the narrative onward, Jones keeps reminding his family and whoever enters the house, including Ruth's teenage girlfriends, about his seafaring days and his masculine adventures. His proud possession connecting him to this past life is



a 'spyglass', a small but high quality telescope. The constant reference Jones makes to his youthful wanderings and experiences are visibly juxtaposed to his contemporary domestic existence, which is dominated by his inability to be more than a barely adequate family provider. While the film makes it clear that Jones, in actuality, values his role as a husband and father and loves his family, it also stresses his anger at having to admit to being a financial failure. Unfortunately for Ruth and her mother, Clinton's resentment and anger is often taken out in their presence, as he launches into a tirade over seemingly minor issues.

The settling vs. wandering tension Clinton expresses becomes significant to Ruth because she, like her father, wants freedom, adventure and the ability to experience the unknown. Several critics have faulted the film for not assuring the viewer that Ruth has talent (as the real-life Ruth Gordon Jones did), citing the scene in which she awkwardly performs for her parents. But, clearly, the film isn't about her talent to be an actress. It is, instead, concerned with Ruth's determination and need to define her self as she sees fit.

If Clinton is an unlikely husband-father figure for a small town domestic comedy, so is Ruth's mother, Annie Jones/Teresa Wright, who doesn't really fit the genre's image of the matri-

arch, presiding with commonsense and wisdom over her household. Not unlike her husband, Annie Jones may be a bit foolish and self-indulgent, but she doesn't come across as being flighty or incapable of connecting to the world around her. Rather, Mrs. Jones is an intelligent woman who attempts both to fulfil her function as a wife-mother and express herself as an individual and equal member of the family. Mrs. Jones may not succeed always in asserting herself, as occurs when she is ignored by Clinton and Ruth during an intense discussion between the two over Ruth's future, but her less than forceful manner doesn't relegate her to the role of a minor functionary in the family. It is indicated early on in the film that Mrs. Jones knows of Ruth's ambition to become an actress and is essentially her ally, although her attitude suggests that she questions the seriousness of Ruth's claim. Yet, later, it is Mrs. Jones who encourages Ruth to tell her father, when he begins to make plans to enrol Ruth in a physical culture school, she wants to be an actress. Clinton's willingness to take seriously Ruth's wishes is based partly on his awareness that his wife supports their daughter's decision.

Ruth Gordon and Cukor create characters that are individualized in their thinking and behaviour, making the Jones family members more human and bringing freshness to the material.

For example, early on in the film, in a long take, semi-comic scene, Clinton, in an attempt to help keep expenses down, reviews the grocery bill with his wife. As the scene develops, Clinton becomes increasingly irritated by her responses to his questions regarding the necessity of the purchase. Clinton, losing his patience, connects the project to the family's inability to afford any extras and, in a burst of anger, announces he is going out for a walk. Throughout the entire scene, Ruth is present, sitting at the table with her father, reading a newspaper; it is her way of rejecting what poverty is imposing on the family. A counterpoint of sorts to this scene occurs later in the film. Again, the scene is semi-comic and shot as a long take and is centred on the issue of money and spending. Clinton, under pressure because he thinks his job is in jeopardy and anxious about Ruth defying him regarding a theatre job interview, tells his wife, to shock and irritate her, about his spending thirty dollars many years ago on a Valentine's Day present for a woman in France. Clinton withholds the information that the present was nothing more than a 'thank you' gesture, given to a woman running a boarding house, until he has finished toying with Mrs. Jones' poorly disguised inquisitiveness about the situation. Ultimately, Clinton, in an attempt to get the money he needs to help Ruth financially, winds up quitting his job because of a fight with his employer over bonus pay. The result is that Clinton, not wanting to disappoint Ruth, offers to sell his spyglass to get the money he promised her. In a curious way, the experience of losing his job liberates Clinton; it allows him to let go of what he had valued most because it represented his independence, and acknowledge fully his love for and respect of his daughter.

Ruth, too, can be self-absorbed and single-minded. For example, although the young Fred Whitmarsh/Anthony Perkins is serious about Ruth, she doesn't share his vision of their future life together. In the film's most humorous sequence, which derives its humour from the lack of privacy in the Jones house, Fred, paying Ruth a late evening visit, attempts to court her in the parlour as the Joneses, upstairs, are heard getting ready for bed. Near the conclusion of the sequence, Fred invites Ruth to Harvard Class Day. Ruth, who is genuinely surprised and thrilled by the invitation, accepts but, as soon as Fred leaves, she gets out her letter from Hazel Dawn and begins to sing the words to 'The Pink Lady Waltz', the song that encapsulates her love affair with the stage. Ruth is flattered by Fred's attention but, later, she doesn't hesitate in turning down his proposal which is made just as she is about to keep an appointment with John Craig, Hazel Dawn's director. In their final encounter, which takes place on the front porch of the Jones house, Ruth maintains her resolve that she must go to New York City immediately to pursue her theatrical career. While there is the suggestion that their parting is tentative, Ruth, after Fred leaves, enters the house and her face in a close shot reveals a sombreness that belies the girlish, slightly theatrical presence she conveys when with Fred. It is a reflective, intimate and private moment that provides the viewer with an aspect of Ruth not previously seen. In *The Actress*, Cukor tends to avoid making Ruth a strong viewer-identification figure; instead, he presents her and the film's other characters in a more objective light, undercutting the more sentimental aspects of the material.

Meet Me in St. Louis follows its credit sequence with a sepia still photograph of the Smiths' house that is transformed into a Technicolor motion picture image. *The Actress* has its credits imposed over a photo album that, at the credits' conclusion, is

opened. The photographs introduce not only the period and setting but also the film's principal characters, including Punk, the family cat, who persists in nibbling at Mrs. Jones' Boston fern despite being repeatedly told not to. (Punk, like the other family members, is strong-willed.) As the captions under the photographs indicate, the album is Ruth's but Cukor doesn't have her provide voice-over narration, a convention that would help establish viewer-identification. In *Actress*, it isn't a photograph of the Jones' house that is used to initiate narrative action; instead, it is a photograph of the Colonial Theatre which has been captioned "Where it all began!". As the camera tracks towards the photograph, the image itself, which features the theatre marquee announcing 'Hazel Dawn, The Pink Lady', moves forward as a dissolve occurs introducing a long shot of Hazel Dawn/Kay Williams on stage performing a number. After a second long-shot of Hazel Dawn from a different perspective, there is a cut to a shot of the main floor audience and the camera then cranes up until it reaches the balcony area. Another cut and Ruth is seen, sitting amongst a crowd of enchanted viewers, intently watching the stage. Cukor cuts back to a long-shot of Hazel Dawn on stage but now as seen from the balcony. There next follows a series of cuts between Ruth and Hazel Dawn; the cuts back to Ruth featuring increasingly closer shots of her face, culminating in an extreme close-up as she mouths the words of 'The Pink Lady Waltz'. This image then dissolves to a close shot of Ruth humming the waltz to herself as she models a dress her mother (as the camera reveals as it tracks back) is presently sewing for her. *The Actress's* introductory sequence is remarkably elaborate and its intimacy and emotional intensity isn't matched at any point later in the film. It is the film's most privileged moment and its function is, in effect, to define Ruth. Cukor shoots it in the manner of a love scene that is what it is for Ruth, who gives herself completely to the seductive power of the stage and performance. Again, Cukor's strategies in introducing Ruth work against the stereotyping of the character and the viewer's expectations regarding what is about to be seen and experienced.

According to Emanuel Levy², MGM wanted Debbie Reynolds to play the part of Ruth and Cukor seriously considered the casting before deciding against it. Arguably, Reynolds would have been an unfortunate choice; her 1950s spunky, girl-next-door persona would have reduced the character to a bland, conventional creation. In contrast, Jean Simmons, despite the British accent which some critics claim is a big problem, was ideal for the role. Critics have also said that Simmons is too beautiful to play Ruth Gordon. The argument seems to be that Gordon's fierce desire to have a theatrical career was motivated in part by her realization that she wasn't physically attractive. While the notion itself is questionable, there is no reason to treat the film as if it is claiming to be a documentary-like reconstruction of Gordon at seventeen. In *The Actress*, Simmons ably communicates the underlying passion that drives Ruth to get to New York City and experience firsthand what it feels like to be in the profession. Simmons can project an outward image of innocence and youthful energy while conveying the potential of having a darker, more ruthless side. Interestingly, *The Actress* was released in 1953, the same year Simmons appeared in Otto Preminger's masterpiece, *Angel Face*. Despite their generic and thematic differences, the Simmons characters in the two films share a number of personality traits. For instance, Ruth, like Simmons's Diane in *Angel Face*, can be self-centred and persistent in getting what she wants; additionally, neither

Ruth nor Diane is the stereotypical ingenue, playing coy and/or petulant. And particularly after confronting her father about her desire to be an actress, Ruth becomes increasingly forceful in defending herself, growing in stature because of her willingness to fight back and reject compromise.

The casting of Spencer Tracy in the Clinton Jones role was equally inspired. The film marks the fifth and final collaboration between the actor and director. *The Actress* was the second Cukor film in which Tracy played a father figure; in the first, *Edward My Son*, Tracy's identity as a father is seen in an almost totally negative light. It is his obsession in indulging and controlling his son that ultimately contributes to the young man's destruction. *The Actress* provides Tracy with a role that is much more in keeping with his popular screen image: he is an American individualist who can be tough and stubborn but he can also be a man of sensitivity and compassion. Late in the film, after Clinton has agreed to help Ruth realize her ambition, he tells her and his wife about his own childhood and how it shaped his thinking. The story is centred on his mother who committed suicide when he was very young because she didn't have any means economically to sustain herself and a child when her husband abandoned her. Clinton's story not only reflects on his own present day existence but it also makes understandable his initial insistence that Ruth get an education in a field which will guarantee her an income. The film reveals Clinton to be, despite his intimidating exterior, a caring man who doesn't want his daughter to experience what he (or his mother) has been through. Tracy makes Clinton a vulnerable person without sentimentalizing either the character or the circumstances under which the revelation is made to his family. Although Tracy receives top billing, he is working as a character actor in *The Actress* as is Teresa Wright. Tracy and Wright have a great rapport and their teamwork in its own way rivals that of Tracy's collaborations with Katharine Hepburn. (According to Gene D. Phillips³, Hepburn considered playing the role of Mrs. Jones. While the characterization would have been a departure for Hepburn, it was decided that her presence in the film would have evoked the other Tracy-Hepburn pairings, causing a distraction.)

MGM wasn't happy with Cukor's completed version of *The Actress* and the studio, according to Cukor⁴ and others, tampered with it, hoping to make the film more commercially viable. MGM thought the film moved too slowly and trimmed it but, additionally, the studio felt that Simmons's Ruth wasn't sufficiently appealing. It appears that the studio's cuts were fairly extensive. For instance, an actor named Ian Wolfe, who plays a character named 'Mr. Bagley' according to numerous cast lists, is billed after Anthony Perkins in the film's opening credits; yet, as far as I can tell, the actor and his character aren't in the film. Other examples of cutting are evident in an occasional lack of narrative continuity. Early in the film, Ruth insists that they have a telephone, with Clinton flatly rejecting the notion; later, a telephone has been installed and Clinton, in a comic scene, is attempting to adjust to using it. Given the emphasis on both the family's tight economic situation and Clinton's resistance, it seems likely that the decision to get a telephone and its installation must initially have been a part of the narrative. Cukor claims that studio interference did substantial damage to *The Actress*, although the film retains enough of the caustic energy and edginess Cukor and Gordon gave it to make *The Actress* recognizably theirs. After attempting to 'salvage' the film through making adjustments, the studio became increasingly uneasy about the film's commercial

prospects and wrote it off as a box office failure before even releasing it. Unfortunately, the film failed commercially, reinforcing the studio's predication.

Cukor, in a number of interviews, claims that the interior of the Jones house as seen in the film was modeled on the actual Jones house Ruth Gordon's parents owned in Wollaston, Massachusetts. In addition to the attention paid to the set design and period detail, the film is beautifully lit and photographed by Harold Rosson. Rosson's lighting functions expressively to reinforce for the viewer the two areas of Ruth's emotional and physical being, with the film's opening sequence lit 'theatrically' and the scenes taking place within the Jones house lit 'naturalistically'. Also, although most of the film is shot on studio-built interior sets, on-location footage contributes nicely to an atmospheric creation of the characters' existence in a small New England town. With the exception of Anthony Perkins, who made his film debut in *The Actress*, Cukor was working with seasoned screen actors, which allowed him to do long takes. These long take shots, such as the scene in which Clinton tells Ruth and his wife about his childhood, aren't staged and/or played as 'big' scenes. Instead, Cukor's mise-en-scene is in the service of his actors and their dialogue. It is only on close inspection that Cukor's thoughtful and intelligent staging of such scenes becomes evident. These long takes are graceful on a visual level and concise in communicating the dramatic and/or comic content of the material.

Since *The Actress* was Cukor's final collaboration with Ruth Gordon, it seems fitting that the project was so personal to her. The film is charming and it is so without being sentimental and cliched in the treatment of its characters and their lives. It conveys a great deal of affection and does so in part no doubt because Cukor himself responded strongly to the material and the actors. *The Actress*, as Gavin Lambert points out⁵, relates directly back to *Little Women*. In both films, there are intelligent, sensitive and generous depictions of New England. Also, there are parallels in the respective personalities and creative aspirations of Ruth Gordon Jones and Katharine Hepburn's Jo March. While *Little Women* and *The Actress* share an episodic structure, the earlier film concludes with a stronger sense of closure and it also is more markedly a melodrama.

With its emphasis on a young and determined woman seeking success as a performer, *The Actress* can be aligned to *What Price Hollywood?* and *A Star Is Born*. Interestingly, given the chronological proximity of *The Actress* and *A Star Is Born*, the two films reflect almost opposing depictions of heterosexual romance. In *The Actress*, the very young Ruth doesn't allow herself to be distracted from her goal by Fred and his naive attempts to court her. In contrast, in *A Star Is Born*, a project that relies much more on the conventions of the melodrama, Esther Blodgett's romantic involvement with Norman Maine almost consumes her identity and threatens to abort her career. Nevertheless *A Star Is Born* is a wonderful companion piece to *The Actress*, despite the seemingly diverse scale and aesthetics of these two projects.

Notes

- 1 Andrew Britton, 'Meet Me in St. Louis: Smith, or the Ambiguities', *CineAction* no. 35 (1994), pp. 29 - 41.
- 2 Emanuel Levy, *George Cukor: Master of Elegance* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994), p. 210.
- 3 Gene D. Phillips,
- 4 Gavin Lambert, *On Cukor* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), p. 213.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 77.