

Make Way for Tomorrow: Remarkable Depression-era film released on DVD

By Charles Bogle
25 March 2010

The Criterion Collection, 2010, one disc, Criterion store price, \$23.95.

Credited with teaming and molding Laurel and Hardy, director of arguably the best Marx Brothers movie (*Duck Soup*), as well as *Ruggles of Red Gap*, *The Awful Truth*, and *Going My Way*, and acclaimed as “Hollywood’s greatest humanist” by French filmmaker Jean Renoir, director Leo McCarey deserves greater recognition. The 2010 Criterion Collection re-release of his 1937 masterpiece, *Make Way for Tomorrow*, will hopefully reignite interest in McCarey’s work.

The melodrama, about an elderly couple who lose their home and find themselves thrown on their children, marked a change for a director whose reputation had been established in comedy. The devastating consequences of the Depression for countless elderly Americans no doubt played a role in McCarey’s change of genre. Moreover, the ultimate fate of the Social Security Act (passed by Congress and signed into law by Franklin D. Roosevelt in August 1935; the constitutionality of the act wasn’t recognized until May 1937) was still in some doubt at the time of shooting *Make Way for Tomorrow*.

The two events, however, given most immediate credit for McCarey’s decision to turn to melodrama also say a good deal about what made him and his work memorable.

In 1936, the director almost died from drinking contaminated milk, one of numerous major accidents that befell McCarey during his lifetime. This susceptibility to misfortune, according to Wes D. Gehring in *Leo McCarey: From Marx to McCarthy*, helped the director fashion an antiheroic persona. This can be seen in the figures of Laurel and Hardy, Charley Chase (a prominent figure in many silent films of the 1920s), and Cary Grant in *The Awful Truth*, *My Favorite Wife*, and *Once Upon a Honeymoon*.

The dark, self-deprecating sense of humor found in many McCarey movies, including *Make Way for Tomorrow*, was another apparent product of the director’s crisis-strewn life. (He was also known, perhaps not coincidentally, as one of the great improvisers in Hollywood, “Noted less,” writes

critic Andrew Sarris, “for his rigorous direction than for his relaxed digressions.”)

During his convalescence in 1936, McCarey’s father died, and the lasting influence of the latter on his son is most evident in the younger McCarey’s populist portrayals of the common man frequently conveyed through a father and child relationship, a motif also found in *Make Way for Tomorrow*.

McCarey’s brand of populism was more realistic (and less bombastic) than that practiced by his close friend, Frank Capra. In Capra’s world, the often naïve and sometimes incompetent heroic common man (for example, in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *It’s a Wonderful Life*) undergoes character changes that strain credulity and allow him to challenge the social order single-handedly.

McCarey’s antiheroic common man, on the other hand, is the product of the school of hard knocks, and therefore more competent and aware of his own limitations, as well as the motivations of those in positions of power and authority. William Wellman, a director of this era whose characters (and personal life) were also products of real-life hardships, is perhaps closer to McCarey’s brand of populism, although quite distinct in style.

Make Way For Tomorrow is actually two stories. The first offers the stark reality of an elderly couple, Barkley (“Bark”) Cooper (Victor Moore), and his wife, Lucy (Beulah Bondi), who are evicted from their Depression-era home and separated from one another, for financial reasons, in order to live with two of their children. Bark goes to live with his daughter Cora (Elizabeth Risdon) and her husband, Bill (Ralph Remley), while Lucy lives with the eldest son, George (Thomas Mitchell), his wife, Anita (Fay Bainter) and their college-age daughter, Rhoda (Barbara Read).

Both parents interfere with their children’s busy lives to such an extent that George and his wife eventually decide to send his mother to a home for the aged, and Cora and her husband convince a sister in California to take in her father.

Aware that they will never see each other again, Bark and Lucy spend their last few hours together in a fairytale,

reliving their honeymoon, from the perspective of half a century of married life.

While the work is a tragedy—Orson Welles claimed “It would make a stone cry”—McCarey’s movie refuses to indulge in sentimentality. *Make Way for Tomorrow* earns honest tears by forcing its audience to think, or more precisely, to cognize the way in which Depression-era America (including the audience members) was throwing away its older citizens. McCarey accomplishes this feat by making his elderly characters very real and presenting their plight from numerous angles, ultimately inviting the audience to question their own assumptions about the elderly.

For the first half of the story, Lucy and Barkley are the aged parents we all secretly fear we might one day be forced to house and care for. Lucy often chatters past endurance; and she requires so much of the family’s attention—not unlike a child—that her granddaughter Rhoda’s friends stop coming to see her. Anita blames her daughter’s affair with a 34-year-old man on Lucy’s presence (a conclusion many a real mother might also reach).

But McCarey will also use situational, often dark humor to present an elderly couple quite aware of what their children (and the audience) are all about. During a scene in which the children are trying to decide who will take in the parents, Bark tells his youngest son, Robert, “Don’t think too hard, Bobbie; you might hurt yourself.” In another scene, Lucy’s squeaky rocking chair helps deflate the stuffy, pompous atmosphere of the weekly bridge lessons that an overly formal Anita holds for a group of suit-and-gown adults. In short, Bark and Lucy are real people, not some aging pair to be propped up in a corner and forgotten.

McCarey produces similar psychological effects in other ways. He may shoot the same scene from different vantage points: e.g., in a wide-angle shot the audience sees Lucy or Bark from the viewpoint of an exasperated Anita or Cora; however, a subsequent close-up of the parent’s face forces the spectator to recognize the heartbreaking character of a given statement or a human being merely asking for understanding and compassion.

By the last third of the movie, we are ready to leave behind the self-centered Cooper children and follow their much more interesting parents. Like two other movies of the period, Fritz Lang’s *You Only Live Once* (released in the same year) and the 1948 Nicholas Ray classic *They Live by Night*, *Make Way for Tomorrow* releases its romantic couple from a rigid, unjust world into one in which their most cherished (and yet simple) dreams are realized.

Arriving in New York, they meet people who treat them as their children—and by implication, society—should have treated them. A salesman, who first sees the elderly couple

merely as an easy mark, offers them a ride in a new car—something Bark and Lucy never had the money to afford—and ultimately comes to appreciate them for the wise and remarkable people they are.

The manager at the hotel where they honeymooned fifty years ago pays for their evening, their meal and drinks, and when they enter the dance floor, the bandleader recognizes their confusion at the modern dance numbers, smiles at them and orders the band to play “Let me Call You Sweetheart.”

The final scene conveys an almost unspeakable amount of respect between two human beings.

Character actors populate *Make Way for Tomorrow*, and all the performances bespeak an understanding of the special nature of the movie they were making. Victor Moore and Beulah Bondi create entirely honest, complex, and moving characters. There’s not much more one can ask of an actor.

During the anti-communist purges, the increasingly religious McCarey capitulated to the hysteria, testifying as a “friendly witness” before the House Un-American Activities Committee and making a stupid piece of Cold War propaganda, *My Son John*, 1952. He later directed *An Affair to Remember* (1957), with Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr—a remake of his own *Love Affair* (with Charles Boyer and Irene Dunne, 1939)—and *Rally ‘Round the Flag, Boys* (1958), with Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, for which a good many extravagant claims have been made.

McCarey’s career is definitely uneven, but one must be willing to recognize his earlier movies for the superb achievements they are.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>