

## Barbara Stanwyck ~ 84 Films and more

Ruby Stevens, fifth and youngest child of Catherine and Byron E. Stevens, was born in Brooklyn, New York on 16 July 1907. When she was four, her mother died and her father, having left town to find work, was never seen again. Ruby and her brother Byron were raised by their sister Mildred, who was just five years older than Ruby. When Mildred began working as a showgirl, Ruby and Byron were placed in foster care.

During the summers of 1916 and 1917, Ruby toured with Mildred and practised her sister's routines backstage. At fourteen, she graduated from grammar school and took jobs in a Brooklyn department store, the telephone office, at *Vogue* magazine (cutting dress patterns), then as a typist for the Jerome H. Remick Music Company. Though she enjoyed the last more than the others, her enduring wish, despite Mildred's discouragement, was to enter show business.

In 1923, Ruby auditioned for a place in the chorus at the Strand Roof, a night club over the Strand Theatre in Times Square and soon after landed a job dancing at the New Amsterdam Theater with the Ziegfeld Follies. For the next three years, she worked as a chorus girl. In 1926, show-people restaurateur Billy LaHiff introduced Ruby to impresario Willard Mack, then casting his play *The Noose*. LaHiff suggested that its chorus girl part should go to a real chorus girl. Mack agreed and, after a successful audition, cast Ruby as Dot. With the help of an old theatre programme that read "Jane Stanwyck appearing in *Barbara Frietchie*", he also changed her name. After some rewriting following a shaky start, *The Noose* became one of the 1926-1927 season's most successful plays. Ruby-now-Barbara's next role, female lead in *Burlesque* (1927), made her a star. In the 1960s, Hollywood veteran Pat O'Brien recalled:

*The greatest Broadway show I ever saw was ... Burlesque.*

In his autobiography, *To a Lonely Boy*, the show's writer/producer Arthur Hopkins describes how he came to cast Stanwyck:

*After some search for the girl, I interviewed a nightclub dancer who had just scored in a small emotional part in [The Noose]. She seemed to have the quality I wanted, a sort of rough poignancy. She at once displayed more sensitive, easily expressed emotion than I had encountered since Pauline Lord.*

*She and [Hal] Skelly were the perfect team, and they made the play a great success. I had great plans for her, but the Hollywood offers kept coming. There was no competing with them. She became a picture star ... [Barbara Stanwyck was] the greatest natural actress of our time.*



*As a Ziegfeld girl (c. 1924)*

Before her *Burlesque* triumph, Hollywood producer Bob Kane had given Ruby a minor part in *Broadway Nights*, a 1927 silent film of which no print survives. So Barbara Stanwyck made her celluloid debut as a humble, mute fan dancer. Her first "talkie" appearance followed two years later in 1929 drama *The Locked Door*. And so it began.

*THE LOCKED DOOR (1929)*



Rotter Frank Deveraux takes Ann to a rum boat. When it's raided, they give false names, but a snapper gets their picture. Deveraux buys the negative for \$100. Eighteen months later, Ann is happily married. The same Deveraux turns up as both the home-wrecker of her husband's best friend and the fiancé of his younger sister. Ann visits his apartment to save young sis from a disastrous elopement. Her husband then turns up to warn Deveraux off before the wronged friend can kill him. In the struggle that follows, overseen by a hidden Ann, Deveraux is shot ...

Very basic filmmaking, maybe, with the material's theatrical origin thinly disguised, but not bad when its vintage is considered. Stanwyck outshines her mannered co-star Rod La Rocque (above). Look out, too, for Chaplin regular Mack Swain floundering out of his depth. Her first words on film are "Isn't it thrilling!" And, yes, before we're done, it surely will be.

## MEXICALI ROSE (1929)



N<sup>th</sup> generation ex-Youtube copy of the hour-long tale of Rose, a young tramp who plays the field, moving from husband to husband and lover to lover until, having announced she's "going home", throwing herself off a cliff, so leaving her second victim free to return to his "understanding" former love with the backing of his mentor and Rose's first victim, casino-owner Happy, played by Sam Hardy (above). Coarse, low-budget corn, for die-hards only.

Ray Johnson: *Mexicali Rose*, released in the UK as *The Girl From Mexico*, is hilariously bad. The girl from Brooklyn plays a wicked Spanish senorita, slinking around with her hands on her hips. This was her first bad-girl role, and the first of many occasions when she met a sticky end. Just 60 minutes long, *Mexicali Rose* has its curiosity value, but I would only recommend it to Stanwyck's most devoted fans

IMDb: This early talkie is a benchmark for really understanding the amazing range Barbara Stanwyck had as an actress. Fans of her other films of this period will be familiar with her playing the poor but honest underdog "doing the right thing". What a departure from that formula is her Rose Manning - outrageous by any era's standards. Refreshingly frank ... Something that all should enjoy / In spite of the cheapness of the production and the other actors giving "by the numbers" performances, there are flashes of the Stanwyck fire and she really tries to rise above the film as a whole. She later commented that the disaster of *Mexicali Rose* sapped nearly all the professional confidence she had developed throughout her tough Broadway years. Thank heaven for Frank Capra and *Ladies of Leisure*.



## LADIES OF LEISURE (1930)



A slow, sentimental tale - and another adapted stage-play - of love across the social divide. For Stanwyck, a big step up from her previous two outings, but one taken comfortably in her stride. (One might almost say: *A Star Is Born*.) Her first of five films for Frank Capra. Though both would go on to do better work than this, *Ladies Of Leisure* remains nonetheless an early and worthwhile testament to the abounding talent of them both.

IMDb: Stanwyck rings honesty out of a cardboard script with good support from three second-tier silent stars who are quite good in talkies - Ralph Graves as the object of her affection, Marie Prevost as her wisecracking, less prudish pal, and especially Lowell Sherman as Graves' drunken buddy who is very open to being Stanwyck's next sugar daddy. Yet the best scene is the confrontation being Stanwyck and Graves' mother, superbly played by unsung character actress, Nance O'Neil / It's the old hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold story but Barbara Stanwyck and director Frank Capra make it shine. Not only is Stanwyck great but there isn't a bad performance by anyone, even down to the minor characters. Capra attains a naturalness from his actors rare at this point in the talkies / We are treated to a beautifully etched characterization by Stanwyck, who covers a wide range of acting territory from crude and lowdown to transcendently idealistic / Stanwyck is excellent at conveying the brassy qualities of her character, but then reveals her softer nature as she falls in love with the man who only wants to paint her portrait. The tenderness of the developing romance is full of nuances one wouldn't expect from Capra, though the sentimental ending is more in keeping with his usual style / While many of her later films are more famous, this is one of her best performances, with real emotions portrayed, complete with tears.

## ILLICIT (1931)



"What have theories to do with love?" Free-thinking Anne Vincent believes that wedlock snuffs the kindling spark of mutual attraction and learns the hard way the error of her ways. As usual in films from this era, an independently-minded woman's ideals must be shown to be wrong-headed and Stanwyck is forced once again (see *Baby Face*, *The Bride Walks Out et al.*) to capitulate with due contrition. Still she's impressive as ever in this superficial scrutiny (by future Capra-collaborator Robert Riskin, making his screenwriting debut) of the marriage bond. Equally superior is Claude Gillingwater (above) as her father-in-law Ives Senior. The Warner Archive print, while fresh and bright, is in need of restoration.

Nowadays, audiences wouldn't bat an eyelash to see a movie heroine unmarried and enjoying romantic freedom, but in 1931 ... this was fairly steamy stuff. [It is also] an important film in the oeuvre of actress Barbara Stanwyck; it was her first starring role after her breakout performance in *Ladies of Leisure*. In *Illicit* Stanwyck gives a sensational performance: as Anne Vincent she exhibits a natural effervescence and playfulness that proves contagious in her interactions with co-star Rennie, who otherwise settles for saying his lines and not bumping into the furniture. The supporting cast also acquits itself nicely ... *Illicit* provides the blueprint for subsequent performances that would help make Stanwyck a classic movie favourite, playing gutsy, take-no-guff women whose independent spirit quickly elicits empathy from the audience no matter what their station in life.

Ivan G. Shreve Jr, *classicflix.com*, 12 September 2014 [revised excerpt]

## TEN CENTS A DANCE (1931)



Stanwyck plays dancer-with-a-heart-of-gold Barbara O'Neill who bails out, sets up and then marries no-good Eddie Miller. Tired print of a slight tale, directed by Lionel Barrymore.

IMDb: An amusing antique, a good reminder of how far we haven't come in 70 years / A slight tale, typical of the time, that Stanwyck alone makes worth watching / A highly entertaining gem that deserves to be re-discovered. What really caught me off guard was Stanwyck's performance, which is quite remarkable. She made a career out of playing tough women who wouldn't take any crap from anyone but here is the complete opposite. Her character is so weak and fragile. It really shocked me at how terrifically she played it / *You're not a man - you're not even a good sample*. It's speeches like that that show Stanwyck's ability to elevate the script of an obvious pot-boiler and make you forget you are watching a movie unworthy of her talents. Highly recommended / Stanwyck, in an early prototypical role, is pursued by guys rich (Cortez, who also co-starred with her in *Illicit* and *A Lost Lady*) and poor (Owsley) and, in a clever reversal, the nice-seeming poor guy turns out to be a cad while the rich one is genuine and caring. Stanwyck's facial expressions are touching and assured; she even cries convincingly, unlike many more "actressy" actresses of the period / I really liked the camaraderie amongst the girls, sort of like what you find among men in combat, which kind of fits. Anyhow, if you have a preference for weepies and gum popping dames, this stone-age talkie fits the bill / Interesting and thought-provoking, also well-paced and suited to its relatively short run time / The razor-thin difference between dancing for a dime and taking money for sex (prostitution) is on display here with some double-speak dialogue, together with a few intriguing peeks at behind the scenes at the dance hall / Hardly any grit to the script - too little great dialogue for Stanwyck to claw her way through / It's apparent that lessons learned from Frank Capra while making *Ladies of Leisure* (her first good film) have galvanised her acting, which has greatly improved since her two previous less-than-decent films made prior, those being *The Locked Door* and her worst film, *Mexicali Rose*.

## NIGHT NURSE (1931)



Director William "Wild Bill" Wellman came to *Night Nurse* from Cagney's star-making *The Public Enemy*. Its plot could be written on a postage stamp - bent doctor and evil chauffeur conspire to lay hands on dipso mother's kids' trust fund - but Blondell and Stanwyck (above) make an engaging double act. Lovely, clean print of a tame though different pre-Code drama, described by Ella Smith as "ahead of its time" - a claim that could be made equally well of its preternaturally gifted leading lady.

IMDb: It helps to be an actual pediatric night nurse to understand this movie fully. Its camp is both intentional and unintentional. It has a rebel flair with the nurses mouthing off to authority and even befriending a bootlegger - one of the heroes of the film. It is pretty spicy for its time with several scenes of Barbara and Joan in their skivvies. The medical lingo is amusing (Stanwyck's blood type is "4h") and two pudgy kids play the starving children / Stanwyck is a standout. Independent, resourceful and tough as nails, she pits herself against bullying authority and absolute evil. An intelligent and spirited actress, it was roles such as this which would hasten her into becoming one of the biggest stars of the 1930s. Clark Gable, *sans* tash and as yet unknown, is very effective as a menacing chauffeur / Gritty depression era flick, showing why Warner Bros was the studio of record. It's tough broads here that get the leads: Stanwyck, before her teeth were fixed, and Blondell, gum-popping her way through the Nurse's Oath, struggle to survive grabby interns, unscrupulous doctors, murderous families and no money. No, this isn't *Young Doctor Kildare*. Just compare *Night Nurse* with that sappy 1940s series for insight into what the Production Code did to social realism. Sure it's contrived melodrama but there are elements of the real world here that, courtesy of the PC, would disappear from the screen for 35 years. Also included are gamey one-liners, mild strip scenes and a really sardonic look at motherhood, together with a very scary Clark Gable / Remember that a great part of America was rural when this film came out. Try to imagine yourself driving in to the Bijou on a Saturday night to see a moving picture. Whoa, Nelly! Undergarments, sexual innuendo, moral ambiguity galore! A revolution parallel to the release of the first jazz recordings by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. It's all been downhill from there ...



## THE MIRACLE WOMAN (1931)



Capra's "rebutal" to fake evangelists bookends solid storytelling with a fiery start and finish. Stanwyck's best film so far by some distance.

IMDb: This potent drama, which surprisingly bombed in its day, is now considered one of the best movies of the 1930s. Stanwyck is just superb. It's kind of sad that a movie over 80 years old still mirrors problems we face today / Stanwyck's character is heavily based on the most famous and beloved female evangelist, Aimee Semple McPherson. At the height of her popularity, there was not a movie star in Hollywood who could rival her celebrity / Stanwyck dominates and fascinates in the title role, never slipping into caricature or allowing her character to become cardboard. She presents a well rounded portrait of a complicated, lonely female who experiences the pangs and joys of unexpected love. She is careful, though, to keep her portrayal sympathetic - realizing that her character was not entirely fictional - but is never dull. Watching Stanwyck give an impassioned exhortation from inside a lions' cage must be one of the more unique scenes from any film of the 1930s / This is like discovering Beethoven's 10th! I could not take my eyes off this movie for one second. From the very first scene when Stanwyck enters to deliver her father's final sermon and her first, the story grabs you by the throat and won't let go. This movie has all the essential Capra elements: the innocent among the villains and cynics who've lost their innocence; the crowd being swayed by sham theatrics; the hard-boiled woman revealing the heart of gold; and most of all, the sheer unpredictability of his vision and the compelling logic of his moral universe. And how he makes you care for those innocents and even the cynics caught up in riptides of life! / This may not be a typical Capra offering but one thing it has in common with his other works is *quality*. From A to Z, *The Miracle Woman* is thoroughly engrossing - and it is fascinating to realize that this oldie is up-to-date: phoney evangelists with plants in the audience, working their 'fans' into a frenzy, getting rich as Midas, etc. Some things never change.

## ***The Miracle Woman*: Best Stanwyck 1930s Film**

Frank Capra directs Barbara Stanwyck, in their second of five cinematic collaborations, as a thinly veiled parody of evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson (whose name, you'll notice, finds its way all over the entertainment of the early '30s) in this brilliantly complex film about false prophets and talking dummies. Finally, after weeks of mediocre films, *The Miracle Woman* "blesses" us (pun intended) with nuanced performances, multi-dimensional characters and the iconic Capra formula of breathtaking beauty juxtaposed with harsh reality. More than that, it's a film with a unique premise - one that contends with both faith and integrity. In fact, the script would have been difficult to make under the Code, for the decided irreverence with which the characters - including our heroine - treat religion would have likely gotten Joseph Breen's knickers in a twist. Only in a pre-Code film would a protagonist be allowed the moral complexity Stanwyck's character is afforded here. For the film is really about Florence Fallon's journey from someone who exploits others, lured by a shyster who manipulates her intense grief, to someone who helps them. Needless to say, the character is a fascinating one.

But it's the players, aided of course by Capra's knack for drawing out unspeakably human performances, who make this film come alive. Stanwyck is perfect for her role as the knock-off McPherson because she has that metaphorical fire in her presence - seductive enough to make a congregation believe that she is, in fact, a miracle woman - that matches a heretofore unseen vulnerability, which imbues the film with its emotional gravitas, its original conflict, and its resonant thematic constructs. In short, Stanwyck is divine (pun intended). But she couldn't do it alone, and David Manners turns in another sensitive performance as her blind love interest, whose uncloying earnestness (his attempt to convince her she's healed his sight is powerful) is then paired with his quirky penchant for ventriloquism. And Sam Hardy is appropriately reprehensible as *The Miracle Woman*'s antagonist, made all the more unlikeable by his humanity, which brings everything closer to the audience's realm of relatability. In short, the film is perfectly cast.

I love this fantastic film, which I recommended not just to Barbara Stanwyck junkies, pre-Code experts and Capra aficionados, but to film lovers - and human beings - everywhere.

### FORBIDDEN (1932)



Third Capra / Stanwyck collaboration *Forbidden* is another plum, eventually melodramatic, eventually tear-jerking, but lots of fun along the way, with a well-turned tale holding this viewer's attention to the end. Stanwyck delivers another strong performance, playing the young, innocent, small-town librarian (above) of her character's early scenes and the grizzled, jaded, ex-con widow the script renders her with equal facility - so too mistress, single mother, Lonely Hearts columnist and gun-toting avenger along the way. Another pre-Code thus relatively "unsanitised" film, and all the better for it. Ralph Bellamy's pushy journo is the weakest link in another Capra-corn winner.

IMDb: Full of surprises and never sells out to the moral crusaders of the time. Furthermore, the characters are human and playful. You feel for them as the story slowly sucks you in until you have no choice but to go along with the melodramatic symphony that plays with your heart and mind / Although the story is "soggy and 99.44% pure soap opera," to use Capra's own words, it still retains powerful moments and excellent interpretations from its main actors Barbara Stanwyck and Adolphe Menjou / I kept in mind the technology available to the filmmakers in 1932 and was thoroughly impressed by the tale Capra manages to tell here. Stanwyck's character just needed a little thrill and found it on a boat trip to Havana, so beginning a love affair that will test her discretion and tact throughout her life. Like a responsive car, the script follows each turn precisely and truthfully, our heroine responding to each new crisis the way we would hope she does. This is what makes the film so impressive. For such an early picture the characters all ring true / Films like this remain important because they remind of us a time when cinema was more honest and blunt in its dealing with real life situations, before the enforcement of the Hays Code in 1934 / When one talks of range, one has only to consider this or *Stella Dallas* (a better known but inferior film) and then *The Lady Eve* and *Ball Of Fire* - not to mention *Double Indemnity*! / A well-done film with absorbing plot - plus Stanwyck gives a real star performance / Heart-wrenchingly effective tear-jerker that grabs you right from the start and never lets go / Stanwyck and Menjou are on top form and the camerawork is exquisite. The story and pacing are weak in places but you won't much mind and perhaps hardly notice unless you're immune to the former.

## SHOPWORN (1932)



A decent if unlikely love story, made all the harder to swallow by the fact that (not for the first time, or last) Stanwyck outclasses her leading man without even seeming to try - and the basis of her class is exactly that: that she acts so naturally and convincingly without apparent effort or artifice. In allowing the camera to catch some vital essence of her true self she animates her characters and so sells the viewer as others, less gifted, cannot. The hapless protagonist here, playing Dr. Livingstone to her Kitty Lane, is Regis Toomey, who will turn up again in *Meet John Doe*, playing a small but pivotal role. As for Barbara, what a pity she was never paired with Leslie Howard or James Stewart. Ex silent-screen heroine Zasu Pitts (above, right), who was not very good in *The Locked Door*, does rather better this time round as Dot.

IMDb: Babs, in one of her first "good-hearted girl from the wrong side of the tracks" roles, is too good for the lot of 'em. Mom and son don't deserve to share the same stage. The ending is contrived and the sickeningly sweet finale hard to swallow / This Columbia potboiler is rather like Capra without Capra, and the anonymous direction doesn't allow for much style. But Stanwyck was always worth watching, and she gets to run an impressive gamut of emotions before the hasty and unconvincing happy ending. And it's short / Like all her non-Capra Columbia films, sadly mediocre / At times it gets so silly that I couldn't help but laugh - but there's still enough going on here to make it worth viewing / Stanwyck is always worth watching, and her charm, fire, wit and charisma help bring some life to the rather cookie-cutter plot / Look for some imaginative camera angles and panning sequences - in particular, one innovative shot of Stanwyck reaching under her bed for a suitcase / A fast-paced little gem.



## SO BIG! (1932)



The second of three adaptations of Edna Ferber's 1925 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, this *So Big!* is a lightweight, fast-flying but well presented and consistently watchable drama that spans most of a lifetime. Stanwyck, just 25, shows her acting chops by playing the film's second half as a grey-haired mother. An unknown Bette Davis, two years before her breakthrough performance opposite Leslie Howard in *Of Human Bondage*, lights up the third act, showing in good measure the rich promise of better things to come.

As their careers progressed, Stanwyck and the spiky Davis reputedly had little time for one another. Perhaps it all stems from this, their only joint screen venture. The stark difference between the two is laid bare: Stanwyck, as usual, gives a generous, selfless performance, investing her girl, young woman, wife and widow with equal and equally convincing humanity, whereas Davis more obviously "acts" - though the camera loves her too.

Selina as a young girl in the film's opening few minutes is played by Anne Shirley, whose career high water mark would come five years later as Laurel (i.e. Stella / Stanwyck's daughter) in the classic *Stella Dallas*: casting either very prescient in 1932 or somewhat opportunistic in 1937.

This ex-TCM print is in good shape and the film better than expected.

### THE PURCHASE PRICE (1932)



Stanwyck's third William Wellman film tells the ridiculously unbelievable tale of a worldly New York torch singer who decamps first to Montreal, where she reinvents her stage persona, and then, in desperation, to the North Dakota prairie as a young wheat farmer's mail-order bride! And though, when her past catches up with her, she's bound, stranded in the back of beyond, in a loveless "marriage" to a taciturn lunk (George Brent, well cast - see also *So Big*, *Baby Face*, *The Gay Sisters*, *My Reputation*), she opts to stay. Unmitigated tosh.

IMDb: *The Purchase Price* is one of ten films Barbara Stanwyck made for Warner Bros. in the early 1930s when she was under non-exclusive contracts to that studio and Columbia Pictures. The Columbia films are often quite good, several of them directed by Frank Capra, but most of the Warner Bros. set are little more than potboilers, films rarely running over 70 minutes with few ambitions. This title is among Stanwyck's weakest films, although it is raised immensely by a typically fine Stanwyck performance making it much more interesting and appealing than it should be / Watch this for Stanwyck and suspend your disbelief about all the rest / There are two great actors here - Stanwyck and Brent. Too bad the plot is so thin it couldn't be rescued / This little film moves quickly and is entertaining but has incredibility all over it / Stanwyck fully earns her reputation as an outstanding actress. She always seems sincere and real, even in this silly little story. She's also stunningly beautiful in scenes where she is presented "naturally" without city artifice and heavy makeup. The big surprise for me was George Brent. He seems perfectly cast as the inexpressive farmer and was seldom more attractive. He is terrific here and I can't remember him giving a better film performance / The movie's premise isn't remotely plausible, but Stanwyck makes it so through the confidence of her performance.

### *THE BITTER TEA OF GENERAL YEN (1933)*



Stanwyck's fourth collaboration with Frank Capra in as many years tells the bizarre tale of Chinese warlord General Yen (played by Danish-born Swede Nils Asther) who takes prisoner just-off-the-boat and soon-to-be-wed American missionary Megan. She pledges her life against the loyalty of a young traitress she befriends - and loses. But, rather than kill Megan, Yen kills himself. A love story with a difference. Not bad, though not great either.

IMDb: This Capra film is wonderfully deceptive; while it delivers all the sentimentality that one expects from this director, it also gives the viewer a whole new level of pragmatism that is not usually apparent in Capra's stories. It plays out via a battle of two distinct world views, one based on modernism's reverence for the self-determining individual and the other on a traditional comprehension of hierarchical values, fate and the importance of continuity. To Capra's credit, neither side of this east / west debate is shown as possessing a monopoly on truth, but there is nonetheless at bottom a clear criticism of colonialism and western imperialism that is rare for the period / Frank Capra, one of America's greatest directors, is noted for well-crafted movies and impeccable set designs (note Yen's palace), even on a tight budget. He was masterful in visual geometry and at using light and shadow for setting mood. Capra's gifts extended to action sets (as here) and character development / Nils Asther's portrayal of the General was a hypnotic performance, as good a job of acting as has ever been put on the Silver Screen. Stanwyck was fine as ever and, coupled with Asther, they worked magic / The film succeeds so well in showing that there is more than one kind of logic that, by its end, we've fallen for Yen as hard as Megan has.



## LADIES THEY TALK ABOUT (1933)



After "gun moll" Nan Taylor gets two to five in San Quentin, and serves the lot, she comes out looking to settle accounts. Gritty and engaging prison drama has three things working against it: the unlikely enduring attraction to Nan of childhood acquaintance and prominent social reformer Dave Slade, the daffy jailbreak plan at the plot's heart and yet another horribly contrived "happy" ending (though delivered, to give the filmmakers their due, in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner). Still, Stanwyck redeems all with another top drawer performance. Adapted from a stage play by Dorothy Mackaye (who also took the lead part) and Carlton Miles. Good.

IMDb: Sardonic, jaded, sexy, tough as nails, this pre-Code gem gives us Stanwyck in her early-thirties glory. Just watching her saunter around with her hands stuck in the front pockets of her prison dress, chewing gum, smoking and distributing zingy put-downs is a joy. To a self-righteous fellow inmate who tells her there's no punishment bad enough for her, she replies: *Being penned up here with a daffodil like you comes awful close* / Engaging pre-Code women-in-the-slammer nonsense, with Stanwyck as a guileless babe in stir for a bank robbery. But, while fun to watch, the film's morality is all over the place - after Stanwyck abets her fellow bank robbers in a breakout attempt, the scriptwriters still demand that she engage our sympathy. We're even supposed to root for her as she falls in and out and in and out of love with snow-white reformer Preston Foster, a relationship that makes no sense at all. This is the type of movie where she shoots her lover and immediately whimpers "I didn't mean that!" Stanwyck was always an interesting actress and as she alternately snarls and screams and charms and smiles, she's intensely watchable. But her schizo Nan Taylor doesn't register as a heroine. And Preston Foster doesn't register at all.



## BABY FACE (1933)



Stanwyck plays Lily Powers, a much-pawed waitress in her father's grimy steel town speakeasy, who vows to use men rather than be used by them. With her maid / companion Chico (Theresa Harris, above, left), she moves to New York, joins a bank and moves up the corporate ladder by judicious use of her "charms" - "I'm working so hard," she says, "I have to go to bed early every night." Despite the contrived ending enforced upon the filmmakers, stands up well, with Stanwyck impressively assured as ever. Eyes peeled for the brief appearance of a young and nattily-attired John Wayne.

IMDb: *Baby Face* unloads 80 minutes of twee sexuality and from blushing start to coquettish finish remains almost relentlessly contextual in its feminism. I would have been charmed by how the movie deals frankly with gender and opportunism, except the message is kinda clubbed to its knees by the moralizing at the end. I love Barbara Stanwyck, but mostly know her from her more noirish parts, so it's easy to forget how hot she was in her earlier roles. She seemed to turn an abrupt corner into "matronly" out of nowhere / Probably the most daring and explicitly sexual movie before the enforcement of the Hays Code - in fact, one of the main reasons for its introduction / Fast moving and raw with sensuality, *Baby Face* is perhaps the greatest example of what pre-Code Hollywood was all about and what made it so much fun. Stanwyck eats up every man she comes in contact with (until Brent comes along) and seems to enjoy doing it strictly out of spite. Eighty years on, it still hasn't lost its heat / With heavy themes of rape, implied rape, sexuality, exploitation and even misguided Feminism, *Baby Face* is a sight to behold. Radical for its time.

### EVER IN MY HEART (1933)



A maudlin melodrama dealing with the pernicious effects of prejudice and propaganda. In 1909, American-as-apple-pie Mary marries German Hugo (Otto Kruger, above, right). He becomes naturalised and is warmly accepted by all their friends. But after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, all changes. He loses his teaching job. Boys stone their dachshund. When she moves back in with her folks for reasons of economy, he returns to Germany to join up. She too serves. They meet in France, he a spy with potentially devastating knowledge of troop movements, she in the catering corps. To prevent him ratting out the dough-boys, she takes the life of them both. Cue violins and fade.

IMDb: This poignant and graceful doomed-love weeper deals with a facet of U.S. history rarely explored. In a beautifully restrained performance, Barbara Stanwyck plays a Daughter of the American Revolution who marries gentle German immigrant Otto Kruger. Upon the outbreak of the First World War, they become victimized by anti-German sentiments. With tasteful understatement and an unusual attention to period detail, director Archie L. Mayo paints a vivid tableau of social intolerance that must have been quite daring in its time (the scars of the Great War were still fresh in '33). The writers, unfortunately, couldn't resist a nosedive into Mata Hari-like spy machinations, an eleventh hour plot contrivance that strikes an indelicate note. Even so, the film's quiet sensitivity stays with you long after / If you want to see a well crafted film you are in the right place; if you are in the mood to be cheered up you are absolutely in the wrong place. A heart breaker but well done at every turn / Stanwyck is wonderful, going from a fresh, young, happy woman to one who has to endure horrible sadness. Otto Kruger (an American of Boer heritage) is very effective as well, but this is Stanwyck's film. She'll break your heart / Soap opera-like, yes. Weepy eyed, yes. Over the top, yes. Cornball to the hilt, yes. But, Barbara Stanwyck was absolutely beautiful in this film. No one can watch this and not fall in love with her.

### GAMBLING LADY (1934)



The first of six Stanwyck films co-starring Joel McCrea (above) - see also *Banjo On My Knee*, *Internes Can't Take Money*, *Union Pacific*, *The Great Man's Lady* and *Trooper Hook*. As that record suggests, the pair play well off each other. Bent bookie Pat O'Brien and C. Aubrey Smith as McCrea's dad Peter also acquit themselves creditably, though the tale is un compelling. Like it or not, at just 66 minutes, it won't detain you long either way.

IMDb: Breezy and entertaining. As always, Stanwyck is utterly fascinating to watch. Not only talented and lovely, her great forte was her utter believability in any role she undertook. Here, she looks perfectly natural with a deck of cards in her hand, playing and dealing. Her authenticity is matched by the passion which she displayed with every performance. Her leading men are two of the best: rich boy Joel McCrea and genial crook Pat O'Brien both do well by their roles. Given equal billing, the viewer is left guessing for quite a while which one will finish the film in Stanwyck's arms. Excellent support is given by marvellous old C. Aubrey Smith / Stanwyck is once again good in her role, as is McCrea, but the film belongs to C. Aubrey Smith who plays McCrea's father. His comic timing and mature performance are a pleasure to behold. O'Brien adds nice support in his small role as does Claire Dodd as the gold-digger after McCrea / Stanwyck shines with her usual talent and beauty as she brightens up another clunker of a story. But, while it doesn't make too much sense, it's okay fun and a suitable vehicle for all three of its stars / The film repeatedly makes little sense. The characters and what they do just never gel. The film left me feeling bored and a bit annoyed that the script wasn't worked out more logically. Good actors, bad script - tough to like / Slightly disappointing ...



## A LOST LADY (1934)



Willa Cather was so unimpressed with this adaptation of her 1923 source novel that she refused to sell screen rights to any other of her works and, up until 1980 - i.e. 33 years after her death - no more were filmed, though several, including *O Pioneers* (1991) and *My Antonia* (1995), have been since. And it's certainly true that this *Lost Lady* (listed on IMDb as *Courageous*) and Cather's book have little, beyond a shared title and characters named Forrester and Ellinger, in common. The novel, while typically redolent and elegiac, is light on narrative, which the film necessarily fleshes out by sending Stanwyck's Marian on an emotional rollercoaster ride that, up, downs, switchbacks and all, is, while tepidly melodramatic, the antithesis of "redolent and elegiac". And though it's inherently unfair to compare books and films, judged solely on the basis of its cinematic merits, *A Lost Lady* is decidedly small beer. Not for the first time, or last, Stanwyck rises above her material to give a good account of herself, but, try as she might, finally this bird doesn't fly and Cather's discomfiture is not hard to fathom. The ex-TCM print is clean and bright, with just a few exterior audio passages a bit noisy. Ellinger, the pilot who so easily turns Marian's head, is played by Ricardo Cortez (see also *Illicit* and *Ten Cents A Dance*). Disappointing.

IMDb: Quick-time soap opera / Unconvincing conclusion adds to the mire that this film got stuck in / This movie means well and the actors seem to give it their best, but overall it's a silly melodrama that is awfully tough to believe / False, false, false.



### *THE SECRET BRIDE (1934)*



Pacy little mystery told with maximum economy. Stanwyck's presence appears to be more about using her name to sell tickets than exploiting her talent, since she is given little of substance to do. Another chemistry-lite pairing, this time with Warren William (above). But worth finding still.

IMDb: A pretty standard Warner's whodunnit that gives up the goods about two thirds of the way through. What puts this Stanwyck vehicle a notch or two above average is the fluid camera work employed. Director William Dieterle isn't afraid to employ some unusual overhead camera angles and tracking shots. It's also obvious that Warner's wasn't afraid to spend more on their productions in 1934 than just a year or two before. The money shows where it counts, right down to Stanwyck's Orry-Kelly gowns - one in particular looks like it wiped out half the fox population in Depression-era California. Some of the motivations in the plot are fuzzy: Glenda Farrell's relationship with her boyfriend is about as unclear as her reaction to his ... but that'd be giving too much away. Ten for production values, four for plot / Superficial stuff ... turn off your brain ... a time-passer but not much more / Pure cinematic contrivance, a step or two below mediocre, this melodrama is so remote from actual human behaviour and events and the end is so predictable that I recommend you skip it / It's hard to believe that this film was produced by Warner Brothers in the studio's heyday. True, it's equipped with a great cast as long as your arm, led by Barbara Stanwyck (none too attractively costumed) and Warren William (whose only claim to fame here is that he knows his lines) and it's superbly photographed with fine art direction - but the script is a shambles. A disappointing load of rubbish / Contrived, a bit too dry, lacks polish and the pace is slow. Involving, but not intriguing / A quick, fun ride.

### THE WOMAN IN RED (1935)



More Warners B-movie fare. In this one, polo player and socialite Johnny Wyatt (Gene Raymond) quits the team to wed pro stable rider Shelby Barret. When he takes her home to meet his snooty folks in Wyattville, the pair get a frosty reception. Later Shelby innocently finds herself alone in a potentially compromising position aboard a friend's yacht. A drunken female guest falls overboard and drowns. Shelby (identified in the papers only as "the girl in the red coat", whence the film's title) is the only witness who can clear her friend's name, but, in coming forward, may jeopardise her own, and that of the whole Wyatt clan. No great shakes - rather, Stanwyck still marking time till something more demanding and rewarding comes along.

IMDb: A rather sappy melodrama, 80% excellent but ending on a silly note / The film is somewhat boring, thanks in part to the bland Gene Raymond, and nothing really happens until the end. Nevertheless, Stanwyck is always worth it / Though Stanwyck reportedly didn't think much of *The Woman In Red*, she elevates an average film with her performance. Bette Davis could do that too, but very few others / Slow-moving at the start with amusing moments whenever Stanwyck and Tobin share screen time, this springs into full gear when Stanwyck boards the yacht. This is still one of her weaker Warner vehicles, obviously made to get her out of her contract so she could move over to Paramount where she got better roles and genuine star treatment. Not bad, but, until the exciting conclusion, rather ordinary / Unoriginal from start to finish. Stanwyck sleepwalks through her role, which isn't the norm for her. Raymond, one of the worst leading men I've seen from this period, turns in a super dull performance.

## RED SALUTE (1935)



A modest little yarn, oft told, of two mutually incompatible folks who, thrown together by fate, gradually find they quite like each other after all. Lots of snappy dialogue. Look out, too, for Old Glory with 48 stars, strange geography (in which Juarez, Mexico and Washington D.C. appear to be no distance apart) and a couple of early prototypes of what the British would call a caravan, here called a trailer. Stanwyck was a shoe-in for zesty, free-thinking women parts, but their stories' denouements always involve the forsaking of ideals smartly followed by the collapse into the welcoming arms of the nearest man, unreconstructed Luddite or not - i.e. rigid stereotypical conformity of the most dismal kind. The film's politics, apparently the cause of some controversy on its release in 1935, are faint-hearted. Co-lead Robert Young (above) as Jeff and Cliff Edwards as Rooney both acquit themselves well. Ex-Youtube print is in decent shape.

IMDb (where the film is listed as *Arms and the Girl*): This simple little film won't make anybody's all-time favourites list, but Stanwyck and Young go well together and are pleasant to watch / Barbara Stanwyck (with Warner Brothers) and Robert Young (with MGM) were loaned out to a "poverty row" studio to make this mess of a film. Just awful and hokey / An independent release worthy of re-discovery. Lovable Cliff Edwards singing "I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now" is delightful / The result of Stanwyck's first venture into screen comedy is a pleasant and innocuous film, one of dozens imitating *It Happened One Night*, Best Picture from the previous year. For a much better view of radical student politics of the 1930s, see *The Way We Were*.

## ANNIE OAKLEY (1935)



Though a city girl through and through, Stanwyck handled a horse and toted a gun as though born and raised not in Brooklyn but in Boise or Billings, and the fine figure she cut in Western duds - and that would serve her so well in later life - was first seen here in pleasant 1935 biopic *Annie Oakley*, her first movie for RKO. The era (circa 1880) is soon set by reference to a telephone as "this new-fangled instrument of torture" and a lovingly recreated Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show plays a central role, including extended action sequences featuring dozens of riders. Preston Foster renders Toby Walker more effectively than *Ladies They Talk About* cipher David Slade and Melvyn Douglas as Cody's business partner Jeff Hogarth is slick too. Anodyne fun.

IMDb: Unless you consider Cincinnati part of the Wild West, this film is not a Western, as usually categorised. Though correctly listed as a drama, it also contains comedic elements, often attributable to the Sitting Bull character. People comment on how fictionalised the story is, but actually many of its main elements are true / The highlight of the movie is the Wild West Show footage, which is almost like viewing a piece of history / If you want to enjoy watching a young Barbara Stanwyck play an authentic American heartland heroine, albeit with a New York accent, this is a film you will enjoy. The acting is good, the direction by George Stevens is quite good, and the recreation of the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show is extremely good / This is a very enjoyable movie. Not one of the greats, but it's difficult not to just sit back and enjoy yourself / It's interesting that Oakley / Stanwyck is not the sole focus of this fun, well written film, which is more than usually an ensemble effort. Its best character is Sitting Bull, sensitively portrayed as a decent and clever guy, which for an American Indian in the 1930s is good going / The film has a great Hollywood ending.



### *A MESSAGE TO GARCIA* (1936)



Babs' poorest effort since *Mexicali Rose*, when at least she had the excuse of not knowing any better. Her role here is very much a supporting one, giving her considerably less screen time than either Beery or Boles (above). She plays a Cuban *senorita* with rebel sympathies who manages to get shot in the left knee by a marksman to her right while astride a horse, which, if you think about it, takes some doing. That's just a small but telling indication of the production values evidenced in this desperately mediocre flick that casts credit on no-one concerned in its making. One to avoid. (The usually reliable Leonard Maltin saw fit to give this three stars, which is three too many!)

IMDb: Lacklustre Fox fiction / A rather limp film / Feeble / Turgid, set-bound drama with some wild miscasting in central roles. It's not that the film isn't filled with some very good performers, Beery is believable as a renegade wanderer looking for the main chance but he's the only actor that really seems to fit. John Boles gives his usual block of wood performance, a dull hole at the centre of the movie. The most ludicrous of all is Stanwyck - a great actress, yes, but a native born Cuban *senorita*? Never! Couldn't they have borrowed Lupe Velez or Dolores del Rio? Perhaps not Cubans either but at least Latins who would not have stood out so glaringly. All great stars have turkeys in their filmographies. This one manages to take down both Stanwyck and Beery. What could have been an interesting rendering of a historical event becomes just so much studio fodder to fill a double bill / Along with *Walk On The Wild Side* and *The Man With A Cloak*, one of the weakest roles of Stanwyck's career / A film she should have been ashamed of / Beery is the main reason to watch.

### THE BRIDE WALKS OUT (1936)



This sprightly little pic proves yet another sell-out in which the Stanwyck character's free-thinking views are ditched in the film's closing moments, turning all she stood for on its head and lauding the submissive little wifie over anything better, more alert or alive. Ned Sparks (above, left) gives an amusing though one-note Groucho Marx impression. The print, while fresh and clean, is heavily cropped.

IMDb: *The Bride Walks Out* makes light of some of those old fashioned sexist ideas - domestic violence, husband / wife roles - so may offend some, but was made for a different time / Since this is a post-Code film you know that somehow by the end Raymond and Stanwyck will get back together, but considering they both seem like idiots and demonstrate no love towards each other, you wonder why the heck the audience should care. I know I didn't / If I'm going to watch a film from 1936 I guess I should be prepared to deal with the values of 1936, but this was just too much / Outdated social attitudes - the jocular references to wife-beating, for instance, are tasteless and unfunny today, and although the film is fairly sympathetic to Carolyn's desire to work, her motivation, rather than the pursuit of a fulfilling career, is mere want of pin-money to keep herself in luxuries. There is also the racist joke of Carolyn's maid who observes that black husbands are too idle to support themselves and prefer to live off their wives. *Halliwel's Film Guide* describes *The Bride Walks Out* as "thin but pleasing" - the first adjective may be apt, the second certainly is not / Lacking in wit and spark. If anything, it's yet another example of how films of this era shot down women who had hopes of making something of their lives. For that, it is perhaps worth seeing. If you're looking for a sparkling, witty comedy, move on.

### *HIS BROTHER'S WIFE (1936)*



Robert Taylor (above) and Stanwyck twice reprised the partnership first forged here, playing opposite one another in *This Is My Affair* (1937) and her last feature film *The Night Walker* (1964). The pair were married in 1939 and divorced in 1951. He said of her:

*She is one of the finest actresses in show business. A lot of young actors and actresses could have profited then and now from a few seminars with Missy on their professional attitudes - their regard for the business of being an actor, on their on-stage and off-stage deportment, as it were, because I doubt that there ever has been, or ever will be, a greater pro than Barbara.*

A "glossy soaper" [Maltin] with two attractive leads, *His Brother's Wife* is listed on IMDb as *Lady Of The Tropics*. No great shakes, perhaps, and certainly not serious, but neither quite the stinker the savaging below suggests.

IMDb: A nice couple, but not an interesting story ... Poorly written ... Absurd / All over the place ... Seemed longer than *Gone With The Wind* / Ludicrous ... Between this and root canal work, go for the root canal - at least they put you to sleep / A terrible film ... A load of hooey ... A god-awful turkey ... 100 per cent, grade-A baloney / Old Hollywood's cardinal rule - if you succeed, imitate. Taylor's breakthrough role in *Magnificent Obsession* was as a young playboy doctor. He was next cast in *Small Town Girl* as a young playboy doctor. After that, in *His Brother's Wife*, he's once again a young playboy doctor ... / Silly / Ridiculous / Physician, Heal This Movie / For fans only / Groan / Yes, it really *is* as bad as everyone says.

## BANJO ON MY KNEE (1936)



Stanwyck's first screen musical is ninety minutes of cornball fun. Chock full of cracker-barrel stereotypes, the best of which is Walter Brennan (42 playing 70) as Pappy Newt (above, right, in a picture-stealing turn - and he's equally good in *Meet John Doe*). The pick of Babs' five 1936 releases.

IMDb: What *Banjo On My Knee* lacks in original story or compelling themes, it makes up for with warm, funny characters brought to life by delightful actors / An ill-conceived and condescending Fox musical study of "river folk," meaning mindless Southerners who overreact to perceived slights and say "dad-blamed" a lot. I love Stanwyck, but one is constantly aware that she's more intelligent than the character she plays / This film, one of the most bizarre movie musicals ever made, makes more sense if you think about when it was made - 1936 - and what it represents - the marriage of 20th Century Pictures, aiming to make a name for itself via musicals featuring well-known stars, and failing Fox Films, which from its inception in 1915 until its bankruptcy in 1935 specialized in films for and about rural folk. It's a shame Stanwyck isn't given more to do / Loads of fun / Terrible in every way / One of the best movies ever made. Stanwyck is outstanding / Absolutely atrocious / Some of the music is great. Stanwyck sings just like she talks. Her voice is low, pleasant and natural. The cast is good. Katharine DeMille has a showy role as Leota, who's in love with McCrea. He, of course, is tall, handsome and boyishly gorgeous / Biggest surprise of all is Stanwyck, who sings and dances with great verve. Brennan also shines as Ernie's father. A river musician who plays a strange contraption, he warms our hearts with his simple melodies / For Stanwyck or Brennan fans, a must see / Will keep you guessing as to which direction it's headed nearly every time there's a scene change.



## THE PLOUGH AND THE STARS (1936)



Sean O'Casey's *The Plough And The Stars*, set during the Easter Rising of 1916, opened at Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 1926 and ran for a long time. John Ford wanted to film the production using the theatre cast, but RKO insisted on established screen stars taking the two lead roles. After Ford had "finished" the project, the studio also re-shot some early scenes, changing the relationship of Jack and Nora from married couple to boy and girlfriend, inserted documentary footage from the actual Easter Rising, and added voice-over, none of which Ford liked. (Note that the film circulates in both its original and doctored forms.) Its message, that women are doomed to love and men to fight, is delivered in mawkish and, at 66 minutes and with an unnecessarily curtailed plot, all too brief a fashion, with stereotypical Oirish business - singing, drinking, fighting, gab - to the fore. *The Plough And Stars*, by the way, was the flag of the Irish Citizen Army.

IMDb: Might be a bit too much like a photographed stage play, but still good drama. More Ford than O'Casey, though / Old-fashioned acting of the best sort ... Political entertainment of a very fine order, with as much said by the words as by what is shown, but how many people alive now can relate to it with the potency it must have had back in the mid-1930s? / A studio-wrecked travesty, a confusing mess. Possibly Ford's worst sound film.

## *INTERNES CAN'T TAKE MONEY* (1937)



Lovely clean print of a smart little film. Stanwyck and McCrea, in their third joint venture, do the business again. Good.

A significant revelation, unexpectedly delicate, *Internes* (the antiquated spelling comes from the source material, a magazine story by the prolific Max Brand) casts Barbara Stanwyck as a young widow who has spent two years in prison, unjustly charged with having harboured her husband when he was a fugitive. She works as a clothing presser in New York City, spending her nonworking hours searching for her young daughter, whom her husband hid away in an orphanage. Even as she's drawn to a young intern, a certain Dr. Kildare (played here by Joel McCrea, before Lew Ayres took over the character for a series of B pictures for MGM), she's prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice and spend the weekend at the country home of a lascivious gangster (Stanley Ridges) who says he knows where the child is being held.

Remarkably, these plot contrivances, and a few more besides, vanish into the highly stylized yet emotionally intimate atmosphere created by Santell and his cinematographer, Theodor Sparkuhl. Long camera movements through spatially complex sets create a trenchant sense of ephemerality; the dialogue direction - slow and unemphatic at a time when fast and loud was the default setting - establishes an attentive tenderness between the main characters, further developed by the emphasis on the silent looks they exchange.

Dave Kehr, *The New York Times*, 25 April 2010

IMDb: An exceptionally flavourful rendering of the Depression era atmosphere: a world of the poor labouring in sweatshops, petty hoods hanging out in smoky bars, backroom bookie joints, pushcart vendors, bus terminals and orphanages. While the B movie plot lacks ambition, the high production values, name cast and imaginative direction from Alfred Santell all boost the quality / A B picture story given A picture production and stars. With its shadowy photography, evocative sets and moody pre-noir atmosphere, *Internes Can't Take Money* deserves to be better known.

*THIS IS MY AFFAIR* (1937)



A slow-burning melodrama set in 1901, and not bad once it finally gets going, *This Is My Affair* is hurt by the implausibility of its plot, the ham acting of Victor McLagen (above, right) as Jock and the pedestrian unravelling of its relatively straightforward tale. Taylor (above, left) is a natural and surprisingly accomplished leading man - arguably, along with Joel McCrea, Stanwyck's most sympathetic 1930s screen partner. The ex-Youtube print, while aurally and visually below pristine, is good enough.

IMDb: A solidly-carpentered example of old-fashioned Hollywood entertainment, this film proves a largely successful hodgepodge of several disparate elements: a period piece, a romantic drama, a crime movie and a political thriller ... Though the Vaudeville sequences are a matter of taste and the romantic triangle slows things up, leading to somewhat of a skimp on the thriller aspect, this emerges a handsome production indeed / The film, set in this interesting time period, did a nice job of creating a story and placing it within a historical context. A good outing for all / Ridiculous premise, bad execution / Pretty good. Stanwyck shines / A clever usage of history is the glue that holds this costume gangster movie together / Though not everything works well, overall a good slice of studio film-making / Stanwyck was one of the most versatile and multi-talented actresses in Hollywood, but here she proves once again that she couldn't sing ... Her outfits, from the Mae West School of Design, overpowered her tiny frame. Taylor does a professional job, but why did the makeup people always slather so much pancake and eye shadow on him? *This Is My Affair* could have been better but, as it is, barely gets by / The premise isn't bad if you can suspend your imagination and the end is fairly tense, but not a well made or thought-out film.

## STELLA DALLAS (1937)



Six years on from *The Miracle Woman* and at last another vehicle worthy of her talent. Paired again (see *A Message To Garcia*) with John Boles, but this time more fruitfully, Stanwyck's tour-de-force performance in *Stella Dallas* earned her the first of four Best Actress Oscar nominations (the others for *Ball Of Fire*, *Double Indemnity* and *Sorry, Wrong Number*). Though none resulted in a win, she did receive an Honorary Award - her only Oscar - in 1981 "for superlative creativity and unique contribution to the art of screen acting."

Between 1936 and 1965, Stanwyck's older brother Bert (Byron) Stevens racked up 372 IMDb credits, and appeared in many very well-known films, including *The Sound Of Music*, *Citizen Kane*, *North By Northwest* and *Some Like It Hot*, though in each case as an uncredited extra. His second role (after "nightclub patron" in *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town*) was "guest at River Club" in *Stella Dallas*, his first appearance of eighteen in one of his sister's films, through to *Roustabout* ("carnival patron") in 1964. In *Clash By Night* his part was "bar-tender"; in *Crime Of Passion* "policeman writing ticket"; in *Titanic* "passenger" and in *Union Pacific* merely "man".

One of the greatest "women's pictures" ever made, this film is as heartbreaking on the subject of class as it is on the substance of maternal love; in King Vidor's *Stella Dallas*, they are inseparable. "On the surface, Stella had to appear loud and flamboyant, with a touch of vulgarity," Stanwyck said of the part. "Yet, while showing her in all commonness, she had to be portrayed in a way that audiences would realize that beneath the surface her instincts were fine, heart-warming and noble." The slender, brunette Stanwyck wore padding that made her look thirty pounds heavier, agreed to have her hair bleached blonde, and stuffed cotton in her mouth so she'd look jowly. But



her real trick was to play a slatternly character in glitter and plumes, without condescending or making her comical. Wilson quotes a co-star in *Stella Dallas* saying that Stanwyck "was an actress who worked from the inside out." It was this "privacy" in her performances that made them last. Watch it and you'll see what she meant.

Margaret Talbot, *The New Yorker*, 20 December 2013



IMDb: *Stella Dallas*, the first King Vidor film I have watched, is too schmaltzy for my taste. For the sake of Stanwyck alone, it is still worth a go - but have your hankie ready / It's a testament to Stanwyck's talent that she can make you care about a character that is so unlikeable / Stanwyck's performance is good - it always is - but towards the end the whole affair gets pretty ridiculous. Modern viewers don't really relate to the concept of giving your kids more than what you had and I can't honestly say "Wow, this is worth seeing just for her acting." *Stella Dallas* is a little dated now and that affects the enjoyment, though not the quality, of the film / The story is dated and corny, but the values of society were so different in 1937. It was very popular in its day / Some viewers will find watching this movie a struggle. It's not Stanwyck's fault - in fact she's pretty good, although not good enough to keep afloat a film in which Boles (above) is such a heavy weight. His presence alone could sink a battleship. Alan Hale has a good turn as an affable friend who lurches into drink as his fortunes decline / There are some extremely illogical and baffling character and plot developments that I could not get over, especially later in the film, even accounting for the fact that it was released 75 years ago when social norms were very different / Why Stanwyck did not receive an Academy Award for *Stella Dallas* is one of life's great mysteries. Hers is a tremendous performance by arguably the best actress of classic Hollywood. No matter what the vehicle, Barbara always delivers the goods. She never appears to be acting. Rather, she infuses her characters with a realism that runs circles around the competition / One of the best old films I've seen in a while / *Stella Dallas* will make you cry, but you'll be glad you saw it.

## BREAKFAST FOR TWO (1937)



A "comedy" that isn't funny makes a film to avoid, and that's what we have here. Tired and tedious, its 67 minutes drag interminably. Thank heaven it wasn't two hours! No rapport between Marshall and Stanwyck and precious little to commend this dog, other than the dog - Pee Wee, a harlequin Great Dane. And butler Eric Blore isn't bad. Otherwise, one to forget.

IMDb: Certain actors of the golden age of Hollywood don't get the kudos they deserve, simply because they seemed so dependable, just clocking in to be eaten up by one of the big, dramatic ladies who dominated that era. Certainly the 1930s had its share of timeless leading men: Cagney, EGR, Bogart, Flynn, Gable, Tracy, etc., but there are many more besides - George Brent, Warren William, Robert Montgomery, Ricardo Cortez, Ian Hunter and, as in this screwball comedy, Herbert Marshall - who worked pretty much every leading lady, yet are known today by movie buffs only. Here, opposite Barbara Stanwyck, Marshall gives as good as he gets, and then some! / *Breakfast For Two* is probably the only one of Herbert Marshall's films I've seen that I didn't like. It's just so blah / A cute dog, a boxing match, six Hasidim window cleaners, three weddings, a daffy Justice of the Peace, a couple of board meetings, a proxy fight, a receivership hearing and a happy ending. What more do you want? / I assume that some of Marshall's slapstick scenes were done with a stand-in, since he lost a leg in WW1 - but it was done seamlessly. Beautiful sets and nice production values. A cute comedy with the young Stanwyck looking beautiful / While the plot is silly, the writing of the characters and dialogue is amazingly witty and clever. In particular, the last fifteen minutes of the film are sparkling and you can't help but laugh out loud - it's *that* good! Just turn off your brain and enjoy!

## ALWAYS GOODBYE (1938)



For the second film in a row, unidexter Herbert Marshall hops forward to co-lead with Stanwyck (though, bar the occasional giveaway creak, his disability is expertly hidden and in no way detracts from his performance). Indeed, all the cast acquit themselves well in this bitter-sweet, sentimental but ultimately satisfying soaper concerning a mother's sacrifice for her child (played by John Russell, above). In her very first scene, in which two women wait anxiously outside City Hall for the arrival of the men they're about to wed, Stanwyck shows her class. The other patently (over)acts; Babs just *is*. The print, ex-YouTube, is pristine. Not dark or deep, but surprisingly engaging. Good.

IMDb: A touching tale ... a very human drama that time does not alter / Barbara Stanwyck gives an admirable, charming performance / A remake of 1934's *Gallant Lady*, this version of an otherwise maudlin story is actually quite lively and a bit more comic than its original. The result is a very entertaining mother love drama that has soap opera elements without the pathos. Stanwyck gives a superb performance as a woman who won't cry today or tomorrow over yesterdays, instilling her character with a likeability that burns a hole through the screen. *Always Goodbye*, blessed with a better screenplay than normal for films of this nature, is delightful / Not the greatest Stanwyck film, but nicely done / The emotion Stanwyck brings to this role is stunning. Her subtle yet brilliant facial expressions convey everything she is feeling. Her acting in this unknown little gem is masterly / A bit too cute / A quality movie, well worthwhile despite the problematic ending. Why is frank, honest, truth-telling conversation *always* out of the question?

### THE MAD MISS MANTON (1938)



Stanwyck and Henry Fonda (above) made three movies together, all comedies: this one in 1938 followed by *The Lady Eve* and *Good Morning, Doctor*, both 1941. While *The Lady Eve* is highly regarded - is, indeed, the favourite film of many BS fans - the other two have fared less well. But *The Mad Miss Manton* is fun too, telling its convoluted tale of blackmail and murder with plenty of zing in a quickfire 80 minutes of glam and pizzazz.

IMDb: This B murder mystery with some screwball elements lathered over it is not a failure. The pace is so fast, the abrupt conversational exchanges zip back and forth with such speed, that some people might call it "frenzied" - but *Bringing Up Baby* it is not. I doubt very much that anyone will care who gets murdered or by whom. And the romance between a handsome young Fonda, as a newspaper editor, and Stanwyck, as a flighty socialite, evolves out of nothing much. But those are the kind of slapdash properties you expect in a B feature. The writing may not be as outrageous as it thinks it is, but there are some good lines / An entertaining comedy-mystery, with the novelty of an all-girl squad of amateur detectives on the side / A great choice for old movie fans / Screwball to the max. Not perfect, not award-worthy, but still a fun film with a great cast. Pure entertainment / Not top-drawer, but enjoyable and worth a look / A delight from start to finish / Dismal ... hopeless / An imperfect plot, but a lot of fun / Hattie McDaniel (as Stanwyck's maid, a year before her Oscar-winning turn in *Gone With The Wind*) is fantastic and Sam Levene as the head cop has some great one-liners / The dialogue sparkles and goes so fast that it takes a second viewing to get all the jokes / This is one pip of a movie / Mediocre / Don't waste your time.



## UNION PACIFIC (1939)



A Western romp on a grand scale with plenty of action, red-blooded heroes and black-hearted villains, intrigue, romance, train wrecks, Indians and Stanwyck never more alluring. If her Mollie Monahan, colleen with a heart of gold, doesn't charm the pants off you, you need to go to Specsavers. Good.

IMDb: What was it that Cecil B. DeMille gave to his movies? Well, how about sentimentality as thick as mashed potatoes, florid exposition, corny humour, American patriotism on a platter, shameless death scenes, ethnic stereotypes, casual and condescending racism, hypocritical bible thumping, leering sex, truly hairy beards and moustaches, ponderous oratory and the kind of obviously manipulative situations that can turn even the best actors into mannequins. Did I leave anything out? But DeMille knew how to serve up spectacle and action, paced to keep the story moving faster and faster. His movies are awful, even if a few still at times stand up to current tastes. In an unfair world, nearly all are still watchable, with their flaws often as enjoyable as their merits. That brings us to *Union Pacific*, DeMille's telling of the great effort to build the first rail line across the American continent / A big production that went down a storm at the box office on release, *Union Pacific*, in spite of its overtly patriotic bluster, is an entertaining and important part of the Western movie story. Alongside John Ford's *Stagecoach*, released a couple of months previously, DeMille's movie helped take the Western to a new, more adult level / Enjoyable ... Highly recommended / Plenty of action, a love story, an exciting race between two railroads, skulduggery, good production values, marauding Indians, thoroughly stereotyped characters and an absence of anything that might suggest unpredictability or ambiguity. What's not to like? / McCrea, Stanwyck and Preston - a robust and engaging trio. The supporting cast is full of colourful personalities, and the upbeat spirit of the movie is broad but unquestionably rousing / What is particularly striking about *Union Pacific* (indeed, all of DeMille's Westerns) is that it does not show off the landscape ... and you just don't get a feel of the pioneer life / An entertaining epic, hokey but fun.

## GOLDEN BOY (1939)



To fight or to fiddle? That is the question posed by this thoroughly enjoyable pre-war drama. Stanwyck is back with Menjou (*Forbidden*), Levene (*The Mad Miss Manton*) and, at the top of her exemplary game, shepherds young Bill Holden - lucky fella - through his first name-part role. Recommended.

IMDb: This character-driven story about a young man with multiple talents seems a bit quaint, 75 years on. Joe (William Holden) plays the violin quite well; he also boxes quite well. One talent is more cerebral, the other more physical and the two somewhat mutually exclusive since one needs uncorrupted hands and the other is likely to damage the hands. The underlying theme here is about making personal choices, about whether to go down this road or that. It's an interesting story and the plot's second half especially is quite good. The script, based on a stage play, is heavy on dialogue. The ending, while all too familiar, conforms to the cinematic convention of the time. *Golden Boy's* main problems fall in the areas of casting and acting. Barbara Stanwyck looks too old for the role she plays and Bill Holden hasn't the right physique to be a boxer; also, he looks too baby-faced. Lee J. Cobb (above), playing Joe's father, an elderly Italian, overacts with an accent that's way overdone. Joseph Calleia as a bug-eyed hood in a black hat gives a stereotypical "gangster" performance. Visually, the film has an old-fashioned look and feel. The home Joe shares with his father reeks of nineteenth century Victorian decor. The lighting is a bit too dark. Director Rouben Mamoulian does a poor job with the Madison Square Garden crowd scenes toward the end, with the spectators unnaturally manic and hysterical. Boxing has become out of step, so to speak, with modern living, which renders this element of the story quaint, but if one keeps in mind its underlying theme of the importance of making sound personal decisions, then *Golden Boy* is likely to resonate with most modern viewers / An extremely satisfying film suitable for the whole family.

## REMEMBER THE NIGHT (1940)



The first of four films to co-star Fred MacMurray (above, second right) and Barbara Stanwyck (see also *Double Indemnity*, *The Moonlighter* and *There's Always Tomorrow*). And while Wilder's 1944 Noir classic is much the best known, and for good reason, this unpretentious little nugget is not bad either. (In fact, of the four, only *The Moonlighter*, due to script issues, struggles to shine.) Good.

IMDb: A well written comedy-drama unjustly ignored as one of the annual Christmas holiday delights, *Remember The Night* blends comedy with sentimentality, but also has its moments of darkness, such as the scene where Lee (Stanwyck) is reunited with her cold-hearted mother, now remarried / A really well done piece with two top notch stars whose characters are both winning and believable / A road trip comedy drama with funny and likable supporting characters, featuring love and tears, a wonderful moral to the story and no hint of sex, profanity, violence or explosions to be seen. A picture for all ages that won't offend or insult anyone. Don't miss it / *Remember The Night* is one of a handful of absolutely indispensable Christmas classics: it deserves to be counted right alongside *It's A Wonderful Life*, *Miracle On 34th Street*, *A Christmas Carol* and *The Bishop's Wife*. It's less well-known than the others doubtless because it's less mystical, less whimsical and, most importantly, because it fails to provide the obligatory Happy Ending - but that's exactly what makes it so great / Not a comedy but a light drama - a forgotten gem / Here is yet one more classic film in which a man and a woman who hardly know each other decide to get married! In Hollywood, all one had to do was go out on one date and marriage would be right around the corner (so too divorce) / A charming film with two superlative stars / A neglected Sturges gem, touching, sentimental, timeless / One commentator claims there's no sex in the movie - not directly, perhaps, but what was that last shot of Niagara Falls saying?



## THE LADY EVE (1941)



On a voyage from Brazil to New York, a Yankee con artist sinks her lovely claws into wealthy Connecticut rube Hopsie Pike. Then, after he's learned her true identity and thrown her over, she reappears at his home posing as a member of the British aristocracy and proceeds to hook him again. Oh, and did I forget to mention that they fall in love? Twice? As Jean Harrington alias The Lady Eve Sidwich, Stanwyck gives a dazzling performance: amoral - *I need him like the axe needs the turkey* - to be sure, but never cold or hard-bitten and irresistibly attractive. Many fans regard this as the favourite of her films and it's not hard to see why. If you can accept the highly unlikely premise that Pike would not immediately recognise the newly arrived Lady Eve for who she really was, there's nothing about this sparkling gem not to like.

IMDb: Fonda (above) and Stanwyck are one of the most flawless screen pairings ever, the perfect combination of sexy meets innocent ... *The Lady Eve* is a prime example of a "How did they get away with that!?" movie. I don't know what Stanwyck's ideological or moral beliefs were, but a number of her films are among Old Hollywood's most sexually suggestive. Call me old-fashioned, but movies were sexier when the actors kept their clothes on ... During the latter part of the film, it's hard to buy into Stanwyck disguising herself as another woman who doesn't look very different from her previous self in order to win back Fonda / That aspect of the plot is just plain crazy / I enjoyed the apple and snake symbolism / Stanwyck is sensational, even though her character makes no sense at all. But Fonda is impossible to sympathise with, let alone root for, so improbably clueless and clumsy is Hopsie. Is he really so stupid as to fall for a grifter not once but twice? Evidently so / The real moral of this film is that people in love believe what they want to. Highly recommended.



## MEET JOHN DOE (1941)



This powerful polemic, the first of three films (see also *Ball Of Fire* and *Blowing Wild*) to pair Gary Cooper, who started out in the silents in 1925, with Barbara Stanwyck, was also the fifth and final Capra / Stanwyck vehicle, a productive collaboration dating back to 1930's *Ladies Of Leisure*. Third and least persuasive (after *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington* and *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town*) of the director's patriotic, anti-corruption trilogy, *Meet John Doe* is by turns saccharine, earnest and hectoring, though, whether as hard-nosed journo cynic or chastened, remorseful moll, Stanwyck is beguiling as ever. While Coop (third left above) holds his end up, too, and Walter Brennan (*Banjo On My Knee*, second left) makes a welcome return, finally the film cloaks its humanitarian, anti-Fascist message too lightly to pass muster as honest entertainment.

IMDb: A preachy though well-acted drama about the fickle heart of humanity leads to a weebegone conclusion that no one behind the camera was quite satisfied with. Only in the film's vibrant first half do we get a sense of something fresh and exciting. Capra settles once again for sentiment over substance / A pitch-black jeremiad against manipulation by the media / Riskin's screenplay is solidly constructed but manipulative. Stanwyck, Cooper *et al.* add a high gloss to what boils down to little more than a Love Thy Neighbour sampler - but, as someone said, it's not the arrival, it's the journey and this is one swell trip / The film's message is that dreams can never be destroyed. John Doe isn't a nobody, he is a somebody, because he is everybody / *Meet John Doe*, from Capra's worthwhile second tier, ends up uneasily advocating Christianity as the healer of society's festering wounds / An absorbing story, one of Capra's best, with some great, at times mesmerizing acting / Capra has been called a 20th Century Dickens. Taking into account the quality of the best of his work, with *John Doe* at its epicentre both temporally and thematically, this "timeless" accolade is richly deserved.

*GOOD MORNING, DOCTOR* (1941)



In *Good Morning, Doctor* (U.S. title: *You Belong To Me*), Fonda (above) plays another wealthy sap (see *The Lady Eve*) who this time marries a physician and then can't stomach sharing her with her male patients. The silly premise, his wimpish, self-pitying shtick, aggravating plot development (she's wholly dedicated to her calling - until he becomes a tie salesman, at which point she throws it up instantly and happily) and a gag-making wrap-up combine to render this one a dud.

IMDb: *You Belong To Me* is a 1941 comedy - I think - starring Henry Fonda and Barbara Stanwyck. Boy, is it bad. Fonda and Stanwyck, such an attractive, delightful couple, are wasted in an absurd story. In real life the Stanwyck character would have dumped this guy in 24 hours / A poorly contrived little vehicle that has not worn well / Though the character Fonda plays bears some resemblance to Charles Pike in *The Lady Eve*, this film isn't anywhere near as funny - and feminists will be aghast at it / Despite an absolutely horrid script, this film remains just about bearable because of its excellent stars. However, no matter how much I love most of their movies, I can't recommend this one / What a creepy little film! / The screenplay of *You Belong To Me* strains credibility from the get-go, betraying a superior cast / Obsolete / What's with the writing here? When annoyed with her husband, Dr. Hunt says, "You've been acting like the Gestapo." This is supposed to be a comedy? Hogwash. A very tedious film / A Stanwyck-Fonda stinker with no redeeming qualities / A pretty boring, so-called "comedy" which attempts to cash in on the huge critical success of *The Lady Eve*, but fails dismally. A clumsy, leaden farce / Another women's career vs. marriage comedy with mediocre results / A painful watch / Skip it.

## BALL OF FIRE (1941)



Cooper's innocent professor meets Stanwyck's street-smart dancer to produce a movie that looks as if it was a lot of fun to make, and the feeling is infectious. Spangled BS (see above) oozes gamine charm. Cooper (also above), bemused head of a group of dusty academics, is putty in her capable hands, as have been and will continue to be countless viewers through the ages - for, yes, the film plays as well 75 years on as it ever did. Recommended.

IMDb: What happens to an Ivy Tower atmosphere when it is invaded by a sexually alluring siren? This is the situation of Howard Hawks' *Ball Of Fire*, the second of two great comedies Stanwyck made at Paramount in 1941 / A 1940s riff on *Snow White*, *Ball Of Fire* is a high point in screwball comedy, perfectly pairing Cooper as an ingenuous professor out to learn about slang and Stanwyck as a vivacious gangster's moll who, in spite of herself, falls for his awkward charm. While it features nothing beyond kissing, the film is sexier than any modern picture I can name / Stanwyck is at her best in a role that seems tailor-made for her, and which earned her an Oscar nomination / Some powerful yum-yum / Slows down a little toward the end, but still a wonderful comedy / Another great Golden Age Hollywood classic and a feather in the cap of all associated with it / A film that will live forever / Cooper does a fine job as the shy professor and Stanwyck is absolutely delightful as the tough-talking but warm-hearted Sugarpuss. They play off each other so well that the movie loses something toward the end when Sugarpuss is back with the gangsters in New Jersey while Potts is held hostage in New York / We are asked to accept a 180 degree *volte face* from Stanwyck's character but the writing, directing and acting are so solid that we happily do so / Falls somewhat flat. It's too cutesy for my tastes and just about everybody in it has appeared in something better / Sugarpuss and Pottsie are quite a pair and director Hawks makes the most out of a witty, gag-filled script / Subtle and sophisticated humour / Dated / One of my favourite films. Find, play, smile.



## THE GREAT MAN'S LADY (1942)



Stanwyck plays a very old woman recalling episodes from her past life - so we see her acting 16 and 105 (yes, that's her, above right) with various points in between. We learn how, by selflessly denying her marriage to a supposedly great man, she preserves his reputation and turns him from graft back to the side of probity and honour. The film's premise - that behind every lauded "hero" stands an unsung heroine - may be shaky, and the abject failure of its narrative to treat honestly with Hoyt's second wife and family is damaging, but Stanwyck is excellent, McCrea personable and Wellman proficient as ever. So, while flawed, still a departure of note.

IMDb: An absorbing romantic drama featuring Stanwyck at her very best ... A great movie / The screenplay has its memorable moments but gets all wishy-washy in the last fifteen minutes - though Stanwyck gives a convincing performance / A mess of a movie that, frankly, should not have been made / Different, with uniformly strong acting, though I didn't particularly like the ending / Far from her best film, but one of Stanwyck's best performances / The screenplay, which includes bigamy and marital infidelity, is compromised by constraints imposed by the Production Code / Outdated ... Not compelling to watch / Excellent / Fake history, played for bathos, with a narrative that is seldom credible and often downright loopy. The movie's intentions are apparently heartfelt and it's a handsome enough production, but there isn't a surprise in its entire 90 minutes / Weak ... One to skip / Many of the lavish costumes are out of place on relatively bare sets and McCrea's moustache looks like it's about to slip off his lip at any moment / An interesting if somewhat incredible film ... Bizarre.



## THE GAY SISTERS (1942)



This dull, contrived tale of love, jealousy and disputed inheritance signs off with another of those irritating endings that forces the Stanwyck character through a perverse 180 degree about-turn, so capping off 100 minutes of mediocre entertainment with a nonsensical wrap-up. A sequel was planned but - perhaps just as well - never made. Not recommended.

IMDb: This very watchable but not quite logical film begins with three sisters whose mother is killed on the *Lusitania*. Then, after their army officer father goes off to war and is killed in action, the film picks up with the adult sisters fighting in court for their inheritance against antagonist Charles Barclay (George Brent), who argues against the original will based on a later will. From there the story rambles between the love-hate relationship of Brent and Stanwyck and the romantic triangle involving the two other sisters and Gig Young. What is this film? A farce, a comedy, a soapy drama? The director doesn't seem quite sure / Much ado about nothing ... Very disappointing / A shrill, unengaging mess, well enough acted but without a shred of logic or plausibility / This film gets off to a cracking good start - so good that I wondered how they were going to keep up the strong pace. They didn't! ... Great cast, great production values, great cinematography, great music, but oh, that overly odd, quite unbelievable resolution / A real head-scratcher / If modern audiences can get over the title, they will discover a classic / According to the script, Barbara only needed a "real man" to steer her towards her biological imperative, and to show her who is boss. Apparently this was acceptable to 1942 audiences, but doesn't sit well with viewers now / Good acting and direction can't make up for the crappy plot / Most unusual - interesting, complex and enjoyable / One of those movies spoiled by the studio's insistence on a happy ending. Worth seeing though far below what it could have been.

## LADY OF BURLESQUE (1943)



A nice little ensemble film, listed on IMDb as *Striptease Lady*, from and about another age. Whodunit? Who cares? Plot is not this film's strong point - but spending 90 minutes in the company of a spirited burlesque troupe, led by the inimitable Stanwyck channelling in such wonderfully captivating style her early Broadway years is more compensation than enough. William Wellman directs Babs for the fifth and last time. Good.

IMDb: In 1943, the Production Code wouldn't allow even a hint of what burlesque was all about - the seductive removal of feminine attire down to the buff. Then there was the murder mystery that didn't amount to much. But thanks to Stanwyck's sprightly performance, William Wellman's fast-paced direction and a knowing nod to the spirit (if not the *take it off, take it all off* reality) of burlesque, it's a thoroughly entertaining movie. Stanwyck sings, dances, wisecracks in lowbrow comedy routines and suggests the depth of a performer who strives for - and just might achieve - classier stardom. She's ably supported by Michael O'Shea, the comic who lusts after her, Pinky Lee, with whom she shares some wonderfully acrobatic slapstick and a chorus line of potential murder victims. Who bumps two of them off, or why, hardly seems to matter. Stanwyck strutting her stuff and the film's authentic backstage atmosphere together make this *Lady* well worth watching / The mystery element is played the right way - completely unseriously. Stanwyck is totally appealing and Stephanie Bachelor - *Only tramps work in Toledo!* - is one bombshell of a funny girl / A great curiosity piece ... A bit of a guilty pleasure / *Lady Of Burlesque* is a lot of fun and Stanwyck - sexy, tough and warm - is spectacular / A charming, light-hearted film with dry wit, wartime panache and a truly gorgeous *femme fatale* / Stanwyck is sensational.

## FLESH AND FANTASY (1943)



An ill-titled hodge-podge of three thinly-connected stories bracketed together by a crude and artlessly superimposed framing device. The first, nice but slight, concerns the liberating power of masks. In the second and best, adapted from Oscar Wilde's *Lord Arthur Saville's Crime*, a palm reader tells an upstanding lawyer, well played by Edward G. Robinson, that he's going to commit murder, and is proved right in a way neither expected. Then jewel-thief Stanwyck and aerialist Charles Boyer (above) do their best with a lame script attempting to purvey some foolishness about the possible foresight of dreams. All in all, mildly diverting but ultimately dispensable B-movie fare.

IMDb: Can fantasy become reality, or a prediction a self-fulfilling prophecy? Are dreams real warnings? Very entertaining, with good performances and direction and three strong stories / Although the three segments have a definite style, the whole thing is let down by the linking sequences which mesh very uneasily with Duvivier's carefully crafted tales / The drawn-out shipboard romance of Boyer and Stanwyck is a letdown coming after the best (second) segment / Pretty good, with acting that is seasoned and professional / The movie is hurt by the elimination of a fourth episode, shot by Duvivier, which apparently explains the discovery of the drowned body that opens the first (originally intended to be the second) story. So not the great film it might have been, but still very good / Not especially original but the combination of stylish direction and fine acting lifts it out of the rut / A trio of mystical stories told in that entertainingly glossy, old Hollywood type of way, boasting showmanship over any sort of logic / Charming / Not wholly successful but a good try / Rather plodding ... Pretty disappointing / Superficial nonsense with few surprises / Great fun.



## DOUBLE INDEMNITY (1944)



As glittering gem then, still, and for ages to come. A1.

The motivation that drives Dietrichson and, in particular, Neff is really the crux of the film. Dietrichson delivers a speech on how her husband mistreats her, but it doesn't ring true. Sure, her marriage isn't a bed of roses, but there is little to really back up her claims, and hers is a crime that appears to be born almost exclusively out of boredom. Neff's reasoning is even more interesting. His attraction to Dietrichson is as obvious as it is immediate, yet that alone doesn't prove sufficient reasoning for his willingness to commit a crime he is so quick to walk away from when the proposition is first put to him. Instead, Neff is a victim of his own cleverness, as he attempts to beat the system he is a part of. The relationship the two share is also questionable. Beyond their physical attraction, and, of course, the fact that each is reliant on the other once they commit the murder, their frequent claims of love ring hollow. Lust? Definitely. But love? Not so much ... The acting is truly first-rate. In this early film noir, Stanwyck and MacMurray deliver performances that set a standard that others tried (largely in vain) to emulate. Yet, for all their excellent work it is the contribution of Edward G. Robinson as Neff's superior, Barton Keyes, that stands out. Keyes is the film's moral compass and the human touch EGR brings to the role is vital as, with the two leads being murderers, the audience needs someone to whom they can more readily relate ... Despite the viewer knowing from the off how events unfold, Wilder still succeeds in engaging them for the film's entirety. A standout scene sees Dietrichson arrange to meet Neff at his apartment. Moments before she is due to arrive, Keyes unexpectedly turns up to discuss his suspicions over her claim, leading to a rapid escalation in tension. Common sense tells us how the scene must play out, yet so invested are we in the story that it still shreds nerves ... Deceptively simple yet completely engrossing, *Double Indemnity* is a film whose standing is well-earned. (DVD Verdict)



## ***Double Indemnity*: Best Stanwyck 1940s Film**

One of the great films of all time, not necessarily because of its story but because of the acting, direction, cinematography, lighting and the way the story itself is told. In 1944, the idea of revealing the identity of the killer in the opening scene was virtually unheard of, but it ended up being very effective because it allowed the audience to concentrate more on other elements of the film: how the crime was pulled off, what mistakes were made, who betrayed whom, how close Keyes was getting to solving the case and, perhaps most importantly, what kind of person Walter Neff is and whether or not sympathy should be extended towards him.

Stanwyck, in one of her most remembered performances, renders with near faultless ease the cold and ruthless manipulator who has no difficulty in ruining other people's lives in order to get what she wants. Her Phyllis Dietrichson and MacMurray's Neff have amazing chemistry on screen, their mutual attraction incredibly well portrayed, and their relationship is developed so convincingly that what happens between them seems almost normal. Besides that, their calculated interaction, which seems at first like it has been rehearsed endlessly and ultimately brought unconvincingly to the screen, is exactly as it was meant to be, because it represents each character's intentions, even very subtly foreshadowing their future betrayal of one another. Phyllis has gone through in her head every word she says to Walter, with a view to collecting on her husband's demise. He begins by makes amorous advances as though it is something he does regularly, then, after starting to suspect her commitment, is careful to tell her only what he wants her to hear. This seemingly stiff dialogue brilliantly reflects Phyllis and Walter's precise, sinister, mutually self-serving intentions, and its quick pace creates a feeling of urgency and restlessness.

Probably the most fascinating and entertaining actor in the film, Edward G. Robinson, plays Barton Keyes, Walter's colleague at the insurance company. Keyes, an assessor, closely scrutinises claims and has a striking history of spotting and rejecting the fraudulent ones. His handling of Phyllis's claim and the way that he gets closer and closer to the truth that lies behind it creates a great atmosphere of tension and drama.

*Double Indemnity* is nearly flawless. From the shocking and unexpected beginning to the already known but still surprising end, the audience is held rapt by top drawer performances, brilliant and imaginative direction and a impeccably created atmosphere. This excellent, excellent filmmaking results in a classic that should not be missed. [Michael DeZubiria, IMDb, 8 Nov. 2000](#)

## CHRISTMAS IN CONNECTICUT (1945)



Five years after *Remember The Night*, another delightful Christmas cracker in which vivacious Stanwyck shines. Don't miss it.

IMDb: A sophisticated screwball comedy in a picturesque, snowy, countryside setting, *Christmas In Connecticut* is a neglected holiday gem / This is the warmest Christmas film I have ever seen. It's one of the few films where I think, "I wish I was there." The house they are staying in is the perfect Christmas cottage. The meals they prepare are perfect. The whole feeling of the film is the embodiment of Christmas / Beckons like an oasis in a desert of mediocrity. Highly recommended / A film that shows us truly and nostalgically the America of the 1940s / Completely charming comedy not really devised to be a holiday classic and all the better for it. Stanwyck is a breezy delight. Of the great studio female stars, she was probably the most versatile - and, for good measure, is surrounded here by a top-notch cast / A real delight ... A wonderful light comedy, perfect for winter entertainment / Frothy and breezy slice of screwball that does a good enough job at yuletide without really breaking out of its routine chains / Every time, I see Barbara Stanwyck I am more impressed with her acting, whether in a dramatic or comedic role. Her talent combined with her beauty makes any of her movies hard to pass by. In this holiday film, she is delightfully paired with Dennis Morgan, the incomparable Sydney Greenstreet and a tremendous supporting cast that includes Una O'Connor and S.Z. Sakall. This is one Christmas movie that Christmas movie fans should see - amusing and well-acted holiday entertainment / Wonderfully engaging / A very pleasant, mildly funny seasonal film - but that may be its biggest problem. Up against some stiff competition in terms of Christmas films, there was nothing about this one that would make me want to watch it again and again ...

## MY REPUTATION (1946)



Stanwyck plays a young widow saddled with two kids of 14 and 12 going on 30, a domineering old bat of a mother and a group of friends (so-called) who thrive on gossip. The film suggests that, stifled to the point of rebellion by the need to conform to social convention, she scandalises the mother and primes the gossips, who in turn upset the kids, by carrying on with Major Landis (George Brent - see also *Baby Face* / *The Purchase Price* / *The Gay Sisters* - above). But, beyond declining to wear black and stay home all day, we neither see nor are advised of any "carrying on" to speak of, and Brent is so hopelessly inadequate a leading man that not a jot springs readily to mind. This very trying 94 minutes of turgid soap starts at a pedestrian lick from which it never once departs through to the far-distant credits. One to avoid.

IMDb: Though the story is nothing special, Stanwyck dominates every scene she's in. While Davis and Crawford had a tendency to remind audiences they were acting, Babs just rolled up her sleeves and got the job done / Slightly disappointing / A great drama, filled with deep sentiments, tight friendships, distraught characters who need more than they can ever get, and rays of hope, made for an audience filled with women recently widowed, either literally or figuratively, with men returning from the war not yet ready to be the men they were before they went away. It is 1946, after all, a giant tipping point in American social life / This movie could have been a lot better with a more dynamic male lead. Even when younger, Brent was one of the most dull and unattractive actors of his day / Stanwyck, so graceful and sturdy, excels, even by her own lofty standards, though the ending is abrupt and not altogether convincing.

## THE BRIDE WORE BOOTS (1946)



Stanwyck's comedy career closes with 86 minutes of puerile piffle. The girl pulling the boot above is a very young Natalie Wood. Poor.

IMDb: Barbara Stanwyck is an expert light comic actress when she is given a good script. Look at *The Lady Eve*, which is considered one of the classic screwball comedies of all times. The year before this, she was absolutely delightful in the charming *Christmas In Connecticut*, which lightened up her reputation after *Double Indemnity* cast her as a murderess. Those two films, in addition to a few other comedies she did (*Red Salute*, *Breakfast For Two*, *The Mad Miss Manton*, even *Good Morning, Doctor*) had at least amusing stories with funny characters. A few of them actually were extremely well written. But *The Bride Wore Boots*, like a similarly titled comedy she did (*The Bride Walks Out*), is a comedy lacking in laughs ... Like *The Awful Truth*, this is a comedy about divorce. It opens at Christmas with Stanwyck introduced as a horse-loving Southern girl whose husband (Robert Cummings) knows absolutely nothing about horses. He's more interested in antiques, which results in her getting him a desk allegedly owned by Jefferson Davis. He gets her a "colt", which turns out to be a 12-year-old well past his prime, too old for racing. Cummings, cast as a poor sap who can't seem to do anything right to save his marriage, gets into a sparring match with Stanwyck's old flame, Patric Knowles, while an extremely annoying Southern belle (Diana Lynn) sets her sights on trapping Cummings, which leads Stanwyck to the divorce court. Peggy Wood, best known as the Reverend Mother in *The Sound Of Music*, plays Stanwyck's mother, and is the most amusing supporting character in the film ... There were more than a dozen comedies about divorce (most notably *The Awful Truth* and *Love Crazy*) during the heyday of the screwball comedy and, though Stanwyck is lovely and does her best with a rather mediocre script, this Johnny-come-lately doesn't come anywhere near the quality of any of them. Like an earlier film of hers (*Ten Cents A Dance*) it took me a long time to find, I found *The Bride Wore Boots* highly disappointing. It's no wonder from this point on in her career that she concentrated mainly on melodramas and Westerns.



*THE STRANGE LOVE OF MARTHA IVERS (1946)*



Kirk Douglas (above) makes his screen debut and Van Heflin his first of three appearances opposite Stanwyck (see also *B.F.'s Daughter* and *East Side, West Side*) in a dark little movie that grips from first frame to last. Douglas went on to stardom - but whatever became of Lizabeth Scott? Very good.

IMDb: "Don't look back, baby," says a man who knows his Gideon Bible, "You know what happened to Lot's wife." But her fate is mild compared to the torments of two people - and a third they draw into their web - who can never stop looking back to something that happened when they were children. What connects this melodrama with noir films like the perfectly named *Out Of The Past*, *The Killers* (in which the hero explains that he is doomed because, "I did something wrong, once") and many others is the theme that one mistake, one "reckless moment", can seal your fate forever. The three children are Sam Masterson, a streetwise kid from the wrong side of the tracks, Walter O'Neil, a timid, obedient boy whose father is ambitious for him, and Martha Ivers, the orphaned heiress to a steel mill, who lives miserably with her aunt (Judith Anderson, in Mrs. Danvers mode). On the fateful night, all three are in the house when Martha, driven over the edge (her aunt both insults her dead father, a mill hand, and beats her kitten!) whacks her aunt with her own cane and sends her tumbling to her death at the foot of a grand staircase. Walter's father sees his chance, and holding the threat of exposure over Martha's head, takes control of her fortune and later forces her to marry Walter. When, eighteen years later, Sam (who ran away on the night of the killing on a circus train) blows back into town, Martha and Walter fear he has returned to blackmail them with his knowledge; Walter also fears, rightly, that Martha and Sam still carry a torch for each other. The highly-charged triangle becomes a quadrangle

with the addition of Toni Marachek, a young woman just out of jail whom Sam picks up and befriends. *The Strange Love Of Martha Ivers* is a conventional studio product, lacking the expressive camera-work or atmospheric settings that noir usually offers. Bombastic music deafens each emotional climax, women go to sleep with their glossy masks of makeup intact and obvious back-projection and poorly staged action sequences make the film look like a staged play. None of this really diminishes the movie, however, since its power comes from a smart script, especially from the complexity of characters and relationships. There is a strong affinity between Sam and Martha, both tough and poised and hard to read, while Toni and Walter are more vulnerable and obvious, driven by the simple motivation of love. But by the end it's clear that Martha and Walter have become twins, warped by their shared guilt (they both took part in prosecuting an innocent man who was hanged for the murder) while Sam and Toni share a fundamental decency and the capacity to look ahead to a fresh start. Nice girl Toni is there to provide eye candy and a potential happy ending for Sam, but she gets a lot of screen time - too much, in fact, for her one-note character. Fans of Elizabeth Scott won't agree, but unless you find her particularly alluring, her scenes get a little tedious. Van Heflin is easy-going as Sam, the self-confident gambler who thinks he's seen it all, until he encounters Martha and Walter's toxic marriage. Heflin, though rather homely, brings a likable raffishness to the part, and his casual opportunism keeps you guessing about what he'll do next. Kirk Douglas was never cast as such a weakling again (this was his debut film) but the mismatch works brilliantly. His intensity and powerful presence make his abject character fiercely compelling, instead of merely pathetic. A less imposing actor would come off as just a milquetoast; Douglas's manliness adds an interesting touch of perversity to his plight. His weakness is inside. Douglas captures perfectly Walter's insecurity and helpless jealousy, his cowardly use of his power (through Martha's influence, he has become District Attorney), his lame attempts to project confidence, his dependence on alcohol to salve his humiliation. He's not dumb; he knows that Martha would never have married him without the threat of exposure, but he clings to his feeble hold on her because he loves her desperately. You can't help feeling sorry for him, especially when Martha accuses him and his father of coming after her money like leeches, and he cries out, "All I wanted was you!" Then there's Martha, the mysterious centre of the film. Barbara Stanwyck has an amazing ability to draw the audience to her side and at the same time make one's blood run cold. She's in her prime here as a glamorous businesswoman (with steely satisfaction she shows off the improvements she made to the factory, "all by myself") who conveys total control, yet feels trapped in a life she loathes. Her hardness is at once glorious and chilling; she controls her husband like a cruel hypnotist. When she breaks down in tears and tells Sam that she has been the victim all along, powerless and frightened, like Sam you're moved but not quite sure you believe her. Even at the end, the ambiguity is unresolved: how much is Martha the victim, how much the villain? Walter says it's no one's fault; it's just the way things are; it's what people will do to get the things they want. The scenes between Martha and Walter are the highlight of the film, saturated with a poisonous mixture of love and hate, tinged with sado-masochism ("Even pain at your hands..." Walter sighs when she puts iodine on his cut hand). This pact with desire, fear, greed and guilt is the spectacle of ruin - the Sodom and Gomorrah - that prompts Sam to warn Toni, "Don't look back, baby. Don't ever look back." / A powerhouse cast delivers a worthy addition to the noir film family / Well plotted ... Does credit to all involved / Haunting and strange / A work of art as relevant and moving now as it was 69 years ago. Awesome!

## CALIFORNIA (1947)



Part musical, part history, part drama, and Stanwyck in colour for the first time - but less than the sum of its parts. Ray Milland (above) is an unconvincing lead, Babs' role is relatively small, her character once again changes wholesale in the film's closing moments and the story is thin. Look out for a young Anthony Quinn (see also *Blowing Wild*). A once-only 97 minutes.

IMDb: So boring, with shallow screenplay, bad scenario, elementary directing and bad acting. Primitive and formulaic / Stanwyck's acting in the first half is more aggressive than necessary. Milland, on the other hand, effectively portrays a man who does not trust women after a previous entanglement made him desert his army post. Their mutual distrust causes a fierce antagonism and they go to extremes to conceal their true feelings for one another. Of course, love finds its way in the end and the final scene is very tender. If the film had concentrated more on them and less on the "epic" side it would have been richer. Nevertheless, well worth seeing / Everyone except Anthony Quinn is miscast. Milland is a suave Englishman, not a wandering cowboy who needs a shave. George Coulouris isn't bad as the powerful heavy and gang leader but Barry Fitzgerald does not belong in the small part of his grizzled sidekick - and Stanwyck belongs in the city, not a saloon / A stab at an epic Western that fails to gel / Stanwyck is alternately tough, tender and tempestuous. Quinn is wasted ... The film's most interesting segment is its last - a fictionalized vision of early California before swimming pools and movie stars, not to mention ski resorts, Hollywood signs, free-ways and Governors / Handsome production values, disappointing results / Not a great movie, but an enjoyable one, especially for Stanwyck fans / Tries hard to be a sprawling epic but ends up just sprawling. The hero barely registers, the villain is a cardboard stereotype and Fitzgerald's character too saintly to be believable. Sad.

## THE TWO MRS CARROLLS (1947)



Bogart at his least convincing as a tortured artist driven to double murder to propitiate his Muse. Well fed and groomed, snappily dressed and 100% paint-free, he fails utterly to bring his character to life. His precocious daughter is equally implausible. Through the murk, Stanwyck shines with her usual unaffected ease - just about all this trite tale has in its favour. The only time Bogie and BS starred together.

The murder of the first Mrs. Carroll has a moral greyness that suggests a mercy killing, casting Geoffrey as a noir anti-hero, which is Bogart's bread and butter. The genius of *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* is when we realize that murder was his plan the whole time. The switch in perspective is a genuinely frightening one, making the audience something of an accomplice in the process. This switcheroo is detracted only by Bogart's ham-fisted interpretation of Carroll's true colours.

Much like John Wayne, Bogart found stardom by perfectly personifying distinctive traits of heroic masculinity. Bogart's onscreen persona had a slow-burning intensity layered by coolly detached, smartass mannerisms that made heroes and anti-heroes like Sam Spade and Phillip Marlowe iconic. Unfortunately, this cinematic persona didn't carry over well with villains. With the exception of his reluctant killer in *The Petrified Forest*, the man never could excel at playing a cutthroat, gangster, or psychopath. He isn't done many favours by the script here, either, which gives Geoffrey zero psychological texture beyond the lame excuse that he goes crazy when he can't paint (which only happens once every few years, apparently) ...

Judge Ike Oden, *DVD Review*, 9 March 2011 [abridged]



## THE OTHER LOVE (1947)



Stanwyck plays Karen Duncan, a celebrated pianist and wilful - not to say self-destructive - consumptive who runs off with a playboy in defiance of doctor's orders and then realises she loves the doctor after all. This medically dubious and dramatically fraught weeper rings false from chic start to maudlin finish. From a Remarque short story. 88 manipulative minutes, with David Niven.

IMDb: A bit slow. With Stanwyck, there's always the possibility of a good twist or something different, but *The Other Love* delivers nothing beyond romantic melodrama / Stanwyck can turn any role into something watchable - but this silly movie taxed her talents to the limit / Lacking pace and energy, the film moves slowly and predictably from one anguished moment to the next with dull results. Croupier Gilbert Roland provides its most powerful passage, superbly shot in the dark doorway of a dingy back street, as he coldly exploits Stanwyck in a highly vulnerable situation / Good for a decent cry but Stanwyck has done better / A wonderful movie, very much a product of its time. Glamour is everything as the sanatorium guests dine in gowns and tuxedos while taking long, smouldering drags on their cigarettes. Stanwyck looks gorgeous, Niven is a dreamy doctor and Conte a bit off-putting as a race driver on the make / During the 1940s, Stanwyck was either suffering or making some man suffer in his quest for sin. In this tearjerker it's the former / If you adore disease movies, you'll probably like this one. Too dramatic and clichéd, perhaps, but reasonably well-done and engaging. Not the career highlight of any of its stars. A sticky, slightly silly time-passer / An above average melodrama, beautifully photographed with lush sets in exotic places / *The Other Love* transitions beautifully from the romantic 1930s film to the modern romantic genre. The setting is wonderful. The glamorous places where scenes take place are enchanting, which does wonders to develop the "feeling" of the plot. All in all, a noteworthy romantic "sleeper" of a movie, with a beautiful musical score and poignant dialogue, that has escaped the attention of vintage film critics / Torrid but never horrid ... [Potentially] great stuff not quite exploited ... A great movie in its bones, but never quite getting off the ground / Too pat and contrived, even for this genre of pulp romance / Niven is too lightweight to make a convincing leading man. Claude Rains as the doctor might have lifted the film out of its mediocrity / Wondrously soppy. A truly irresistible piece of high-fashion schmaltz.

## CRY WOLF (1947)



Remote gothic pile + creepy tenant and staff + locked laboratory + things that go bump (and AAARRGH!!) in the night + madness + dark deeds + a body or two + a feisty heroine + Errol Flynn acting (and it shows) against type = 84 minutes of B-movie schlock.

IMDb: A tense, suspenseful melodrama, ominous and unsettling throughout. The dependable Stanwyck rarely disappoints - nor does she here - but the big surprise is Errol Flynn, who shows unexpected depth and nuance. Who knew he was capable of such acting? / An American variation on *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre*, with film noir elements / An effective old-dark-house mystery in which neither Flynn or Stanwyck are asked to stretch themselves. Standard stuff with a nice, old-fashioned feel. An enjoyable failure / A pretty limp noirish mystery. Stanwyck is good but she and Flynn don't have strong chemistry, which makes the inevitable (and predictable) ending fall flat / A truly dark and under-appreciated film, full of menace from title to credits. / A great movie about trust, and how suspicion, cynicism and paranoia can influence our impressions of people ... The viewer is left to guess whether Flynn, who seems rigid and controlling, is the villain. He succeeds in investing his character with sufficient depth and stability to have us - and Stanwyck - questioning his intentions to the close. The cinematography and score are first-rate. The climax ties up all the loose ends in memorable fashion. The last line of dialogue is redolent of the wall of doubt that can be forged between two people when the worst of human nature is assumed / Top-notch acting and a genuine frightfest / Satisfying and entertaining. I thought the film built to a finale that, while not greatly surprising, was revelatory. Though I suspected the mystery's solution, I didn't know for sure until the end / The writing, choppy and shallow, offers up only shadows and stereotypes / Stanwyck, tough and determined, is called upon to do some amazing physical stunts - riding, climbing, falling, jumping. She's just great! / Bad Script Trumps Glossy Production Values / What a dud!

### *B.F.'S DAUGHTER* (1948)



Listed on IMDb as *Polly Fulton* (the name allegedly changed due to the vulgar connotation attached in Britain to the letters B.F.) and dismissed by Leonard Maltin as "dreadful", *B.F.'s Daughter* - an adaptation of a politically-charged J.P. Marquand novel of the same name - spins in 108 consistently engaging minutes an unlikely yarn of capitalist v. commie crossed love. With Van Heflin (above - see also *Martha Ivers* and *East Side, West Side*). Stanwyck looks so like Margaret Thatcher in her prime (and, go-getters both, they *were* two of a kind) that you have to wonder whether the PM deliberately (or perhaps subliminally?) modelled her persona on the bright-shining star. Good.

IMDb: Stanwyck's picture from start to finish. Even if this movie is not all it should be, just look for the silver lining. It's Barbara Stanwyck / Glossy, slow-moving, inconsistent. One of Stanwyck's most disappointing films / Features some interesting class concepts regarding rich and poor, but the characters are obtuse and the story is artificial, with no real "poor" on screen. Romantic entanglements rise barely above the adolescent. Still, the sets look nice and everything is well photographed / Mostly dull with Heflin and Stanwyck showing little chemistry / The controversial, more political source novel is turned by MGM into a romantic soap opera, with terrific performances from Stanwyck, who is lovely and sincere, and Heflin, a fine leading man or character actor, who left us too soon / The script needs spicing up or something. Everything and everyone is technically competent, but there's something lacking / Marquand didn't deserve this / Stanwyck plays with complete mastery / Absolutely no sense of period detail. We see 1948 fashions throughout, and although the film covers fifteen years, no one ages a whit. Competent acting but the script is so weak. Utter piffle!

## *SORRY, WRONG NUMBER* (1948)



89 minutes, with Burt Lancaster, William Conrad and a small part for Leif "Big John" Erickson. In this shrill, busy, densely plotted and beautifully shot noir, Stanwyck plays another controlling, moneyed wife (see *B.F.'s Daughter*), this time also a hypochondriac neurotic. Well wrought with lots to enjoy. Good.

IMDb: One of the great works of '40s black cinema / Padded: a half-hour premise painfully stretched to 89 minutes / Melodrama on steroids. Hysterical in every sense of the word. Often extremely funny without intending to be. Quite dated and stupid but thoroughly enjoyable / No Hitchcock, but still worth seeing / A very nice film noir with original storytelling and beautiful acting by Stanwyck, which earned her a Best Actress Academy Award nomination. The last scenes define the movie's greatness / Lancaster is stiff and uneasy / Heck of a thriller, though the narrative is difficult to piece together at times / A gripping storyline, surprising plot twists, great direction and perfect use of the suspense factor add up to a movie that every cinephile should watch and admire / Highly recommended as a very engaging film noir with lots of rather unsympathetic characters you'll come to care about nonetheless / If you are looking for a hyper, climatic, edge-of-the-seat thriller then *Sorry, Wrong Number* will get you to where you want to go - and how. An unparalleled forties thriller / The last five minutes are as good as drama gets / No masterpiece and inferior to the radio play it's based on, but suspense fans might want to give it a try / A confused, limp movie in which Stanwyck is miscast / Wonderful acting, pretty good script and old-fashioned suspense make this a classic gem / Stanwyck's fine performance carries the film to an exciting, tense, conclusion / A powerful, unconventional, underrated classic / Enjoyed every moment of this gripping, tension-packed film noir thriller. Stanwyck is superb / The real star here is the crisp, deep focus, black and white cinematography / Wow!



## THE LADY GAMBLER (1949)



Solid though psychologically suspect tale of gambling addiction. 99 minutes, with Robert Preston (*Union Pacific*), Leif "Big John" Erickson (for the second film running) and (look sharp) a fresh-faced Tony Curtis. Worth a punt.

IMDb: Okay, though predictable. Stanwyck carries the film with good support from gangster Stephen McNally. Preston changes his tune as he swings from rejecting to accepting his troubled wife, the big sister role is annoying and some sentimental pop psychology is dragged into the proceedings. The film ends in a disappointingly corny way after a funny moment when the doctor shows us what to say to someone (*Go on! Jump!*) when they are about to leap off a window ledge / A hidden masterpiece, way ahead of its time / Sadly dated / Barbara Stanwyck is surely one of the greatest motion pictures actresses ever, but *The Lady Gambler* is one of her lesser works despite a sincere, empathic performance from its star. This movie, which seems to want to be the gambling version of *The Lost Weekend*, is more like *The Lost 100 Minutes*. Even the charismatic Stanwyck can't prevent this heavy-handed drama being a chore to watch ... The worst thing about the film is the jaw-dropping pop psychology that attempts to explain away Stanwyck's gambling habit as caused by her possessive elder spinster sister Ruth / In one of the best performances of her later years, Stanwyck plays an emotionally distraught woman who is tortured by the deep-buried "guilt" of having killed her mother during childbirth / Stanwyck's was a curious career. The highest paid woman in pictures - actually, in America - for a while, she made her share of workaday, forgettable films, *The Lady Gambler* among them - though, despite its semi-documentary approach, it sustains interest to the end / A wonderful gem / With regard to the indifferent doctor (more concerned with finishing his meal than attending a newly arrived and semi-conscious patient), all I can say is The more things change, the more they stay the same ...

## *EAST SIDE, WEST SIDE (1949)*



Characterful study of a troubled marriage with a murder mystery thrown in for good measure. James Mason (above) is well cast as the rat who can't leave Ava Gardner alone and Van Heflin turns up again. Stanwyck's confidante is Nancy Davis (later Mrs Ronald Reagan). 108 minutes. Good.

IMDb: What a cast! I can enjoy this movie for that reason alone, and the stars really strut their stuff / A pretty good story with some fine acting. Recommended / Powerful acting by top actresses, perfectly matched by James Mason in the glorious setting of old New York. They don't make movies like this anymore / A sparkling script and any number of wonderfully dramatic scenes / This movie illustrated so well the multi-dimensional facets of our human characters. I don't think there was a bad guy here. There were people trying to make their relationships work, falling in love, falling out of love, being weak, being strong, having regrets and having hope - in other words, being very human. I loved it / A nervous, flighty picture, paced exhaustively by director LeRoy, but quite watchable overall / Ava Gardner is outstanding and Cyd Charisse excellent. Mason is not my cup of tea but he too pulls it off. Seamless and sexy in a very subtle way / An over-written, over-long "will she or won't she leave him?" turkey. One talky, static scene after another with a desultory murder thrown in / Ava's fabulous here as one amoral woman, the kind that Stanwyck herself has on occasion played on screen. Their one scene together has extra bite because Ava's previous picture, *The Bribe*, co-starred Robert Taylor and the two of them allegedly went at it like rabbits in the off hours. Talk about Art imitating Life / I never knew what was going to happen next and kept right on watching till 2 a.m. / Nothing here that hasn't been done before, but it is handled with such style and finesse that it's impossible to dislike and the story is surprisingly involving / Exquisite cast, superb production and a tight story line make this a must see / Pedestrian / Compelling.

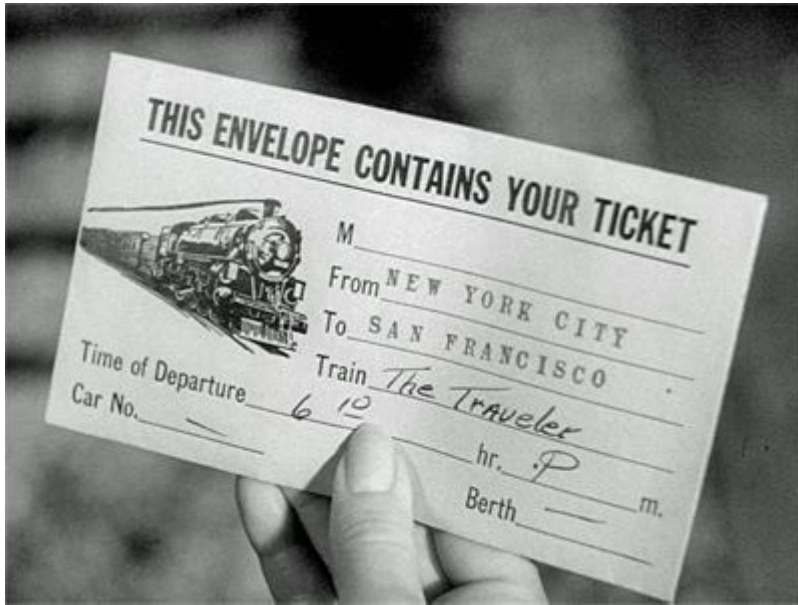
*THE FILE ON THELMA JORDAN (1950)*



*Double Indemnity* revisited, except the crime is less interesting, the *femme* is less *fatale* and the assistant DA (Wendell Corey, above - no Keyes, him) is a sot and a sap. In case that wasn't enough, *Thelma Jordan's* lacklustre 100 minutes concludes with yet another last gasp deathbed moral somersault that Stanwyck - just out of a fireball car wreck but unmarked and made up to the nines - has to put over with a straight face. And who said acting was easy? Director Robert Siodmak made acclaimed Burt Lancaster noirs *Criss Cross* and *The Killers*. This one, though, struggles in vain to top Average.

IMDb: A twisting, gripping, quality noir thriller. The relative anonymity of the cast (Stanwyck apart) adds to the veracity of stories like this, of out-of-the-ordinary events happening to ordinary people / A great mystery story that will keep you guessing how it will eventually end / Entertaining ... Some nice twists and turns ... Outstanding cinematography / Interesting and well acted though at times a tad predictable - so much so that you have to assume that Corey's character is an idiot! Still, a decent representation of the genre / A film noir where characterization is the most important element of the plot / Another film spoiled by its Hayes-imposed "moral" ending / Overcooked dialogue, overwrought acting, an impossibly convoluted plot ... The final confession sequence was just too much / Stanwyck was marvellous in so many movies spanning the decades ... In *Double Indemnity*, she and MacMurray sizzle. This pair don't quite fizzle but they dawdle. Tepid / A must for films noirs buffs / A dark highlight of the noir cycle / Suspenseful, despite an old hat ending that's been done *ad nauseam* / An underrated classic with a brilliantly constructed narrative / Fair.

## NO MAN OF HER OWN (1950)



Stanwyck, eight months gone and on her uppers, assumes another's identity after a train crash, but she and her new son have hardly settled into the good life before the past catches up with her. Luckily, she has a .38 and some slugs in the drawer. One shot is fired. Shame about the rushed denouement, otherwise good. 97 minutes.

In many ways, the perfect TCM movie - not necessarily a top-drawer piece of vintage Hollywood studio craft, but the kind of absorbing, well-turned and somewhat ludicrous flick that immediately sucks you in while channel-surfing on a lonely Friday night. *No Man of Her Own's* durable story was based on a novel called *I Married a Dead Man*, written under a pseudonym by crime fiction icon Cornell Woolrich (*Rear Window*, *Deadline at Dawn*). The story veers from typical women's-picture stuff into dense, compelling noir. Director Mitchell Leisen is noted for getting strong performances from his leading actresses and (perhaps unfairly) for lavishing undue attention on the lighting, sets and overall look of his pictures. In this case, the tactic works well as the cosy domesticity of the Harkness home over Thanksgiving, Christmas and the following Spring is contrasted with Stanwyck's mounting dread. Leisen does a lot of interesting business with mirrors and reflections commenting on the character's duality. It also helps that the film benefits from some truly gorgeous cinematography by Daniel L. Fapp (*West Side Story*, *The Great Escape*). Certainly the best reason to seek out *No Man of Her Own* is Barbara Stanwyck. She gives a committed performance, even as the story strains credibility. It's a tribute to her gifts that her Helen / Patrice remains a sympathetic character even as most of us are yelling "tell the truth, already!" at the screen. It's also fascinating to watch her transition from pathetic woman-done-wrong into a more assertive noir heroine. Overwrought and unbelievable it may be, but *No Man of Her Own* benefits from one of Barbara Stanwyck's better performances and some finely-tuned scenes of suspense from director Mitchell Leisen. Stanwyck did particularly well at playing women in peril and her Helen aka Patrice here is a pip. Recommended. (Matt Hinrichs, *DVDtalk*, 23 March 2012)



## THE FURIES (1950)



In his last film appearance, Walter Huston (above) plays rapacious, larger than life cattle baron T.C. Jeffords, *The Furies* is his Southwestern ranch, Stanwyck his fiery daughter Vance and charisma-free Wendell Corey (*The File On Thelma Jordan*) her calculating banker / swain Rip Darrow. *The Furies* is 109 minutes of mildly pretentious, economically suspect bunkum peopled with a raft of equally unlikeable characters, leaving the unfortunate viewer with no-one to root for and a feeling, well before the end, of Who cares?

IMDb: Fevered and kinky, with a lot of psychological baggage / Compared to Mann's other Westerns, a disappointment ... Corey is about as dangerous as an assistant manager in a shoe shop / One of the best Westerns ever made / Some of the acting is very far from subtle / A weird, uneven cross between a women's picture, a Western and film noir ... Characters seem to turn on a dime - Huston and Stanwyck go from idolizing one another to hating each other and back again - but maybe that's the point / A disappointing film noir version of *Duel In The Sun* that stretches the limits of the Western genre by introducing too much romance and soap opera. Stanwyck does a great job, but her role is too hammy / Gorgeously photographed, fascinating entertainment / An intensely passionate movie swirling with psychosexual emotionalism and Shakespearean-level acts of murder, revenge and greed, but oddly, perhaps due to the edicts of studio censors, Mann applies the brakes in the disappointing final portion of the film / Overwrought, but entertaining as all get out. The time flies by while these self-centred people have dangerous fun tearing at each other / A tangy, well-salted, par-boiled Western with great performances by Stanwyck, Huston and Anderson / A well-crafted, enjoyably mean-spirited Western with an unpleasantly conventional moral ending / Over-hyped, overblown and schlocky / A wild ride that really crackles with energy / A dark, simmering film with over the top performances. Good.

## TO PLEASE A LADY (1950)



Stanwyck adds Clark Gable (above) to her impressive roster of leading men (though their paths crossed briefly in 1931's *Night Nurse*). Who did she miss out on? Cary Grant, Spencer Tracy, Jimmy Stewart, Leslie Howard - any more? (Rather, they missed out on *her*. I'll bet that in the '70s Peter Falk tried to get her for *Columbo*, but, perhaps due to other commitments, it never happened.) Adolphe Menjou (*Forbidden*, *Golden Boy*) is back again. Look out, too, for a young Will Geer. As for the film, *To Please A Lady*'s extended footage of midget and Indy car racing footage bolsters a trite but watchable romance played out by two leads with hopelessly flip-flop personalities. Gable is mean but then not really while Stanwyck needs only a slap in the puss / rough clinch one-two to metamorphose magically from hard-as-flint journo to soft-as-mush camp follower. 91 minutes. A petrol heads' delight - otherwise fair.

IMDb: A demented romance-from-hell that bored me to tears / Car racing at its best / Surprisingly unexciting ... Ho-hum, predictable and formulaic. Stanwyck's character is completely unlikeable / Little complexity or depth, but I liked it / Asks the question: can a tough female journo remain objective in reporting a story when in love with its subject? / Gable's sex appeal comes steaming off the screen. His chemistry with Stanwyck is the way you dream that love can happen / The story line is thin as Gable's moustache but the 65 year old automotive background is priceless / Worth watching, even after all these years / Exceptionally dull / Just another Gable-playing-himself movie. That's called acting? / Not very interesting / Corny / Highly recommended for vintage race fans / Of more than 50 Stanwyck films I've seen, this is the worst.

## THE MAN WITH A CLOAK (1951)



A short (80 minutes) but engaging little period piece set in a nicely rendered New York of 1848, relating the battle between a crooked domestic staff (headed by housekeeper Stanwyck, in an undemanding part) and a young emissary from Paris for a dying man's money. The identity of mysterious title character "Dupin" is revealed in the film's closing seconds - but the alert viewer should be able, helped by a few clues along the way, to get there first. See how *you* fare. Well worth a dip.

IMDb: Some genuinely suspenseful moments ... Brims with atmosphere / Not as dark as it needs to be. Never gets truly interesting. The reveal at the end answers a question that nobody is even asking / A routine story masked by its setting / You'll need to watch this movie at least twice to appreciate it fully. Despite its many intertwining plots and sub-plots, the real crux of the story is only revealed at the very end / This film wastes Barbara Stanwyck. I have seen many of her films and she nearly always steals the picture - but here she is dominated by an extremely boring Joseph Cotton. About the last of her films you should watch / An absorbing 80 minutes with a surprise payoff / Good, solid, if unspectacular filmmaking / An impressive roster of performers who somehow fail to jell as a team. Not a winning film / There's a murder in this mystery, but it's not at all what you would think. There are several plot twists that, while not spectacular, are still suspenseful and entertaining. You may or may not be caught by surprise by the revelation at the end, but many will be / Not an important movie but an engaging one, with a well-upholstered production and solid supporting players - peculiar, unusual, well-acted and thoroughly enjoyable. The last twist is a smashing one / Victorian noir - a pleasant surprise / A plodding, talky, aridly cerebral botch of a thriller / Stanwyck, a tough broad, not a poseur, is miscast / An almost forgotten treasure / Worth watching / Good show all round / Stay away.

*CLASH BY NIGHT* (1952)



An unrelentingly dreary drama full of unconvincing characters. Leading men Jerry and Earl are equally unappealing - one a lunk, the other a lout - and that Mae would fall for either of them is equally implausible. She's manipulative, cynical, flawed, mostly bad, but not stupid. The fondness of some for this kitchen-sink soap opera is hard to understand. Marilyn Monroe is feisty; the bartender (uncredited) is Stanwyck's brother Bert. Robert Ryan (above, left) will re-appear in the equally tiresome *Escape To Burma*. Poor.

IMDb: Barbara Stanwyck is so good at playing rough-hewn women, characters with a cynical edge, that it's easy to take her presence here for granted. Once again, she is remarkably good as a tough cookie returning to her hometown along the waterfront and eventually reuniting with her estranged brother. Marilyn Monroe is also good as a sassy local girl (although her lines sound as if they were looped in post-production) and Paul Douglas is terrific as a love-struck skipper. Tempestuous melodrama is decent fare; it has heated emotions and florid dialogue, but perhaps more subtlety and nuance would've made it a more memorable picture / The ending had to be a reconciliation with the husband, at the insistence of the Hayes Office. Okay, I've seen plenty of other films ruined by an ending that forces the woman into submission / curtailng her freedom / desires. However, this ending was still extremely painful, asking us to swallow a sudden and complete change of Mae's personality occurring in the space of *two minutes*. I'm not saying I necessarily wanted her to go off with Ryan, but I didn't like how or why she decided to stay. It would have been nice to see the original ending to the play preserved, in which the husband is driven to murder.



## JEOPARDY (1953)



Stanwyck, husband Barry Sullivan (above) and son take a road trip down into Mexico. After falling timber traps Dad on the beach with the tide coming in, Mom races off to find a means of rescue, but is soon taken hostage by hood Ralph Meeker on the lam. Sullivan will be back in *The Maverick Queen* and *Forty Guns*. 69 minutes of low-budget, B-movie hokum.

IMDb: An above-average "race-against-time" thriller / A real nail biter! / Has the feel of being a stock movie, but surprisingly effective / Solid and simple with some nice moral twisting / A tough movie made on a small budget / A B movie, but a darned good one. A taut little thriller, worth watching at least once / A nicely filmed and compact little melodrama that's hard to dislike / No masterpiece but 69 minutes of pure "old school" entertainment / A brisk story, tightly constructed around a simple theme that works beautifully. Director Sturges doesn't waste a moment / Dim-watt distress thriller, often howlingly far-fetched, that relies almost completely on every character acting foolishly / Interesting locales and cinematography / Barely more than a competent made-for-TV film, beneath the talent of all the players involved / Ends weakly but still plenty to enjoy / Foolish, awesomely improbable potboiler redeemed only by some crisp location photography. Too unbelievable to generate much in the way of tension ... Threadbare ... Infuriatingly dumb / A marvellous and quite unknown little thriller ... A wonderful little gem that hasn't dated one iota! Classic noir / A small piece of art / Fantastic - kept me on the edge of my seat / Suspenseful almost from the get-go / Idiotic but mercifully short. Just a dumb old movie / Despite some ridiculous flaws, a good white-knuckler that starts off tepid then catches fire, building to an exciting and edifying conclusion / A qualified "beat the clock" success.

## TITANIC (1953)



44 years ahead of James Cameron and on one per cent of his budget, this first *Titanic* launches nicely with film of a calving iceberg, then, helped in no small part by a star turn from Stanwyck, steams through to its inevitable conclusion in first class style. Won the 1954 Best Writing, Story and Screenplay Academy Award. Look out for a young Robert Wagner who, according to him, began a four year relationship with Barbara during the making of this film. 98 minutes.

IMDb: Very good and worth checking out. Unless you're an iceberg, the ending will have you in tears / The best *Titanic*. A winner all round / With its poetic script and terrific execution, *Titanic* gives us a timeless story of ominous fate, a poignant humanistic story of misplaced trust in technology and the dramatic contrast between short-term pettiness and misfortune so dire as to overwhelm those affected for the rest of their lives. By far the best cinematic treatment of the epic ocean disaster / While falling a little short of *A Night To Remember*, *Titanic* hits all bases successfully and remains a fine example of Hollywood-produced product from the 1950s / Pretty mediocre / In contrast to *A Night To Remember*, released five years later, has little to offer a modern audience / Not as technically sophisticated as the Cameron version but much more emotionally resonant / A great script with performances to match / Much, much better than the long and expensive 1997 version. The whole story is told in half the time courtesy of a scrumptious script and superb performances by Stanwyck and Webb. The special effects are as effective as anything in Cameron's film, but less important, because here the filmmakers' hearts and minds focus on the human drama. Also, stories in those days were told with an adult audience in mind, with the tale's poignancy related by thinking people for thinking people / Visually stunning.

## ALL I DESIRE (1953)



Stifled wife and mother of three Naomi first carries on with Dutch down by the lake and then leaves town to avoid a scandal. After several years of hard-scrabbling on the stage, she returns, to deal with Dutch, reconnect with her family and pick up the threads of her old life. Well produced and performed but excessively soapy and lamely concluded. 76 minutes. Worth a look.

IMDb: A tight script, Stanwyck is riveting as always and Sirk's eye for brilliant framing is hard at work, making for a quick, easy watch with some slight subversiveness in its commentary on small town gossip and hypocrisy / The ending is untrue to the story and impacts its overall effect / A minor film that showcases the flair of its German director in enhancing tired storylines into something resembling art / One of the best films of its period ... What a hoot! / Sirk's films are always worth watching.

The first of two movies Stanwyck made for director Douglas Sirk (see also *There's Always Tomorrow*): both black and white, both sudsy melodramas on the surface, and, just beneath, devastating critiques of societal smugness and conformity. Here Stanwyck plays Naomi Murdoch, an actress who split from her husband long ago and has returned home to their small town to see their daughter perform in a high-school play. She's a woman who has to salvage her own feelings for her husband and children from the resentment and pride with which she protects herself from the town's disapproval. What makes it harder is that her husband and one of her daughters hide their own pain behind the same disapproval: she was too stylish, too ambitious, too much, so it was just as well she left them. Stanwyck's gift for playing ambiguous emotion never served her better than in this delicate, mature performance.

Margaret Talbot, *The New Yorker*, 20 December 2013

## BLOWING WILD (1953)



85 minutes of barrel-scraping bilge, on a par with the equally hopeless *A Message To Garcia*, in which Stanwyck is a histrionic caricature of her best self, Quinn proves a one-trick pony and Cooper seems embarrassed to be caught up in such mind-numbingly dismal proceedings. A series of heated action sequences involving *bandidos* with dynamite, a race between a horse and a car, a torpedo-containing oil well "blowing wild" and so on is stitched together with a facile love-triangle narrative that fails to convince or grip or interest, even mildly. Risibly poor fare, best avoided.

IMDb: An entertaining little flick that wastes the huge potential of a dream cast / Stanwyck characters are never someone you'd see grocery shopping (unless plotting a murder with Fred MacMurray) or attending a social function. Here she is aging but still very much on the prowl - a cougar roaring loudly with desire / Surprisingly cheapjack production featuring three top stars who all acquit themselves well despite a script that seems half-finished. From a narrative standpoint, the picture is a mess; however, it is sharp-paced, torrid in spots and frequently entertaining in spite of its flaws / *Blowing Wild* is a great, relatively unknown gem of a modern Western featuring some exquisitely overblown melodrama. In the current trend of films that must have uplifting themes and happy endings, I found it so refreshing to watch something where it all goes wrong. Anthony Quinn is on top form / Only holds interest because of the star players involved. Everybody overacts outrageously to keep the film afloat - even Gary Cooper, if you can believe that / Decent action drama that seems to have been made in a rush / Good cast in a watchable product ... Unpretentious but interesting / Sort of a pot luck movie / Felt underdeveloped.



### *THE MOONLIGHTER (1953)*



A decent if modest little Western set early in the twentieth century, with time having advanced to the point where two bank robbers can flee the scene in the manager's car; conversely, a suspected moonlighter (meaning an after-hours cattle rustler) may still be sprung from jail by a mob and hanged from the nearest tree. This third of four Stanwyck / MacMurray pairings results in their weakest film together - all the same, not a total dud, with Babs offering her usual, feisty, professional, no-nonsense performance. 78 minutes.

IMDb: Some tense moments and the action sequences are well shot, but the dialogue and unbelievability of many of the things going on stretch credibility ... The only thing missing is a Frankie Laine song / Familiar stuff / Rather bizarre ... Starts with a huge bang then slowly dies into melodrama / Unconvincing, implausible, boring, clichéd, embarrassing, demoralising and just downright bad. Truly terrible in every regard.

## WITNESS TO MURDER (1954)



Released in the USA in August 1954, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, opens with James Stewart believing he's witnessed a murder in an apartment across the way - and *Witness To Murder* (April 1954) begins just the same way. The cops are called to investigate, but find no body. Loopy ex-Nazi Richter (George Sanders) eventually meets a sticky end through not being able to leave well alone. Let down only by a silly and quite unnecessary chase sequence towards its end, this sprightly, coherent little noir is otherwise good. Gary Merrill as the sympathetic detective / love interest is well cast. 81 minutes.

IMDb: Carefully stewed leftovers come to a slow boil and give off a robust cinematic aroma / Top-notch / A dud / A fairly routine woman-in-peril movie elevated above others by its cast / Broad but undeniably effective / Superb / A modest but entertaining thriller; some sensational cinematography and conspicuously good lead performances more than compensate for its rather unremarkable plot / Repetitive and tiresome / Not even an A cast can overcome a bad script and direction / Predictable, implausible, sexist, simplistic / Entertaining film noir scenery chewing. They don't make 'em like this any more and that's perhaps not a bad thing ... so pop your corn, turn the lights down low and spend a pleasant 81 minutes. You won't be sorry, but in a couple days I'm betting you won't even remember the characters' names. The real stars here are Alton's camera work and the appropriately moody lighting / A relatively compelling film noir murder mystery with a so dumb ending / Nothing really new here, but so well done, you'll hardly notice / Good start, shame about the formula finish / Obvious and corny / A diamond-bright little thriller / An effective pre-feminist potboiler.

## EXECUTIVE SUITE (1954)



A 56 year old company president has five potential successors but no deputy. He drops dead late on Friday afternoon, just after calling a 6pm executive meeting. Once word leaks, it's knives out for a power struggle between the contending stereotypes: the schemer (Fredric March, above), Mr. Clean (Bill Holden - see also *Golden Boy*), the callow two-timer, the has-been and the dark horse. Stanwyck, in the relatively minor role of Julia Tredwell, daughter of a former (long dead) company owner, also has a vote, as does bent director Caswell, who, on witnessing the boss's demise, immediately phones his broker to short-sell 37,000 shares on the expectation of making a quick killing. Of course, not much goes according to plan ... Top-hole material powerfully delivered. 104 minutes, excellent from first to last.

IMDb: Typical MGM product: star-studded, slickly produced, with a pat, sunny ending. Fascinating nonetheless / Heartily recommended. The heavyweight cast all perform so well ... Nina Foch (above, centre) as the executive secretary is outstanding, able to convey more with body language than with words / A quality drama / An absolute home run, still relevant today / Grand Hotel in the boardroom. A great cast keeps it interesting / A delightful watch - all the actors are right on and the story is gripping - but this is not a film about "big business". Tredwell is actually quite a small business with most of its shares held by the founder's daughter / A story of mundane events - the death of one company president and the election of a new one - with no major scandal, no true evil, no violence and no comedy. That it stands as an engaging and compelling piece of cinema is testament to the power of a rich ensemble cast to breathe life into character and continually command audience attention / Prescient.



*THE CATTLE QUEEN OF MONTANA (1954)*



Stanwyck plays opposite future President Ronald Reagan (above) in a banal, by-the-numbers Western that must have seemed dull - Technicolor and pretty Rocky Mountain scenery notwithstanding - even in 1954. Her second film in colour and, prior to the seventies TV movies, one of only six. Though it's hard to fathom quite why, black and white looks so much nicer. 84 minutes. Grim.

IMDb: Filled with Native American stereotypes and one-dimensional supporting characters, this is only noteworthy for the strong performance of Barbara Stanwyck. Otherwise, a total bore / A classic Western. Stanwick is magnificent and Reagan splendid as a mysterious gunslinger / Famed horse opera with renegade Indians and treacherous settlers / The plot is complicated though formulaic / That its claim to fame is being the film playing at the Hill Valley cinema in *Back To The Future* speaks volumes. Poor all told, not even worth recommending to those after a time-filling cowboys and Indians no-brainer / A good but routine Western, helped considerably by fine location photography and crisp direction. Stanwyck looks very much like she's in preparation for her role as Victoria Barkley in *The Big Valley*. Reagan doesn't do mysterious real well, but does look right at home on the range / Stanwyck stars as a hard-riding redhead out to reclaim land and cattle stolen from her by an unscrupulous rancher in cahoots with hostile Indians. She was great in this type of role - see also *The Furies*, *Forty Guns* and *The Maverick Queen* - but the story is plain routine / Reagan is not very convincing as a ruthless gunfighter - he's just not mean enough. Stanwyck is supposed to be a "cattle queen" but doesn't have any cattle to speak of through most of the picture, and Lance Fuller looks about as much like an Blackfoot Indian as I do / Many of the standard Western movie clichés make up the story, so there's nothing new here / Reagan is very weak - so cardboard he could blow over in a breeze.



## THE VIOLENT MEN (1955)



After appearing in separate chapters of 1943 portmanteau *Flesh and Fantasy*, Stanwyck and Robinson (above) scored big the following year with the superlative *Double Indemnity*. Eleven years on, *The Violent Men* (listed on IMDb as *Rough Company*) marks the pair's third and final collaboration, and rather odd to find city-boy Edward G. (a last minute stand-in) out West. Set back in the days when the biggest rancher had the sheriff in his pocket and Messrs Colt and Winchester laid down the law, *The Violent Men* is potent, fully effective and streets ahead of the vapid *CQOM*. 92 minutes.

IMDb: Right up there with the best Westerns ever made / Very derivative / Neither as suspenseful nor as tension-tingling as it might have been in more expert hands. Somewhat disappointing / If you thought Stanwyck was ruthless in *Double Indemnity*, just wait until you see what she does here / An exciting trip into the Old West / A very well done film, action packed and engrossing / Hardcore, with a body count to make Tarantino envious / Six clichés in search of a plot / The story isn't exactly original but provides plenty of action / A classic / Another cracker of a fifties Western, enjoyable and memorable / Incredibly cool, but not very deep / The almost Shakespearean level of tragedy raises it above the mundane / A satisfying B-movie, well worth your time / Slightly better than average / Spice stampedes, shoot-outs, ambushes, close-ups of hard-riding cowboys and a *High Noon*-style duel with more twists and turns than the standard shoot-'em-up to give one heck of a Western / Fine performances from the principals, with a sub plot exploring infidelity / One of the best Glenn Ford Westerns, perhaps surpassed only by *3:10 To Yuma* / All been done before and since - but still something special / Entertaining but rushed / Old pros in a derivative B oater / One of the genre's most enduring classics: an intensely satisfying drama of rugged primitive justice / Action packed and handsome looking with fine performances from all concerned (though Robinson is miscast) / If you like EGR and Glenn Ford, this is a film you will want to view and enjoy from beginning to end / A nice mixture of action and lulls - neither overdone - featuring realistic people in a realistic setting. The CinemaScope widescreen showcases the expansive Western terrain. Though over 60 years old, *The Violent Men* is fast-moving enough to enjoy no matter what age you are or what you're used to seeing / Poor title for a great film / Highly recommended.

## ESCAPE TO BURMA (1955)



An alleged killer on the run holes up with planter Stanwyck. There's more, but none of it worth the telling. A paper-thin *Boy's Own* tale of jungle derring-do and justice deferred but ultimately triumphant, with elephants, tigers, apes (see above), rubies and Robert (*Clash By Night*) Ryan. Another (see *A Message To Garcia* / *Blowing Wild*) from the bottom of the barrel. 83 minutes.

IMDb: In one of the oddest casting choices in film history, Barbara Stanwyck plays the matriarch of a Burmese plantation who welcomes strangers into her house with open arms (and apparently an open bar), not even checking their references. The moment alleged killer Ryan shows up, she's eying him up and down like a searchlight, offering him a second drink just as he's chugged down his first ... Much of the acting of the mostly British cast playing the Burmese is amateurish and silly, but this isn't without its compensation, since I've never had so much fun laughing at a Stanwyck movie in my life / An acceptable and passable quickie / Entertaining in a Saturday matinee sort of way, with colourful and exotic backgrounds / An obvious, eye-candy adventure ... A quick fix with no thinking involved / Direction, acting and virtually everything else about this mid-fifties pulp action flick are too flat to make it more than mildly enjoyable in a camp way. Ryan and Farrar fare better than Stanwyck, whose performance verges on self-parody. Though very watchable, the script is so lazy and routine that her typical (and admirable) energy in tackling the role works against her / Crisp, clear, colour photography, otherwise pretty embarrassing. Clichéd would be putting it mildly. The script seems to have been written in an afternoon / Camp as a row of tents. Director Dwan (72) must have been having a senior moment / Tosh ... Although the story is reasonably entertaining, the dialogue is almost laughable / Looks like an Asiatic Western with elephants replacing the horses / Quite dreadful.

*THERE'S ALWAYS TOMORROW (1956)*



MacMurray (above) plays Rex the Robot Man, "living in a tomb", until former employee Stanwyck gives him a tantalising glimpse of a possible way out. But she's no home wrecker and he's a decent guy. A fine film. 81 minutes.

Teamed with Fred MacMurray (above) for the fourth and last time in this Sirk movie, Stanwyck plays another sophisticated outsider, polished and gleaming, but animated by contradictory feelings that can't quite be labelled or confined. Here she's an old flame of MacMurray's toy manufacturer, a man who doesn't know how desperately diminished he feels until she reappears in his life, reminding him of who he was before he married and settled into a somnolent, suburban existence with a placidly maternal wife and a couple of teenagers who've invaded him like body snatchers.

Margaret Talbot, *The New Yorker*, 20 December 2013

IMDb: Fine performances but rather dull / Stylish drama acted expertly by super professionals. MacMurray and Stanwyck bring out the best in each other / The visuals are great. There is even a scene with Stanwyck shedding tears that are actually reflected raindrops / A very serious drama, but not an exciting one / A lovely movie, highly recommended / An auteur masterpiece? No / Bitterness and acidity combined in a masterful way / An ordinary story, stylish direction, powerhouse acting, excellent cinematography ... Worth the effort / Not melodrama - closer to realistic, psychological drama / Virtually unknown among Sirk's catalogue, but a gem - easily one of the best films to come out of the studio era / Very good, except for the preposterous, tacked-on ending / A wonderfully made, moving piece of cinema / Sirk at his best / One of the great Hollywood films, crying out to be rediscovered. Outstanding.

## ***There's Always Tomorrow*: Best Stanwyck 1950s Film**

Quite simply a brilliant movie, one of my favourites of Douglas Sirk's, and one that doesn't get talked about nearly as much as other better-known titles in the director's *oeuvre*, but one that becomes deeply meaningful the more times you watch it. Beginning like a fairy tale, with music by Heinz Roemheld and Herman Stein that sounds like the inspiration for *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* and a title card in flowery script that reads "Once upon a time ... in sunny California," Sirk pulls his first joke on *us*, cutting immediately to a shot of rainy Pasadena. But as always with Sirk, this little trite visual gag isn't an end to itself; that title card gives away the film's central dramatic theme: Cliff's existential awakening to a life-saving love affair with Norma is nothing more, in the end, than a fairy tale. A delusional fantasy. And he's destroyed by that knowledge in the end.

Anyone familiar with the pop culture concerns of the 1950s knows that one consistent concept that wove through that culture and the media - the American home - was considered a sacred institution threatened from without (by Communism) and within (by juvenile delinquency, rising divorce rates, eroding religious observance) and that "buying into" the notion of the "American Dream," which at this point in our history meant expanding out into the suburbs after the Second World War, was good for the country, good for the family ... and good for business. And of course, with such a pervasive concept filtering through all manner of media, stereotypes inevitably evolved of the "typical" American home and nuclear family. That stereotype probably reached its peak of idealistic expression on television (although it was never as simplistic as today's critics would like to think, if you actually go back and look at episodes from series like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* or *The Donna Reed Show*), but the movies in the 1950s were already well underway in subversively attacking such stereotypical notions of "perfect" American homes and families (from films as diverse as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* to Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without A Cause* and *Bigger Than Life*). And 1956's ***There's Always Tomorrow*** certainly fits into that category, although I would suspect most critics at the time passed it off as a melodramatic soap more concerned with mid-life romance than commentary on the American home.

Seeing Barbara Stanwyck top-billed here, and knowing this is a Douglas Sirk film, noted for directing "woman's pictures" as they were dismissed back during his active years, one might assume that *There's Always Tomorrow* is largely about her character, Norma Vale. Wrong. If anything, Stanwyck's character serves only as a dodge while the screenplay tricks us into thinking *There's Always Tomorrow* is a potential romance picture - until she offers up



the crushing truth about what we the audience *really* just watched. *There's Always Tomorrow* is far more interested in another much-examined component of the pop culture at the time - the American *male* and father-figure (that's why we had so many Westerns back then) - and how *he* suffers in a loveless marriage, a loveless home, and in a meaningless modern existence. And it's a fairly grim, even terrifying image. Working from a script by Bernard C. Schoenfeld (from Ursula Parrott's novel), director Sirk shows successful toy manufacturer Cliff *not* as the king of his castle, but as a little boy in his own home, literally *shushed* by his eldest son when he comes home and yells too loudly for his wife, and who then actually *apologizes* to that same balefully staring son when he sheepishly tries to explain himself. His wife, Marion, is more a mother than a wife to Cliff, treating his every frown as a sign of some on-coming illness. Constantly involved in her children's every moment, Marion doesn't have a second to really *hear* any of Cliff's potentially ominous signs of discontent, falling back instead on fearing for the children's psychological development anytime she cuts Cliff off to hear one of the screaming brat's complaints. Cliff can't even put his foot down like a man and demand his wife go out with him on *her* birthday, because she guilts him into staying home alone while she attends the youngest girl's dance recital. After asking all the remaining kids if they'd like to go with him to the theatre (they both say, "No," but one asks him for money), he's alone in the house, wearing an apron and fussing ineffectually in the kitchen - the very picture of the emasculated modern man, stymied on all fronts by a passive-aggressive mother/wife, and snotty, self-involved kids. It's only when old flame Norma shows up at his door, out of the blue after twenty years, does Cliff begin to feel like a man again. After all, the first thing she does for him is remove that silly apron (shades of *Rebel*, perhaps?).

Once Norma comes on the scene, Cliff begins a transformation back to the days when she worked for him at the toy factory (and one would assume by the timing, when Cliff was already married). And it's not hard to see how badly needed is the transformation. Marion provides the picture-perfect ideal of what a 1950s suburban housewife should be, as if she just stepped out of a four-colour Sunday supplement feature. But terrifyingly, that's *all* she truly is: an apparition, an image. When Cliff brings up her birthday, her response is a wish to turn the mirrors to the wall - an acknowledgment not only of her surface concerns (her looks), but also an indicator that she doesn't want to look at the truth of any situation. She's so oblivious to the man that she married, that when he comes home from his business trip at the glamorous, romantic Palm Valley Inn desert resort and gleefully tells his family the truth - that his client *didn't* show up but a wonderful woman from his past *did*, and that he had the best time he'd had in *years* - *her* reaction is to smile and laugh at his wonderful story and invite the woman over for dinner to meet the

family (I can assure you this would *not* be the reaction at my house, nor at any other sane married woman's home). And when that dinner goes hideously wrong as her children coldly shut down, suspecting their father of having an affair, she describes it calmly as a pleasant evening and can't for the life of her understand why Cliff saw it differently. When Cliff, in spiritual agony and obviously on the brink of doing something drastic in his marriage, dredges up memories of the kind of life he and Marion *used* to live, and pleads with her to help him live a more adventurous life, she pooh-poohs it, brushing him off with the deadening "If life were always an adventure, it would be very exhausting," before she toddles off to bed. When her son has a fight with his girlfriend, she replies, obviously unconscious of what she's really saying, "That's the wonderful thing about youth. In a little while, they won't remember what it was all about." Indeed, they won't ... just like Marion. Marion, becoming the living embodiment of those stereotypes for perfect 1950s American wives, has a set idea of what the *appearance* of a 20-year marriage should be, and she's stuck with it. That's why she won't take clothing designer Norma's youthful-looking dress as a gift (even though she looks beautiful in it), refusing to believe that Cliff would rave over her in it, because that not what husbands of 20 years do. Who would ever blame Cliff for seeking out some form of comfort away from this magazine advertisement automaton?

Surface appearances are everything in *There's Always Tomorrow* ... until someone is forced to face their own illusions. Norma comes to Clifford's home and sees that it's lovely, so, of course, she assumes he's happy there (happy home = happy people). Marion can never understand why Cliff seems disaffected because everything in her life is going according to plan, just like her list of endlessly meaningless chores to perform. It's only when a disruptive force enters their home - Norma at the dinner party - when those who *really* run the house, the children, can't control this force, does the façade of happiness evaporate, and they show the real tensions underneath, revealing themselves to be cold, superior and exceedingly rude. Marion, of course, is unaware of *any* of this. But Sirk never lets *you* the viewer feel smug and superior, either, in your assumptions, as he constantly plays with your expectations of where the film is going. A good example is the character of Ann, who defends Cliff's actions to the end. She can't believe that Cliff would do such a thing as have an affair, and technically, she's right - he hasn't done anything with Norma. She even defends his right *to* cheat, if he does, since she sees exactly what Cliff sees: a loveless home filled with self-involved children. But in a true sense, she's totally wrong, because Cliff *is* thinking of cheating, and Vinnie sees this, watching his father pick up the phone and drop it, waiting to call Norma. But importantly, Ann doesn't see this reality. She's just as blind as everyone else, and she's just as incapable of communicating this with Vinnie (who's going nuts because he knows the "truth" about his dad).

Indeed, Sirk's biggest switcheroo here is the revelation that all along, we *haven't* been watching a romance ... but, instead, a romantic *fantasy* cooked up by misguided, lost Clifford. The signs that Clifford was fooling himself all along are put right up front by Sirk, the most telling being Clifford's failure to even recognize Norma when she's standing at his doorway (if she truly was such an important love, he wouldn't recognize her?). He also doesn't remember other events that were obviously important to her, such as taking her to a theatre matinee or going on a picnic. Sirk encourages us in our *own* fantasies as they relate to romantic melodrama - he *knows* we know what *should* happen in *There's Always Tomorrow*, and he tries to fool us with little moments that should lead to our expected clichés, such as Norma stopping Clifford at the play and meaningfully asking him to skip the second act and go to his factory. Or agreeing to stay on at the Inn when he plaintively asks her to (when they go horseback riding, the groomsman calls to Cliff, "Don't worry, Mr. Groves - just ride her easy, and everything will come back to you," setting us up for a sexually explosive moment). Or agreeing to meet Cliff privately after he almost begs her. But if we've been watching closely, we'll see that Norma does *nothing* that truly indicates she wants to have an affair with Cliff. It may have been unwise to revisit her own past, but every indication in the movie points to her wanting to settle something in her own life ... not offer a life-line to Cliff. After all, she was smart enough to leave her job because she was falling in love with her boss (and that probably confirms that he was already married to Marion) and she's smart enough now to recognize that Cliff is searching for something she can't possibly provide. As she says after their first "date," "For a little while, time stood still tonight." For a "little while." But there's no further encouragement: no clinch at the office; she refuses to invite him in for a nightcap at the Inn; she cancels their private meeting. Norma is *not* pursuing an adulterous affair with Cliff, but we viewers sure *feel* like she is ... or, at least, we keep *hoping* she will.

Of course, as with any Sirk film from this period, his *mise-en-scene* is meticulously crafted (aided by hefty Hollywood professionalism and gloss) to get across messages *no one* was really looking for back in those pre-*Cahiers du cinema* days. Although Norma sees Cliff's home with the lights turned on as he walks her through it, we often see it like some horrific fun house, with deep, menacing shadows creating a scary, claustrophobic feeling that's totally out-of-wack with the Nelson and Cleaver homes down the block. The staircase spindles provide constant reminders that the people behind them are prisoners here, not in a physical sense, but prisoners to their limited, stunted aspirations and powers of observation. Sirk even goes outwardly comedic when he places a veil (a Norma "Vale") in between Cliff and Marion on her vanity table. And Sirk's framing at the horrible dinner party is quietly brilliant, with Marion forever isolated on one side of the table (always alone in a one-shot) with Cliff

and Norma together on another side, and the adversarial children stalking around them all. But you don't need to see all the "tricks" to understand on a deeply fundamental level what Sirk is going for here. He's not shy about having the script spell things right out. Clifford talks, in simple terms, about how men become afraid of life when they fall in a rut. And that he's built himself a tomb out of his "happy" home life, and that the kids are taking over any chance he has at personal fulfilment. Or even having Cliff come right out and say he's just like his new toy robot, Rex, the mechanical man (and we thought we were so clever at the *beginning* of the film, connecting that all up). But what *is* sly about Sirk's technique is how he weaves a false reality through the soap opera conventions, playing on our own expectations and hopes of how a conventional mid-life crisis adulterous affair should play out, only to show it all to be a ruse: Cliff was deluding himself all along because Norma never wanted an affair. And if she did fall a *little* bit in love with him at the end, she's immediately brought back to reality when Vinnie and Ellen visit, where she explains how getting older means not being reckless at love; you find out what is important in life, and *that* takes precedence over one's own selfishness (Sirk even gives us a crying child screaming, "Don't take our Daddy away from us," for anyone still not sure about what he's doing). And she confirms that when she meets Cliff for the final time, telling him how good his life is, when what she's really saying is, "I'm escaping, because I don't want to be the cause of your inevitable unhappiness away from your children and wife." She buries Cliff with the truth: he was only trying to push back the years to regain those hopeful feelings of youth, and *no one can do that*. She leaves and a devastated Cliff pushes back on his toy Rex, the mechanical man who earlier asked to be pushed any way one wants - only this time, Rex *doesn't talk*. He's even more inhuman, now muted, like his creator, Cliff.

In the final, perverted "happy ending" that Sirk is obliged to give, Cliff comes home like a zombie, unable to concentrate on his obviously relieved kids. Looking outside at the plane that's carrying Norma back to New York, he closes the French windows and tells the totally clueless Marion (who thought he was sick with a cold, the poor boob), "But I'm alright now. *You know me better than I know myself*," to which she replies, "I should, after a lifetime with you." She leads Cliff away, who walks and talks like a mental patient who's just had a lobotomy, while his three smiling children, "locked away" behind the stair railing, smile, with Frankie stating, "They make a handsome couple, don't they?" - the single most *meaningless* way one could possibly describe a long-married couple. A surface compliment. All for show. For appearances. Cliff is finally, and forever, *dead*. It's one of the most terrifying, *sick* "happy endings" I've seen, and no matter how many times I watch *There's Always Tomorrow*, I always hope it will turn out differently. I can't think of a better reaction to Sirk's intentions. [Paul Mavis, DVDtalk, 27 April 2010](#)



## THE MAVERICK QUEEN (1956)



In which the ruthless Hole-in-the Wall Gang is infiltrated, with Stanwyck's help, by a Pinkerton's agent (Barry Sullivan - see also *Jeopardy* and *Forty Guns*) and eventually overrun - even though she's supposedly one of its members! Scott Brady as Sundance is a poor actor and the tale is trite - but Colorado (standing in Wyoming Territory) looks nice and Stanwyck, in her late forties, performs some impressive stunt work. 86 minutes. Fair.

IMDb: A fairly ordinary Western adventure. The plot, driven by betrayal, lies, jealousy and intrigue, offered potential. Shame, then, that it doesn't all come off. Enjoyable, but run-of-the-mill / None of the principal characters seem to have any real motivation for what they are doing. Jeff at least has a plot rationale for his inconsistent actions - and for why we never see beyond his surface - but neither Kit nor Sundance seem to have sufficient justification for acting clean against their own best interests. Kit Banion is no lovable rogue with a heart of gold; she is depicted as a ruthless and hard-headed businesswoman - albeit with a slightly unusual turn of trade - who is deliberately toying with a young newcomer in order to pay out the lover of whom she has tired. At some point her dalliance is presumably supposed to betray her into genuine affection, but for all the kissing in evidence, it somehow fails to convince ... Given its intelligently-drawn villains, morally ambiguous title character and cleverly set-up twist, the material might have made a great off-beat Western. I'm afraid, however, that it did not / Pretty routine, bordering on bad. Should you see this? Not really. There are better Stanwyck Westerns, better Westerns and better movies / Should have been in the hands of director not from the grind-'em-out school ... Too many plot holes / Considering that *The Maverick Queen* was the first widescreen film from Republic Studios, you'd think it would be a prestige picture. Well, apart from sporting once A-list Stanwyck (who looks pretty awful in colour under such heavy makeup) it is far from a memorable movie ... NB: in the film, Sundance is killed. However, in real life he died thousands of miles away in South America. Historical accuracy - who needs it?! / Both Stanwyck and the audience deserved better / Handsomely produced but strictly minor stuff.

## *THESE WILDER YEARS (1956)*



A vehicle for Cagney (above) that never requires of its star more than second gear, though his irrepressible bounce is still fun to watch. Stanwyck offers solid support in delivering a script that stretches credibility, even when allowance is made for the mores of the era. Passable but forgettable. 87 minutes.

IMDb: The performances of the leads are surprisingly tender and subdued / Rarely seen, well acted, just misses greatness ... Bradford's abandonment of his child ought to have been 30 years before rather than 20. Also, they should have cast someone who looked like Cagney to play his long lost son / Cagney, against type, is understated and subtle / A tear jerker for all the right reasons. Bring the tissues! / Not a good title, but the storyline is well thought out and engages the viewer right from the start ... A nice counterpoint to Cagney's more traditional roles, particularly since the star, who's in nearly every scene, doesn't dominate with his celebrity or performance. It's a somewhat offbeat role for one of cinema's greatest actors and one that deserves a viewing for both his performance and the story it tells / Neither Cagney nor Stanwyck seem able to work up much of a sweat about the issues involved, but even cruising they are more effective than today's generation of actors at full throttle. As good a time-waster as any and better than some / We are spared a Cagney-Stanwyck romance, although there is one, albeit invisible / A bland screenplay that doesn't offer anything fresh or original / A highly unusual and soap opera-like film that still manages to satisfy, despite a bit of predictability / The climactic confrontation feels empty and the ending seems a little strange / A somewhat creaky plot redeemed by fine performances / A sentimental not-quite-weeper / A new role for an old hood - a softer, gentler Cagney / Better than expected / Takes some far-fetched turns, but, overall, pretty good.

## CRIME OF PASSION (1957)



Stanwyck does her best to carry the wooden Sterling Hayden (above). His casting as an unambitious lunk of a cop is credible enough, but that a cynical and successful career woman would throw up everything to marry him in two seconds flat is not. Indeed, her character's erratic behaviour throughout is never satisfactorily explained. Until plugged by Babs, a young Raymond Burr impresses. His wife Alice is played by 1933 King Kong plaything Fay Wray. 86 minutes of beguiling but ultimately disappointing schlock.

IMDb: Only if you've nothing better to do / Awkwardly scripted and filmed and deadly dull. Stanwyck is uncomfortably brittle and hysterical. A real endurance test / Despite the word *passion* in the title, this modest 1957 noir wannabe never builds up a head of steam. Nothing here that hasn't been done before and better / A disjointed script ... Almost unwatchable drivel ... Atrocious / Not one of Stanwyck's better assignments. Burr gives the film's most interesting performance. A weak conclusion / A sort of a pre-feminist tantrum / An insightful and incisive melodrama / An absolute hoot, god-awful, yet fun! If you get up ten times to use the facilities or grab some cold pizza, you won't have missed a thing / One of the best noirs of the 1950s - a cool little film / Even the brilliant pyrotechnics of Barbara Stanwyck couldn't quite bring *Crime Of Passion* off / Shockingly shows what happens to an independent woman when she is suffocated by the conventions of her time / Bad. I expected so much more / Tart and absorbing on a minor level / Riveting. Ten stars / Some of the worst noir writing I have come across: do not marry a woman who is insanely into your job status, that's the plot ... Be prepared to be disappointed / Quite dated today but ahead of time in 1957 / An offbeat and interesting crime noir thriller / An entertaining film from start to finish / Slow at times, but well acted and filmed / Too erratic to register as anything more than a time-passer / Baffling story, abysmal script, plodding and uninteresting. One of the worst Stanwyck movies I have seen / Entertaining but ludicrous / Misses the mark. Mediocre / Performances are good but the plotting is not / A worthwhile misfire / Rarely exciting or suspenseful. Crawls to a resolution that does not satisfy.



### TROOPER HOOK (1957)



Stanwyck's last outing of six with Joel McCrea (above, left) is arguably their slightest, although *Gambling Lady*, the first, from back in 1934, runs it close. Some nice location shooting and competent lead performances struggle to paper over the thinness of the story or disguise its inevitable end. 82 minutes of standard Western fare. Not bad - but whatever happened to the \$15K?

IMDb: Well acted, but the story is poor / The incredible photography of the travelling stagecoach and backgrounds rivals anything John Ford has done. Better than most Westerns of the era / Way ahead of its time, dealing with child custody and parental rights issues, as well as the racial implications created by the abduction of a white woman by Indians. A tidy package, well scripted and acted, with good attention to detail. The cast is first-rate / Rape, illegitimate birth, miscegenation and kidnapping were not usually subjects for the Saturday afternoon kiddie crowd who saw Westerns. But the Fifties was the decade of the adult Western and *Trooper Hook* is a prime example. Ford himself could not have done a better job. An undiscovered masterpiece in need of re-evaluation / To deal with such a difficult subject that admits no false answers, a film has to be very truthful to its story and its characters and therein lies the beauty of *Trooper Hook* / I watch movies to be entertained not depressed and this one fits the bill / Enjoyable and amusing / Some unusual material, but ultimately just a standard Western with uninspired direction / Just plain dull / Not a lot to dislike. Well worth seeing, though a shame about the rushed ending / Another fine McCrea Western with more substance than most. I just wish the script showed as much imagination in its last five minutes as it had in the previous 75 - then we would have had a complete little gem / A predictable B Western with a low-grade, TV movie feel and some poor moving effects / Dano as the crotchety stagecoach driver is great fun.



## FORTY GUNS (1957)



Barry Sullivan (above - see also *Jeopardy* and *The Maverick Queen*) turns up again in an impenetrable tale of three gun-toting brothers, at least one of whom is a US Marshal. A bravura opening, the silly premise of Stanwyck keeping a squad of 40 dragoons (mounted gunmen), songs, shoot-outs, corpses, riding, dust, some rank bad acting (most notably from John Ericson) and a hurricane conspire to deliver 77 narrative-lite minutes of old hat. You can't help but feel that, somewhere along the trail, a decent Western was lost.

IMDb: Shot in eleven days. One fast, strange ride / One of my favourite Fuller films and, for that matter, one of Stanwyck's best / Sick, creepy, beautiful / A somewhat surreal and operatic Western, *Forty Guns* gets your attention immediately with a thunderous opening-credits ride-by. Thus it begins. Eventually it ends. You may or may not be quite sure what happened in between - but this is not necessarily a bad thing / The only thing that keeps this from being a classic is that a few of the main actors are somewhat lacking in ability / Leaves a lot to be desired. Several scenes have been cut down, making the story very hard to follow / A highly overrated cult movie, tough to sit through, due to the ultra corny script, some terrible acting and lots of camera moves designed to attract attention to themselves rather than to tell the story. What's more, the score is among the most uninspired ever composed for a Western / Mediocre, uneven and weird / Sullivan is excellent as the seemingly unstoppable Angel of Death and the last showdown is impressive / The worst Stanwyck film I have seen, with too many characters, dreadful pacing and the always irritating Dean Jagger given way too much screen time. Awful / Hysterical, creative, unexpected and surreal / Like a John Ford movie on acid. It doesn't hang too well together as a drama, but who cares? / No-nonsense, gritty action and extremely compact storytelling, predominated by themes rather than mere exposition. Theme: the selfishness, corruption and burden of worldly accomplishments vs. the selfless renouncing of same for love. The story swings from one extreme to the other, marking the journey of transcendence for a man and woman, from struggle and conquest, alone in the world, to renunciation and escape to bliss, expressing the perfect, unreal and unattainable fantasy of film / A confusing pastiche of archetypes, visually stunning. A film for film lovers / Fine entertainment.

## *WALK ON THE WILD SIDE (1962)*



A well presented and consistently watchable film to which all players contribute with credit. Stanwyck's role is minor but put over with her usual sure-footed assurance. In her third film Jane Fonda holds her own and the opening credits are almost worth a look alone. Good.

IMDb: Hardly a high point for Stanwyck, but she proves that you can put her down anywhere - in a screwball comedy, a tearjerker, a hard-boiled noir or a TV Western - and she can hold her own / Throughout, both the music and the B&W cinematography evoke a noirish, downbeat mood totally in sync with the film's theme of embittered sleaze. Although set in the 1930s, the film looks and sounds more like something from the hip, "beat" generation of the 1950s, and I'm comfortable with that / The film's red light title is a tease. It advertises brothel life, but the screenplay delivers only boredom and preachy morality. But in 1962 the moralistic Hays Code still exerted influence on what Hollywood could say and show. The result here is a yellow light plot that merely hints at sleaze. All the same, 50 years after its release, *Walk On The Wild Side* does have entertainment value, both as a curious period piece and as a sudsy soap opera with some campy dialogue, helped along by the always engaging Barbara Stanwyck / This sleazy bit of melodrama, loosely based on a racy Nelson Algren novel, is now dated kitsch, but can be enjoyed for what it is, thanks to the Hollywood team that put it all together / The plot is one of the endless variations on *La Traviata* - the whore with a heart of gold - but has some twists in it that are original. Stanwyck is great in this first overtly gay role of any character in films. The Harvey / Fonda prelude is terrific. And of course the plotting brings her significantly back in the denouement. There's not a wasted motif in the plot. Stanwyck's husband at the beginning and end. It's easy to cry 'pot-boiler' but that's a vacuous charge against this better than average movie. Certainly a milestone of sorts / Like always, Stanwyck is great, and Anne Baxter's accent is so natural, you see the character (Mex cafe owner Teresina) and not Anne, which is a testimony to her acting chops / Lithuanian born, South African raised, English trained Harvey and Frenchie Capucine play Texans to Indiana gal Baxter's Mexican - but it works! Not half bad.

## ***Walk On The Wild Side* : Best 1960s Stanwyck Film**

*Walk on the Wild Side* is a story about sinful people in the New Orleans Red Light district. Save for one Mexican-American diner hostess, the female characters are prostitutes, a tramp and one dominating lesbian madame. The hero is a humble but God-fearing Texas innocent trying to save his dream girl from a sad life.

Mainstream American movies openly discouraged the subject of prostitution for thirty years, which naturally resulted in a lot of vocational excuses and evasions. Wild West prostitutes became dance-hall girls, hookers in bars were hostesses and streetwalkers were often given some kind of visible trade as camouflage. Fritz Lang's *Manhunt* sticks a sewing machine in London prostitute Joan Bennett's room and calls her a seamstress. This practice cleaned up the movies but distorted reality, often with the undesired side effect of glamorizing women who live by 'depending on the kindness of strangers.'

In 1962 we finally come to *Walk on the Wild Side*. Houses of prostitution had finally become grudgingly acceptable as film subjects (see *Elmer Gantry*, 1960), but only if nothing that usually transpires in a brothel was depicted on screen. So The Doll House is a weird New Orleans fantasy club where the girls sit around in nightgowns playing cards and talking to each other. Nobody talks about sex. Men come in but only once do we see anyone heading upstairs, and even then there's an abrupt fade. The clients never touch the women, at least not amorously.

In this sanitized brothel fantasy, we're frequently reminded that the top dame, played by Capucine, is really a *sculptress*. She's the personal pet of the lesbian club owner played by Barbara Stanwyck, but everything about their relationship is kept even more of a secret. So we have an activity that cannot speak its name, portrayed in a business establishment where no business is transacted. Lots of films made after the 1968 ratings overhaul are set in brothels (*The Learning Tree*, *Pretty Baby*, *The Lady In Red*). Even when exaggerated or glamorized, they at least made basic sense.

*Walk on the Wild Side* takes a lot of interestingly trashy material and makes it unrecognizable as human behaviour. Barbara Stanwyck's Jo holds Hallie in half-voluntary confinement, apparently for undefined sexual purposes. Jo is apparently a monster as perverse as Ona Munson's Mother Gin Sling in Von Sternberg's *The Shanghai Gesture*, a much earlier fantasy brothel film. She hates men and is revulsed by sex, but makes her living servicing rich men while oppressing weak women. Her henchman Oliver (Richard Rust) whips the feeble-minded Miss Precious, one of those addled Blanch DuBois types (Joanna Moore of *Touch of Evil* and *Nevada Smith*). And the pathetic legless snitch (Karl Swenson of *Major Dundee*) who carries messages around The Doll House turns out to be Jo's husband, demoted to worthless cripple because of an accident.

The lack of a convincing depression-era period doesn't help matters. Nobody in the film has a 1930s hairstyle, and the Le Maire gowns worn by Capucine look 100% sixties. Capucine herself has a pronounced *La Dolce Vita* contemporary appearance. She's far too classy-looking for The Doll House. Texas hick Dove is played by the very

good actor Laurence Harvey, who is once again terribly miscast; his Texas accent is so forced, it often sounds as if someone else dubbed his whole performance. Barbara Stanwyck is efficiently impersonal - all of her scenes involve threats or near-threats, so we don't get any understanding of her character.

*Walk on the Wild Side* was reportedly a troubled production. According to the IMDB, Blake Edwards was hired to direct 'additional scenes,' indicating perhaps that things weren't working. Once an expressive and intensely creative director in shows like *Murder, My Sweet* and the recently rediscovered *Christ In Concrete*, Edward Dmytryk's work here is impersonal, uninspired, and sometimes incredibly sloppy. One scene gives Hallie and Dove a romantic afternoon in the park. She sits above him and they talk. In Hallie's close-up, his hand reaches up with a sprig of flowers, and she caresses it lightly. In repeated cutaways to Dove, both his hands are visible, folded over his chest. Most continuity errors are negligible in their effect, but this goof makes it look as though Harvey has three arms.

The cast list in the IMDB also names actors and roles that no longer seem to be in the movie. There are two women who might be Hallie's sisters (?) and an 'auctioneer' played by Paul Maxey that indicate cut material. Perhaps there was once a different opening back in Dove's hometown, where he watches while his father's farm is auctioned off. In the completed film, we know Dove is penniless, but we aren't told what happened to the family homestead.

Most of the acting is accomplished but the performances don't mesh and the atmosphere doesn't gel. Both Stanwyck and Anne Baxter tend to overpower the other actors. Baxter's accented Mexican woman with a heart of gold appeals in vain to Dove, and seems to be in a different picture entirely. Jane Fonda gives her trampy hobo Kitty a lot of energy but is never convincing. After two reels she disappears suddenly, and then she shows up to throw a monkey wrench into Dove's plans. Kitty just doesn't seem gullible enough to fall into her place in Jo's crooked scheme. Laurence Harvey is sincere but generates no heat with Capucine. The prospect of him getting serious with Baxter or Fonda doesn't appeal either.

*Walk on the Wild Side* starts with a bang that the rest of the film never matches. Elmer Bernstein's provides a great main theme and Saul Bass illustrates it with a terrific title sequence of a black cat stalking proudly through a maze of pipes and slatted fences. The slow-motion photography is so sleek and smooth that the superimposed titles almost look painted onto the cat; the feline pace syncopates perfectly with the driving momentum of the music.

When the theme is used as jazzy source music played in The Doll House we see musicians, but no singer. Brook Benton is heard singing the tune with them, but when we cut to the band, there's no vocalist!

Among the various squeaky-clean denizens of the brothel are Juanita Moore as the house maid, and familiar Columbia contractee Todd Armstrong (*Jason and the Argonauts*) as an eager Marine given the brush-off by Hallie.

Glenn Erickson



## ROUSTABOUT (1964)



Babs goes bottom-feeding with Elvis and Leif "Big John" Erickson in a deadly dull Presley vehicle that swallows 100 minutes of your life for no appreciable return. One to pass on, in either sense.

IMDb: Too many songs (good as they are) and too many embarrassing moments from a script just one draft short of "done" / A standard-issue Elvis opus with a cold fish (Joan Freeman) for a leading lady / Stanwyck was probably the biggest name ever to appear in an Elvis movie. She saw it as a way of getting her name across to a younger audience but, after one more film, abandoned the big screen for the small one and did all her remaining work on television. Fans of both legends should be pleased with *Roustabout*, which ranks as one of Presley's best films / Not one of Elvis's best movies but not one of his worst either - but it's one of his better formulated musical dramas with some realism and believable, down to earth characters ... Watchable even on repeated viewings, but not worth buying / Often viewed as one of the lesser lights in Elvis's 1960s movie output, which is a shame given that it has vitality in abundance, sees the King playing a two-dimensional character, features the professional work of Barbara Stanwyck and Leif Erickson and is beautifully staged and photographed amongst a Carnival backdrop ... A lovely, enjoyable Elvis film, with foot tapping and smiles guaranteed / Solid support from old pro Stanwyck and the story ain't too shabby either. All in all; a solid Presley film / The waste of cast and crew involved in this boring film is criminal / This must have been the beginning of the end of Presley's film career. There is the makings of a decent movie here, but the writing is so bad and Elvis is made to sing a bunch of ridiculous songs. He deserved better than this / With a supporting cast such as this, it should have been better / Presley is let down by the plot which is not only formulaic and entirely predictable but rather sentimental as well, with Stanwyck's carny show forever on the brink of foreclosure. Another thorn in the film's side is the one-dimensional nature of Leif Erickson's grumpy characterisation. On the other hand, Stanwyck's participation adds undeniable distinction to the film (her role had previously been offered to Mae West!) and lovely Joan Freeman projects the right mix of independence and vulnerability as the heroine / One of Paramount's best Elvis films. Barbara and Elvis have great chemistry - too bad no May-December hootchy-cootchy was allowed / This movie is light and easy going. The story isn't much and the acting is less, but it doesn't matter. Elvis had charm and charisma to spare and it's on fine display here / Biggest drawbacks are the less-than-stellar songs / Recommended.

## THE NIGHT WALKER (1964)



Stanwyck's final feature film before concentrating exclusively on TV starts with a tedious voice-over and doesn't improve. Taylor is dull - no glimpse remaining of the late '30s (*His Brother's Wife*, *This Is My Affair*) pretty boy. Though time has dealt more kindly with his one-time wife, beware: in screaming mode (only) (see above) she loses every ounce of her appeal. For diehards only.

IMDb: Stanwyck and Taylor coast along on their former reputations in a horror film not really worthy of them / What were these two veterans thinking of when they became involved in this juvenile comic strip? The dummies in the chapel scene were more animated than poor old Robert Taylor / The last 20 minutes do not equal the first hour. Still, a competent and entertaining piece of work, definitely worth seeing / An unsung Castle classic / The plot is absurd, full of holes and unexplained incidents, but Castle's direction is more inventive than usual and delivers all the expected shocks with dramatic effectiveness / Stanwyck screams more often, and louder, than in all her previous movies put together. The plot is ludicrous - utter schlock that leaves multiple loose ends dangling. I've seen it twice now and that's enough / The twists at the end can only be supported through the most convoluted of contrivance, making *The Night Walker's* resolution rather dreary / Bargain basement Hitchcock plagiarism with an astonishing resolution but, like any guilty pleasure, still enjoyable in a ludicrous, low rent sort of way / Quite ridiculous / Babs' histrionics might make her devoted fans cringe but she's always a pleasure to watch / A fine film effort / Style over substance? This move *has* no substance / A little gem ... Surprisingly good / An excellent thriller / A clunker / This rather eerie confection from Robert Bloch (who wrote *Psycho*) is over-the-top but also engrossing and intense / Be warned, this is one bad movie.

*THE HOUSE THAT WOULD NOT DIE (TV, 1970)*



Insufferable Amish country haunted house twaddle in which Stanwyck, aging well, belies her 63 years - but nothing else positive to say. The film's message would seem to be that when the wind gets up, or the house feels excessively draughty, look out - and have your Mace handy! With Kitty Winn (above) and Richard Egan.

IMDb: Derivative and mostly dull / This nifty item with a fine Stanwyck performance is worth a watch / Stanwyck is disappointing - she pretty much walks through this one - but Egan is a good romantic match for her and the finale is tied up well / A scary name for a mediocre movie. Worth a look but not very memorable / This is very high up on my list of Ten Best Ghost Stories ... Having developed her characterisation of the ideal mature woman - strong, intelligent, well-spoken, charming and able to rise to any occasion - Stanwyck is at her acting peak / Stanwyck's marvellous performance helps hold together this modest, uneven, but successful little film / 74 minutes, but felt like it was going on forever / As any fan of classic film and cheeseball TV knows, Barbara Stanwyck was one durable dame. The woman who conquered the corporate world in 1933's *Baby Face* and blasted gun-toting outlaws in *The Big Valley* is more than a match for the wind machines and bad actors who challenge her in this cheapo 1970 made-for. Neither scary nor suspenseful, it's also hampered by a cobwebbed ghost story plot. Still, it's always fun to hang out with Babs, so *The House That Would Not Die* isn't a total waste of time. It's like decaffeinated coffee - a short, mild indulgence that won't keep you awake at night / A brilliantly acted ghost story with an excellent climax / Stanwyck offers a primer on how to maintain your dignity during the twilight of your career. Bette Davis should have watched this movie.



### A TASTE OF EVIL (TV, 1971)



A decent, lively, little mystery, with too few suspects for its own good, but still surprisingly effective. Hard to find, but worth the effort. With Barbara Parkins and Roddy McDowall. 73 minutes. Good.

IMDb: Many genuine thrills and chills. Barbara Parkins plays a young woman returning to the creepy mansion where she was traumatized as a child, with Barbara Stanwyck as her mother. Both actresses, fresh from their respective 1960s TV series - *Peyton Place* and *The Big Valley* - give excellent performances. Parkins, an under-rated and very beautiful actress, is truly memorable as the terrorized girl, while Stanwyck, dignified and elegant, reminds us once again of the great talent that was hers. This movie is a forgotten gem / An unintentionally funny film / Stanwyck's tour-de-force in the thriller genre / A pastiche of clichés, efficient enough within its very limited aspirations, but several notches below the high standard of numerous seventies made-for-TV suspenseurs / The imagery of this movie is amazing. The usage of dark shadows in the house adds a very spooky feeling. About halfway through the film we discover the cause of the strange occurrences, and I must say I was surprised. We then get another twist that leads on to a satisfying ending / Some classic jump up and scare-you-silly scenes as only Stanwyck could do / This movie is absolutely haunting! I have never forgotten it and can still recall the slowly growing horror it produced back when I first saw it as a girl / Nothing going on to keep the viewer interested. The story is decent but too little is done with it / Demonstrates only mild ingenuity. Concerning the rapist, there are really only two suspects it could have been / A wonderful suspense film from two horror masters: director John Llewellyn Moxey and writer Jimmy Sangster / Thoroughly ordinary / Great film! / A chilling sleeper.



### THE LETTERS (TV, 1973)



*The Letters* is, like 1943's *Flesh And Fantasy*, a three-tale portmanteau. Made for TV and running 74 minutes, it stretches credulity (why would letters to California mailed from Arizona and Mexico travel on the same plane?) and relies on coincidence (two of three letters written on the day of the writer's death) but succeeds nonetheless. The second (Stanwyck) chapter is much the weakest, with poorly established, non-credible characters acting out a nasty, ill-conceived little story; the other two work better. Stanwyck knew the value of making an entrance and, playing a glammed-up 65 year old man-eater - and getting away with it, too - she surely (see above) makes one here. This is the second film (after *The Gay Sisters*) in which she is required to act "drunk". Ida Lupino, Leslie Nielsen and Ben Murphy also feature, and Harry Jones's opening, closing and linking mailman parts are nicely done. Worth a watch.

IMDb: *The Letters* comprises three stories linked by the common factor of a letter gone astray. All are modest yet engrossing little vignettes. Though Stanwyck is a highlight, her story is the most unsatisfying due to its superficial and unlikeable characters. On the whole, very entertaining / Four divas - MGM musical star Jane Powell, drama queens Barbara Stanwyck and Ida Lupino and one of the heirs to the Barbara Hutton estate, the gorgeous Dina Merrill - for the price of one. Stanwyck shows she still has the power to dominate every scene she is in, and Merrill shows, when she gets the chance, that she's a tiger in kitten fur who really has what it takes. *The Letters* is one of those fun, "so bad it's good!" efforts that today would end up automatically on *Lifetime* / The best segment concerns the two sisters (Stanwyck and Merrill) who fight over the same man (Nielsen) and the devious methods he utilizes to get his hands on a fortune / A great film, unknown, underrated / Sometimes the moves you don't make are the smartest and most influential of your life. Excellent, very well done / To see so much Hollywood royalty in one place makes this one a winner.

## OTHER TV WORK



Episode 9.9 of *The Jack Benny Program* (13 January 1959) includes a 17 minute sketch called *AutoLite* featuring Stanwyck as Bella Manningham (above, with Benny). This *Gaslight* parody was filmed on 11 June 1953 but held back for five and a half years due to protracted legal wrangling - the case going all the way to the Supreme Court! - over alleged infringement of copyright. *Lots* of fun.

*The Barbara Stanwyck Show* (1960-1) was an anthology series of 37 episodes, most starring Babs herself, with her character either facing difficulties or overcoming peril. Several episodes were pilots, though none became a series. 28 of 37 are available on DVD, and, in the main, very good too.

Very popular Western series *Wagon Train* ran for eight seasons (284 episodes) between 1957 and 1965. S1-6 + 8 were shot in black and white with episodes running 50 minutes. In S7, shooting was in colour with each of the 32 episodes running 75 minutes. Stanwyck appeared in one episode of S5, one of S6 and two of S7, playing a different character each season.

In 1962, Stanwyck appeared in a single episode (S4.14) of another high profile Western series, *Rawhide* (1959-65). Though Clint Eastwood served a long apprenticeship as ramrod Rowdy Yates on this show, as luck would have it, he doesn't appear in this episode - though trail boss Gil Favor and Wishbone the cook (briefly) both do. Scheming Army Captain's wife Nora Holloway is a role right up Stanwyck's street and resultant drama is, of its kind, well wrought.

Set in Chicago in the period 1929-34, *The Untouchables* ran for four seasons (119 episodes) from 1959 to 1963 and starred Robert Stack as Special Agent

Eliot Ness, waging a weekly battle against organised crime. Stanwyck appeared in episodes 8 and 13 of Season Four as Lt. Agatha Stewart of the Missing Persons Bureau. Both reward finding.

In 1959, via a successful pilot, Jackie Cooper Productions sold a show called *Hennessey* - about a Navy doctor in an onshore office - to CBS. When, after three series (95 episodes) it wound up in 1962, Cooper looked to repeat his success via a second pilot, *Calhoun: County Agent*, co-starring himself and Barbara Stanwyck. But this one never aired and no follow-up series ever materialised - and, having watched it, it's not hard to see why. Though it tells a decent one-off story and prepares the ground for a slow-burning romance between the two leads, not much potential for development is evident. Still, an interesting curio in her résumé.

Through four seasons and 112 episodes of *The Big Valley* (1965-9), Stanwyck was a mainstay - indeed, despite her long and distinguished career in cinema, it is as feisty matriarch Victoria Barkley from this ABC Western that many Americans best know and remember her.

Mini-Series *The Thorn Birds* (1983) is slick, though Stanwyck, whose character dies at the end of episode one (of four) does not figure largely.



In 1985, Stanwyck featured in three episodes of *Dynasty* (1981-9). In 1985-6, she then reprised the same character (see cartoon above) in all 24 S1 episodes of spin-off soap *The Colbys* (1985-7), but took no part in Season Two.

## CAMEO APPEARANCES



*The Stolen Jools*, listed on IMDb as *The Slippery Pearls*, is a star-packed promo short, sponsored by Chesterfield Cigarettes, released in 1931 and distributed free to cinemas to raise funds for the National Variety Artists TB sanatorium. (After each showing, a live speaker would come out and request donations.) The plot, such as it is, involves an investigation into the reported theft of Norma Shearer's jewellery, though the fun lies not in the tale but in trying to put names to numerous then-famous faces: Wally Beery, Buster Keaton, EGR, Joan Crawford, a young Gary Cooper, Laurel and Hardy, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Fay Wray, Maurice Chevalier (above, right) and, though so early in her career, Stanwyck alongside first husband Frank Fay (above, left). Babs, on screen for just 37 seconds, reads a verse of bad poetry before going out to be shot by Chevalier. It's clear from what she says ("Oh no, there's more - wait ...") that she declaimed at least two stanzas to camera, though sadly only one survived the edit. 19 minutes. Slight but significant.

Along with many others, Stanwyck made a brief appearance as herself in two films - *Hollywood Canteen* (124 minutes, 1944: "Amiable all-star silliness, two and a half stars" - Leonard Maltin) and *Hollywood Victory Caravan* (20 minutes, 1945), shot and released during WWII to help the war effort.

Barbara Stanwyck (1907-1990) - what a talent, what a legacy, what a gal!

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