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UCLA fest: A stylish way to get to know Mitchell Leisen

The director's witty, intelligent films are pillars of Hollywood's golden age, yet we don't know him that well. It's time to change that.

By Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times Film Critic

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Though the elegant, urbane and sophisticated director would recoil in horror at the comparison, Mitchell Leisen is the Rodney Dangerfield of golden age Hollywood directors. He simply can't get no respect.

That's not for lack of people trying. Every few years, almost on cue, a melancholy critic will write an essay bemoaning the fact that a filmmaker this gifted has been forgotten, or an adventurous institution will put on a comprehensive and enjoyable retrospective, such as the UCLA Film & Television Archive's 16-film "The Signature Style: The Films of Mitchell Leisen" that begins on Friday at the Hammer Museum in Westwood.

But though library shelves and film school syllabuses groan under the weight of books and courses about such acknowledged auteurs as John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles, there is but one slim volume (written by David Chierichetti) with this man's name on it. And though boxed sets of Leisen's films are available in French, Italian and even Spanish editions, nothing of the kind exists over here.

[PHOTOS: Behind-the-scenes Classic Hollywood](#)

This is all the more remarkable because, both as a group and individually, his films "Midnight," "Easy Living," "Death Takes a Holiday" and "Remember the Night" are as reliably — and stylishly — entertaining as anything made by the director's contemporaries.

Leisen's written signature at the start of a film — a mark of the great esteem in which he was held by his bosses at Paramount back in the day — is as good a guarantee of a pleasurable experience as one could hope to find. So why the lack of respect?

One explanation is that Leisen's gifts and tendencies turn out to be harder to quantify than easily identifiable markers like Hitchcock's feeling for suspense, Ford's passion for westerns, or even tropes like the respective Lubitsch and Capra touches.

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For what made Leisen's films distinctive was the wit, style and intelligence he consistently brought to them, gifts that invariably made his characters more realistic and his stories more emotionally complex and involving than the norm.

Because he was so good at amplifying the strengths of scripts, the director often had his pick of the best ones at Paramount, which was certainly the case with the two Leisen films that open the series on Friday at the Billy Wilder Theater: "Midnight" and "Easy Living."

"Midnight" (1939), which is sometimes considered Leisen's signature film, was written by Wilder and partner Charles Brackett. The film stars Claudette Colbert as a genial adventuress who arrives in Paris on a third-class train ticket with nothing to declare but the gold lamé evening gown she's wearing.

Helped by Don Ameche's easygoing cab driver, she bluffs her way into a fancy party (the dress helps), where she catches the eye of wealthy John Barrymore, but not for the reason you might suspect: He wants her to distract the gigolo who is after his wife. Misunderstandings and hilarity ensue, as does a largeness of spirit that typifies Leisen's approach.

The same goes for "Easy Living" (1937), from a script by Preston Sturges, which starts with a classic screwball premise: Tyrannical banker J.B. Ball (Edward Arnold), the Bull of Broad Street, drops a \$58,000 sable coat on the head of penniless Mary Smith, who toils for the Boy's Constant Companion, and nothing is the same for anyone ever again.

Actress Jean Arthur brings to spirited life the spunky young woman whom everyone starts to mistake for Ball's mistress. Sturges' rat-a-tat dialogue is a treat ("Where there's smoke, someone's smoking," says a hotelier played by Luis Alberni), as is an enormous hotel suite that Leisen, who came to directing from art direction and costume design, took particular pleasure in creating.

Though having fine writers to work with helped Leisen's career, it hurt him in the auteur sweepstakes, as his reputation became one of being no more than an adroit adapter (as if this was an easy task) of other people's material. It also didn't help that both Sturges and Wilder segued to directing and, in Wilder's case, heaped vituperation on Leisen for what he'd allegedly done to their earlier scripts.

As it turns out, the UCLA series has another film apiece for both the Brackett-Wilder team and Sturges, and the comparison between how Leisen handled their material and what they did when they were on their own is instructive.

"Hold Back the Dawn" (1941, playing Nov. 30 with "Swing High, Swing Low," 1937) is an unusual film for Leisen in that it's a brooding romantic melodrama about a heartless Romanian gigolo (who else but Charles Boyer) who marries a naive schoolteacher (Olivia de Havilland) to get American citizenship. Leisen's talent takes some of the chill out of the air (the film got six Oscar nominations, including one for De Havilland), and the director himself is visible behind the camera in the story's Hollywood soundstage framing device.

Similarly, "Remember the Night" (1940, on a Dec. 14 double bill with Carole Lombard at her best in "Hands Across the Table," 1935) has a much different feeling than it would have had it been directed by screenwriter Sturges.

The situation is classic screwball — foursquare district attorney Fred MacMurray ends up sharing a Christmas trip home to Indiana with Barbara Stanwyck's intoxicating shoplifter — but Leisen's direction adds

both drama and humanity to a top-notch script with lines like Stanwyck's wised-up, "One of these days one of you guys is going to start one of these scenes in a new way and one of us girls is going to drop dead from surprise."

Another way Leisen is regrettably pigeonholed is as a strictly visual director. The look of his films is certainly important, even in tip-top romantic comedies like "Take a Letter, Darling" (1942, on a Dec. 9 double bill with "Lady in the Dark," 1944), but the crisp byplay between Rosalind Russell's female executive and MacMurray as her beleaguered male secretary is the main attraction.

One of Leisen's most visual films, "Death Takes a Holiday" (playing with "Murder at the Vanities," both films from 1934, on Nov. 18), is also one of his most touching and sophisticated. Fredric March is exemplary as death itself, determined to take human form for three days to try to determine why humanity fears him, who ends up making an unexpected connection with Evelyn Venable's spiritual seeker.

The best way to fall under Mitchell Leisen's spell is to see as many of his films as you can. You may enter the theater as a skeptic, but you will leave with an unlooked-for appreciation of an overlooked man. And you will have had a very good time in the process.

 'The Signature Style: The Films of Mitchell Leisen'

Screenings at 7:30 p.m. (except where noted) at the Billy Wilder Theater, Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., Westwood.

Info: (310) 206-8013 or <http://www.cinema.ucla.edu>.

Midnight Friday: "Easy Living"

7 p.m. Sunday: "Death Takes a Holiday"; "Murder at the Vanities"

Nov. 30: "Hold Back the Dawn"; "Swing High, Swing Low"

7 p.m. Dec. 2: "No Man of Her Own"; "The Mating Season"

7 p.m. Dec. 9: "Lady in the Dark"; "Take a Letter, Darling"

Dec. 10: "Kitty"; "Frenchman's Creek"

Dec. 14: "Remember the Night"; "Hands Across the Table"

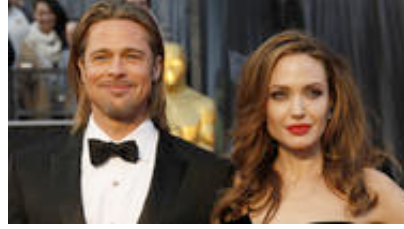
7 p.m. Dec. 16: "To Each His Own"; "No Time for Love"

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