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Classic Hollywood: 'Two Faces of Jean' showcases Jean Arthur

Jean Arthur is seen in comedies ('The More the Merrier') and dramas ('Whirlpool') in the 'Two Faces of Jean' series at the Billy Wilder Theater.

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No actress had a voice like Jean Arthur. It was an almost undescrivable blend of a squeak and froggy croak.

Arthur put that voice to great use in the comedies and dramas she made in the 1930s through the early '50s. She literally purrs when she is kissed by Joel McCrea in George Stevens' 1943 comedy "The More the Merrier," for which she earned her only lead actress Oscar nomination.

But in Arthur's breakout film, Frank Capra's 1936 "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town," one can hear the pain and tension in her voice when she tries to persuade Gary Cooper's Mr. Deeds to defend himself at a sanity hearing.

PHOTOS: Hollywood back lot

"Her voice is amazing in that scene. You can sense the hysteria that she feels that this man will never stand up for himself," said Richard Jewell, film professor at USC's School of Cinematic Arts. "I think it is some of the best acting in 1930s Hollywood films."

That acting talent is on full display in "The Two Faces of Jean," the UCLA Film & Television Archive retrospective opening Friday at the Billy Wilder Theater with two of her early films at Columbia — the 1934 drama "Whirlpool" and the 1935 John Ford-directed comedy "The Whole Town's Talking," with Edward G. Robinson.

The festival highlights several of her rarely seen early films that have been recently restored by Sony, including 1935's "Party Wire," 1934's "Most Precious Thing in Life," which casts Arthur as, of all things, an elderly maid at a men's college dorm, and the 1935 comedy "If You Could Only Cook."

INTERACTIVE: The stars on Hollywood's Walk of Fame

There are also Howard Hawks' underrated 1939 gem "Only Angels Have Wings" and the World War II comedy "The More the Merrier." One of Arthur's best-loved films, Capra's 1939 masterpiece "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," is screening in the archive's "Family Flicks" series.

"I think Jean Arthur is special because she did not necessarily fit the glamorous star image of Hollywood in terms of being a larger-than-life beauty," said archive head Jan-Christopher Horak. "She was relatively normal looking. She had issues with her cameramen. She thought one side of her was really terrible and the other side, the left side, was acceptable."

Allyson Nadia Field, assistant professor of cinema and media studies at UCLA, believes that though Arthur is thought of as a favorite actress from the golden age of Hollywood, she is in some ways underappreciated.

"I think that probably stems from her versatility and depth," she said. "She is not someone you think you can get a handle on because of her versatility and the roles that she would play."

Field said that Arthur located both the comedic and dramatic aspects of her characters. "When you have these comedies with a strong dramatic core, they really exhibit the strength she has in both genres," said Field.

Above all, Arthur had spunk. "She is like the All-American woman who is actually quite headstrong and knows exactly what she wants," said Horak. "She is not apologetic about it and does not kowtow to men the way it was expected. I think that endeared her to many women in the business."

Arthur also was a working woman in the majority of her films, including playing an attorney in "The Defense Rests," a reporter in "Mr. Deeds," an entertainer in "Only Angels Have Wings" and a congresswoman in Billy Wilder's "A Foreign Affair."

"She was tough," said Jewell. "But at the same time there was a heart of gold inside that always came out no matter how cynical she seems at the beginning of those films. She stepped up and became the right kind of woman at crucial moments."

Despite her confidence on screen, in real life Arthur suffered from painful stage fright. "She was inhibited," said Horak. "She couldn't really deal with people and hated going on publicity tours, hated doing interviews."

Arthur made three films for Stevens — 1942's "The Talk of the Town," "The More the Merrier" and her last film, the classic 1953 Western "Shane."

"When he was casting 'Shane,' he had to move quite quickly," recalled the filmmaker's son, producer/director/writer George Stevens Jr. "Paramount had a commitment with Jean Arthur. So he said to the head of the studio, 'Jean Arthur has never let me down.'"

For more information, go to <http://www.cinema.ucla.edu>

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