



# By George!

Dubbed "The Woman's Director" George Cukor brought out the inner majesty of Hollywood starlets from Katherine Hepburn to Elizabeth Taylor, even helping Judy Garland find her groove in *The Wizard Of Oz*. As a 21st Century restyling of his classic, *The Women*, hits screens, Matthew Myers profiles the renowned gay director.

Although George Cukor has long gone, there are still many actresses that can brag about working with the legendary director. Angela Lansbury, Maggie Smith, Jane Fonda and Elizabeth Taylor, to name a few. He also directed Candice Bergen and a 20-year-old Meg Ryan in his last screen effort, 1981's *Rich And Famous*. Strangely enough, both actresses star in the remake of the director's 1939 classic, *The Women*. The 2008 remake of the bitchy socialite drama, directed by Diane English, has just hit the screens so make sure to spare a thought for the man who not only made the original but also turned novice

actresses into icons and created a classical film genre many now take for granted.

Born in New York to Hungarian-Jewish parents, Cukor had a passion for the Hollywood movie matinee, which led him to work as an assistant stage manager in a Chicago theatre group. He then successfully formed his own stock theatre company back in New York before hitting the bright lights of Broadway. But it was Hollywood that lured Cukor when the call went out for talented theatre professionals to join the flourishing movie business. Cukor became a dialogue coach at Paramount and Universal Studios,

getting the occasional chance to co-direct movies and, eventually, a solo shot at directing Tallulah Bankhead in 1931's *Tarnished Lady*. For Cukor, directing Bankhead was the beginning of a unique career skilfully nurturing and coaxing the best performances out of Hollywood's leading ladies.

Cukor grew up watching his mother's party shows where she would impersonate the famous divas of the day. But it wasn't just the dress-ups that influenced him. He was fascinated with the subject of a troubled human identity, hidden behind a mask. The other elements that would often show in his

films were those of a social misdemeanour, with a particular focus on alcoholism. It was not that Cukor had issues with these, more a fascination. They were the fundamentals that brought true melodrama to light and he used them to his advantage.

A role call of iconic Old Hollywood actress began as Cukor starlets. He directed the majestic Joan Crawford in *A Woman's Face* (1941), the seductive Greta Garbo in *Two Faced Woman* (1941) and the innocent Ingrid Bergman in *Gaslight* (1944). Then there was the outspoken Katharine Hepburn in *Adam's Rib* (1949), the underrated Judy Holliday in *Born Yesterday* (1950) and the ingenuous Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* (1964).

It was the latter film that won Cukor an Academy Award for Best Director with Best

Actor going to Rex Harrison. Indeed, it was not just Hollywood's leading ladies who benefited from Cukor's guidance. Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart, Spencer Tracy, James Mason, Robert Taylor and Sir Laurence Olivier all owe him at least a nod for their career highlights.

But it was *The Women*, a unique all-female ensemble film starring Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford and Rosalind Russell, that galvanized Cukor's reputation as a director of women. It was a tag he despised, however, probably due

to his homosexuality, which was something of an open secret.

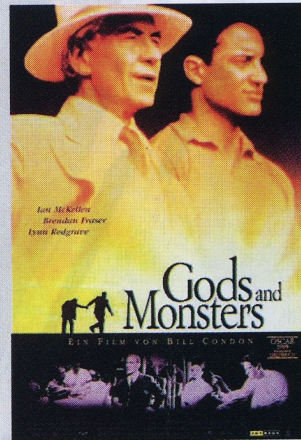
Unfortunately we know very little about Cukor's private life or his lovers. "Cukor grew up at a time when discretion was obligatory," his biographer, Gavin Lambert, has explained. "Like his good friends Somerset Maugham and Noël Coward, Cukor simply kept his private life private."

But high in his Hollywood Hills mansion, Cukor would hold men-only Sunday parties

## Cukor was fired from *Gone With The Wind* when Clark Gable reportedly stormed off the set saying, "I won't be directed by a fairy!"



and lavish soirées for the entertainment world's elite. Check out the *Gods And Monsters* (1998) scene, in which James Whale (played by Sir Ian McKellen) takes his gardener (Brendan Fraser) to a garden party thrown by Cukor (Martin Ferrero). The two directors were bitter rivals and polar opposites. Whale didn't try to hide his homosexuality and was jealous of Cukor's greater success.



At one stage Cukor landed himself in hot water when mugged by a group of sailors while out cruising. The director had enough star power to keep the

scandal under wraps though many Hollywood heavyweights treated Cukor badly. *Gone With The Wind* (1939) may have been a different kind of movie had Cukor stayed on as director but he was fired when Clark Gable reportedly stormed off the set saying, "I won't be directed by a fairy!" It is believed that Cukor knew of Gable's liaisons with other men in his climb to the top. Regardless, Cukor still had some input into the production by continuing to coach both Vivien Leigh and Olivia de Havilland after his departure.

*Gone With The Wind* was not the only movie masterpiece that lacked proper credit to Cukor. He was also brought onto *The Wizard Of Oz* set to coach Judy Garland after original director Richard Thorpe was fired. In true Cukor fashion, he rounded Garland's performance into a more natural state, changed her costume and make-up and wisely tossed out her original blonde wig. Later in Garland's adult career, he directed her in the comeback vehicle *A Star Is Born* (1954), for which she received an Oscar nomination. >>



Clockwise from left: Lawrence Olivier; Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh in *Gone With The Wind*; George Cukor on set with Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn.

>> Even Marilyn Monroe worked under Cukor, including on her last film, the ill-fated and unfinished *Something's Got To Give* (1962). Unusually, there was much difficulty between the star and director and her tragic death eventually halted production. He once said of Marilyn, "There's been an awful lot of crap written about Marilyn Monroe and, I don't know, there may be an exact psychiatric term for what was wrong with her but truth to tell, I think she was quite mad."

However, the director established his best working and personal relationship with Katherine Hepburn. He first took the actress under his wing in *A Bill Of Divorcement* (1932) and continued to work with her in *Little Women* (1933), *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935), *Holiday* (1938), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *Keeper Of The Flame* (1942), *Adam's Rib* (1949), *Pat*



*And Mike* (1952), *Love Among The Ruins* (1975) and *The Corn Is Green* (1979). There was definitely a unique rapport between the two and Cukor brought the best out in the actress. She was, indeed, his muse.

In his later years, Cukor tried to get his own projects off the ground. Long before Stephen

**"The woman's director" was a tag he despised, probably due to his homosexuality, which was something of an open secret.**

Daldry's *The Hours* (2002), he wanted to make a feature based on the life of Virginia Woolf, with none other than Maggie Smith in mind. But the project never saw the light of day.

Sadly, over the years, Cukor found fewer projects to suit him. The new school of emerging fashionable directors worked in stark contrast to his style and his contemporaries such as John Ford, James Whale and Victor Fleming. Even so, Cukor was a fan of the avant-garde filmmakers such as Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey. He was a good friend of Roddy McDowall (*Lassie*) and his goddaughter was Mia Farrow. Cukor's last film was *Rich And Famous* (1981), which starred Candice Bergen and Jacqueline Bisset. It was a remake of the 1943 film *Old Acquaintance*, directed by Vincent Sherman. The movie was no great success but does bear some of the director's great style, especially in the performances of the two leads.

Cukor once said, "You can always land on your feet if you know where the ground is." Many will agree he did just that. 🍷

