

Want to help *Cineaste* sustain its in-depth, comprehensive coverage? Please consider making a **tax-deductible donation** today! ×

# CINEASTE

America's leading magazine on the art and politics of the cinema

[STORE](#)   [CUMULATIVE INDEX](#)   [WRITER'S GUIDELINES](#)   [ADVERTISE](#)   [RESOURCES](#)  
[WEB ARCHIVES](#)   [EDITORS AND STAFF](#)   [FAQ](#)   [CONTACT](#)   [THE CURRENT ISSUE](#)  
[DIGITAL EDITIONS](#)

## ***The Lady Eve*** (Preview)

Reviewed by Catherine Russell

*Produced by Paul Jones; written and directed by Preston Sturges;  
cinematography by Victor Milner; edited by Stuart Gilmore; art direction by  
Hans Dreier and Ernst Fegté; costumes by Edith Head; starring Barbara  
Stanwyck, Henry Fonda, Charles Coburn, Eugene Pallette, William Demarest,*

and Eric Blore. Blu-ray or DVD, B&W, 94 min., 1941. A Criterion Collection Release.

Film critic Robin Wood once described *The Lady Eve* as a “perfect film.” Peter Bogdanovich in his introduction to the new Criterion Blu-ray says that “you can’t get a better movie,” and indeed it is a standout comedy in Preston Sturges’s short career, in Barbara



Stanwyck’s long career, and among early Forties studio releases. The writing is sharp, smart, and loaded with double entendres that provocatively challenge the mores of the Production Code. Sturges’s script, very loosely based on a story by Monckton Hoffe, takes an elliptical, allegorical detour through the Garden of Eden, aka the Amazon, where there are women, but none of them “white.” Outside that garden is a world inhabited by con artists, a seductive white woman (Stanwyck), and a snake exported from the Amazon as a sign of the deception awaiting the travelers—Charles “Hopsy” Pike (Henry Fonda) and Muggsy (William Demarest), his bodyguard, keeper, and “very bad valet.”

The “perfection” of *The Lady Eve* is already compromised by what is easily seen today as its racist opening. The fall from innocence is indeed an elaborate trick that can be played only on someone who is already tarnished, and, in this case, Hopsy is indeed tainted by excessive wealth as the heir to a beer...excuse me, an ale empire. The entire film is an elaborate stunt, pulled by Sturges and Stanwyck on this poor sap of a rich boy. Stanwyck plays Jean

Harrington, the daughter of a card sharp, and a con artist in her own right. Halfway through the film, Stanwyck appears as a completely different character, the British aristocrat Lady Eve Sidwich, and everyone except Hopsy can see the con, including viewers, who can only marvel at Stanwyck's portrayal of another woman who is, in fact, the same woman.

Jean's father, "Colonel" Harrington (Charles Coburn), says to his daughter early on, "Let us be crooked, but never common," indicating their aristocratic pretensions as well as the terms of the farce. Traveling on a cruise ship, Jean lures Hopsy into a poker game with her father. But Jean falls in love with the mark and vice versa. As a result, during the second night of poker, Jean and her father engage in shifty attempts to cheat each other, as the Colonel tries to beat Hopsy by slyly slipping new cards out of his pocket or wallet, while Jean, as the dealer, keeps switching his newly improved hands for weaker ones. The mutual sleight of hand is completely lost on Hopsy, whose innocence and ignorance is as exaggerated as the Harringtons' trickery. When Jean momentarily steps away from the table, her father quickly drives up Hopsy's debt to \$32,000 in a double-or-nothing gambit. When Hopsy is alerted to the con the next day by the ship's purser, he confronts Jean with the evidence, and she gives an earnest speech about "bad girls" not always being so bad and "good girls" not always being so good. Hopsy doesn't buy it and angrily reneges on his marriage proposal.



The Lady Eve. Photo courtesy of Photofest.

To get her revenge, Stanwyck later comes back into Hopsy's world as a completely different woman—the Lady Eve Sidwich, the supposed niece of Sir Alfred McGlennan Keith (Eric Blore), one of Hopsy's upper-class neighbors in Connecticut (who is actually another con artist fleecing the neighborhood swells in games of bridge). Hopsy does not recognize her, although his buddy Muggsy immediately does. After Eve has successfully married Hopsy, and on their honeymoon regales her shocked husband with casual references to her

numerous prior sexual relationships, she is offered a generous divorce settlement from Hopsy's father (played by the hilarious character actor Eugene Pallette), and her own father notes that she is now holding a royal flush. She refuses to play it, however, and, realizing that she still loves the chump, holds out for love. Jean and her father quickly resume their larcenous activities on a cruise ship where they once again encounter Hopsy, who, after his ordeal with "Eve," is happy to see "Jean," and they rush to her cabin to consummate the "marriage."

Sturges and his cast pull off the central stunt of the film through a combination of snappy dialogue and superb performances. Fonda, cast against type and far from the profound seriousness of previous films such as *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), repeatedly takes clumsy tumbles or is the victim of others' bungling behavior, his dopiness made literal by comic pratfalls. These stunts are offset by his deadpan or credulous expressions when Stanwyck, in her different guises, unravels her outlandish tales. For her part, Stanwyck can turn on a dime from lovey-dovey to deep-down disappointment when she learns that Hopsy has "made" her as a crook. Likewise, she can switch from a posh British royal to a long-winded, giggly girl with a checkered past when she turns the tables on Hopsy during their honeymoon. The twists and turns of the plot of *The Lady Eve* are managed principally by Stanwyck's ability to sustain a single credible character within and behind her chameleon-like performance.



*Jean (Barbara Stanwyck) enjoying the attentions of Charles (Henry Fonda), a naive millionaire.*

Sturges wrote the part of Jean/Eve with Stanwyck in mind, after working with her on *Remember the Night* (1940), for which he wrote the screenplay. Although she had done comedy before (what else is *Baby Face* [1933]?), Sturges saw Stanwyck's untapped potential, and the role set her up well for later films such as *Ball of Fire* (1941) and *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945). The duplicity of Jean/Eve also arguably enabled her to play the unreliable women of film noir, including Phyllis Dietrichson (*Double Indemnity*, 1944) and Thelma Jordon (*The File on Thelma Jordon*, 1950). Moreover, Edith Head's costume designs for *The Lady Eve* catapulted Stanwyck into the glamour pages, giving her a new silhouette. Her uplifted breasts and shapely

buttocks also gave her a fresh, new sexy look. The glamorous Stanwyck was featured prominently in the publicity and critical reception of *The Lady Eve*. The “Latin look” of her black-sequined, midriff-baring bolero jacket with a floor-length skirt became a popular style, and it was the first time Head’s designs had crossed over from movie costume to fashion trend. Stanwyck and Head’s fruitful collaboration lasted for decades, on screen and off.

The new Criterion Blu-ray package includes an excerpt from Paddy Calistro and Edith Head’s 1983 book *Edith Head’s Hollywood*, adding nothing to Criterion’s original 2001 DVD inclusion of this extra except correctly crediting Head as co-author of the book. Nevertheless, the newly mastered Blu-ray edition really shows off the detail of the costumes that outshine the rest of Sturges’s elegant yet banal set designs. The black beads of the Latin outfit seem to glisten, and Eve’s grand entrance as a countess wearing a sequined white gown and wielding a luscious feathered fan becomes even grander. The textures and craftsmanship of the outfit are far more demonstrative of her aristocratic pedigree than Stanwyck’s uneven British accent. The rear projection views of the shimmering ocean in the background of the cruise ship scenes are gorgeously vivid in this new 4K digital restoration, and the overall shallow focus of the film acquires a new glow that makes the love story within the farce even more sensuous.

In addition to the rather tired feature on Edith Head, the new Criterion disc includes the original trailer, the 1942 *Lux Radio Theatre* version (with Stanwyck and Ray Milland), a commentary by film scholar Marian Keane, and the Bogdanovich introduction, all of which were available in the 2001 DVD release. The new features include a video essay by David Cairns, which starts out as a playful weave of Sturges’s biography and *The Lady Eve*,

following the thread of magic and card tricks to Aleister Crowley, an acquaintance of Sturges's eccentric mother. Cairns's video quickly gets bogged down in a predictable account of the film's most clever scenes—of which there are many. Criterion has also reprinted a fun profile of Sturges by Noel F. Busch published in 1946 in *Life* magazine that explores the director's unconventional and eclectic biography to find out what makes him tick...

*To read the complete review, click [here](#) so that you may order either a subscription to begin with our Winter 2020 issue, or [order](#) a copy of this issue.*

Copyright © 2020 by Cineaste Magazine

Cineaste, Vol. XLVI, No. 1

---

© 2024 Cineaste Publishers, Inc.

subscribe to our newsletter

