

Barbara Stanwyck: The Miracle Woman: A valuable, passionate portrait of a great actress

Charles Bogle
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In *Barbara Stanwyck: The Miracle Woman*, Dan Callahan argues convincingly that with the help of some of the better directors and writers of her generation, actress Barbara Stanwyck drew from her painful childhood and adolescence to develop her remarkable acting style across a range of genres.

His critical analyses of her performances are not, thankfully, uncommitted, academic regurgitations of what others have written, but highly observant, passionately written considerations of her artistry.

Callahan writes persuasively that this gifted, driven actress's early years are also responsible for her later, troubled private life, although the source of Stanwyck's right-wing political leanings deserves more careful consideration.

Finally, Callahan's biography helps explain what to this reviewer's mind is Stanwyck's gift to the cinema: a "less-is-more" approach to acting that asked her audience to take her characters on their (the characters') own terms.

Born Ruby Stevens on July 16, 1907, in Brooklyn, Barbara Stanwyck would later admit to having "had a terrible childhood. Let's just say," she added, "'poor' is something I understand."

Orphaned at the age of two—her mother was killed when a drunk knocked her off a street car, and two weeks later her father went to work on the Panama Canal never to return—she was first left in the care of her older sister, Millie (a chorus girl), who, when she went on the road, left Ruby and her brother Byron in foster care.

Callahan claims that whatever she saw in foster care homes and the streets of Brooklyn "seems to have made her as guarded as possible," and accounts, at least partially, for her on-screen ability to hide barely suppressed emotions behind a stoical face.

Going to the movies was her escape, and she became a chorus girl by 13, dancing in mob-controlled nightclubs—where, according to Callahan, she gained the skill of enticing men and then brushing them off, a skill she took with her into movies.

Stanwyck brought the same attitude to her memories of that time in her life, never mentioning, for instance, the cigarette scars that people would later notice on her chest. Callahan believes that this refusal to collapse into self-pity, or worse, "allowed her to become perhaps the most consistently fine actress of her time in American movies."

By 15, Ruby Stevens was a Ziegfeld Follies girl. She never attended high school.

In 1926, Stevens became Barbara Stanwyck for her first acting job in a movie, and in 1928 signed a contract with Warner Bros. Here, Stanwyck developed her film acting style during the pre-Production Code early 1930s.

Director Frank Capra used close-ups and multiple cameras to force Stanwyck to be genuine and spontaneous, and when he found that the first take was her best—Stanwyck was apparently capable of emptying her immense emotional reservoir into a scene only one time—he didn't rehearse her with the rest of the actors.

The results were the impressive pre-Code movies *Ladies of Leisure* (1930), which Callahan calls an Oscar-worthy performance; *Miracle Woman* (1931); and 1933's *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*. Stanwyck would use and refine this method for the rest of her career.

Under Alfred E. Green's direction, Stanwyck learned to mine experiences from her past in the 1933 movie *Baby Face* about a working-class girl who sleeps her way to the top.

Callahan finds that, like other actors of this period, Stanwyck felt forced to tone down her performances after the enforcement of the Production Code, which involved moral and political censorship of the movies. Still, she managed to deliver a number of powerfully memorable performances while further refining her craft.

One striking example is King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937). Callahan writes that in her role as the self-sacrificing mother who ultimately exiles herself from her daughter so that the latter might lead a happy life, Stanwyck relived her childhood by performing an act of catharsis for the "audience" and the orphaned Ruby Stevens.

Stanwyck was self-admittedly "not a funny person," but she brought her work ethic to several brilliantly written and directed comedies and eventually mastered the genre. Preston Sturges' scripts for *Remember the Night* (1940) and *The Lady Eve* (1941) gave the actress the words to add verbal expression to her acting arsenal.

According to Callahan, Stanwyck's search for a protective male figure resulted in her marriage to the abusive Frank Fay, vaudevillian and sometime actor (1928-1935), while her marriage to actor and adulterer Robert Taylor was a "Hollywood marriage" (1939-1951) arranged by MGM head Louis B. Mayer. A four-year relationship with the much younger actor Robert Wagner and numerous nights spent with "escorts" followed.

The final two decades of Stanwyck's film career were a mixed bag. While the near-great *The Furies* (1950), directed by Anthony Mann, Fritz Lang's *Clash by Night* (1952) and Douglas Sirk's *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956) attempted to tackle serious matters, Callahan rightly declares that the writing suffered from the 1950's dictum that "the status quo must be maintained." In addition to *The Furies*, Stanwyck acted in eleven other westerns during her career, further testimony to her acting range.

Callahan finds even less to praise about Stanwyck's television work, which he finds to consist largely of the mostly empty scripts and downright trash typical of the 1960's-1980's era of "squalid spectacles."

The biographer pays considerable attention to Stanwyck's difficult past when discussing her performances. Unquestionably, there was no female performer in American films who could at the same moment register and conceal extraordinary anguish as Stanwyck did.

Callahan explains the famous opening "foreplay" scene in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), with Stanwyck and Fred McMurray, in terms of his subject's past. He notes the similarity between the rapid-fire dialogue (written by Raymond Chandler) and "vaudeville patter routine," and surmises that Stanwyck might have drawn on the "specter" of first husband to bring an emotional realism to her role as a woman who despises her husband.

By this time, however, Stanwyck had learned how to parcel out the emotional baggage. Callahan points to Stanwyck's use of a "sensible, hushed, but uncommonly forceful voice" for the scene in which Walter tells Phyllis about a woman who was executed for murdering her husband. "Stanwyck," argues Callahan, "knows exactly what she's doing, but she's never going to show you all of her cards in this movie."

The author claims that Stanwyck got her right-wing political views from her husbands, especially Taylor. Stanwyck joined Taylor in helping to found the Motion Picture alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, which a few years later aligned itself with HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee). Taylor was the only major movie star to name names at the hearings.

No doubt Stanwyck's right-wing husbands influenced her politically, but her background and situation should also be considered. Lacking in formal education and forced to live by her wits and determination at an early age, she became one of those whose very success blinds them to the fact that for the great majority such good fortune is ruled out. Her characterizations of women in emotional and economic desperation was no guarantee that she consciously understood the processes involved.

Stanwyck's premature adulthood and her later unwillingness to give in to self-pity may help account for her "less-is-more" approach to acting that asked her audience to reserve judgment on her characters.

In the comedic masterpiece *The Lady Eve*, also directed by Sturges, Stanwyck uses minimal visual and verbal cues to reveal first her con-artist character's (Jean Harrington) designs on brewery empire heir and herpetologist Charles Pike (Henry Fonda) and then her ensuing inner conflict as she grows to care for him. Jean responds to the shy bachelor Charles' fascination with snakes, "Snakes are my life, in a way," with a non-inflected "What a life!" and the slightest narrowing of her eyes.

Because she is looking away from Charles when she says this (she's lying on a chaise, while he lies beside her on the floor), the audience is of course meant to understand that Jean's comment is mildly sardonic, but also that she has played this con game so often the eye-narrowing has become second nature.

There's also a hint in Stanwyck's gesture that she's just becoming conscious of what such a life would mean for her. In the next scene, after all, she's telling her father/gambling partner Harry (Charles Coburn) that she thinks she's falling in love with Charles, and that before she marries him, she will tell him about their (she and her

father's) ruse to take his money in a rigged card game. As she leaves to meet Fonda-Charles, she turns away again, but this time with deep concern on her face. Is it concern about Charles' reaction, or for herself?

Stanwyck's most important scene in *The Lady Eve* occurs next: as part of preparing to inform Charles the truth about herself, she explains to him that all women have to be "adventurous if they're going to catch a man," only to hear Charles say that he learned the unpleasant truth about her before they spent the previous evening together. (This is a lie; he has just been given photographic proof that Jean and her father are known con artists.)

Tears well up, but don't fall, and a barely perceptible tremble enters her voice, but not due to being rejected. In fact, she does not give him the time to reject her before she asks, plaintively,

"Don't you believe me? Don't you believe I was going to tell you [the truth about herself]?" and then tells him he must feel better for having made her feel "cheap" and runs into her state room to cry in private. What is really hurting Stanwyck's Jean is that Charles has not accepted her for who she is; he has not accepted her on her own terms.

Jean's second ruse—pretending to be the rich, English Lady Eve of the movie's title—ultimately results in Charles accepting her for who she is. There is great comedy in between, slapstick, mistaken identities and verbal sparring; but Stanwyck had done the serious work, brilliantly, in the first half of the movie.

Callahan concludes that like her Stella Dallas character, "Stanwyck didn't like reality—which is why she needed to act almost non-stop [she appeared in 82 movies between 1927 and 1964 and three television series and four television movies between 1960 and 1983]." That may be, but his biography proves once again that all great artists begin with life as it is lived, and it is to the author's credit as a biographer that we are made more aware of Barbara Stanwyck's ferocious determination to look at life honestly.

The biography includes a filmography.



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