

An interview with film historian and biographer Joseph McBride, author of *How Did Lubitsch Do It?*

David Walsh
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I spoke recently with film historian and biographer Joseph McBride about his recent book, *How Did Lubitsch Do It?*, published in June 2018.

The fascinating work is a study of the life and films of German American filmmaker Ernst Lubitsch (1892-1947), famed for *The Marriage Circle* (1924), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925), *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), *Design for Living* (1933), *The Merry Widow* (1934), *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), *Heaven Can Wait* (1943) and other works.

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David Walsh: *How Did Lubitsch Do It?* is very well-researched and conscientious, and elegantly written. It raises many artistic and historical questions. My chief aim in a relatively brief interview would be to encourage people to see Lubitsch's films and read the book. You say it took nine years to research and write.

Joseph McBride: On and off, I also did other things. During that period I had several other books published.

The first motivation was that I felt Lubitsch was underappreciated, in comparison with other great directors from that period. Second, in a selfish way, I had a desire to see all the films.

When I first saw *Trouble in Paradise* [1932] in the late 1960s, even though it was my initial exposure to Lubitsch, I had the impression that I'd seen this director's masterpiece. It just seemed so perfect. And I still believe it his masterpiece. Forty-eight of the 69 films Lubitsch directed survive. Some are in fragments, some are complete. That's a pretty good percentage for a director who started in 1914.

I went various places to see all of his films, the Locarno International Film Festival, Munich, Berlin and elsewhere. Collectors also helped me to find rare prints.

DW: Why do you think Lubitsch is less recognized than other film directors of the era?

JM: There are pockets of Lubitsch admirers who write me and come up to me at screenings. So he has devoted supporters. But he's not a household name, as he was in the 1930s, as Frank Capra and Alfred Hitchcock were. The "Lubitsch Touch" was a phrase that was used all the time.

There's something clichéd or reductive about the phrase, but I also like it because it connotes sensuality and lightness of touch. He made fun of the "Lubitsch Touch." He said, if you can find out what that means, let me know! I quote Lubitsch extensively in the book about his working methods from rare interviews and other long-forgotten material.

If you mentioned John Ford's name in the 1960s—I was working on a critical study of him at the time with Michael Wilmington—you would receive a blank stare. Even when I worked on my biography, *Searching for John Ford* [2000], in the 1990s, I would still get that awful blank stare. Now, because of all the work that's been done on him, and because his

films are shown on cable television and streaming channels, that's not the case.

With Lubitsch, you definitely get the blank stare. Part of it is due to the fact that he died in 1947, before the film buff wave of the 1960s in America, in the 1950s in France. So he was not around to burnish his legend.

Lubitsch had the disadvantage of being dead. More to the point, his style of filmmaking was considered a thing of the past. Even before he died, I think he realized he was becoming sort of passé. Times were changing. The "proletarian comedies" of Capra came in during the mid-1930s. Then, screwball comedies arrived, more emotionally and physically violent films.

Lubitsch did adapt, he was more protean than many comedy directors. He was still "bankable" until he died, but he was foundering a bit. Still, he made some of his best films late in life, including *To Be or Not to Be* [1942], which is considered one of his masterpieces today. *Heaven Can Wait* [1943] was successful, but it's an autumnal work. *Cluny Brown* [1946] is a charming finale to his career. He went out in the middle of *That Lady in Ermine* [1948], a musical that is not good.

DW: Part of the problem obviously is that the Central European Jewish culture, with which Lubitsch's approach was bound up, was actually exterminated, physically.

JM: Andrew Sarris made that point back in the 1970s, that the world Lubitsch filmed was gone, the whole world. When I visited his old neighborhood in Berlin, miraculously the apartment building is still there, the store where his parents had their tailor shop is still there, but the Jewish residents were all killed in the local synagogue or sent to death camps. In the U-Bahn station, they have huge murals with photographs showing what the neighborhood was like before the Nazis. It's terrible and moving.

The entire milieu and mindset that Lubitsch was drawing from are things of the past. French filmmaker Jean Renoir had a fine comment in 1967, which is worth reminding people about: "Berlin, before Hitler, was blossoming with talents. In this short Renaissance, the Jews, not only of Germany but also of the surrounding countries, brought to this capital a certain spirit which was probably the best expression of the time. Lubitsch was a great example of this ironic approach to the big problems of life. His films were loaded with a kind of wit which was specifically the essence of the intellectual Berlin in those days. This man was so strong that when he was asked by Hollywood to work there, he not only didn't lose his Berlin style, but he converted the Hollywood industry to his own way of expression."

Lubitsch had a tremendous influence on Hollywood in general, and other filmmakers around the world. The roster of those who claimed him as their master or as an artistic model is astoundingly long, including such

figures as Hitchcock, Capra, Howard Hawks, Yasujiro Ozu, Max Ophüls, Douglas Sirk, Billy Wilder, Preston Sturges and Orson Welles. His peers learned a great deal from Lubitsch's style and his subtle, witty approach to life and society, including his somewhat skeptical view of authority.

Hollywood and America were still very puritanical and D.W. Griffith was the leading director when Lubitsch arrived in America in 1922. If you compare Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* [1921], a remarkable film in its own right about the French Revolution, to Lubitsch's *Madame DuBarry* [1919], their approaches are very different. Both are good films, but the Lubitsch film is highly sensual and deals frankly with that aspect of human nature, whereas the Griffith film is Victorian in its outlook.

Both directors are great at handling crowds and spectacle, but Lubitsch brought in a more modern feeling. A more cynical, postwar mood was setting in throughout the world. Wilder, with his dark humor, suggested Lubitsch was "one of the talented ones" who was called to Hollywood, and didn't arrive there because he was fleeing Hitler, as Wilder and so many others were forced to do.

Lubitsch's most influential early film in America was *The Marriage Circle*, which came out in 1924, a wonderfully wry, sensual romantic comedy. He had been influenced, in turn, by Charlie Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* [1923] and Mauritz Stiller's *Erotikon* [1920], from Sweden, in particular.

Lubitsch set *The Marriage Circle* in Vienna. He often located his films in Europe as a kind of subterfuge, because you could always say, "Oh, those naughty Europeans." You could get away with more in America if you placed your film in Paris or Vienna.

But also, Vienna was the sort of milieu that Lubitsch felt comfortable in. These films were widely imitated. Michael Powell in England said later that *The Marriage Circle* was the work that made him want to be a filmmaker.

The elliptical and precise style is so unusual. French filmmaker François Truffaut wrote that if you tell me there is a needless shot in a Lubitsch film, I'd call you a liar.

So, even though the world of these films vanished to a large extent, we can revisit it—or its spirit—in Lubitsch's films.

The sad thing is that a lot of young people are not taught anything about history anymore. When I was a kid, you got out of eighth grade or high school certainly knowing the basics of history, civics. Most Americans these days don't even know there are three branches of government. We had to know some of the classics of literature. Not anymore. All of that has been swept away.

I teach at San Francisco State University. A colleague used to say, don't show your students films that have been made in the last five years, they will have seen them all. Now, I find they don't know films made five years ago or even last year. They watch streaming stuff. Watching what is called "old films" is not something most people do. But as it has been said, an "old film" is just a film you haven't seen yet. And Peter Bogdanovich noted that we don't refer to "old" novels or "old" symphonies, only to "old" films.

But when I teach Lubitsch, Wilder or Ford, or other classical directors, the students get excited, they love them. When I show Lubitsch films, they think, "This guy is terrific, he's so modern, so sophisticated, so amusing." You have to lead them to such films. But that's how it works. You help expose people to these things and you hope that they go on and watch them themselves, but the study of the past is not as automatic or built-in as it used to be.

DW: There's another side to it, the postmodern charlatanism that argues that history is purely subjective, something invented by the historian, that objective truth doesn't exist. What's the point, the argument goes, in doing serious research because it's all a matter of subjectivity and your "personal narrative" anyway?

Your book, whether you fully know it or not, is a polemic against all

that.

JM: I am aware of that, and I had some pushback on this book from certain people who read it in manuscript and had some strange reactions to it. One university press editor, who evidently did not know what a critical study is, wanted me to resubmit it with all my opinions cut out! Some people objected to my criticisms of modern romantic comedies in contrast to Lubitsch's or to my attacks on the cult of "political correctness" and how Lubitsch is neglected in academia. I knew that, to begin with, I was being somewhat defiant in taking up Lubitsch.

Part of the problem is that Lubitsch deals so much with sexuality, and tastes and attitudes change in that regard. His sexual outlook is somewhat controversial. He's old-fashioned in that he does support the gender double standard to some extent, but he's also highly advanced in his sexual mores.

For example, my students were surprised that he celebrates or doesn't moralize about adultery in many of his films. He has an anti-puritanical point of view. A good number of his films suggest that affairs can enhance a marriage, or at least not destroy it. Some of the films deal with adultery in a more tragic manner, such as *The Shop Around the Corner* [1940] or *Angel* [1937], but he's consummately sophisticated about sexuality. And today, unfortunately, we've entered another puritanical era.

DW: Yes, there's an old-fashioned element, but for me at least Lubitsch's female characters are generally the strongest and most interesting personalities: Ossi Oswalda, Pola Negri, Marie Prevost, Irene Rich, Jeanette MacDonald, Miriam Hopkins, Kay Francis, Greta Garbo, Margaret Sullavan, Carole Lombard and others.

JM: *Design for Living* [1933] is an astonishing film for its time and even now—it's an argument for a *ménage à trois*. Ben Hecht wrote the screenplay, based on the Noël Coward play. The latter, frankly, I find misogynistic. In Lubitsch's film, the Miriam Hopkins character is portrayed as admirable and honest, feisty, sexually adventurous. She has these two guys [Gary Cooper and Fredric March] in love with her. The final shot includes the three of them, with her arms around both of them.

One of the reasons I love *Trouble in Paradise* so much is that's a work about a man in love with two women, who are equally wonderful. Usually, filmmakers load the dice by titillating you, but then making one of the women—or men—less interesting, less attractive. In Lubitsch's film, both women—Miriam Hopkins and Kay Francis—are so charming and lovely, you really feel the dilemma of Herbert Marshall—it would be great to be with both of them, but he can't.

There's a line in *Monte Carlo* [1930], one of Lubitsch's earlier Hollywood sound films, a musical, to the effect that a woman mistreated a man because she "just obeyed the dictates of society." Lubitsch is continually reminding us of this problem, the strictures of society in relation to human feelings and emotions.

DW: When you speak about the destructive pressure of society's dictates, I was very moved by *Lady Windermere's Fan* [1925], based on the Oscar Wilde play, along with *The Student Prince in Old Heidelberg* [1927].

JM: Yes, *Student Prince* is a beautiful film, with Ramón Novarro and Norma Shearer. It's about a young man who is forced to become a king, and he's terribly unhappy because of the social role he has to play. He's in love with a "commoner," Norma Shearer. She's adorable, and it's tragic when they have to separate.

The film version of *Lady Windermere's Fan* is perhaps even better than the classic play. It's a silent film, and it cheekily omits the epigrams. There are very few intertitles. Lubitsch translated the film's themes into a visual style. Mrs. Erlynne, played wonderfully by Irene Rich, is a scandalous woman who is treated with complete sympathy by Lubitsch (and Wilde, of course). It deals with the naïveté of her daughter [May McAvoy] who is never told the truth about her mother. Her husband [Bert Lytell] keeps the truth from her, to keep her in a childlike state. The

situation is portrayed as melancholy, since she can't get to know her mother because of the social circumstances.

DW: I had never seen the German silent films. I thought *The Oyster Princess* [1919], especially the first portions of it, was extraordinary, energetic, sensual, funny.

JM: It's stunningly stylized and thoroughly delightful. That's the film in which Lubitsch said he found his style. There's such a *joie de vivre*, a rambunctiousness, an anarchic character to *The Oyster Princess*. Ossi Oswalda is a charming comedienne, she's not particularly glamorous, she's like the girl next door. She's charming and zany, she's introduced to us when she's smashing up her room, out of pent-up sexual feeling in part.

The Doll [1919] is another remarkable work, an entirely artificial and stylized comedy. Ossi Oswalda plays a real girl pretending to be a sex doll. One of the lost Lubitsch films I'd most love to see is a 1919 comedy he made with Ossi called *My Wife, The Film Actress*.

DW: What about the supposed anti-Semitism of the early German films in which Lubitsch acts and sometimes directs?

JM: The *Cahiers du Cinéma* critic Jean-Louis Comolli in 1968 called that series of early Lubitsch vehicles "the most anti-Semitic body of work ever to be produced." This is absurd, in my view.

Lubitsch first made a name for himself as a comic actor in *The Pride of the Firm* [1914], which he didn't direct, playing a sort of *schlemiel*, a shop clerk who is a bumbler and a klutz, always exasperating his boss. He is ambitious at the same time, a go-getter, and he succeeds in winning the girl and generally triumphing.

Lubitsch then directed *Shoe Palace Pinkus* [1916], a virtual remake of *The Pride of the Firm*. He played the same sort of character.

Ethnic humor is not popular today because we're very sensitive to it, and for good reason. Obviously, after the Holocaust, we look back differently at German films from the pre-Hitler period. You can read into them the Daniel Goldhagen view that all Germans are inherently anti-Semitic.

DW: A thesis that I reject entirely.

JM: Indeed, I also find it ahistorical and reductive. There was a range of views on that subject among Germans. The fact that they found a Jewish character—who was somewhat of a caricature—amusing in the pre-Hitler period is not necessarily sinister, it might be as much a sign of fellow feeling, if the ethnic humor is done with warmth and affection, as it is in these films, including the bumptious 1919 comedy *Meyer from Berlin*.

I think that this notion of the anti-Semitic character of Lubitsch's initial films, frankly, is ridiculous. There's a profound essay by Joel Rosenberg on *To Be or Not to Be*. He points out that there are certain individuals in Lubitsch's work whom he terms "implicit" Jewish characters. In other words, there are characters who are metaphorical "stand-ins" for Jews, although they are not actually Jewish. Characters who are outsiders, who are clever at overcoming persecution, who are survivors. The Arab hunchbacked clown Lubitsch plays in his last acting role, *Sumurun* [1920], is one of them."

DW: What about the criticism Lubitsch received from leftist or "aesthete" critics for some of his German films?

JM: Lubitsch made his name as a director with *Madame DuBarry*, about the French Revolution, and then he did *Anna Boleyn* [1920], another spectacle, about one of Henry VIII's unfortunate wives. Lubitsch then made *The Wife of Pharaoh* [1922], which was released in America under the crass title *The Loves of Pharaoh*.

Some European critics, the leftist critics, attacked those films because they didn't think they were socially responsible or socially conscious, mainly because they dealt so centrally with sexuality.

Lubitsch is making fun of monarchy in those films—French and English kings and queens, the Egyptian pharaoh—which is rather anarchistic, subversive. Samson Raphaelson—his principal American

screenwriter—said, "We just laughed our heads off at kings. Neither Lubitsch nor I ever met any king. We were just having fun." Lubitsch brings his dramas down to the common, earthy level.

Some of the critics argued that Lubitsch had failed, in *Madame DuBarry*, to present the conditions that had brought about the French Revolution, and instead showed the king's dalliance with a milliner. Lubitsch does ignore the broader causes. I think the greatest historical film ever made is Renoir's *La Marseillaise* [1938], about the early days of the French Revolution, which begins with an incident of local injustice and steadily broadens its viewpoint, while employing a truly democratic casting ensemble.

That doesn't mean you can't enjoy *Madame DuBarry* and its take on human sexuality and human weakness. Siegfried Kracauer was one of the critics who attacked Lubitsch, Lotte Eisner, the writer and critic, was another. She was a German Jew who tended to look down on the eastern Jews. Lubitsch's father was Russian, he fled the tsarist pogroms. He thought Berlin would be more welcoming. He married a German woman. Ernst avoided serving in World War I because he was a Russian citizen at the time. His parents died before the Holocaust.

DW: Personally, I don't think you watch a Lubitsch film to discover the secrets of the social and historical process in the 20th century. *Ninotchka* [1939] has its amusing sides and its reactionary sides, but if you want to understand the Russian Revolution and the character of Stalinism, that is not the work I would rush to. That's not Lubitsch's strength, he's often over his head in relation to these big questions.

His strength, I think, is his tolerance and his sophisticated insight into certain forms of human behavior, his amused and amusing grasp of human foibles and problems. This is a part of life, although it's not the only part of life. I don't think I would want to be restricted to a diet of Lubitsch films for the rest of my life, too much would be left out. But you watch his films because of those aspects of life he does include, understand and represent beautifully.

JM: I agree, generally speaking. But one of the things my book does argue is that he is more political than he is often given credit for.

DW: He was alive and working, and thinking, in the 20th century. Certain questions couldn't be avoided.

JM: *Trouble in Paradise*, for example, is very much attuned to the Great Depression. Money is a big issue, everyone is corrupt. They keep talking about "In times like these..." That film is really about capitalism. And yet the woman who runs the perfume factory is charming and humane, the female capitalist. He doesn't stack the deck by making her a monster. I discuss "Lubitsch's own profound moralism—a level of seriousness toward the consequences of human behavior that has nothing to do with conventional notions of morality but everything to do with how men and women can and should treat each other."

In terms of *Ninotchka*, Lubitsch traveled to the Soviet Union in 1936. He was partly of Russian heritage, as I mentioned. He was appalled by Stalinism and its brutality. The film also lampoons capitalism.

To Be or Not to Be is a brilliant film about Nazism. It survives because it works on so many levels. It is so audacious. It's about a group of theater artists who outwit the Nazis. It sent a message that the Nazis could be beaten and they could be outsmarted.

But I agree that we don't watch Lubitsch's films primarily because of their profound analysis of the political and economic system. Clearly, Renoir's *La Marseillaise* is another type of film.

DW: What would you say to encourage someone to watch Lubitsch's films?

JM: I would say, be prepared to submerge yourself in a different world, a better world. Lubitsch portrays life as he would have wished to live it. There's a famous quote from him: "I've been to Paris, France, and I've been to Paris, Paramount. I think I prefer Paris, Paramount." There's a love of artifice, of charm, of beauty in his films. It's a vanished world.

If you want to see what humanity is capable of, go see one of his films. His films are fresh, witty and original. He and Samson Raphaelson spent three days thinking up the opening of *Trouble in Paradise*. Lubitsch would often say in his heavy German accent, “How do we get into it? How do we open? It gotta be brilliant!” He’d ask, “How do we do that, without doing that?” In other words, he never went for the easy solution. He racked his brains coming up with fresh ways to tell stories. As Truffaut wrote, Lubitsch “worked like a dog, bled himself white, died twenty years too early.”

DW: Finally, tell me about your new book, *Frankly: Unmasking Frank Capra*.

JM: This is a book about my struggle to tell the truth about Frank Capra, the celebrated American film director. I’ve long been an admirer of Capra’s films, and I still am. When I began to get to know Capra, in 1975, and then when I co-wrote the American Film Institute Life Achievement Award to him in 1982, I realized he was starkly different from the way he portrayed himself in his autobiography, *The Name Above the Title* [1971].

His films are often seen as promoting New Deal sociopolitical values. In fact, Capra was politically conservative—he hated Franklin D. Roosevelt, he admitted to me. His films are very mixed-up politically. There are moments that are progressive, some that are reactionary. He was all over the map.

Although Capra was deeply conservative, he worked with many writers who were liberals or leftists, some of them Communist Party members and others who also were later blacklisted. I found out, from going through his papers, that after World War II, during the Hollywood Red Scare, he had informed on some of his writers to the Defense Department and also to the FBI. That was a shock. He violated the principles, for example, of his finest film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* [1939], which was written for him by a Communist Party member, Sidney Buchman.

To his credit, Capra in his prime was able to work with people from a wide political spectrum, partly out of commercial calculation, but also there were aspects of progressivism he could relate to. He came from a peasant background in Italy, but he identified with the ruling class.

So when I wrote my biography *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* [1992], it was riveting work. He’s such a contradictory character, a figure of Dostoyevskian complexity. He waved the American flag fervently but betrayed the principles of the Bill of Rights by informing. I was trying to figure this out in writing the book. I had access to him for a year of interviews. I also interviewed 175 other people. Most of them are gone now.

I faced a lot of opposition from his archivist, Jeanine Basinger, of the Cinema Archives at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. She let me see his papers, and then she started making my life difficult. The book’s original publisher was Alfred A. Knopf, and my editor was Robert Gottlieb, one of the most illustrious editors in the country. But it turned out that Knopf and Wesleyan and Basinger had a compromising relationship, and they blocked my book. They kept throwing up obstacles during the seven years I was writing this big book. I had to fight a Byzantine legal battle. Gottlieb said to me at one point, “You know it all—you may know too much.”

Eventually, I extricated myself from Knopf, which took about four years. It was Kafkaesque. Much of the obstruction was subterranean. I kept voluminous notes and correspondence files, which form the basis of the new book. We finally got the original biography freed and went to Simon & Schuster, and they published it, but I had to cut out a lot of the quotes from Capra’s writings since I couldn’t get the permissions I had been promised. But ultimately it helped the book, because I was able to summarize Capra in pithier, hopefully clearer language. In any case, I prevailed because I found an honest publisher.

No one knew this story, I kept it under wraps. Now *Frankly* tells the whole story. It’s a disturbing episode of how a major publisher in

America can work against an author trying to tell the truth about an iconic cultural figure and how an archivist, who should be helping scholars, does the opposite.

Sometimes we think we live in a relatively free country, but there are immense obstacles to exercising our First Amendment rights. This book is about those issues. It’s an eye-opening saga, I think.



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