

Movies for Isolation, 1939 Edition

By the common acclamation of many critics and film historians, as well as amateur aficionados like me, 1939 was the most notable single year for the release of great movies in the golden age of American filmmaking.

Everyone knows it is the year that gave us [*Gone With the Wind*](#) and [*The Wizard of Oz*](#). (All links provided here are to [JustWatch.com](#), a guide to where streaming movies and TV shows are available.) Many people know as well that 1939 gave us [*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*](#), the improbable but moving political drama in which director Frank Capra sent the career of James Stewart into the stratosphere. Other films, once mentioned, may elicit the response – oh yes, that was made in that year too! “Why of course, [*Ninotchka*](#), the great Ernst Lubitsch comedy in which ‘Garbo Laughs!’ was the same year.” And so forth.

What made the cinematic arts soar to such heights, over and over again, in 1939? I should probably leave this to the film historians, but here’s the way it seems to me. A dozen years after the “talkies” arrived with *The Jazz Singer*, the combined professional contributions to filmmaking had really gelled. Silent film directors had mastered the use of the camera for visual storytelling in the absence of audible dialogue, and even musical scoring had made strides that the presence of spoken dialogue might have interfered with. But the talkies brought dialogue writing and acting alike to new levels of naturalistic perfection, bringing the best features of the theatrical stage to the movie screen, but suitably adapted to the new medium. The often stilted and histrionic gestural acting commonly seen in too many silent films, and the overstated projection of emotions often seen on stage, were both hammered into the subtler art of film acting. The

marriage of the camera and the dialogue soundtrack – long delayed in the silent era but now happily consummated – resulted in a long gestation through the 1930s until Hollywood recognized what the offspring should look and sound like.

With the growing confidence of writers, directors, cinematographers, composers of scores, and actors, we see by the mid-1930s a mature art form in its own right, containing every element familiar to us in films to this day. And thanks to the increasing resources of the Hollywood studio system, by 1939 there was a high volume of production to match the high quality.

As for the actors, 1939 was a certainly a banner year for film debuts and breakthrough roles for some of the most famous Hollywood stars. I have already mentioned Jimmy Stewart; in addition to Mr. Smith, he made two eminently watchable comedies in 1939 in which his co-stars showed how much his star was rising: [*Made for Each Other*](#) (with Carole Lombard) and [*It's a Wonderful World*](#) (with Claudette Colbert). Basil Rathbone made his first two Sherlock Holmes movies, [*The Hound of the Baskervilles*](#) and [*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*](#). Maureen O'Hara, having debuted early that year in Alfred Hitchcock's British production of [*Jamaica Inn*](#), came to Hollywood and starred as Esmeralda in [*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*](#). William Holden launched his career opposite the established star Barbara Stanwyck in *Golden Boy* (sadly, not streaming anywhere right now, it seems). Laurence Olivier made his Hollywood debut in [*Wuthering Heights*](#). Ingrid Bergman made hers in [*Intermezzo: A Love Story*](#), a remake of a Swedish film in which she had starred three years earlier.

And there's more! Errol Flynn made his first Western (with frequent co-star Olivia de Havilland) in [*Dodge City*](#). Henry Fonda, still playing supporting parts that year in films like [*Jesse James*](#) (starring Tyrone Power) and [*The Story of Alexander Graham Bell*](#) (starring Don Ameche), landed the lead in two John Ford films, [*Young Mr. Lincoln*](#) and [*Drums Along the Mohawk*](#). Ford

also plucked John Wayne from B-movie obscurity and revived his A-list career with the landmark Western [*Stagecoach*](#), and Wayne went on that year to co-star a second time opposite Claire Trevor in William Seiter's [*Allegheny Uprising*](#). Greer Garson made her film debut opposite Robert Donat (who won the Oscar for Best Actor) in [*Goodbye Mr. Chips*](#). The already-established star Bette Davis hit a high point in her career with [*Dark Victory*](#). Memorable crime and gangster pictures – a popular genre then – include James Cagney and George Raft in [*Each Dawn I Die*](#), Cagney and Humphrey Bogart in [*The Roaring Twenties*](#), and John Garfield in [*They Made Me a Criminal*](#). And Burgess Meredith and Lon Chaney, Jr. played George and Lennie in Steinbeck's [*Of Mice and Men*](#).

Cary Grant had a good year in dramas, with [*In Name Only*](#) (with Carole Lombard), [*Only Angels Have Wings*](#) (with Jean Arthur), and [*Gunga Din*](#) (co-starring Victor McLaglen and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.). Tyrone Power and Myrna Loy co-starred in the epic [*The Rains Came*](#). Director Leo McCarey made the touching melodrama [*Love Affair*](#), with Irene Dunne and Charles Boyer – a film he would later remake with Deborah Kerr and Cary Grant as *An Affair to Remember*. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers brought their seven-year, nine-film run together to an end (until a reunion ten years later) with [*The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*](#). But Rogers continued to establish herself as a comedienne that year in [*Bachelor Mother*](#) and *Fifth Avenue Girl* (the latter unavailable for streaming, alas). An all-female cast (right down to the dogs and horses), led by Norma Shearer and directed by George Cukor, brought Clare Boothe Luce's play [*The Women*](#) to the screen.

I've saved my own favorite for last. I could watch almost any of the films above at the drop of a hat (*Gone With the Wind* being a conspicuous exception), but the most consistently enjoyable movie of 1939 for me is the glorious British-produced adventure [*The Four Feathers*](#). Filmed in Technicolor on location in the Sudan by the Korda brothers – produced by

Alexander, directed by Zoltan, with art direction by Vincent – its leads were played by the now-forgotten but very fine John Clements and June Duprez, with the ever-reliable C. Aubrey Smith as Duprez's father, and an unforgettable performance by Ralph Richardson as the fellow who . . . well, I won't spoil it! It's a pure escape into a world where friendship and love must be weighed against honor, duty, and courage.

So pop some popcorn, find one of these great films to watch, and settle into a comfortable seat.

Enjoy!

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