



Urban Optiques “Movies at the Marquis” Viewing Guide

Tonight's Feature

The Philadelphia Story

Viewing Notes

Released in 1940, *The Philadelphia Story* directed by **George Cukor** stars the trio of **Cary Grant**, **Katherine Hepburn** and **James Stewart** in this **Oscar-winning film** about a socialite whose wedding plans are complicated by the simultaneous arrival of her ex-husband and an attractive journalist.

The Philadelphia Story is based on the Broadway play of the same name by **Philip Barry**. It's considered one of the best examples of a **comedy of remarriage**, a popular film genre in the 1930s and 1940s.

James Stewart won an Oscar for **Best Actor in a Leading Role** and the film also picked up an Academy Award for **Best Screenplay**.

FAST FACTS

Year: 1940
Studio: MGM
Length: 112 minutes
Director: George Cukor
Screenplay: Donald Ogden Stewart
Color: Black and White
Original Sound Mix: Mono
Genre: Comedy/Romance
Cast: Cary Grant, Katherine Hepburn, James Stewart, John Howard, Ruth Hussey
Awards: Winner of 1941 Oscar for Best Actor in a Leading Role (Jimmy Stewart) and Best Screenplay. Nominated for 4 Oscars including Best Director and Best Picture.

Studio Tagline:

"Uncle Leo's Bedtime story for you older tots! The things they do among the playful rich - Oh, boy!"

Plot

Tracy Samantha Lord Haven (**Katharine Hepburn**) is a wealthy Main Line Philadelphia socialite who had divorced **C. K. Dexter Haven** (**Cary Grant**), a member of her social set, because he did not measure up to her exacting standards. (He was an alcoholic, and her lack of faith in him exacerbated his condition.) She is about to marry nouveau riche “man of the people” **George Kittredge** (**John Howard**).

Spy magazine publisher **Sidney Kidd** (**Henry Daniell**) is eager to cover the wedding, and blackmails Dexter into introducing tabloid reporter **Macaulay “Mike” Connor** (**James Stewart**) and photographer **Liz Imbrie** (**Ruth Hussey**) as friends of the family so they can report on the wedding. Tracy is not fooled, but reluctantly agrees to let them stay, after Dexter explains that Kidd has an innuendo-laden article about Tracy's father, **Seth** (**John Halliday**), who, Tracy believes, is having an affair with a dancer. Though Seth is separated from Tracy's mother **Margaret** (**Mary Nash**) and Tracy harbors great resentment against him, she wants to protect her family's reputation.

Dexter is welcomed back with open arms by Margaret and Tracy's teenage sister **Dinah** (**Virginia Weidler**), much to Tracy's annoyance. In addition, Tracy gradually discovers that Mike has admirable qualities. Thus, as the wedding nears, **Tracy finds herself torn between her fiancé, her ex-husband, and the reporter.**



Original Studio Movie Poster for *The Philadelphia Story*

Production

Broadway playwright **Philip Barry** wrote *The Philadelphia Story* specifically for **Katharine Hepburn**, who ended up backing the play, and foregoing a salary in return for a percentage of the play's profits. Co-starring with Hepburn on Broadway were **Joseph Cotten** as “C.K. Dexter Haven”, **Van Heflin** as “Macaulay Connor”, with **Shirley Booth** as “Liz Imbrie”.

Hoping to create a film vehicle for herself which would erase the label of “box office poison” that the **Independent Theatre Owners of America** had put on her after a number of commercial failures (including the now classic *Bringing Up Baby*), Hepburn happily accepted the film rights to the play from **Howard Hughes** who had bought them for her. She then convinced MGM's **Louis B. Mayer** to buy them from her for only \$250,000 in return for **Hepburn having veto over producer, director, screenwriter and cast.**

Hepburn wanted **Clark Gable** for the Dexter Haven role and **Spencer Tracy** as Macaulay Connor, but both had other commitments. Grant agreed to play the part on condition that he be given top billing and that his salary would be \$137,000. The pairing of

Cukor and Clark Gable would have been problematic in any case, as they had not gotten along on the recent ***Gone with the Wind***, and Cukor had been replaced with **Victor Fleming**.

The Philadelphia Story was in production from 5 July to 14 August 1940 at **MGM's studios in Culver City**. The film was shot in eight weeks with no retakes, and came in five days under schedule. At one point, James Stewart slipped in his hiccuping during the drunk scene. Grant turned to him, surprised, and said "Excuse me." The scene was kept and was not reshot.

Stewart had been extremely nervous about the scene in which Connor recites poetry to Tracy and believed that he would perform badly. **Noël Coward** was visiting the set that day and was asked by George Cukor to say something to encourage him. Coward remarked to Stewart offhandedly, "Did I mention I think you're a fantastic actor?" Stewart was also quite uncomfortable with some of the dialogue, especially in the swimming pool scene. He said at the time that if he had played the scene in just a swimming costume, it would have been the end of his career.

Hepburn **performed the dive into the swimming pool entirely by herself** without the help from doubles. Forty years later, during the filming of ***On Golden Pond***, **Jane Fonda** was frightened to do her own dive, to which the annoyed Hepburn responded, "*I did my own dive in The Philadelphia Story.*"

Reception

The Philadelphia Story **premiered in New York City** in the week of 27 December 1940 and it was shown in other selected theatres in December, but MGM had agreed to hold the film's general release until January 1941 in order not to compete with the stage play, which was no longer playing on Broadway, but was touring the country. The film went into general American release on 17 January 1941. The film **broke a box office record at Radio City Music Hall** by taking in \$600,000 in just six weeks.

Awards & Honors

James Stewart received the **Academy Award for Best Actor** for his performance, and screenwriter **Donald Ogden Stewart** won for **Best Adapted Screenplay**. George Cukor (Best Director), Katharine Hepburn (Best Actress), Ruth Hussey (Best Supporting Actress), and producer **Joseph L. Mankiewicz** (Best Picture) received nominations.

Stewart was not expecting to win and was not planning to attend the awards ceremony. He was called and "advised" to show up in a dinner jacket. Stewart himself said he had voted for **Henry**

Fonda for his performance in ***The Grapes of Wrath***, and always felt the award had been given to him as compensation for not winning the Academy Award for his portrayal of Jeff Smith in ***Mr. Smith Goes to Washington***. Donald Ogden Stewart, on the other hand, declared upon winning his Oscar: "I have no one to thank but myself!"

Hepburn won a **1940 New York Film Critics Circle Award** for her performance, and the film was named **one of the ten best of the year by Film Daily**.

In 1995, *The Philadelphia Story* film was deemed "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" by the **Library of Congress** and was **selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry**.



Goofs

- When Mike is outside the library, **there are no columns** outside, but when he enters, **the shot from inside the library shows one**.
- As Connor and Tracy exit the library, **the boom mic is reflected on the windshield of Tracy's car**.
- When George pays his first call upon the Lord home, he bounds down the "stone" steps, landing very heavily on the bottom one, which makes a **hollow wooden noise**.

Trivia

- The character of "Tracy Lord" was inspired by **Helen Hope Montgomery Scott** (1904-1995), a Philadelphia socialite known for her hijinks, who married a friend of playwright Philip Barry.
- Cary Grant demanded top billing and **\$137,000 salary** - a huge amount at the time. As it transpired though, **he donated his entire earnings to the British War Relief Fund**.
- The necklace that Dinah says "this stinks" about and later wears to entertain the reporters, **is a copy of the necklace from Marie Antoinette's "The Affair of the Necklace"**. You can see it in **Norma Shearer's Marie Antoinette** (1938), as well.

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