

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

by Emily Soares | December 04, 2008



Based on the book by Betty Smith, **A Tree Grows in Brooklyn** (1945) tells the story of a turn-of-the-century family living in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood, battling poverty alongside the charismatic patriarch's alcoholism and impracticality. In this, Elia Kazan's first picture, his career-long ability to rend powerful performances from his cast is already in full bloom.

James Dunn won the Best Supporting Actor Oscar® in this film, in a portrayal that was not far from his off-screen personality. Dunn had co-starred with Shirley Temple in her first three features, *Baby Take a Bow* (1934), *Stand Up and Cheer!* (1934), and *Bright Eyes* (1934), but with the decline of the musical for Twentieth Century-Fox, he was sent to the B-movie roster, where he gained a reputation for heavy drinking. When he was proposed for the role of Johnny Nolan, Fox executives said no, concerned about the actor's alleged alcoholism. But Darryl Zanuck was persuaded that Dunn was the right person for the role of the Irish singing waiter, and against all advice, he approved the casting. Kazan explains Dunn's rare ability for the part in *The Master Director Discusses His Films* by Jeff Young:

"He was terrific. I did a smart thing or a good thing with Dunn, something I learned from [Louis] Lighton. In the theater if you needed a guy to play a drunk, you got an actor who probably had some experience with drink, but more importantly someone who you knew was good at playing those kinds of scenes....Jimmy had been run out of movies for drinking. He was largely unemployable and felt ill at ease at the studio. But he was an awfully sweet, nice man, a hell of a guy. When I met him I said, this is it, this is Johnny Nolan, himself. He's full of watery-eyed Irish affection. He's ebullient. He feels guilty. He slinks."

Peggy Ann Garner, who was, according to the *New York Times*, "Miss Smith's Francie Nolan to the life", earned a special Oscar® as Best Child Actress for a remarkably realistic performance. Kazan's practice was to connect personally with his actors and get to know them well before the shooting began, so that he could "edge them towards the part so that the part becomes them." In her real life, according to Kazan's remembrance in the Young biography, Garner was constantly anxious about her father with whom she enjoyed a close relationship but who was serving in the air force at the time; Kazan encouraged her to use her emotional vulnerability for the part. Kazan also worked to create a personal bond between Garner and Dunn, whose amazing chemistry is the cornerstone of the film's emotional punch:

"I treated him [James Dunn] and Peggy the same way. I also threw them together a lot. I would tell Jimmy about her father being away and how much she missed him. I got him concerned about her. And I would tell her she was important to Jimmy and got her to love Jimmy. I have often tried to create something behind the scenes, that was close to what has to be in the scenes."

Betty Smith's book was a bestseller on its own and the rights became a studio bidding war before it was even published. According to *The Hollywood Reporter* news items at the time, Twentieth Century-Fox paid \$55,000 for it and planned to star Alice Faye as Katie Nolan. Jeanne Crain was also considered for the role and Fred MacMurray for Johnny Nolan. Dorothy McGuire, who did win the part of Katie Nolan, had only one film in release when she was cast - *Claudia* (1943).

Bringing all the humanity of the book to the screen proved to be a problem for Hollywood's self-regulating Censorship board. The Production Code Administration (PCA) originally refused to approve the screenplay due to "the bigamous characterization of Sissy". They finally consented, as long as the film firmly established that all her earlier husbands had died or divorced her.

Smith's cousin, Sadie Grandner, filed libel suits against the book and the film, alleging that Smith had based the character of Aunt Sissy on her and that her reputation had suffered as a result. The studio, fearing the suits, reportedly toned down the character's representation, and Grandner settled for \$1,500.

Joan Blondell (Aunt Sissy), who was going through a divorce from Dick Powell during production, is full of affection for Kazan in Matthew Kennedy's biography *The Interrupted Family*, but spares no kindness for the PCA, which cut a scene where Sissy, who works in a condom factory, tries to explain to the children what one is when they accidentally find it:

"They cut the best scene in the picture, the best scene I ever played and the best piece of acting I have ever done....in the most beautiful writing the author, Betty Smith, did, Sissy tries to explain to the children what the rubber is; not by talking about the actual thing, but about love and life itself. It was very simply done, and all of us players hugged each other spontaneously at the end of the scene. It was marvelous and the Legion of Decency made us take it out. Wasn't that stupid?"

Fox provided Kazan with a generous production budget for **A Tree Grows in Brooklyn**, and the film's sets were elaborate and costly. A full stage was devoted to a four-story replica of the Nolan's tenement building and the cameras were mounted so they could move the full height of the building to capture action on all floors during the staircase scenes.

When he arrived in Hollywood for the production, Kazan was accompanied by Nicholas Ray (*Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955), with whom he had done stage work. Ray's participation in the film is alternately described as Kazan's assistant or the dialogue director. One source claims that he assisted Alfred E. Newman with the film's musical score.

For Kazan's first feature film, **A Tree Grows in Brooklyn** was an impressive beginning. It performed well at the box office and received widespread critical acclaim, appearing on a number of lists as one of the top 10 films of the year. In addition to the cast accolades the film earned, the screenplay, penned by husband and wife team Tess Slesinger and Frank Davis, was also nominated for an Oscar®. For its powerful cultural merit, **A Tree Grows in Brooklyn** was one of the first films chosen for preservation by the Library of Congress Film Registry.

Producer: Louis D. Lighton

Director: Elia Kazan

Screenplay: Frank Davis, Tess Slesinger; Betty Smith (novel); Anita Loos (uncredited)

Cinematography: Leon Shamroy

Art Direction: Lyle Wheeler

Music: Alfred Newman

Film Editing: Dorothy Spencer

Cast: Dorothy McGuire (Katie Nolan), Joan Blondell (Sissy Edwards), James Dunn (Johnny Nolan aka The Brooklyn Thrush), Lloyd Nolan (Officer McShane), James Gleason (McGarrity), Ted Donaldson (Neeley Nolan), Peggy Ann Garner (Francie Nolan), Ruth Nelson (Miss McDonough), John Alexander (Steve Edwards), B.S. Pully (Christmas Tree Vendor).

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