

The Actress

by Emily Soares | January 19, 2010



The Actress (1953), George Cukor's unsentimental and moving adaptation of Ruth Gordon's autobiographical play *Years Ago*, tells the story of her determination to become a star. But before she can begin the struggle to fame, 17-year-old Ruth Gordon Jones (Jean Simmons) must first overcome the obstinacy of her father (Spencer Tracy), an irascible ex-sea farer with broken dreams of his own. Soft-spoken Mrs. Jones (Teresa Wright) tries to keep the peace between daughter and husband, while keeping the cat from eating the parlor fern. Mr. Jones eventually sees in his daughter's desires the hopes he had as a young man and believes that she deserves the chance to pursue them, sacrificing his most prized possession to help get her start in New York.

In real life, Ruth Gordon's obsession with acting was partly inspired by a performance she attended of *The Pink Lady* at a Boston theatre. It starred Hazel Dawn as a seductive Parisian vamp and led Gordon to later remark, "All I wanted out of a career was to look like Hazel Dawn and wear pink feathers.

Cukor's research for the film was extensive, and he returned with Gordon, who adapted her play for the screen, to her hometown of Wollaston, Ma., meeting with her old friends and visiting locations that would never actually appear in the film (exteriors were shot in Pasadena, Ca.), so that he could get a real feel for it. In Richard Schickel's book *The Men Who Made the Movies*, Cukor says that seeing Ruth's house, in particular, was pivotal to the story's feel of authenticity: "It was much smaller than she'd thought and the kitchen was a room that had eight doors. Now, no architect or art director would have imagined that, but it had the texture of reality...and we did all sorts of research on that trip....Ruth Gordon's father had worked for the Mellin's Company - Mellin's Food - and we went to where they were dismantling it. We went to see the neighbors. You do a complete research so that you really know what you're doing, and even though you don't use it...some of it seeps through."

In what many believe to be one of his finest roles, Tracy provides a fascinatingly complex weave of crankiness and compassion in the character of Ruth's father. One of the wonders of his tough, sad but ultimately supportive Mr. Jones is the character's ability to respond, though reluctantly, to the strength of his daughter's dream. Tracy drew on some of his own experiences to make it real, as he explains in Gene D. Phillip's biography of Cukor: "Well, I remember when I told my father I wanted to be an actor and he looked at me, this skinny kid with big ears, and he said, "Oh that poor little son of a bitch; he's going to go through an awful lot."

According to Cukor, Simmons and Tracy were very fond of each other, although Tracy could be a little too believable as the iron-fisted patriarch. In the scene where Ruth's father finds her with a copy of an expensive theater magazine and blows a gasket, Spencer's anger was so real that Simmons responded with nervous giggles. Cukor liked it though, and left it in.

And though the film faithfully delivers many bittersweet memories of Gordon's early years, Gordon herself was said to be disappointed with the casting of Jean Simmons as Ruth because she thought the actress was too pretty to play the young girl authentically. Gordon and some critics were also upset by cuts the producers made to the film that diluted the spitfire personality of the teenager (a trademark of the older Ruth). Meddling cuts aside, Cukor was very pleased with Simmons' performance: "It was the only time that I have ever seen a British-born actress play an American girl with absolute authenticity. She's a wonderful actress." Reportedly, Debbie Reynolds had wanted the role, but the studio felt she didn't have enough box-office appeal to carry a lead role at that time.

Anthony Perkins makes his film debut in **The Actress** as the gangly boyfriend who falls hard for Ruth, though she is too concerned with her dream of acting to be bothered with anything as mundane as the opposite sex. The role of Mrs. Jones was initially offered to Katharine Hepburn, but she decided to return to the stage in a revival of *The Millionairess* instead. According to Cukor biographer Gene D. Phillip, during first-run engagements of **The Actress**, selected movie houses around the country projected the film's opening sequence - a recreation of a production number from the play, *The Pink Lady*, in wide screen to emphasize the larger-than-life quality of Gordon's fascination with the stage.

The story of young Ruth Gordon Jones is all about insuppressible hope in the face of insurmountable odds. And no one could put that better than Gordon herself in her autobiography **My Side**. "I believe in God, Jesus, Life Eternal, people, luck, my voices, myself. Pan me, don't give me the part, publish everybody's book but this one and I will still make it! Why? Because I believe I will. If you believe, then you hang on."

Producer: Lawrence Weingarten
Director: George Cukor
Screenplay: Ruth Gordon
Cinematography: Harold Rosson
Film Editing: George Boemler
Art Direction: Cedric Gibbons, Arthur Lonergan
Music: Bronislau Kaper
Cast: Spencer Tracy (Clinton Jones), Jean Simmons (Ruth Gordon Jones), Teresa Wright (Annie Jones), Anthony Perkins (Fred Whitmarsh), Ian Wolfe (Mr. Bagley), Kay Williams (Hazel Dawn).
BW-91m. Closed captioning.

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