

Albert Finney and Audrey Hepburn in *Two for the Road*, which jumps back and forth in time to portray a marriage.

MARRIAGE IN THE MOVIES

In her latest book, film historian Jeanine Basinger shares her expert knowledge of movies about marriage, which didn't always end happily on the big screen.

BY DAVID LOW



Corwin-Fuller Professor of Film Studies Jeanine Basinger has just published *I Do and I Don't* (Alfred A. Knopf), a meticulously researched and highly engaging history of marriage in the movies from the silent era through the years of the Hollywood studio system to modern times. Basinger watched hundreds of movies over three years, and readers will delight in her perceptive discussion of film classics as well as lesser-known film treasures and some key television shows. For her research, she also read countless movie magazines, popular magazines, and newspapers on marriage and divorce.

Basinger notes that she has “impeccable credentials” to write about the subject of her latest book. “I have been married 45 years, and to the same guy!” Her book is dedicated to her husband John Basinger.

The book has garnered excellent reviews and wide attention in the media. Glenn C. Altschuler in *The Boston Globe* wrote: “The real fun in *I Do and I Don't* ... comes from the splendidly crafted, creative, and compelling critiques that make you want to see many movies again or for the first time,” while Abbe Wright in *O, the Oprah Magazine* called the book “a witty look at how films portray marriage, and how these onscreen contradictions mirror the institution itself.” Judith Newman '81 in *The New York Times* added to the praise: “Basinger is wonderfully insightful, and her witty asides made me laugh out loud.”

DAVID LOW: What made you decide to write a book about marriage in the movies? Was it a difficult subject to write about?

JEANINE BASINGER: I had written on marriage as part of my book *A Woman's View*. I thought it would be fun to do a more com-

plete picture. It was one of those off-handed decisions. I thought, this will be good, and so did my editor. Soon other film writers and scholars started telling me “No, no, no, don't do that. We've tried to do this and it's impossible.” Once I heard that, I decided it would be fun to take up the challenge.

One of the reasons it *was* so challenging is that Hollywood didn't really designate films as “marriage movies.” They'd call them something else such as “domestic drama.” And they didn't make a lot of them. On the other hand, marriage is discussed and presented everywhere in movies of all kinds: sci-fi movies, Westerns, horror films. But marriage didn't exist as a specific genre in old Hollywood the way Westerns, musicals, and horror films did. You can observe this because in old movie magazines and in studio records, they designated genre. Genre is not the brilliant deduction of latter-day academics; it was a concrete business decision. The Hollywood film business knew what genre it thought it was making. If you look at old film magazines, they always identified the film by type: musical, Western, drama, social realism. Never once do you see the word marriage; it does not exist.

After the silent era, Hollywood tended to shy away from marriage as a story subject because they felt they would be telling a story the audience understood better than they did. Hollywood was concerned that if people came to the movies for some kind of entertainment—escape, reassurance, whatever—that showing how marriage doesn't work was perhaps something an audience wouldn't want to spend their money to see.

DL: You mention in your book that even when movies were centered around marriage, Hollywood tended to avoid talking about marriage in promotion and advertising.

JB: Yes, they thought that selling love or romance or comedy or drama—anything—was better than trying to sell marriage. Even when the film was called *Marriage Is a Private Affair* with Lana Turner, ads stressed her glamour, her beauty, and the fact that she had 37 wardrobe changes.

DL: What challenges does the theme of marriage pose to screenwriters and filmmakers?

JB: Marriage is a kind of day-to-day merry-go-round. To make an interesting movie out of it, it has to be turned into a roller coaster ride. Marriage has no story arc. A happy marriage is presumably calm, harmonious, structured.

It is solidly built, with no destructive forces at work either inside or outside its boundaries. A marriage movie plot has to break up the marriage, challenge it, or in effect, kill it in some way to create drama. Then it has to resolve the problem, reassemble the union, and put the marriage back together in order to achieve the traditional happy ending. Of course, not all marriage movies end happily. It's important to remember that. There is both “I do” and “I don't.”

A lot of marriage movies are told in reverse. They start out with a couple in the divorce court, and then through flashbacks you see how they were first happy and fell in love. Then they got married, and life challenged and hurt them and hurt their marriage. Then it becomes an uplifting story as they fight their way back to the happiness they originally had. But this was not an easy story form to make believable. It stressed the “I don't” side of marriage.

DL: What are some films that you feel portray marriage in a successful and satisfying way?

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JB: One of the best marriage films is *Dodsworth* (1936) with Walter Huston and Ruth Chatterton. It's based on a Sinclair Lewis novel, and it is an extremely intelligent and mature motion picture. It's not just a good marriage movie, it's a good movie. The performances are fabulous. It tells the story of a middle-aged couple who have been living happily in a small city. He has successfully built an automobile factory. They're rich after he retires, so they travel to Europe. He's been a good husband, a good father, a good provider. She's been a good

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wife, a good mother, a good partner in furthering his business. So allegedly you have the perfect couple.

But as they leave their surroundings where they lived their lives the way they were expected to live them by the rules of society, everything goes wrong. They find out they're incompatible. Their goals and attitudes are different. She, in particular, wants excitement, which she has never had. She points out he had all the fun and challenge of business while she had to stay home or do the ladies lunch. They wake up to realize they really don't know each other. They can't really communicate and the marriage does not survive. It's a wonderful movie.

The most typical example of the marriage movie is a fairly sentimental and yet still entertaining movie called *Made for Each*

NO ONE REALLY KNOWS WHY TWO ACTORS CAN BE PUT TOGETHER AND SEEM MARRIED AND COMPATIBLE AND OTHERS CAN'T. IF ONE COULD FULLY UNDERSTAND THAT, CASTING AND CREATING STARS WOULD BE A LOT EASIER THAN IT IS.

Other with Carole Lombard and Jimmy Stewart. I put their picture on the cover of my book for that reason. *The Marrying Kind*, with Judy Holliday and Aldo Ray, is also a wonderful example. Their relationship is sort of a Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy for the masses. They're not all ritzy and smart-talking in a world of high-level lawyers and judges; they're more of an ordinary couple. She's been a secretary; he works in the post office. They start out in the divorce court and have to reassemble their marriage by looking back at it. I also like *Two for the Road* with Audrey Hepburn and Albert Finney.

DL: *Two for the Road* is one of my favorite movies, and I was wondering why you think that movie works so well. Do you think it's par-

tially the screenplay, the way it's constructed?

JB: *Two for the Road* has a very sophisticated screenplay and a very sophisticated cinematic presence. It's an example of how someone can create an unusual story arc for a marriage movie. It takes place in overlapping time sequences in which the couple are driving, always moving forward in an automobile of some sort across five or six different phases of their relationship. You see them when they first meet and fall in love, also when they're newlyweds and new parents, and then in their present tense, in which they are unhappy and constantly bickering, but very, very rich and successful. They've managed to stay married all this time, although they've both had affairs and many things have gone wrong.

It's a more modern portrait of a marriage, and the overlapping time frame gives the presentation an irony and a meaningful juxtaposition as you see the tragedy of being unable to sustain the emotions of their original happiness. Of course, Audrey Hepburn and Albert Finney are very, very good. You have everything working—the direction, the writing, the performances—and it's a beautiful looking film. Though it's not like earlier more sentimental movies, it gives you the same issues but presents them in a sophisticated, modern way and primarily in a striking cinematic form.

DL: You write at length about the British classic *Brief Encounter*, which deals with two middle-aged people (played by Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard) who meet but aren't married to each other.

JB: But they *are* married to someone else. *Brief Encounter* is a story of marriage because the issues never stray from the two characters' domestic situations. He and *his* wife and she and *her* husband—and the way they feel about them—dominates everything the two do together. On the soundtrack, the woman's narration always discusses her feelings about marriage and her life. She dreamed of romance and excitement, and she didn't find it. Her life is dull. In the end, they have only a brief encounter but the main issue of the film is about domesticity, about marriage, about fidelity and infidelity. Each stays with the legal partner.

DL: I think you like *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*.

JB: I love *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*, based on two separate novels, *Mr. Bridge* and *Mrs. Bridge*, with Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward,



Clockwise: Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward in *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*; Tommy Lee Jones and Meryl Streep in *Hope Springs*; Elliot Gould, Natalie Wood, Robert Culp and Dyan Cannon in *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*; Annette Bening and Julianne Moore in *The Kids Are All Right*; Kyle Chandler and Connie Britton in *Friday Night Lights*.



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who, it's no surprise, can play marriage impeccably and correctly. They are in a rhythm of each other's presence that feels right and natural. It *feels* married between them, and they play it beautifully.

DL: Hollywood often paired stars as married couples in a series of films. Can you talk

about a few of these star couples who really worked as being married on screen?

JB: One of the interesting things about star pairings is how sometimes a couple who really love each other and are married, such as Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, can generate excitement on screen

and you feel their attraction. On the other hand, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, celebrated for their off-screen shenanigans and passion, are dull together on screen. Mysteriously, a couple who aren't married and not in love with each other, such as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers or Greer Garson

and Walter Pidgeon, can generate a strong sense of being married or united.

No one really knows why two actors can be put together and seem to be married and compatible and others can't. If one could fully understand the why of that, casting and creating stars would be a lot easier

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BILL BURKHART



Clockwise: Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard in *Brief Encounter*; Ruth Chatterton and Walter Huston in *Dodsworth*; Aldo Ray and Judy Holliday in *The Marrying Kind*; Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire in *The Story of Irene and Vernon Castle*; Myrna Loy and William Powell in *After the Thin Man*. Center: Jeanine Basinger.

than it is. It's about comfort levels, acting harmony, the sound of the voice, the body movements, the size and shape of two people. The ability to banter. So many factors go into it. William Powell and Myrna Loy (in *The Thin Man* film series) could play married impeccably. They were in each other's rhythm. With Astaire and Rogers, of course, it's a little bit easier to understand because they are dancing, and the movement of the dance, which is physical, suggests to the viewer a deeper connection.

DL: Who was the audience for these movies about marriage?

JB: In Hollywood during the studio system, movies were aimed at the total audience. It wasn't like today, with niche audiences and target groups. However, statistics indicate that women were often allowed to choose the movie that the family went to, and women probably went to movies oftener than men and also would see the same movie more than once. As a result, there were great female stars in those days, and many movies were built for them and around them. The woman could be the center of a filmed universe.

Many movies presented the woman—who was marginalized in society outside the movie theater—as the main character, and that worked well for a marriage plot. A married woman would take action to free herself from boredom or from the oppression of poverty. The latter is one of the most popular forms. A couple have no money, so the woman gets a job. The husband never wants his wife to work, but the wife, who always has brains and ability, says that's foolish and goes to work anyway. Usually, her career wildly exceeds his. This was typical, and can be seen in movies such as *Weekend Marriage* and *Ann Carver's Profession*. It was a plot that challenged tradition. When movies took up adultery as a topic, men weren't given more excuses. A male adulterer loses his wife and family the same way a female adulterer does. The issue of motherhood, however, reshapes plots. If a woman abandons her children, that shifts the balance. The deserting mother is always presented negatively; she'd need a very good reason. Amnesia, maybe! She just forgot about those little devils.

DL: Around the 1960s, there were major social changes in America. Did that affect the way marriage was portrayed in the movies?

JB: Of course. The '60s arrived, the sexual

revolution moved into place, and the feminist movement had a powerful effect on marriage movies. They started making sophisticated movies about sexual relations such as *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*. And they made a series of movies with feminist viewpoints, movies in which the woman wakes up and is very unhappy with her marriage. She takes steps to get out of it and to be free and become an individual on her own—discovering that she doesn't need to be married to live. Then, after that, there was a period of time when very few marriage movies were made. It just wasn't an interesting subject for audiences. Those are the years in which people complained bitterly that you couldn't even find five performances to nominate for the best actress Oscar.

IT'S REALLY QUITE MELANCHOLY TO REALIZE THAT MOVIES TELL US THAT ONE OF THE MAJOR PROBLEMS THAT CAN GO WRONG IN MARRIAGE IS MURDER. HOW MANY COUPLES DO YOU KNOW WHO ARE TRYING TO KILL EACH OTHER?

Then you have a period of time where you have movies about weddings. Big, fancy weddings. The wedding is the story, not the marriage. It's kind of like Halloween. We don't know why we're celebrating Halloween. What was the original point? We just have the party. These movies are elaborate structures built around the wedding party. We have the ritual event, but the point of it doesn't matter.

Lately, movies are returning to the idea of marriage as a movie plot, because it's now become almost quaint. I think this is why this book has generated so much interest. You no longer have to marry. You can live together without being married, you can have children without being married, you can have children without having sex. You have all these options, and suddenly this becomes an interesting variation on plot.

The marriage movie is almost the new romantic comedy as in *Hope Springs* with Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones. They're married, so the story is "Will they fall in love again?" Now you also have *The Kids Are All Right*, where the married people are two women; you know we're moving into new variations and the world has changed, which is as it should be.

DL: You write about how television is sometimes better suited to portray a marriage. What are some recent good examples of that?

JB: A story about marriage needs time and the movies have no time to give to it. They're going to have about two hours. But a television series has weeks, episode after episode, and then it can come back next year and the year after that. So television is a good place to see a marriage story.

A really good example of how television can tell the marriage story well is *Friday Night Lights*. A lot of people think of that show as being about football, but I watched the whole thing, and I thought it was very much about a marriage. It was probably the best, most honest and realistic portrait of marriage that I've seen. This couple (played by Connie Britton and Kyle Chandler) has a normal, married life. They don't have a lot of money but they don't have affairs, they're devoted to each other. They work out their problems together, they argue, but they get along. They take turns making things right for each other, the way a real married couple does. I also thought the Danish series *Borgen* (about a married woman who is a career politician), also presented an interesting portrait of a marital situation that breaks down.

DL: One of my favorite parts in your book was the chapter about marriage and murder. Murder is something I wouldn't normally associate with marriage films.

JB: It's really quite melancholy to realize that movies tell us that one of the major problems that can go wrong in marriage is murder. How many couples do you know who are trying to kill each other? Well, maybe more than we think. But it doesn't take very long to realize what the appeal is to the audience. I always say, how many times has a person said to a mate, "I am going to kill you if you don't take the garbage out." The movies picked up on that—that this is a satisfying form of telling a marriage story, which I think is quite interesting. I don't show those movies to my husband!