

To Be or Not to Be (U) USA 1942

11 January 2016

DIRECTOR: **Ernst Lubitsch**

Running time: 99 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Jack Benny** (Joseph Tura), **Carole Lombard** (Maria Tura), **Robert Stack** (Lieutenant Stanislaw Sobinski), **Felix Bressart** (Greenberg), **Lionel Atwill** (Rawitch), **Stanley Ridges** (Professor Siletsky), **Charles Halton** (Producer Dobosh), **Sig Ruman** (Colonel Ehrhardt), **Henry Victor** (Captain Schultz). SCRIPT: **Edwin Justus Mayer**, from an original story by **Melchior Lengyel** and **Ernst Lubitsch**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Rudolph Maté**. EDITING: **Dorothy Spencer**. MUSIC: **Werner R. Heymann**. (Polonaise in A major, Op. 40, No. 1, 'Military' by Frédéric Chopin heard during the opening and closing credits.)

First imagine an actor so mediocre that his greatest role ever is to impersonate an officer. Then make him Polish, make the officer German, and put him in Nazi Poland, endeavouring to escape with his troupe of (partly Jewish) actors to London.

You can already perceive the slightly delicate arena of taste in which we are operating here. That this film was made during the war, and before America's entry into the war, was considered sensitive enough to delay its release, but is still remarkable, although perhaps more so with hindsight (the abominations of the camps and the atrocious suppression of the Polish uprising were not yet known).

The set-up is choice Lubitsch from the off: Joseph Tura's portrayal of Hamlet is greeted, to his nightly frustration, with apparent indifference by his audience, encapsulated by the young officer Sobinski, who excuses himself during the titular soliloquy and makes his way along his row in order to leave the auditorium. The Lubitsch touch here is that the famous words are the established signal between himself and Mrs Joseph Tura for their nightly assignation (she knows her husband will be tied up on stage for a while, especially given the meal he makes of the soliloquy itself. Which calls all manner of parallel calculations of time and activity into the mind of the filmgoer!) Oh, the ingenuity to which the Hays Code demanded the film-maker go to inject a bit of sauce into his creations!

The plot of the film involves the efforts of the Polish Resistance to prevent a German spy from delivering sensitive information into the hands of

the Gestapo. To this end Tura's acting troupe is employed to impersonate various members of the Nazi top brass and outwit their very real counterparts.

The rest is situation comedy in the best *Dad's Army*, 'Allo 'Allo tradition, with Benny (a relatively rare performer in Hollywood) ably abetted by Miss Lombard, ever a talented comedienne, and glamorous to boot. I have been careful also to credit above Messrs. Bressart, Ruman and Atwill, three excellent character actors, who could always be depended upon to play army officers, bureaucrats or, in Bressart's case, clerks and trusted relations. (Atwill himself was English rather than German, but he memorably portrayed Krogh, the policeman with the wooden hand in *Son of Frankenstein*, lampooned brilliantly by Kenneth Mars in Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein*). Ruman for his part gets to make play with the famously repeated line, "So, they call me Concentration Camp Ehrhardt, do they?"

The film remains one of Lubitsch's most cherished comedies and, just to show that lightness of touch and innuendo *are* everything, was remade by Mel Brooks in 1983. Poignantly, Carole Lombard died in January 1942, before the film was released, her plane hitting a mountainside in Nevada while on return from a War Bonds tour. *To Be or Not to Be* was her last completed film.

David Clare