Harlee Harlow Carpenter - later Jean Harlow - was born in Kansas City, Missouri on 3 March 1911. After being signed by director Howard Hughes, Harlow's first major appearance was in *Hell's Angels* (1930), followed by a series of critically unsuccessful films, before signing with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1932. Harlow became a leading lady for MGM, starring in a string of hit films including *Red Dust* (1932), *Dinner At Eight* (1933), *Reckless* (1935) and *Suzy* (1936). Among her frequent co-stars were William Powell, Spencer Tracy and, in six films, Clark Gable. Harlow's popularity rivalled and soon surpassed that of her MGM colleagues Joan Crawford and Norma Shearer. By the late 1930s she had become one of the biggest movie stars in the world, often nicknamed "The Blonde Bombshell" and "The Platinum Blonde" and popular for her "Laughing Vamp" movie persona. She died of uraemic poisoning on 7 June 1937, at the age of 26, during the filming of *Saratoga*. The film was completed using doubles and released a little over a month after Harlow's death. In her brief life she married and lost three husbands (two divorces, one suicide) and chalked up 22 feature film credits (plus another 21 short / bit-part non-credits, including Chaplin's *City Lights*). The American Film Institute (damning with faint praise?) ranked her the 22nd greatest female star in Hollywood history.
A lucky few aspiring actresses seem to take the giant step from obscurity to the big time in a single bound - Lauren Bacall may be the best example of that - but for many more the road to recognition and riches is long and grinding. Myrna Loy appeared in seventy films over seven years before she started to win decent roles and Jean Arthur paid her dues for much longer than that. Jean Harlow's breakthrough film - *Hell's Angels* (1930) - was her nineteenth, so you might say she arrived relatively quickly. But still there were the uncredited bit parts to work through. In 1929 she appeared in three Laurel and Hardy silent shorts: as a taxi fare in *Liberty* and as the wife of a debtor in *Bacon Grabbers*, in each case on screen for just a few seconds. For her third and more substantial role with the comic couple, see below. She made another brief appearance as an unnamed party guest in *New York Nights*. Though this 63 minute film is a talkie, she has no lines, nothing to do and once again receives no credit.
You know what to expect with Laurel and Hardy. It’s not Bergman or Truffaut, but, provided you’re in the right mood, sometimes lots of fun, as here, in their last wholly silent short (their shtick by now very well honed) - indeed, one of the last silents, period. Harlow is on screen for a little under two minutes, but, after Stan manages to remove her dress by trapping it in the taxi door, her innocent sashay across the hotel lobby becomes one to remember. Brief - just eighteen minutes - but a well-turned, gag-filled, smile-making delight.

IMDb: Good old fashioned entertainment / The Sound Era was fast crashing down on the movie industry when Double Whoopee was released on 18 May 1929. The Laurel and Hardy show had just about hit its pinnacle following years of trial and error after the duo's serendipitous pairing in 1926. A little slower than most Laurel and Hardys, Double Whoopee is nonetheless an excellent example of the Roach/McCarey/Laurel brand of carefully staged and meticulously fashioned business: beautiful gags, beautiful sets and beautiful Jean Harlow in a superb black and white two-reeler! / A wonderful little comedy of ever increasing disaster on disaster. Though Harlow's screen time is shorter than one would wish, at least what we see is very good / Jean Harlow did not appear in three Laurel and Hardy comedies, but four. In Beau Hunks (1931), the pair join the French Foreign Legion so that Ollie can forget "Jeanie-Weenie", the woman he loves. He gazes sadly at her picture several times. Imagine his chagrin when he finds that most of his fellow legionnaires have joined up to forget the same woman and that even the leader of the Riffs (the Arab enemy) has a morbid crush on her. And whose is the smiling face in all the photographs? Jean Harlow's, of course! / A reasonably entertaining short with Stan and Ollie doing their usual stuff / Good enough to make you forget the medium's limitations and distinctive enough to be a worthwhile watch.
Howard Hughes directed this pioneering 127 minute Great War epic that, like *Wings* before it, focuses mainly on the battle for aerial supremacy. The story concerns two brothers - one upstanding, one an amoral rat - who argue over a girl (feisty free spirit Harlow, acquitting herself well in a relatively minor role), take on a Zeppelin (in the film's most memorable sequence) and then volunteer for a particularly hazardous mission bombing a munitions dump in a captured enemy plane, knowing that, if caught, they will be shot as spies. The end is suitably melodramatic, and not very credible, but all done with a style that belies the period. B&W with short tinted and coloured passages. Good.

IMDb: Produced only three years after sound entered the movies, *Hell's Angels* is entertaining and thoughtful. It makes good use of sound effects and has great visual effects also. The flight scenes are impressive. Hughes flew a plane in this film (but crashed it) and three other pilots were killed during filming. The scenes of dozens of tiny aircraft swarming in the sky are still breathtaking. The plot is standard good guys / bad guys but adds some sensitivity to all parties. We have groups fighting a war in the air and not too happy to be doing it. But they do their jobs and give their lives for victory. The scene of Germans abandoning their airship is particularly wrenching. Some token love interest and the usual inept comedy characters round out the cast, who all stood up to the task as well as anyone in 1930. Harlow gets her first billing in this film, making it her breakthrough movie. Not a keeper but see it if you can / Betters today's air movies. Stunning / A beautiful piece of art / The Zeppelin scenes are so realistic it is difficult to believe it was all model and special set work / Very watchable corn / An early epic.
A famous early talkie, groundbreaking in its time, and compelling still, thanks to a good story briskly told and artfully shot. New Kid On The Block Cagney (above) is charismatic though a bit more tricksy than need be. Harlow, second-billed despite having only two scenes, plays a tramp with no redeeming features - and that goes equally for character and actress, which makes her well-cast on the one hand but out of her depth and instantly forgettable on the other. Beryl Mercer (Outward Bound, Berkeley Square) and Joan Blondell (Night Nurse, Stand-In etc) both lend solid support. 81 minutes.

IMDb: Jean Harlow wasn't that great, but there's no denying she has a certain presence / Everything about Harlow in this film is horrible. She delivers the worst lines, gives far and away the worst performance and actually looks like a man in drag / Harlow's work in this film is flat, at best / Harlow's part seems horribly underwritten, giving her very little to do / Cagney's natural talent makes The Public Enemy all it's worth / Harlow wasn't much of an actress at this point. Anyone familiar with her history knows that her best work would come a year later, after she developed her comedic talent at MGM ... Harlow knew she couldn't act at this time, and would fully agree with those who call her work here bad. She did not look her best, either, as the legendary screen image we're familiar with today was still a year away. The Public Enemy is a Cagney film and the reason why most of the promotional material featured Harlow was because of her success in Hell's Angels and Platinum Blonde, which started a hair craze / Go easy on Jean, she was just learning! / Harlow's early work focuses on her hair and looks rather than talent. For her best dramatic acting, try China Seas / At MGM, Harlow develops into a delightful little comedienne. Just wait! / Beautiful and historically important.
Lew Ayres (above) plays "Iron Man" Kid Mason, a boxer married to a tramp out to take him for all she can get. After his manager Regan (Robert Armstrong) has guided him to the Championship, his hard-won status goes to The Kid's head. Wifie two-times him with a man who becomes his new manager. Regan brings on a new protégé who beats the Kid. What will become of him now? Harlow holds her end up well and it's nice to come across Ned Sparks again, but the whole is no more than mildly diverting. 68 minutes. Fair.

IMDb: Don't expect anything special. View Iron Man as a relic of Hollywood's early years when sound was new / One of the worst examples of a stiff early talkie. A chore to sit through / A mediocre account of the rise and rot of a boxing champ / At this stage in her career, Harlow's screen persona was still up in the air. In The Public Enemy, she plays an upper class type who goes slumming with Cagney. That role did not fit her well. This one is hard to take too. One can imagine Harlow as a gold-digger easily enough, but she deserves better dialogue. Watch her final confrontation scene with Miljan and you'll be hard pressed not to laugh. But, distinctly working girl, she is now in the right social class / Easily the worst film of Harlow's career. She is wasted in a cardboard role and handled most unsympathetically by director Browning / In 1931 the only things that made Harlow stand out were an earthy sex appeal and her platinum hair - definitely not her acting. Reviewing Iron Man in The New York Times, Andre Sennwald wrote: "It is unfortunate that Jean Harlow, whose virtues as an actress are limited to her blonde beauty, has to carry her share of the picture." But he also noted "exhilarating performances by Lew Ayres and Robert Armstrong" and it is Armstrong who holds the movie together. Like Ned Sparks (who has a small role as a gambler) he lifts up any film he plays in / An odd little film, the central theme of which has nothing to do with prize fighting and everything to do with unrequited love.
A splendid little film in which Robert Williams (above) plays hard-boiled news-hound Stew Smith, the wise-cracking reporter who wants to lampoon high society only to find himself hostage to the pretensions of the rich he previously mocked. Williams, looking like and acting with the natural ease of a young Alan Alda, gives director Capra a fine performance, ably supported by a radiant Loretta Young, lugubrious Halliwell Hobbes and a game though miscast Harlow. The film runs 85 minutes. Four days after the release of *Platinum Blonde*, with early reviews proclaiming him a star in the making, Williams died of peritonitis following appendicitis, aged 37. It was his last film of just seven.

IMDb: *Platinum Blonde* could be said to have launched the careers of both Capra and Harlow. The film is not perfect. The sound is bad, Harlow is miscast and poor Loretta Young struggles gamely to bring depth to a part that is the filmic equivalent of wallpaper. She and Harlow would have done well to reverse roles. But set against all that is the greatest on-screen portrayal of fresh, modern, naturalistic acting from the refreshingly brilliant Robert Williams. Every time he enters a room, the whole film lights up and every time he leaves, all the other actors seem to lose their purpose and energy / Dated but interesting thanks to some great dialogue. Though Harlow gets the billing, a young Loretta Young has the greater beauty and charm. Too bad her role was so minor - she looks absolutely gorgeous / The scene in which Williams and Harlow sing a ditty to each other is played with such natural wit and affection that their joy in each other's company is perfectly expressed. This was love, this was sensuality, without a hint of the physicality that modern films feel obliged to depict all too graphically. Seeing a movie like this, made in low-fi black and white 84 years ago shows what we have lost / Surprisingly literate and engaging / One of the best early talkies.
This time indisputably Harlow's film, in which she plays another unattractive, predatory tramp who stalks and wins men in spite of their power, position, supposed good sense and whatever token resistance they might offer. Well crafted by all concerned, but cold, cynical and scarcely credible. 79 minutes.

IMDb: A nearly perfect, perfectly amoral comedy / Notice that for all her outrageous behaviour, Harlow's character remains unpunished and unrepentant - a situation not allowed post-Code / This is the prototypical Jean Harlow character, done to the hilt by a very skilled performer who, in the final analysis, probably has more in common with Mae West than with Marilyn Monroe. If she played virtually the same character in most of her pictures, she wasn't the first to do so / Wicked, guilty fun - a wonderful surprise / I never understood why men fawned all over Harlow. I don't see a lot of beauty. Is it just me? / Preposterous beyond words / The ultimate example of pre-Code excess. Recommended / At only 21, Harlow is already confident and brassy, and Una Merkel shines as her best friend Sally / Harlow as a home-wrecker of the worst kind delivers her first great performance in Red-Headed Woman / Try playing solitaire before watching this: your time will be better spent / Marylin Monroe's stage was her body, Harlow's her face. She kisses with rascal-like smiling in which is already anticipated what comes later / Glossy, gratuitously naughty (witness Harlow's fleeting nudity) and displays little cinematic inventiveness throughout / Uncompromising as it is fast and funny / Not great but worth watching / Very disappointing. Yes, it was fun to see Harlow vamp her brains out, but she was so transparent you have to conclude she was dealing with inferior mentalities. Provocative as a bowl of oatmeal and nearly as interesting / Empty-headed crap / Unless you are a Harlow completist, skip it.
Stormy days and steamy nights on the rubber plantation. Passions rise, bullets fly, but all survive. Gable (above), Harlow and Mary Astor act out a mildly engaging but lukewarm yarn of love and lust in the jungle. Fails to grip because both Gable and Harlow have their tongues too obviously in their cheeks. From a play that probably crackled with tension and angst to a film that, more’s the pity, never does once. Gable is good, though. 83 minutes.

IMDb: Red Dust, with Gable and Harlow in top form, offers the perfect balance of sexuality and restraint, but is marred by the racist depiction of Asian characters / The chemistry between Gable and Harlow beats all / Harlow is dynamite. No other blonde bombshell comes close to this original / Terrific. Gable is virile as anything and Harlow full of strength and sass / This important piece of pre-war Hollywood history is still a viewer-grabbing flick / Harlow completely dominates this rather tepid story with her crackling crisp dialogue. Watching her controlled exuberance is just great / Those hoping to see Astor at her best should look elsewhere / As performers, Gable and Harlow get 10 out of 10. For commitment to the cause of racial justice, they pull zeroes / This movie left me mad and sad for Harlow’s character and very disappointed with this famous pre-Code classic, supposedly so great. What a dumb story! / A grade B melodrama, weighed down by the colonialist subtext, the incredibly annoying notion that a tall, handsome, arrogant, misogynistic brute is the ultimate in sex appeal, and the utterly predictable love-triangle plot - though Harlow brightens every scene she's in / Unadulterated pre-Code sleaze. Fine entertainment of an unsophisticated kind / A soap opera that compels, thanks to script, actors and director. Who needs more?
DVD Verdict: If your tolerance for [its disturbingly casual racism] is strong, then there's plenty to like about Red Dust. Traditionally, I'm not the biggest fan of either Clark Gable, whom I find wooden, or Jean Harlow, whom I find terribly shrill, but their chemistry here is pretty fun. Rarely has there been an actress as flouncy as Harlow and, though her actual performance serves little but to take advantage of her good looks and loose dresses, she works well with the lovable cad that made Gable a star. Then there's Mary Astor, one of my favourite early actresses. A beauty by the standards of her time or any other, she is absolutely radiant here in an important but supporting role. The character itself is a little shallow, and there's no doubt that, when the rain comes while Dennis and Babs are walking in the jungle, they will get soaked and kiss so their affair can begin, but she always makes it work, bringing her often lacklustre male leads above their usual talents. Gene Raymond is pretty worthless as her husband, but he's a sap anyhow and doesn't have much to do aside from standing there while his young wife is trying in vain to stay faithful. The story mostly brings the goods, though much of it is obvious and not terribly exciting. It's all fodder for some snappy banter and a few love scenes, all of which is put together just fine by director Victor Fleming. It's far from his strongest effort, but it's consistent in tone and serviceable in its delivery, though there are plenty of rough patches in the smaller roles and, especially, in the servant who works the house. It moves along at a fair pace and the banter is all pretty funny, but the story really isn't substantial enough to stand up to anything these people had done in the past or would do in the future.

The movie is enjoyable, no doubt, but the racism of Red Dust is alarming. It doesn't matter whether the white people are rich or poor, an owner or a worker, they throw around a derogatory term for the Indonesians that I certainly won't repeat here, but you'll figure it out soon enough - it's likely the most common word in the script. Not only that, the cartoonish depiction of the natives is disgraceful, like the rare old Warner Brothers cartoons where Bugs interacts with a Chinese person. I don't like to force my modern morality onto old art, but there's so much and it's so blatant that it can't help but take away from the overall picture. [Otherwise] a pretty fun movie.
Gable plays a con man, all cheekbones and roguish glint, to Harlow's familiar grifter with a heart of gold (this their third film of six together). But what starts out as a breezy hustle flick takes a swerve halfway into a women's reformatory, at which point Gable disappears, two become three and a more sombre mood prevails. All is finally resolved with the most unlikely of weddings and new job, new family, happy-ever-after wrap-up. Good old Al! 86 minutes. Fair.

IMDb: The two leads show their mettle as actors, adding telling nuances and quirks to their characters that send them beyond typical Gable and Harlow / Takes one wrong turn, and then another. Enjoy the first half, then be ready for a letdown / Harlow's character is multi-dimensional beyond the traditional 1930s moll. She starts in one place and travels an arduous journey to end up on the other side of life. I loved her tough exterior. I loved her smile. I loved her song at the piano. My God, she was stupendous - as real as unreal gets / Starts well, but it's downhill from there / One of the very worst films Gable made. Leonard Maltin says "The stars are at their best here." Gimme a break! / Witty, watchable and utterly touching. And how often do you get to see Jean Harlow sock another woman in the jaw? / 50 out of the 86 minutes are entertaining - then it crashes and burns / Starts out His film and ends up Hers. One of Harlow's best at MGM. Her fans should not miss it / Not overly long and has many captivating facets / The ending is very dramatic and contains a beautiful message that comes across very well / One of the finest examples of Depression era cinema / Harlow and Gable at their best / Bad-to-mediocre confusion unworthy of all the ballyhoo. There is no real conflict and all of the supposed fringe society characters turn out to be saints - especially the unbelievable Al / Corny, clichéd and predictable - but Gable and Harlow pull it off / Harlow fans will love it / Gable plays a jerk and is perfectly cast - a rather sad note for his fans. Harlow comes across as a more slender Mae West. Some of her cynical, throwaway lines even sound like her / Enjoy those sassy verbals!
An excellent multi-faceted ensemble piece, flawlessly played by all concerned. Yet another stage to screen adaptation, *Dinner At Eight* is hard to fault and easy to enjoy. Marie Dressler (above, right) is particularly good. 111 minutes.

IMDb: An all-star cast in an all-star movie / An adult film about adults. See it after you have lived a little. Absolute genius / Deadly dull / A set of the greatest actors in the history of film are handed a brilliant screenplay that radiates mature wit and genuine compassion, while spinning off the most delicious double entendres. Devastatingly brilliant / The Academy totally ignored this one. Don't make the same mistake / A wonderful grab bag of talent / In an all-star cast, Dressler manages to steal the show / Long-winded and exposition heavy, Badly dated / A timeless classic rendition of the human condition, both comic and tragic. One of the great movies of the Golden Age / Despite being almost 70 years old, this drama (not a comedy, as often billed) stands up very well for modern viewers / It could be called a dark comedy, even a black comedy, but a comedy it is nonetheless / So many delicious moments. I could watch it every day and never get bored / You owe it to yourself to see this movie / Harlow and Dressler's final little duet is beyond priceless / An actor's movie - laughter with tears / Episodic tone-shifting from tragedy to farce and back again. The aspic never makes it to table - but life plods on / The snappiest dirge, the Wittiest elegy ever produced by Hollywood, made in an era when actual artists worked in that L.A. suburb - unlike the automatons running the show today. As such, it's prophetic about society, yes, but the art form to which it belongs as well / A five course meal of grand entertainment! / A bittersweet beauty / As good as it gets / Loads of fun / Glorious! / Each of the story's character is developed, giving emotional depth. Superb / In one word: "Wow!"
Though *Bombshell* started life as a stage play parodying the life and career of "It Girl" Clara Bow, the starlet Harlow portrays so well bears uncomfortably close similarities to her own self (the family, the dogs, the hangers on, the Midwest origins, even *Red Dust* retakes with "Clark"). The film is cynical and strident, but also thoroughly entertaining, thanks in no small part to a fine turn from Lee Tracy (above) as a conniving studio publicist. Franchot Tone's WASP doesn't ring true, but, we find, wasn't meant to, so that's alright. With Frank Morgan, C. Aubrey Smith, Pat O'Brien and Una Merkel. 96 minutes.

**IMDb:** More than any other film in the Harlow canon, this one is a testament to her impressive comedic talent and her knack for rapid-fire delivery and dialogue - gifts that made her literally unmatched in the 1930s among comedic actresses. Like her final film *Saratoga*, this is another hard to view with detachment, as it bares many similarities with her real life right down to parasitic parents and an exploitive studio. In her gestures, pitch control and body movement, Harlow displays skills that most actors only acquire after many years of stage and screen experience, if at all. Harlow did this at age 22 with no stage experience. John Lee Mahin's classic script is one of the most devastating satires of the studio system ever produced. Victor Fleming's direction (he also directed Harlow in *Red Dust* and *Reckless*), while not exactly of *Gone With The Wind* calibre, is adequate. The real show, however, belongs entirely to Harlow / Every second is breathlessly paced, rudely funny, cynically observant and near-unbelievably satisfying. If you don't love *Bombshell* on first viewing, you're not as smart as you think you are / Harlow is funny and poignant and Tracy is brilliant / Hollywood at its best / A comic riot / Exhilarating in its very coarseness / Count me in. This slam-bang,
A latter day review:

I suppose there will always be discussion and debate over which movie was the 'original' screwball comedy: Twentieth Century? Theodora Goes Wild? Perhaps one of the late silent-era vehicles for Marion Davies? The debate will probably never be settled, especially as esoteric older films are forgotten, never released on home video. To quote filmmaker Chris Marker in the brilliant essay-film Sans Soleil: "History always throws its empty bottles out the window." One film that seems in constant peril of extinction is the 1933 Jean Harlow comedy Bombshell.

Bombshell was one of those unorthodox and self-reflective pieces of heightened cinema which managed somehow to be released under the aegis of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, perhaps the stodgiest of classic era film studios. Other works that fall in this category include Going Hollywood and Hollywood Party, all three released between the Fall of 1933 and the Summer of 1934. (One possible reason these dissident and eccentric films ever got beyond a three-martini lunch meeting could be that MGM Studio Chief Irving Thalberg had suffered a heart attack in December 1932 and on doctors' orders had spent the majority of 1933 recuperating in Europe.)

How irreverent is Bombshell? Well, before we get to dialogue or plot points or performance, the film's maverick concept situates the movie in a tug o' war between fiction and reality. The 'Bombshell' character in the film is Lola Burns, a wildly popular movie star ballyhooed by her studio as the ultimate sex symbol and whose life is a string of media-obsessed scandals. Lola Burns is played by Jean Harlow, a wildly popular movie star ballyhooed by her studio as the ultimate sex symbol and whose life is a string of media-obsessed scandals. In Bombshell, Lola is finishing a film called "Red Dust" which, of course, was a film Harlow had done with Clark Gable in 1932. On the set of "Red Dust", Lola's director (played by Pat O'Brien in a rare non-Warner Brothers role) exchanges dialogue with the cinematographer whom he calls "Hal". Hal Rosson had been the director of photography for the real Red Dust and was also the ex-husband of Jean Harlow.
Bombshell’s source material was an unproduced play which was doctored by a good team of writers including the exceptionally gifted Jules Furthman (The Big Sleep, To Have And Have Not, Shanghai Express, Rio Bravo) who produced some surprisingly en vogue dialogue including sassy comebacks delivered by the African-American maid, industry-related wisecracks (how many films have a funny - and accurate - crack about Second Assistant Directors?) and copious double-entendres.

As the movie explores the substrata of Hollywood, the film itself is a hothouse of film history rhizomes: e.g. when Lola Burns decides to adopt a baby, she is interviewed by a representative from the orphanage (played by Ethel Griffies, the craggy-faced ornithologist sitting on a stool in the besieged diner of Hitchcock's The Birds). Lola’s interview is interrupted by the entrance of her brother (played by Ted Healy, originator of The Three Stooges) and his floozie pick-up played by Gone With The Wind-featured actress Isabel Jewell. (When a fight erupts during this scene and reporters swarm in with cameras flashing, floozie Jewell frowns, nudges dowager Griffies and slurs: "I’m gettin' sober, aren't you??")

Perhaps even more intriguing is to see how many actors were deleted from the final cut, including singer Etta Moten, for whom Gershwin wrote Porgy And Bess and who - the same year as Bombshell was released - became the first black celebrity to entertain at the White House (for a Democratic president, of course) and silent movie leading-man Nils Asther, whom the media dubbed "the male Greta Garbo."

And as the perfect cinematic after-dinner mint, actor Leonard Carey plays Lola’s butler. (Carey made a 30 year career out of playing butlers in the movies. Did any other thespian top his dominion of the role?)

The leading man is the forgotten fast-talker performer, Lee Tracy. Atlanta-born Tracy was big box-office when movie dialogue began to crackle with smart-assed wit, but soon after Bombshell, while filming Viva Villa! in Mexico, he created an international incident by peeing from his hotel balcony onto a passing military parade. Tracy’s act of urination really ... er ... pissed off Louis B. Mayer, Tracy’s boss. It killed his career until his role in both the 1960 play and subsequent film version of Gore Vidal’s The Best Man garnered him both Broadway’s Tony Award and Oscar nominations.

How much of Bombshell is constructed satire and how much is Hollywood letting its hair down and blowing off steam? It’s a question that - in addition to my appreciation of the manifest talents apparent on the screen - keeps me returning to this resplendently outrageous film.

Doug Bonner, 27 April 2009
Scuffling Eadie Chapman wants to marry money without selling herself in the process. This improbable tale entertains throughout thanks to an engaging cast - Harlow, Franchot Tone (above), Lionel Barrymore and Patsy Kelly - delivering the script with dash and charm to spare. 72 fun-filled minutes.

IMDb: Bright and sassy. Don't miss it / Harlow sizzles in this excellent little comedy. With her platinum hair and gorgeous accoutrements, she is a dazzler. But her beauty should not obscure the fact that she was also a very good actress who rightfully earned her spot at the very top of the Hollywood pantheon / I don't think that Harlow was that great an actress and most of her movies are not very good - but she had star quality and in this one is wonderful / A fun, clean-cut (post-Code) romp as Harlow and her pal chase men around the country, with mistaken identity, plot twists, a young Franchot Tone, love stories and even Jean in "Palm Beach" in a bathing suit. Look out, too, for Nat Pendleton as the lifeguard - an Olympic wrestler (1920 silver medal winner) turned actor who appears in four Harlow films / Tone makes for a good leading man but it's Barrymore who steals the show / The shower scene is sexy / Not the film it could have been, because of the Code - but fun from start to finish just the same / A fast-moving comedy and, yes, Miss Harlow really can be effortlessly funny. Whenever she is in a scene, it is hers / With her wonderful screen presence, Harlow is a delight / A sweet Harlow flick / Kelly gives a solid performance and Lewis Stone has one poignant scene early on, but overall it's Jean Harlow's show all the way. She is charming, strong yet vulnerable, ultimately as tough and clever as Barrymore's political schemer and a match for Tone and his charming grin. No classic, but good fun / Made just on the cusp of the unfortunate Hays code, there's still plenty of innuendo concerning sex, prostitution, infidelity and cocaine to go around. Not as blatant as previous Harlow outings (her gold-digging Red Headed Woman in particular), but still plenty juicy / While it's not
quite a classic and its resolution comes far too quickly, *The Girl From Missouri* remains "must see" viewing simply for [screenwriter] Loos' ability to distil the essence of sexual double standards into a fast-moving, enjoyable romantic comedy / Jean and Tone are oil and water. She was always more comfortable with an earthy man like Gable or Spencer Tracy. And one last thing - what a lousy title for any film but for a Harlow movie, ridiculous! Shot as *Eadie Was A Lady*, the title then became *Born To Be Kissed* (vetoed by the Hayes Office) then *100 Percent Pure* (which is how the film was released in the UK). While not great, any one of them would have made more sense than the lemon they settled on / The only function the final title has is to draw a parallel between the real Jean Harlow (from Kansas City, Missouri) and the story, which the studios didn't scruple to do. The title *Platinum Blonde* trades unashamedly on one of her most famous attributes. The narrative of the rather unsavoury *Reckless* can be read as a riff on Harlow's real-life marital troubles that resulted, both on screen and off, in her husband committing suicide. Bums on seats, no matter what.

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A latter day review:

Released only a few weeks after the enforcement of the Production Code in August 1934, you can see the fingerprints of the new, sanitised Hollywood all over *The Girl From Missouri*. A sex comedy with Jean Harlow as a rapacious gold digger isn't new or essentially moral, but MGM did their best to make her that way. The Girl From Missouri is about a kind hearted virgin who wants a rich husband - and the only way it seems she'll be manage it is by insisting time and time again, yes, she's a gold digger, but, no, really, she's a virgin.

This is rather notably contrasted by her best friend and sidekick Kitty (Patsy Kelly). In most earlier Jean Harlow movies, Jean would probably be in the Kitty part - a girl who is completely gaga for men in uniform, despite her friend's protestations. Kitty leaps on butlers, porters, bellhops and even sailors, while Jean's Eadie patiently awaits for the corpulent millionaire to finish dressing her down before she calmly reminds them of her exchange rate: one (1) virgin hotsy-totsy wife for one (1) wedding ring.

This kind of currency in a woman's virginity can feel pretty off-putting nowadays, but the movie sells it as a kind of virtue, proving her purity of purpose. She isn't satisfied with half measures, you see. She's all in and expects nothing less than to get the same from the millionaire she pounces upon.

But is it sexual chastity that the millionaires want? So many movies and stories revolve around the playboy and the showgirl, she eager to please and he eager to be pleased. The transaction is often shown to be mutually beneficial as soon as the showgirl either learns not to involve emotions (as in *Are You Listening?*) or to completely dominate the sucker and get a ring on her finger (as in *Gold Diggers of 1933*). Eadie is gaming for a middle ground, though she tries to paint
it a little more romantically even while she eagerly wants to keep romance out of it.

The best shot she finds towards her desired ascension into the monied class is Tom Paige Senior (Lionel Barrymore). He has similarly worked his way up from nothing, though it's no surprise that it wasn't with his looks. He's instead fought his way through the stuffy upper class to make a name for himself and is finally earning his reward - the chance to negotiate at a disarmament conference. And Paige Sr. is deeply horrified that a woman like Eadie is going to come in and make trouble at the hour of his greatest success.

While Eadie chases Paige Senior, his debonair womaniser of a son, Paige Junior (Franchot Tone) sets his sights on her. And while he's certainly more romantically receptive to her charms, she can tell exactly what he wants and wants to give none of it. It also hurts that Paige Jr. is genuinely predatory - his idea of a big romantic gesture is to bring Eadie back to his father's mansion and show her the bedroom before revealing that he's locked the two of them in.

This leads to the film's big showdown - a man with a mission to sexually assault a good looking woman, and a woman desperately clinging to 'no' in hopes of keeping her only bargaining chip. It's a ridiculous confrontation on one level, but heart-breakingly real, too. It may be one of Harlow's best scenes in the whole era, a desperate plea not just to escape his sexual domination but to be taken seriously. Her argument is that while he's right, she loves him, he's still taking advantage of her emotions. Eadie begs to be taken seriously in spite of her body and the assumptions that Paige has made because of it. Because she's a human being, too, dammit. And it's not exactly a situation that has lost any of its relevance, either.

Her plea manages to snap Paige Jr. from his lustful machinations and realise for the first time that he's pushing around a real human being - and a virgin, to boot, which is still emphasised to be the important point - that part may have lost some relevance. Understanding for the first time that it's unfair to treat a woman like a floozy, he goes to Paige Sr. and tells his dad that he's going to marry her. But Pop has other plans for his son.

As much as Hold Your Man tried to turn Harlow's sexy screen image to that of a devoted lover and mother in a 90-minute span, The Girl From Missouri is the first full 'new and improved' Harlow for an age of censorship. While we still get a few naughty wisecracks (including a really out-of-the-blue joke about cocaine), the transformation is complete - it's okay for a woman to sleep her way to the top, just so long as she doesn't do any sleeping. What's the old joke about Doris Day? "I knew her before she was a virgin." Fans of pre-Code Jean Harlow knew her in the same way.
The Girl From Missouri is a fun exercise in spite of that Production Code seal that opens the film up. Franchot Tone and Lionel Barrymore (below) rarely get a chance to play such meaty characters who are essentially good natured while also brazenly cruel and egotistical. Both see their money as leverage and both find common people to be below them. Only Eadie’s will melts their hearts and helps them see the errors of their ways.

And Jean Harlow? She’s great in The Girl From Missouri, having finally mastered screwball comedy as much as well-honing the finer dramatics. Jean Harlow died three years after The Girl From Missouri was released. By that time her screen image had been thoroughly pasteurised in pictures like Suzy and Wife Versus Secretary. Did that matter to her as a person? Not so much, I gather.

But more than any other star, Jean Harlow's screen career was a true reflection of the idea of pre-Code Hollywood. From her rough start in talkies with Hell's Angels to clumsy turns in The Public Enemy and Iron Man to her final mastery of being the biggest beauty symbol the screen had ever seen in pictures like Red Dust and Red-Headed Woman, Harlow epitomised Hollywood and America's love/hate relationship with sex. Other blonde sexbombs would come for decades afterward, but rarely would you get the chance to see them grow and change as the movies did the same thing right along with them. Harlow was the bad girl, the good girl, and, by the end, every girl. There was never anyone else like Jean Harlow, and there never will be again.

Danny at Pre-Code.com, 21 November 2014
RECKLESS (1935)

Harlow plays a showgirl pursued by playboy Franchot Tone and sports event promoter William Powell. She chooses the wrong one with consequences that disrupt several lives. But love heals all - eventually. Powell (above) and Harlow, both from Kansas City, were an item at this point in their lives and in this first of their two films together (see also Libeled Lady) shine bright as only stars can. Tone is also his usual well-scrubbed (mostly) cheery self, May Robson shows that her Lady For A Day success was no fluke and Nat Pendleton's benign dope persona is honed by much practice. One for a rainy afternoon. 97 minutes.

IMDb: How do you make a turkey with Jean Harlow, William Powell, May Robson and Franchot Tone among the cast and with music by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein? It happened in 1935 with Reckless, an unfunny, almost incomprehensibly bad melodrama from MGM. The script is terrible and the music awful / Not a great film, but the people in it surely are / Poorly plotted. Not very good / Harlow, often funny and likable (Platinum Blonde, The Girl From Missouri, Red-Headed Woman, Dinner At Eight) is wasted in this surprisingly plodding and undernourished comedy-musical-melodrama. As Mona Leslie she gives one of her weakest performances. Powell plays the secret admirer who rescues her from carelessness and Robson the granny whose delightful banter with Powell is one of the few high spots of the film. Like Personal Property and the overrated Libeled Lady, Reckless offers little more than its earnestly plush and overproduced MGM look. From the get-go Harlow seems uncomfortable. Her singing and musical numbers, mostly dubbed, are highly forgettable / Watch this movie and remember just how few there are with Harlow in. Appreciate it for her every trademark gesture. Enjoy it for its pure entertainment value. Enjoy it for Jean.
Gable and Harlow again, in 87 minutes of overcooked, under-seasoned B movie hokum. Less salacious than Red Dust (thanks presumably to the Hayes Code) with more plot and Boy's Own action - smuggled gold, pirates, careening steam-roller and all - tossed in as unsatisfactory makeweight. Harlow again plays Miss Brassy No Classee, but with considerably more confidence now. Just about worthwhile. With Wally Beery (above).

IMDb: Rollicking, unprofound fun with something for everyone: romance, adventure, tragedy, comedy, pirates, torture and a largely studio-bound but remarkably effective typhoon. No sense ... Pure escapism. Gable, Harlow, Rosalind Russell, Wallace Beery (above), Lewis Stone and a believably inebriated Robert Benchley make it livelier and more entertaining to watch than most films. The constant movement of the ship is well conveyed. Uncredited Hattie Gone With The Wind McDaniel plays Harlow's maid / The special effects are superb / Harlow and Gable are a knockout A-class pairing and their character roles are well-handled. Juicy dialogue and gory action are additional plusses / A fine film that probably served as one source of inspiration for Spielberg's Indiana Jones series / A gem. Don't pass it up / A lively mix of comedy and tragedy / Great entertainment with all the stops pulled out / A post-Code Red Dust on the Hong Kong-Shanghai run. Harlow, rehashing her brassy platinum blonde act for the nth time, is not at her best / Rugged action-adventure entertainment / Derivative but very enjoyable / A really enjoyable film hindered by an ending that makes no sense! / One of my favourite films, with a lot of plot, some - the gold in the steam engine (Kipling) and the "fake" pearls (Somerset Maugham) - lifted from other sources: / Shallow ... This lemon of a star vehicle is mostly a cacophony of yelling. Man the lifeboats.
WIFE vs. SECRETARY (1936)

A heavyweight cast - Gable, Harlow and Loy (above, right), with young James Stewart on the undercard - tell a tale that smoulders promisingly without ever quite bursting into flame. Harlow for once plays - very well - a virtuous working girl, secretary to Gable's boss, with not a steamy clinch or doe-eyed look in sight. A Code-sanitised yarn concerning the corrosive influence of suspicion and jealousy that passes 87 minutes in tame though palatable style.

IMDb: Not much of a story, but with such a cast, who cares? / Warm and touching / A sophisticated and intelligent film that belies its silly title. If not for the slightly forced happy ending, it would be perfection / Close to perfect / Dated but satisfying / Not the best film Gable did with Harlow or Loy, but good fun / Dreary ... Where's the comedy? Even the title is bad! / The ending is not happy, but very bittersweet / No classic but entertaining still. Loy's sensitive portrayal raises it a cut above / A well-rounded and exquisite gem, beautifully scripted, intelligently directed, ebulliently acted. Gable is a joy to watch and Loy has to be the most sophisticated creature ever filmed / A superior 1930s "women's picture" / Harlow's starring career blazed briefly, but with almost no wasted roles. Here she gets to behave not like a débutante, tenement dweller, criminal's moll, voracious mantrap, comic banshee or adventuress working the China Seas or Malay docksides, but like a normal, working class woman. A part this quiet remains a rarity for the winsome, brilliant and doomed genius that was Jean / Harlow without fizz is rather like a soda gone flat - tolerable but disconcerting / Loy was never lovelier / Star power undermined by mediocre script / Interesting though in parts desperately old fashioned / Though the rest are good, Harlow steals the show / Note that the title has a subtle double meaning, since Gable's character's initials and nickname are V.S.
Jean and Clark Expose Each Other

Six years ago, Jean Harlow, with Hell's Angels behind her as her single screen appearance, and Clark Gable, with small parts in The Painted Desert, Easiest Way and Dance Fools Dance behind him, met for the first time in The Secret Six, an MGM production starring Wallace Beery and Lewis Stone, as beginners. The other day I talked with them on the set of Wife vs. Secretary, as stars. We sat in Jean's portable dressing room on the set, near enough to the ice palace which had been constructed for the picture to hear the band playing and the clink of skates as professional skaters, engaged for the sequence, described arcs and figure eights and other geometric designs on the "ice" of the rink. Jean wore ice skates and a blue skating outfit. Clark wore ice skates and brown tweeds. They had just shot a scene in which both had taken a "brodie" and come up laughing. They had taken the brodie, too, not once but several times. Meanwhile, their stand-ins stood comfortably to one side watching the stars seeing stars and risking bruises. I said to Jean and Clark, "What I want to know is this - what dreams did you two dream when you were making your first picture together? Did you dream that it would come to this?" And I indicated, comprehensively, the small deluxe dressing room, Jean's maid hovering in readiness, Clark's man proffering him a gold cigarette case, the stand-ins standing at attention - the whole luxurious frame of stardom. Before the question was out of my mouth they answered in union: "We didn't!" "Nope," said Clark. "I can answer for both of us and if I'm wrong Jean can stop me. We didn't have a dream in our heads. We didn't even think about a tomorrow but only of the day itself. We never thought about being stars. We knew that there were such animals and we admired them, respectfully, but at a distance. For never once did we think of ourselves as potential stars, or any kind of stars at all. Fact is, we didn't think about it all. While, as for dreaming ... Well, dreams don't sit so well on an empty stomach."

"I still can't think of myself as a star," said Jean. "Sounds silly but it's a fact that I never think of me as a star. I find myself thinking of Garbo and Dietrich and Colbert and Crawford and others as big stars and then the thought comes, 'But you're a star, too' - and it doesn't ring the bell. It doesn't seem to be real!"

"Doesn't sound silly to me," Clark said, "because I feel the same way. Always have and always will."

"Clark hasn't changed one mite," Jean said, with an affectionate smile. "He's just the same today as he was that first day in The Secret Six. My chief recollection of him then is the way he threw hard rolls at me in one of the scenes - and then between the scenes for fun. Fun! He got realism into those rolls, believe me. He aimed 'em with deadly precision. He gets realism into falling on the ice, too, as my fair limbs will doubtless bear witness tomorrow. What I mean is, we fall - and fall again ..."
"And Jean hasn’t changed either," Clark said. "In the beginning she wouldn’t have thought of allowing anyone to take the blows for her. She doesn’t think today of having anyone take the falls for her. No, in the days of The Secret Six we just thought that we had jobs and were darned lucky to have ‘em. Our only hope was that there would be another job for us when the current one was finished. We never got beyond that point."

"At the risk of being called an Elsie Dinsmore or something," Jean broke in, "I was really thinking only of my mother, then ... Of the sacrifices she had made, of the family opposition she faced when we came to Hollywood. I was just hoping, from hour to hour, that I would be allowed to keep on working, for her sake. Just as I would have felt if I’d been a stenographer or had any other kind of a job. I also had the hope that after a good many years and a lot of hard work I might develop into the kind of an actress I’d like to be. But of stardom, of great success, of all the glamour that went with the Garbos and the Loys I never had a thought or a dream. I just didn’t place myself in their category at all. I didn’t have time to dream."

"I was thinking of my tummy," grinned Clark, "and what steady jobs could mean to it!"

"But it was fun," Jean said, blue eyes wistful, almost wishful for the departed days when she and her mother shared a modest home and modest hopes; when Clark used shoe leather instead of a Dusenberg to get around.

"Well," I commented, "I have picked two honeys! If you don’t dream of stardom for yourselves, didn’t you think of it for each other?"

"What d’you mean?" asked Clark, blankly.

"I mean, didn’t you, Clark, gaze upon the platinum blonde glory that was Jean and say to yourself, ‘Here is the next big box office Glamour Girl! Here is a rising star! Here is the studio’s next gift to the fans?’"

"I did NOT," retorted Clark with the ruthless and unpretified honesty which characterises everything he says. "I thought she was a nice kid but a rotten actress and that was as far as I went in thinking about her at all."

Jean laughed.

"And you?" I turned to her. "Did you think when you looked at Clark that he was to be the biggest star sensation since Valentino? Did you know?"

"Imagine my embarrassment," grinned Jean, "but honestly - NO! I didn’t think about him at all. I mean, I thought that he was just another actor, and not such a hot one at that. I thought he was a lot of fun and I took his advice only because I always take advice from everyone."

"It wasn’t until we made Red Dust together," Clark cut in, "that I realised Jean was an actress to be reckoned with, a comer, a star. She had improved so vastly by that time that even a blind man could get a glimmer of the glamour ... A glamour of the glimmer ... You know what I mean."

"Thanks for that, Mr. G.,” chirped Jean, "and right back at you. While we were working together I didn’t recognise you for what you were. I didn’t ‘get’ you. But when I saw you on the screen - well, then I did get the full impact
of the Gable personality. When we're actually in production, working together I just know you're a good scout and a lot of fun. But when I get a look at you on the screen, I think, 'For goodness' sake, didn't I even try to make a date with that? I don't know, I think I must always have felt in my bones, even if I didn't consciously think it, that Clark was a grand actor, otherwise I wouldn't have taken his advice quite so seriously all these years. Even in this picture I read my lines over to him and he suggests that I stress this line or emphasize that word and I always do what he tells me and he's always right."

"And thanks for that, Miss H," said Clark with an aw-cut-it-out-now expression. "And here's back at you. One of the reasons why Jean is a star is that she's never got beyond believing that she can learn from others. She never has been touched with the know-it-all malady."

"We were very unimportant persons then," said Jean. "Wally Beery and Lewis Stone were the stars. They were very kind to us. They helped us read lines. They taught us camera tricks. They gave us advice and encouragement and everything in their power to give. They really cared about us."

"And that," said Clark, "is the one outstanding thing about those earlier days - how kind everyone was. If I dreamed any dream at all it was that there might be such a thing as the brotherhood of man - and movie actors. It was so different from the theatre where all of the stars, especially the big women stars, are prima donnas and the rest of the cast are cattle. Boy, they could make things sizzle for you, some of those babies! There was none of that temperament stuff out here and I couldn't get over it. I've never yet had any experience with any star or player trying to hog things, to give the other fellow a shove down."

"D'you remember, Clark," Jean laughed, "the funny little dressing room you had, tucked away at the end of nowhere?"

"Just enough room to change my coat and vest," said Clark. "Well, it was all I needed. Matter of fact, it's all I need now."

"We weren't allowed to see the rushes," Jean reminisced.

"And now we don't want to," said Clark.

"The rushes," said Jean, "were only for important people. We just did our day's work and went home. We went to the commissary for lunch and if there wasn't any empty table, which there often wasn't, we sat at the lunch counter and very glad to be there, too."

"Very glad to be eating at all," said Clark. "I was dreaming of the day, if you must have a dream, when I could let out my belt a notch or two."

"We never studied our scripts," mused Jean.

"For a darned good reason," laughed Clark. "We didn't have any scripts to study. We weren't important enough for that - or perhaps they thought we couldn't read! We arrived on the set with painstaking punctuality and the director told us what to do and we did it, to the best of our abilities."

"Did you work awfully hard?" I asked. "Were you under a strain and nervous all the time?"
"No," said Jean, "we weren't important enough for that. What we did or did not do was of such little consequence. The picture didn't in any sense depend on us, you know. It's only when you carry responsibility that you carry the 'white man's burden'..."

"We still don't see the rushes," said Clark. "We haven't seen a foot of this film. I didn't see half a foot of Mutiny until it was previewed. What's the use? It's all 'in the box' by that time. There's nothing we can do about it. And if anything is seriously amiss they'll call us back for retakes fast enough."

"But you must have had ambitions in those days," I persisted, "if not dreams. After all, you must have known that other beginners had become stars, and you must have thought ..."

"I didn't," said Clark. "I don't know what that makes me, but I didn't, I'd had other jobs before - in lumber camps, in the oil fields, on farms, on the stage. I'd never thought, when I had them, of becoming the 'Big Boss.' I carried a spear in a play with Jane Cowl. I just hoped that I'd carry that spear sufficiently well to be allowed to keep on carrying it. Ambition doesn't rear its ugly head in my breast, I guess. I make very few demands in life, have very few wants. And so the movie work was just another job to me. I hoped I wouldn't be fired. I dreamed of three squares a day and a decent place to sleep. I never got beyond it."

"Me, too," agreed Jean. "You see, I knew that Hell's Angels was just one of those accidents - it was absolutely that, a fluke. It didn't give me any reason to suppose that it would lead to anything important. I didn't think I could act. I was so absorbed in having a job and in hoping for a follow-up that I didn't have time to think where a follow-up might lead."

And they both mean what they say. If they don't they've been lying to me all these years. For I've talked with Clark and Jean frequently since the days when they were unknown beginners. And of all the stars I know they are the most genuinely, the most honestly, unaffected by success. They are the most honest and sincere, and humble in their own self-esteem. Clark was glad he "had a job" when he played in The Secret Six. As a star of Wife vs. Secretary, he's still glad he has a job. Jean hoped, when she played in The Secret Six that one day she might be the actress she aspired to be. As a star of Wife vs. Secretary she still hopes that she will be the actress she aspires to be. I honestly believe that of all of the top-notch stars in Hollywood today, these two have the largest and most loyal legions of personal friends. Neither has lost perspective, neither has lost the ability to remember the days of poverty and struggle. And to my own knowledge, those memories have made them keen to realise the problems of others. I could cite innumerable instances to show their willingness to help. But neither would appreciate the broadcasting of such good deeds. They are two stars who do not look down upon the good earth.

Gladys Hall, Movie Classic, May 1936
A cracking little drama set just before and during the Great War, Suzy stars Harlow in good form alongside Cary Grant (above), Franchot Tone and, in the role of Grant's father, Lewis Stone. The action moves between London, Paris and the French front, with Grant a flying ace, Tone an aeronautical engineer and Harlow romantically involved with them both. A little bit more resolution would have improved the end (though what’s missing can be imagined readily enough) - otherwise Suzy, running 93 minutes, is just the job.

IMDb: I would recommend this film for any Grant or Harlow enthusiast but I would have preferred Grant in the Franchot Tone role. Still, Suzy has a decent plot and the story comes together nicely in the end / Though the acting is a little clunky in places, it's all done with such enthusiasm you can't help but love it / While I much prefer Jean Harlow in comedy she does well enough with drama. Grant was okay but why they cast him as a Frenchman I'll never know / An excellent little picture with good acting and direction. The plot is involving throughout. One of Jean Harlow's better films / What a loss to films when Jean Harlow died. She was so immensely likable, with a wonderful vulnerability / Grant plays his part of a war hero and bounder very well. The sweetest scenes were between Harlow and Lewis Stone / An entertaining, well-made WWI era romance, Suzy features a routinely-scripted but winningly-executed love triangle with some espionage and spy action thrown into the mix. In the title role, Jean Harlow (arguably MGM's biggest female star at the time) gives a refreshingly natural and totally believable performance, and really carries the film with her considerable charm and screen presence. Franchot Tone and Cary Grant may draw some criticism for utilising improper accents, but both actors contribute solidly also. The movie is further enhanced by the quiet strength of Lewis Stone. Almost a masterpiece.
LIBELED LADY (1936)

William Powell (above) and Myrna Loy reprise their first Thin Man outing (of an eventual six - in all, they appeared in fourteen films together!) with Harlow and Spencer Tracy in an entertaining though overly contrived tale of newspaper skullduggery. Harlow's character reverts towards the manhunter end of her limited scale, essaying common and loud while steering clear of cheap and brazen. Loy, as usual, is a delight, especially with Powell. Harlow and Powell were a real-life couple during this time. Brain-in-neutral, soon-forgotten, fun fest Libeled Lady wins a full-house four Maltin stars. 98 minutes.

IMDb: Timeless entertainment / Powell and Tracy are both in peak form and the film moves like quicksilver. If one line doesn't work, don't worry, another will be along in a few seconds. This and Bringing Up Baby are true screwball classics / The acting is top of the line. Tracy was great at comedy, Loy is classy, sassy, funny and witty, Powell at the zenith of his game and glowing Harlow steals the show / One of the finest romantic comedies ever filmed / This unsung starry gem offers wit and slapstick wrapped in some gorgeous sets and costumes / Too clever and complicated at the end - otherwise great / Powell must have loved the year 1936, in which he made The Great Ziegfeld, which won the Best Picture Oscar, My Man Godfrey, for which he was nominated for Best Actor, and one of the finest screwball romantic comedies ever made. That would be Libeled Lady. Although widely viewed, with good reason, as one of Jean Harlow's best, Powell steals it - not that the rest of the cast are too shabby, either / Right up there with My Man Godfrey and the pick of Tracy-Hepburn / The film's real selling point is its clever drawing room dialogue and rat-a-tat-tat delivery. One doesn't see this type of intelligent comedic script come out of Hollywood these days - and watching Loy glow on screen is always magic / The likes of which we'll never see again.
Harlow's sixth film with Clark Gable was also the last of her life, for, with shooting still incomplete, she collapsed on set and, within a week, was dead. MGM considered both starting afresh with Virginia Bruce or Jean Arthur and scrapping the project altogether but were persuaded, so the story goes, by public support for Harlow to complete and release the film using existing footage. What's more likely is that they knowingly seized the opportunity of turning their property's loss to advantage - and so indeed it proved, for when *Saratoga* was released on 23 July 1937, not quite seven weeks after Jean's death, so many of her fans turned out to see it that it became one of the year's biggest box office hits. As for the film's completion, presumably some rewriting was done, and half a dozen additional scenes were shot using an uncredited actress called Mary Dees either back-to-camera or with her face obscured by expansive hats or binoculars. A second ringer, Paula Winslowe, mimicked a few lines of Harlow's voice and the end product was cobbled together. Sadly, even had Harlow herself finished the film, it probably wouldn't have been very good, for the story is weak. Gable plays that rare species, a bookie with a heart of gold. Lionel Barrymore (above, left) is saddled with an old blowhard's part and Frank Morgan (right) with a buffoon's. Hattie McDaniel, Una Merkel and Walter Pidgeon round out a cast that, while strong on paper, can collectively do little with such modest material. Other than a ghoulish wish to play Spot The Stand-in, there's not much reason to watch this. 92 minutes.
IMDb: When you watch this film, you are overwhelmed with sadness realising that Harlow died during production. Jean was never better than she is in *Saratoga*. First of all, MGM finally found her 'look' - her make-up toned down and her platinum blonde hair now a darker shade. She was never lovelier. But most remarkable are her acting skills. She developed such a natural style and her comic ability was flawless / *Saratoga*, not a great movie, lacks the expected chemistry between Gable and Harlow. It was released, as I understand it, after public pressure for a last look at her and ended up being her most financially successful film. I don't know of another film finished after its star's death like this. For that alone it is a curiosity. The added footage is obvious, comical yet macabre, and the ongoing theme about her being sick is equally macabre. As for trivia, stand by for one of Lionel Barrymore's last ambulatory roles, long time MGM contractee Walter Pidgeon in his first MGM role and Hattie McDaniel singing / *It's hard to work up any enthusiasm for this sort of comedy from MGM. With stars of the calibre of Gable and Harlow one expects much more than a routine story of the jet set circa 1930s amid a horsey racetrack background. Furthermore, watching it with an awareness that Harlow was gravely ill during filming makes the comedy even less enjoyable than it's supposed to be. Her illness shows in more than the make-up needed to hide the shadows around her eyes. She seems to be forcing herself to come through with any sense of comic timing for the sake of getting through the shooting of a very tedious comedy. A certain listlessness can be detected in many of her scenes. The use of a double is painfully obvious in the last third of the film. Seldom is there any inkling of the comic skill Gable showed in movies like *It Happened One Night*, and never is Harlow anything less than remote and subdued even in her best moments. The cigar smoking scene is the only highlight in this otherwise feeble comedy / I wish that Jean's last movie was a different and more worthy one. This picture offers little entertainment and is even a bit boring at times because of the formulaic story. As a comedy it simply ain't funny enough and as a drama it ain't powerful enough, making it a bit pointless to watch / *Saratoga* is a comedy, yet a weird morbidity hovers over the film. Harlow's character's father is played by Jonathan Hale, who later committed suicide. Gable has a bizarre scene in a racehorse cemetery, appropriately spooky. The scenes left unfilmed at Harlow's death were completed with three different actresses doubling for her: a body double, a face double, and a voice double dubbing her dialogue. The doubling is laughably inept, even by 1937 standards. Several film critics have claimed that we'll never know how great *Saratoga* would have been had Harlow completed it. That's rubbish, that is. For the first two-thirds of the film - with the possible exception of one shot in which she pushes her way through a crowd of punters, with her back to the camera - it's clear that Harlow did all of her own scenes. By the two-thirds mark, *Saratoga* has failed to register as a classic on the level of *Red Dust* or *Dinner At Eight*. There's nothing in its first five reels to indicate that this movie would have attained greatness if only Harlow had completed it. I find it intriguing that all of her doubled sequences are in the last third of the movie, indicating that *Saratoga* was shot roughly in sequence. Through the last third, her character is strangely taciturn, always holding field glasses or some other object in front of her face so that we can't get a good squizz at the unconvincing double. Jean's character appears to have been written out of some late scenes, but the film's very last shot reveals Harlow herself, with Gable and Una Merkel, reprising a song, *The Horse With The Dreamy Eyes*, from earlier on. Thus the director ensures that his movie - hardly a classic - ends with a close-up of the real Jean Harlow. Ironically, the last line she speaks on screen (two-thirds of the way through the film) is "Goodbye."
MGM chief photographer **George Hurrell**: Harlow was not frightened of the camera. She reacted to it and, in some strange way, I was the third party, *they* were the conspirators.

**Jean Harlow**: Men like me because I don't wear a brassiere. Women like me because I don't look like a girl who would steal a husband. At least, not for long.

Portrait photographer **Charles Sinclair Bull**: In the first sitting I fell in love with Jean Harlow. She had the most beautiful and seductive body I ever photographed.

**Spencer Tracy**: A square shooter if there ever was one ... Grand gal.

**Jean Harlow**: When you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas.

*The New York Herald Tribune's* **Richard Watts Jr**: Always, she is so straightforward and human and pleasant to observe that she is of inordinate value to a film that certainly does require her gifts.

**Clark Gable**: She didn't want to be famous. She wanted to be happy.

**Jean Harlow**: I wasn't a born actress, you know. No one knows it better than I. Events made me one ... If I had any latent talent, I have had to work hard, listen carefully, do things over and over and then over again in order to bring it out ... I'm not a great actress, and I never thought I was. But I happen to have something the public likes.

**Apocryphal**: Harlow was at a dinner party with Margot (wife of British prime minister Herbert) Asquith and repeatedly addressed her as "Margot", pronouncing the "T". Margot finally had enough and said to her, "No, Jean, the 'T' is silent, as in 'Harlow'."

**Joan Crawford** allegedly hated Harlow. Crawford's then-husband Douglas Fairbanks Junior termed her attitude toward Harlow a "controlled detestation".

Of Harlow's final performance in *Saratoga*, **Graham Greene** wrote: "Her technique was the gangster's technique - she toted a breast like a man totes a gun." **Clark Gable** stated that acting with stand-in Mary Dees to close out the film after Harlow's sudden death was like being "in the arms of a ghost".

**Director George Cukor** admired Harlow's tremendous talent for comedy, saying she "played comedy as naturally as a hen lays an egg."

Harlow was the idol of **Marilyn Monroe**, who backed out of a biographical picture on Jean's life. After reading the script, Monroe reportedly told her agent: "I hope they don't do that to me after I'm gone." The co-star in the last film of both actresses was Clark Gable.

**Diane M**: She was young, sweet and caring - completely the anti-diva - and was at the beginning of a new page in her career when her life was suddenly whisked away. I have no doubt that Clark was thinking of Jean when he later said: "That's what's so strange about life. The brave ones don't make it."