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History 225: Section 36

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Equality

George Dewey Cukor was an American staple in the directing industry. Starting in the early 1920s he made his fame known in New York City; a place where dreams come alive. Growing up in Manhattan to two parents that immigrated over of Hungarian-Jewish decent could be difficult to most but Cukor established himself well in the acting community.¹ During his young life, he starred in various amateur plays and performances getting a knack at the profession he would soon come to know very well. Before getting his foot through the door in directing, Cukor attended The City College of New York where he shortly after had to serve two months in the later parts of World War II.² Once Cukor returned home, he set out to pursue his passion in the acting world, leaving college behind. Hard work and determination paid off for Cukor as he made a name for himself in New York City. Soon after, George Dewey Cukor would find his way across the country, holding on to a secret most did not know.

“Women’s director” was a name George Cukor wore with little pride. Although he did not like the title, his films spoke otherwise. During an interview with Gene Phillips, Cukor was very critical and analytical of his techniques as a director. “Your first major success came within 1932 with a *Bill of Divorcements*.”³ Phillips pressed Cukor. Cukor responded with his embarrassment at how the audience laughed at the wrong parts of the film. Even with his

¹ Michael Barson, *George Cukor* (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 3 July 2018)

² Ibid.

³ Gene Phillips, *George Cukor (Film Comment* 8, no. 1 (1972): 53-55)

success, Cukor found ways to critique his abilities. Cukor developed the title, “Women's director” by working with major actresses still relevant in today’s society.⁴ Audrey Hepburn was an American actress still known for her work and still watched by many.⁵ Cukor directed the film, *The Women*, which not only starred over one hundred female actresses but also allowed him to embody the name itself.⁶ George Cukor was gifted at the art of directing and allowed him to produce films that appealed a greater audience than just himself.

In today’s society, most cannot fathom the idea of a person sexuality impairing their professional lives. George Cukor lived during a time where one's sexuality could not only easily destroy your professional life but could also end your social life and for those struggling, could end their own lives. Throughout Hollywood, Cukor being gay was an “open secret”, and even then most articles could not be published while the director was alive due to the extreme fear the industry held for gay men in that generation.⁷ Equality has never been static throughout America. It is constantly changing and redefining itself. Although during the 1930’s it can be argued that gay men in the society were unheard of. This was because of the harsh negativity the connotation had around it. If someone was gay in the 1930’s, one doesn’t fear the unknown, they fear the cruelty and punishment they will get for being their true selves. Only close peers or confidantes in the “know” knew about Cukor's “sexual tendencies”. This is also a reason he was named the “Women's Director”, far different than the stereotypical directors in the 1930’s that sexualized every actress.⁸ No one in the industry would put a label on Cukor and his sexuality. George

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Charlie, Keil, *George Cukor and the Case of an Actor’s Director: Hepburn And/or Tracy in Little Women, The Actress, Keeper of the Flame, Adam’s Rib, and Pat and Mike*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2015)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Patrick McGilligan, *George Cukor: A Double Life*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1997)

⁸ Andrew Sarris, *The Man in the Glass Closet* (The New York Times, 15 Dec. 1991)

Dewey Cukor was a man that came to be himself and was someone of the film industry professionals could look up to. He was worshipped in the film community. Throughout New York City, Hollywood, London, and Paris film connoisseurs analyzed his fifty plus works of art in order to adopt his “thematic and stylistic obsessions.”⁹ That was also why there was such a balance between his social and professional lives, Cukor realized gay directors in the 30’s could not be as highly respected in his field as he was. It was known Cukor would throw extravagant parties in his older life with the A-listers and others with the “Gay-listers” “For the most part, Cukor presided over two separate groups in two separate worlds for two separate sectors of his psyche.”¹⁰ It was a double-life, in a time where hiding his sexuality as best he could was Cukor's only option. Cukor can be described as a catalyst, his sexuality, although at the time was hidden allowed a progressive shift in the field of directing. This makes him, a significant puzzle piece in America up until today, allowing for the stretch equality for gender, race, and importantly sexual orientation.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Citations:

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