

The Ten Best Movies About the Theatre

by Scott Edmiston

How many times have we heard a movie star proclaim, “but what I really love to do is theatre?” They usually mean it – especially since most screen actors began their careers in the theatre (and often return to it when their films stop making money). Although movies can offer fame, million dollar salaries and huge international audiences, Hollywood frequently symbolizes “selling out” whereas the stage, for all its modest limitations, promises integrity, artistry, and romance. The long love affair between stage and screen has produced some of the most powerful and enduring mythology about our art form. Often movie-makers get it hilariously wrong: dressing rooms as opulent as a Newport mansion; brightly lit backstages where costumed showgirls parade by lounging stage hands; egocentric and lecherous directors who only humiliate or fire actors; inexperienced understudies who go on for the star without a single rehearsal; and of course, those spectacular musical stage shows that would never physically fit on any actual Broadway stage. But much of the time, Hollywood gets us right. Here are my candidates for the ten best movies ever made about the theatre.

1. **ALL ABOUT EVE** (1950)

“Want to know what the theater is? A flea circus. Also opera. Also rodeos, carnivals, ballets, Indian tribal dances, Punch and Judy, a one-man band...Wherever there's magic and make-believe and an audience - there's theater... You don't understand it, you don't like it all - why should you? The theater's for everybody - you included, but not exclusively - so don't approve or disapprove. It may not be your theater, but it's theater for somebody, somewhere.” *Will the movies ever be this smart again?* Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s stunningly literate and acerbic screenplay centers around the uncompromising ambitions of a mysterious understudy, and in the process, simultaneously pays tribute to and satirizes the talents and egos of actors, playwrights, directors, and producers. Despite its surface viciousness, it’s actually a valentine to the grand, glamorous, glory days of Broadway when Tallulah swigged martinis with the Lunts while Noel and Cole provided bon mots and background music. Bette Davis, as the archetypal Bitch-Goddess Margo Channing, could devour today’s VH-1 Divas for lunch – and spit out their bones with an epithet worthy of Congreve. Nominated for 14 Academy Awards, it remained the champ until *Titanic*, which says a lot about what makes us fasten our seat belts. Margo’s melancholy monologue about her regrets at surrendering womanhood to stardom may make feminists wince, but it’s undeniably true that something often has to be sacrificed to survive in the theatre.

2. **SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE** (1998)

We all secretly dream of finding true love in the theatre – and of experiencing the kind of thrilling, charmed opening night depicted for *Romeo and Juliet*. Playwright Tom Stoppard’s witty, informed, Oscar-winning screenplay forgoes his usual intellectual elitism for an emotionally rewarding, exquisitely irreverent, poetic but unpretentious lark that is filled with so many Elizabethan show biz in-jokes that it requires multiple viewings to catch all the references. Could Joseph Fiennes and Gwyneth Paltrow be any more divine as the neurotically blocked Bard and his luminous muse Viola-Juliet? A sumptuous, simultaneously classical and contemporary look at how heartbreak brings out the best in artists and actually fuels the creative fire. In the end, Boy doesn’t get Girl, Boy gets Art – but you leave feeling exhilarated with the belief that great theatre, like love itself, can live forever.

3. **STAGE DOOR** (1937)

“The calla lilies are in bloom again!” – and this perennial classic remains as fresh and funny as it was 65 years ago. Forget the dull Kaufman and Ferber play on which it is based, director Gregory LaCava’s fast-paced, highly improvised comedy-drama is the definitive examination of the bitterness that comes from unrealized stage ambitions. As Depression era actresses sharing a shabby boarding house and leftover lamb stew, this ensemble cast can’t be beat: Katharine Hepburn as the slumming, starry-eyed socialite in love with the “thea-tuh;” Ginger Rogers as the wounded, wise-cracking chorus girl determined not to care anymore; plus Lucille Ball, Eve Arden, Ann Miller, Constance Collier (Hepburn’s real-life Shakespeare coach), and Andrea Leeds as the melodramatic suicide. Aristocrat Hepburn and proletariat Rogers were legendary rivals on the RKO studio lot, and their palpable dislike for each other deliciously energizes their chemistry as rival roommates. “Why don’t we just sleep in hall,” Ginger snaps, “No sense crowding the trunks.” When a Pulitzer-prize winning playwright challenges Hepburn’s ability to criticize his dialogue, she blithely barks back: “Well, you don’t have to be a chicken to know a bad egg.” This may be the most unromantic view of a life in the theatre that Hollywood ever produced.

4. **BULLETS OVER BROADWAY** (1994)

Woody Allen’s farcical homage to stage integrity is so funny and insightful that it can leave you speak-less. Behind the sumptuous production design and incandescent performances, *Bullets Over Broadway* seriously contemplates what is art and what is collaboration – “If the common people don’t understand your work, you’re a genius.” Like its stage cousin *As Bees In Honey Drown*, *Bullets* explores the seductive lure of fame as personified by a devastatingly glamorous woman – outrageously portrayed by Dianne Wiest in a hilarious, over-the-top, Oscar-winning performance. Idealistic Group Theatre-esque playwright David Shayne (John Cusack) must choose between compromise and obscurity, and in the process examines some hard questions about his own creative identity. Throw in a shrewd gangster (Chazz Palminteri) who’s really the great talent, a shrill bimbo (Jennifer Tilly) who’s “allowed to improvise,” a leading man (Jim Broadbent) who’s a food-aholic – and a supporting cast that includes Tracey Ullman and Harvey Fierstein – you might be persuaded to sell your creative soul for this kind of comic success.

5. **THE CRADLE WILL ROCK** (1999)

A glorious, inspirational paean to the social-consciousness and commitment of the artists of the 1930s, who truly believed that the theatre could change the world. Tim Robbins’ intricate cinematic mural stirring captures the spirit of a time when art and politics were passionate bedfellows. Capitalism and Communism battle for the soul of the American artist as Bertolt Brecht, William Randolph Hearst, John Houseman, Nelson Rockefeller, Diego Rivera, and Frieda Kahlo become entangled in the fight. Centered around the true-life tale of Orson Welles’ troubled but determined mounting of Marc Blitzstein’s socialist opera entitled *The Cradle Will Rock*, the film effectively recreates one of the most thrilling nights in American theatre history. The exceptional cast includes Hank Azaria, Susan Sarandon, Bill Murray, Joan Cusack, Ruben Blades, Cherry Jones, and Vanessa Redgrave. You will both cheer and despair as the Federal Theatre Project’s Hallie Flannigan passionately pleads for government support of the arts (adapted from actual congressional transcripts), though we all know how that plot ends. The chilling final image wordlessly expresses everything you need to know about the decline of the role of art in the 20th

century.

6. **THE BANDWAGON** (1953)

Broadway's Comden and Green wrote this sparkling backstage gem about a new musical's tryout struggles on the road, wonderfully enhanced by Vincente Minnelli stylish direction and Michael Kidd's elegant choreography. An aging Fred Astaire parodies himself as a has-been movie hooper returning to the stage to appear in a post-modern musical version of *Faust* opposite a young classical ballerina (Cyd Charisse). The mismatched lovers dance in the dark, bicker over rewrites and high heels, drink beer with the chorus kids, and almost implode during an apocalyptic tech rehearsal. In the end, pretentious, conceptual Art gives way to a show that is really a Show. One of the last great Hollywood musicals, *The Bandwagon*'s old-fashioned, romantic sophistication sends you out with a kind of a glow, and you say, as you go on your way...well, you know the rest.

7. **FANNY AND ALEXANDER** (1983)

Winner of four Oscars, *Fanny and Alexander* is the culmination of a lifetime's work by one of the cinema's greatest artists, Ingmar Bergman. The story is a rich tapestry of one year in the life of the Ekdahls, a warm, loving theatrical family living in turn of the century Sweden. Although not a traditional backstage saga, Bergman's screenplay combines Ibsen's critical intelligence, Chekhov's quirky, comic humanity, Strindberg's disturbing dream-reality, and plot twists worthy of Dickens in a stunning work that feels like a masterpiece of modern drama. Who more than a theatre artist feels life's continual shift from laughter to tears but is still able to see the world through the innocence of a child?

8. **A MIDWINTER'S TALE** (1996)

Kenneth Branagh directed this unpretentiously delightful romantic romp about "the actor's eternal despair." Joe Harper, a frustrated out-of-work actor, attempts to salvage his stalled career by mounting his own starring vehicle – a Christmas time production of *Hamlet* in a small-town church hall. Unfortunately, all the respected theatrical talent is involved in productions of *A Christmas Carol*, and Joe finds only six available performers who must assume all the roles. Gertrude is a drag queen; Ophelia is a nearsighted neophyte; Horatio is a drunk; and the set designer Fadge is a mystic who predicts the potential success of the production by how stiff her nipples become. This group of inept misfits and hammy has-beens seem doomed, but in the end, the magic of theatre weaves its spell -- uniting spirits, igniting love, reconciling families, and providing a community with a moment of hope. Perhaps you've seen this same astonishing scenario played out at the Boston Center for the Arts?

9. **WAITING FOR GUFFMAN/MOON OVER BROADWAY** (both 1997) (tie)

What fools we be in these two devastatingly funny examinations of theatre folk at their very worst. GUFFMAN improvisationally parodies the eternal delusions of the community theatre world – and thanks to Catharine O'Hara, features the funniest drunk scene ever captured on film. Tyrannized by the swishy, temperamental Corky St. Claire, a director with dubious wife and New York credits, a dentist, a waitress, and their colleagues labor away under the belief that this show will be the Big Break to take them to Broadway. BROADWAY turns an unforgiving documentarian's eye on the Big Bad Business of producing just such a Broadway hit -- in this case the unfortunately unfunny *Moon Over Buffalo*, which starred Carol Burnett and Philip Bosco. From the kissy, self-important

proclamations at first rehearsal, through the shockingly insulting direction endured at daily rehearsal, to the panicked playwright begging for new jokes in the preview lobby, to the final strategic marketing meetings attempting to counter disastrous reviews, could we possibly be such...well, *ass-faces*? (BROADWAY also has lots of Boston tryout footage which makes it especially dishy and watchable.) These comedies will not only make you laugh with recognition, but are sure to keep you humble.

10. **PRESENTING LILY MARS** (1943)

Sure, those adorably ridiculous Mickey-Judy “Let’s put on a show in the barn!” series of MGM musicals inspired our youthful fantasies, but have you tried sitting through one lately? (To experience their giddy, infectious showmanship you’re better off watching the abbreviated compilation in *That’s Entertainment!*) That same innocent optimism is captured more effectively in this sensitive, little known adaptation of a Booth Tarkington novel. Garland, at her youthful loveliest, plays Lily, a small-town girl with big city dreams. Coached by her high school teacher in Delsatre gestures, she hilariously performs Lady Macbeth on the living room stairs. After running away from her doting, eccentric family, Lily sneaks into a Broadway theatre where, hungry and lost, she falls asleep between the seats. Awakened by the cleaning woman (herself a one-time actress now reduced to mopping the stage), the disillusioned, dewy-eyed Garland asks her, “What should I do -- go back home?” “Lily,” the old-timer responds, “I think you are home.” And sure enough, by the final reel she is twirling in black tulle to “Broadway Rhythm” as the fantasy of movies and myth invite us to believe in power of applause once more.

What are your favorite films about the theatre? Visit the StageSource Members Message board and give us your reviews and recommendations!

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