

Theodora Goes Wild

In “Theodora Goes Wild” (1936), Theodora Lynn (Irene Dunne) is a modest, well-bred lady from the small, uptight Connecticut town of Lynnfield who has, unbeknownst to her staid community, written a racy romance novel under an assumed name. During a visit to her New York publisher, she meets her book’s jacket illustrator Michael Grant (Melvyn Douglas). He’s a well-off smoothie who eventually shows up in her town and, in exchange for his silence about her controversial novel, gains employment as a gardener for Theodora and her crusty maiden aunts. He and Theodora fall (see photo at left) for each other, but Grant skips back to the city—



because he’s still married—though estranged from his wife. Theodora, though crushed, rushes to New York and promptly “goes wild,” camping in his apartment and making a play for her guy as a swinging vamp.

Based on a story by Mary McCarthy, “Theodora” is a screwball comedy with heart, a film too rarely seen today. It’s director, Richard Boleslawski, was a Polish stage director who came to Hollywood drawn by the lure of talkies. He turned out several stylish films in the 1930’s, including this one, but died less than a year after finishing it at the age of 48. The film boasts a bright and well-observed screenplay by Sidney Buchman, one of Hollywood’s brightest screenwriters of the Thirties and Forties and one who liked building dramatic opposition between small-town and big-city life. Buchman’s most noted screenplay was for Frank Capra’s “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” (1939). His best work was, as one critic noted: “subtle, eccentric, full-bodied—and enduring.”

There are some nice character performances in the film: the always reliable Thomas Mitchell as the feisty editor of the Lynnfield Bugle, Robert Grieg as Theodora’s high-living New York uncle, and Spring Byington—best remembered from her 1950’s TV sitcom “December Bride”—as Lynnfield’s town prude. Co-star Melvyn Douglas at this time was perfecting his persona as a debonair man about town with a light touch, a style that matured for him just a few years later in *Ninotchka* (1939) where he co-starred with Greta Garbo.

The film is, however, really Irene Dunne’s as Theodora. In this role, the actress breaks out as a full-blooded comedienne for the first time after several years of working mostly in romances and weepers. For Dunne, “Theodora Goes Wild” came on the heels of starring roles in the first version of “Magnificent Obsession” (1935) and the singing role of Magnolia in her previous picture, “Showboat” (1936). “Theodora Goes Wild” confirmed her standout quality of

refined versatility. As writer Richard Corliss wrote of her in this film: “Miss Dunne holds ‘Theodora’ together with a combination of star quality and a rich anthology of behavioral nuances.” If Buchman’s script makes the film lively, Corliss writes, “Miss Dunne’s performance makes it live.”

The role was a crucial one for Irene Dunne and she went on to make other great movies such as “The Awful Truth” (1937), “Love Affair” (1939), and “My Favorite Wife” (1940); in 1952 she retired from the screen at the age of 48.

Her film character sums up Miss Dunne’s very nature when she insists “A Lynn may go wild, but never silly.” Precisely.

(The film runs 94 minutes.)