

Frank Gagliano

April 5 2020

Like most today, I look for plague diversions. I discovered one that I recommend: The Ernst Lubitsch film, “Cluny Brown.” I discovered it last week while surfing the Verizon menu (the new, to me, “Cinèmoi” channel). Two of my favorite Lubitsch films of all time are “To Be Or Not To Be” and “The Little Shop Around The Corner.” Somewhere along my cinematic journey I must have seen Lubitsch’s 1946 “Cluny Brown,” because the image of one of the stars, Jennifer Jones — (yes, *THAT* Jennifer Jones, of the “Song Of Bernadette” Jennifer Jones) — under a sink, fixing the plumbing, always stayed with me. I couldn’t remember anything else about the film — just that scene under the sink, AND the (quirky?) tone of the film; they called that tone — “The Lubitsch Touch.” Cinema aficionados have been trying to define that “touch” ever since.

“Cluny Brown” takes place in 1938, pre Second World War England, and turns out to be a romantic comedy satire of British smugness in the upper classes, the middle classes and below-the-stairs, in-service, classes. Among other things. Cluny is a free spirit who “doesn’t know her place” and finally finds it. It involves another outsider to British snobbery who helps her find her true place — and romance; an elegant Czech refugee, played by Charles Boyer. (<https://trailersfromhell.com/cluny-brown/>)

Some of the plotting is clunky (it was Lubitsch’s last film, before he suddenly died) — but a lot of it lands: Funny, charming; with surprising comic chops from Boyer and Jones. Boyer, especially, often looks at the British world he so admired, and now, as part of it, observes, and confronts it all, amused.

But “Cluny Brown” is not in league with Lubitsch’s, “To Be...” and “Little Shop. . .” — or other Lubitsch notables; “Ninotchka,” — or “Heaven Can Wait” (the 1943 Lubitsch version) — or, what some consider Lubitsch’s masterpiece, “Trouble In Paradise.” But what Cluny Brown does have, that the other’s also have, is, finally, an ensemble of disparate, terrific, actors who cohere into one Lubitsch style and voice.

And the question I have for all the cinema mavens out in facebook land is, how did Lubitsch do it? Anyone know, or hazard a guess? (I would ask the same question about a Wes Anderson, or a David Lynch ensemble). How

might Lubitsch have directed actors to achieve “the Lubitsch touch?” Film maker Peter Bagdonovich says that Lubitsch always used to act out every thing he wanted done

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwIFozne3OQ>). Think that's it?

For my next diversion, I will try to get my hands on a copy of Lubitsch’s, “Heaven Can Wait.” (Lubitsch in color) Starring Don Ameche and the outrageously gorgeous Gene Turney — and a whole slew of outstanding character actors of the period who, as I recall, succumb to “The Lubitsch Touch” — whatever that is — and inhabit to the teeth, the Lubitsch world. FG (www.gaglianoriff.net)

(Photos below: 1) Boyer and Jones — love at first sight under the sink — actor Reginald Gardner, in between the two, can’t believe what he’s seeing
2) Jennifer Jones, attacking the plumbing.

