

To Be or Not to Be (1942 film)

Peter Anderson (written by Adrian Chapman)

“**To Be or Not To Be, That is the Question**” are probably the best-known lines in English literature, Hamlet's greatest soliloquy /sə'lɪləkwɪ/ is the source of more than a dozen everyday expressions. However, “To be or not to be” – the film this evening is a remastered version of a 1942 American political satire classic comedy directed by Ernst Lubitsch, about a troupe of actors in Nazi-occupied Warsaw who use their abilities at disguise and acting to fool the occupying troops.

Lubitsch was a German American actor, screenwriter, producer and film director. His urbane comedies of manners gave him the reputation of being Hollywood's most elegant and sophisticated director; as his prestige grew, his films were promoted as having "the Lubitsch touch." In 1947 he received an Honorary Academy Award for his distinguished contributions to the art of the motion picture, and he was nominated three times for Best Director. The screenplay was adapted by Edwin Justus Mayer from the story by Melchior Lengyel.

The film stars Carole Lombard, Jack Benny, and Robert Stack.

Carole Lombard (who was married to Clark Gable) was an American actress. She is particularly noted for her roles in the **screwball comedies** (read about screwball comedy at the end of the presentation) of the 1930s. She was the highest-paid star in Hollywood in the late 1930s. She appeared in "Twentieth Century" (1934), "Bolero" (1934) and "My Man Godfrey" (1936) for which she received an Oscar nomination. To Be or Not to Be, marked the final screen appearance of comedienne Carole Lombard. The film was released two months after the actress was killed in an airplane crash, at the age of 33, while returning from a World War II War Bond tour. Carole Lombard's acting is both charming and adorable and her dialogue delivery and comic timing is amazing. The role of Maria Tura is at once street smart, sexy and totally up to taking on the Nazi's in the script.

Jack Benny was an American comedian, **vaudevillian** (read something about vaudeville at the end of the presentation), radio, television, and film actor, and notable violinist. Jack Benny (1894-1974) was one of the funniest comedians who conquered vaudeville, radio, film, and TV. His film career was the least of his considerable achievements with only a handful of memorable films, the best of which were this film and "The Horn Blows at Midnight" (1945). Jack Benny, shines in the role of her husband Joseph Tura your typical egocentric actor who is known for putting the "ham" in Hamlet once and for all !!!

The supporting cast is first rate with Robert Stack shining in one of his earliest roles as Lieut. Stanislav Sobinski, Maria's lover who always exits the front row of the theatre as Joseph Tura the hammiest actor in all of Warsaw launches into his "To be or not to be" speech.

In Warsaw at the beginning of WWII, Maria Tura (Lombard) and husband Joseph (Jack Benny) perform anti-Nazi plays with their theatre troupe until they are forced to switch to Shakespeare's Hamlet. Lt. Stanislav Sobinski (Robert Stack) falls for Maria and meets up with her during Joseph's famous "To Be or Not to Be" speech as Hamlet. When the film opens, the biggest problem that Jack Benny has on his mind is who is this secret admirer who keeps sending flowers to his wife Carole Lombard every night while they are on stage. But the movie is a comedy, centered on a theatre troupe that is about to perform an anti-Nazi play when the Nazis actually arrive. The actors then find that their skill at impersonating Nazis will be of great use to the Polish underground resistance. Shakespeare is at the heart of the story. The troupe's lead actor (Jack Benny) fancies himself a great Hamlet, which is where the movie gets its title. There's a subplot involving the

troupe's Jewish actor, Greenberg and his lifelong dream of playing Shylock; and then there's a sort of play-within-the-film, a grand and daring impersonation that nudges at a moment in "Hamlet."

To Be or Not to Be opened to a controversial release in 1942, when the U.S. was still very much involved in WWII. Black comedy wasn't in fashion then, and the subject hit too close to home for many audiences. Moviegoers were also upset by the recent, tragic death of its star, Carole Lombard. It was remade in 1983 starring Mel Brooks and real-life wife Anne Bancroft.

Today the film is regarded as a masterpiece of satire and one of the more controversial films of its day, the film is a brilliant example of how comedy can be as effective in raising social and political awareness as a serious propaganda film, while still providing hilarious entertainment. The film is both very funny and quite dramatic, touching and farcical, even scary at times. Lubitsch manages to brilliantly balance political satire, romance, slapstick, and urgent wartime suspense in a comic high-wire act that has never been equalled. Ernst Lubitsch's ambiguous anti-Nazi comedy has its roots in reality. Many a Jewish actor in exile from Germany was forced to earn his livelihood by playing Nazis. This movie proves that comedy can be sublime. At a time when the gods are crazy, this movie swims with the current, seeking to outdo their craziness. That's why it's also very touching. The outcome of the craziness was unknown at the time. That also makes this film daring. Whether intentionally or not, the film implies that Hitler himself was a Hitler-impersonator, that Hitler is a kind of unattainable ideal, a Platonic idea of pure evil.

To Be or Not to Be has a 97% approval rating on the review aggregator website **Rotten Tomatoes** (www.rottentomatoes.com). Finally, as the great bard himself stated, "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer; The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or simply to sit back relax and enjoy the ride!

Screwball Comedy

The **screwball comedy** is a principally American genre of comedy film that became popular during the Great Depression, originating in the early 1930s and thriving until the early 1940s. Many secondary characteristics of this genre are similar to the film noir, but it distinguishes itself for being characterized by a female that dominates the relationship with the male central character, whose masculinity is challenged. The two engage in a humorous battle of the sexes, which was a new theme for Hollywood and audiences at the time. Other elements are fast-pace repartee, farcical situations, escapist themes, and plot lines involving courtship and marriage. Screwball comedies often depict social classes in conflict, as in *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *My Man Godfrey* (1936). Some comic plays are also described as screwball comedies. Screwball comedy has proven to be one of the most popular and enduring film genres. It first gained prominence in 1934 with *It Happened One Night*, which is often cited as being the first true screwball. Although many film scholars would agree that its classic period had effectively ended by 1942, elements of the genre have persisted, or have been paid homage, in contemporary film. During the Great Depression, there was a general demand for films with a strong social class critique and hopeful, escapist-oriented themes. The screwball format arose largely as a result of the major film studios' desire to avoid censorship by the increasingly enforced Hays Code. As such, they were routinely able to incorporate adult, risqué elements, such as pre-marital sex and adultery, into their plots. The screwball comedy has close links with the theatrical genre of farce, and some comic plays are also described as screwball comedies. Many elements of the screwball genre can be traced back to such stage plays as Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Other genres with which screwball comedy is associated include slapstick, situation comedy, romantic comedy and bedroom farce.

Vaudeville

Vaudeville (/vɔːdəvɪl/ BrE ; /vɔːdvɪl/ AmE) was a theatrical genre of variety entertainment popular in the United States and Canada from the early 1880s until the early 1930s. Each performance was made up of a series of separate, unrelated acts grouped together on a common bill. Types of acts included popular and classical musicians, singers, dancers, comedians, trained animals, magicians, female and male impersonators, acrobats, illustrated songs, jugglers, one-act plays or scenes from plays, athletes, lecturing celebrities, minstrels, and movies. A vaudeville performer is often referred to as a **vaudevillian**. Vaudeville developed from many sources, including the concert saloon, minstrelsy, freak shows, dime museums, and literary burlesque. Called "the heart of American show business," vaudeville was one of the most popular types of entertainment in North America for several decades. **Etymology:** the origin of this term is obscure, but is often explained as being derived from the expression *voix de ville* which means "voice of the city" or "songs of the town." A second speculation is that it comes from the fifteenth-century songs on satire by Olivier Basselin, "Vaux de Vire."^[2] Another plausible etymology finds origins in the French *Vau de Vire*, a valley in Normandy noted for its style of satirical songs with topical themes.^[3] The term *vaudeville*, referring specifically to North American variety entertainment, came into common usage after 1871, with the formation of Sargent's Great Vaudeville Company of Louisville, Kentucky. It had little, if anything, to do with the Comédie en vaudeville of the French theatre. Leavitt's and Sargent's shows differed little from the coarser material presented in earlier itinerant entertainments, although their use of the term to provide a veneer of respectability points to an early effort to cater variety amusements to the growing middle class. Though *vaudeville* had been used in the US as early as the 1830s, most variety theatres adopted the term in the late 1880s and early 1890s for two reasons. First, seeking middle class patrons, they wished to distance themselves from the earlier rowdy, working-class variety halls. Second, the French or pseudo-French term lent an air of sophistication, and perhaps made the institution seem more consistent with the Progressive Era's interests in education and self-betterment. Some, however, preferred the earlier term "variety" to what manager Tony Pastor called its "sissy and Frenchified" successor. Thus, vaudeville was marketed as "variety" well into the 20th century.