

**MoMA PRESENTS RETROSPECTIVE OF THE "BLONDE BOMBSHELL" JOAN BLONDELL**

**Films in Series Spanning 50-Year Career Include *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *Blondie Johnson*, Concluding with John Cassavetes's *Opening Night***

***Joan Blondell: The Bombshell from Ninety-first Street*  
December 19, 2007–January 1, 2008  
The Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters**

**NEW YORK, December 3, 2007**—The Museum of Modern Art presents an exhibition of 13 films starring Joan Blondell, one of Hollywood's most versatile actresses, whose long and varied career spanned the 1930s through the 1970s. ***Joan Blondell: The Bombshell from Ninety-first Street*** captures the metamorphosis of the Manhattan-born actress from a young "blonde bombshell" to more mature roles while illustrating her accomplished—yet largely underappreciated—talents, such as perfect timing and versatility in the roles she played. Despite never landing the starring roles like contemporaries Barbara Stanwyck and Joan Crawford, Blondell (American, 1906–79) was illustrative of the strengths of the Hollywood studio system, carving out a memorable career over the course of half a century.

The exhibition is presented December 19, 2007–January 1, 2008, in The Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters, and includes Blondell's films with directors Elia Kazan, Edmund Goulding, and John Cassavetes.

Screenings of six films will be introduced by Matthew Kennedy, author of the new biography *Joan Blondell: A Life Between Takes* (University Press of Mississippi, 2007): *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *Blonde Crazy* (December 19), *Blondie Johnson* and *Nightmare Alley* (December 20), and *Footlight Parade* and *The Blue Veil* (December 21). Several of the prints shown in this exhibition are new and represent rare films that have long been unavailable on video or DVD. The exhibition is organized by Charles Silver, Associate Curator, Department of Film.

Born on West Ninety-first Street in New York to vaudevillian parents, Blondell went to Warner Bros. in 1930 with James Cagney after they appeared in the same Broadway production (*Penny Arcade*, which was adapted for the screen that same year as *Sinner's Holiday*, also featuring Blondell and Cagney). She went on to make 45 films for the studio over the next decade. She was a consistently solid performer, yet, as Kennedy notes, "she was rarely showcased and never won a major award." Her Warners period includes seven films with Cagney between 1930 and 1934, among them Roy Del Ruth's hard-boiled *Blonde Crazy* (1931) and Lloyd Bacon's musical *Footlight Parade* (1933), and she earned a reputation as a tough-talking, wise-cracking, no-nonsense actress for her title role as the gangster *Blondie Johnson* (1933). After leaving Warners, she returned to stage work and continued a solid output of films—approximately one a year over the next 33 years—most of which were memorable character roles, such as in Kazan's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945) and Goulding's *Nightmare Alley* (1947). Blondell had a

remarkable "third act" to her career in a handful of films in the late 1970s, including Cassavetes's *Opening Night* (1977), in which she plays a playwright whose vulnerability and barely concealed anger are apparent when her play is loosely interpreted by a mentally unstable actress, played by Gena Rowlands.

*Joan Blondell: The Bombshell from Ninety-first Street* is made possible by Matthew Kennedy, Ned Price, Linda Evans-Smith, and Marilee Womack, Warner Bros.; Schawn Belston, Twentieth Century Fox; Grover Crisp, Sony Pictures; and Todd Wiener, UCLA Film and Television Archive.

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**Public Information:**

**The Museum of Modern Art**, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019

**Hours:** Wednesday through Monday: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Friday: 10:30 a.m.-8:00 p.m.  
Closed Tuesday

**Museum Adm:** \$20 adults; \$16 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$12 full-time students with current I.D. Free, members and children 16 and under. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs)  
Target Free Friday Nights 4:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m.

**Film Adm:** \$10 adults; \$8 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D. \$6 full-time students with current I.D. (For admittance to film programs only)

**Subway:** E or V train to Fifth Avenue/53rd Street

**Bus:** On Fifth Avenue, take the M1, M2, M3, M4, or M5 to 53rd Street. On Sixth Avenue, take the M5, M6, or M7 to 53rd Street. Or take the M57 and M50 crosstown buses on 57th and 50th Streets.

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***JOAN BLONDELL: THE BOMBSHELL FROM NINETY-FIRST STREET***

**SCREENING SCHEDULE**

**Wednesday, December 19**

**6:00** *Blonde Crazy*. 1931. USA. Directed by Roy Del Ruth. With James Cagney, Louis Calhern, Ray Milland.  
An early Warner Bros. romp for Cagney and Blondell, only months after Cagney's epochal star turn in *Public Enemy*. This was the fourth of seven films in which they appeared together in less than four years. Blondell attributed the team's box office appeal to the fact that they were showing "something fast and to the point." 79 min.  
**(Introduced by Matthew Kennedy)**

**8:00** *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. 1945. USA. Directed by Elia Kazan. With Dorothy McGuire, James Dunn, Lloyd Nolan, Peggy Ann Garner.

Kazan's debut film provided Blondell with one of her best mature roles as Aunt Sissy (although she was only 38 years old). This sensitive adaptation of Betty Smith's bestselling novel about adolescence and tenement life won Oscars for Dunn and Garner. Blondell noted that Kazan "let me have a moment or two of tenderness, of maturity, that nobody had ever given me before." 128 min.

**(Introduced by Matthew Kennedy)**

#### Thursday, December 20

**6:00** *Blondie Johnson*. 1933. USA. Directed by Ray Enright. With Chester Morris, Allen Jenkins.

In this gem from the height of Warner Bros.' gangster cycle, a poverty-toughened Blondell tries her hand at running a gang, only to get mushy at the end. Although the film was a typical Depression-era quickie, it afforded Blondell the opportunity to dominate the screen as never before. 69 min.

**(Introduced by Matthew Kennedy)**

**8:00** *Nightmare Alley*. 1947. USA. Directed by Edmund Goulding. Screenplay by Jules Furthman, based on the novel by William Lindsay Gresham. Cinematography by Lee Garmes. With Tyrone Power, Coleen Gray, Helen Walker, Mike Mazurki. Blondell is superb as Zeena, a carnival psychic married to a hopeless drunk but in love with a con man played by Power. She eventually winds up with Bruno, portrayed by wrestler-turned-actor Mazurki, the Arnold Schwarzenegger of his day. Highly atmospheric, the film is a throwback to the work Furthman and Garmes did on Josef von Sternberg's masterpieces *Morocco* (1930) and *Shanghai Express* (1932) (Marlene Dietrich, star of both films, was considered for the psychiatrist role in *Nightmare Alley*)—and a surprising anticipation of the worlds of John Waters and David Lynch. 111 min.

**(Introduced by Matthew Kennedy)**

#### Friday, December 21

**6:00** *Footlight Parade*. 1933. USA. Directed by Lloyd Bacon. Cinematography by George Barnes. Musical numbers created and directed by Busby Berkeley. With James Cagney, Ruby Keeler, Dick Powell, Frank McHugh.

In some ways the ultimate Warner Bros. musical, as Matthew Kennedy says, "*Footlight Parade* had it all." Blondell is endearingly comical, and Cagney dances spectacularly away from and beyond his *Public Enemy* persona. Berkeley's numbers were described as "the most extravagant, eye-paralyzing chorus scenes...that ever graced a movie screen." Blondell found the musical to be hard work, accentuated perhaps by the fact she was married to cinematographer Barnes—and was shortly to marry Dick Powell. 104 min.

**(Introduced by Matthew Kennedy)**

**8:30** *The Blue Veil*. 1951. USA. Directed by Curtis Bernhardt. Musical numbers choreographed by Busby Berkeley. With Jane Wyman, Charles Laughton, Richard Carlson, Agnes Moorehead, Natalie Wood.

Blondell made only one film in the four years preceding *The Blue Veil*, and she was not to make another until 1956. Much of her work during this period was devoted to television and off-the-beaten-path regional theaters. Her spunky performance in *The Blue Veil* brought rave reviews, but she saw her future as portraying "fallen-faced dames." Still, she brought much-needed energy to this weepy film. 113 min.

**(Introduced by Matthew Kennedy)**

#### Saturday, December 22

**2:00** *Blonde Crazy*. See Wednesday, December 19, 6:00.

4:00 **Blondie Johnson.** See Thursday, December 20, 6:00.

6:00 **Footlight Parade.** See Friday, December 21, 6:00.

### Sunday, December 23

2:00 **Nightmare Alley.** See Thursday, December 20, 8:00.

4:30 **The Blue Veil.** See Friday, December 21, 8:30.

### Monday, December 24

5:30 **A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.** See Wednesday, December 19, 8:00.

8:00 **Night Nurse.** 1931. USA. Directed by William A. Wellman. With Barbara Stanwyck, Ben Lyon, Clark Gable.  
An example of the kind of supporting role Blondell played before the break of *Blondie Johnson*, this was the actress's tenth film in the first year of her film career. She is a perfect gum-chewing sidekick to her real-life friend Stanwyck, and both were apparently enamored of the young Gable just before he attained stardom. 72 min.

### Wednesday, December 26

6:00 **Three on a Match.** 1932. USA. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy. With Ann Dvorak, Bette Davis, Warren William, Humphrey Bogart.  
The kind of fast-paced, pre-Production Code melodrama that only Warner Bros. had the cast and the chutzpah to provide, *Three on a Match* is a surprisingly enlightened and uncompromising feminist tale of "gutter-inspired realism," in which Blondell plays a reform-school graduate. 63 min.

7:30 **The King and the Chorus Girl.** 1937. USA. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy. Screenplay by Norman Krasna, Groucho Marx. With Fernand Gravet, Edward Everett Horton, Jane Wyman.  
This is Groucho's take on the affair between King Edward VIII and American Wallis Simpson. Blondell claimed that her stint as a Lubitschean heroine was her favorite role, enabling her to subtly elevate her status, and that of chorus girls everywhere, above vulgarity to new heights of "intelligence and character." 94 min.

### Thursday, December 27

6:00 **There's Always a Woman.** 1938. USA. Directed by Alexander Hall. With Melvyn Douglas, Mary Astor, Frances Drake.  
Originally intended as the first in a series of *Thin Man*-like comedy/mysteries, this Columbia release allowed a reinvigorated and pregnant Blondell to escape some of the drab sameness of her Warner Bros. routine. This was the period when fans voted her "Public Gold Digger #1." 80 min.

8:00 **Three Girls About Town.** 1941. USA. Directed by Leigh Jason. With Binnie Barnes, Janet Blair, Robert Benchley.  
This screwball comedy—Benchley's hotel manager, Wilburforce Puddle, hosts a morticians' convention—never quite rises to the level of Preston Sturges, although it does anticipate Alfred Hitchcock's *The Trouble with Harry*. However, "No one did been-around-the-block-but-not-jaded better than Joan" (Matthew Kennedy), and one regrets that no studio (or Sturges himself) latched on to her for comedy in the succeeding decade. 73 min.

### Friday, December 28

- 6:00** *Lizzie*. 1957. USA. Directed by Hugo Haas. With Haas, Eleanor Parker, Richard Boone, Johnny Mathis.  
Lizzie deals with the multiple-personality fad of the Cold War era. Blondell considered her performance as Parker's drunken aunt her best in over a decade, but 1957 was the last year in which she made more than two films, now having to content her strong work ethic mostly with television and touring stage companies. 81 min.
- 8:00** *There's Always a Woman*. See Thursday, December 27, 6:00.

### Saturday, December 29

- 2:00** *Night Nurse*. See Monday, December 24, 8:00.
- 4:00** *Three on a Match*. See Wednesday, December 26, 6:00.
- 5:30** *Opening Night*. 1977. USA. Written and directed by John Cassavetes. With Cassavetes, Gena Rowlands, Ben Gazzara, Paul Stewart.  
Now past 70 years of age and in poor health, Blondell initially struggled with Cassevetes's improvisatory filmmaking style (about as far from Warner Bros. as a girl could get), but in the end her superb performance as an angry playwright won excellent reviews and the admiration of her costars. 144 min.

### Sunday, December 30

- 2:00** *Lizzie*. See Friday, December 28, 6:00.
- 4:00** *Three Girls About Town*. See Thursday, December 27, 8:00.

### Monday, December 31

- 5:30** *The King and the Chorus Girl*. See Wednesday, December 26, 7:30.
- 7:30** *Opening Night*. See Saturday, December 29, 5:30.

### Tuesday, January 1

- 2:00** *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. See Wednesday, December 19, 8:00.