

THE BADLANDS COLLECTIVE
presents

PAINFULLY FUNNY

THE COMPLETE DIRECTORIAL WORKS OF ELAINE MAY

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Elaine May is a legend in the world of comedy – acknowledged as an influence by comics such as Steve Martin, Lily Tomlin, Woody Allen and countless others – but her work as a movie director has become curiously and unjustly obscure. While other filmmakers who emerged in the New Hollywood of the 1970s have become venerated icons, Elaine May’s films have fallen out of the conversation, and in some cases have fallen out of circulation entirely. With this retrospective, we’re pleased to bring her back into the limelight and hail her as one of the most brilliant artists from that exalted generation of American directors.

May directed four theatrical feature films, three of which resulted in fierce behind-the-scenes battles before they finally reached cinemas, with May fighting to protect the integrity of her vision. Her background in improvisation – developed with the Compass Players, before she and Mike Nichols revolutionised American comedy in the late 1950s – led to her taking an exacting, exploratory approach to filmmaking. She would shoot dozens of takes for a single scene, exhausting every possible variation and often filming with multiple cameras in a constant attempt to capture spontaneous moments of inspiration, humour and truth. When editing she relished pauses, dead spots and extended moments of awkwardness, adding a tension underneath the films’ comic surface. May’s filmmaking style inevitably led to her amassing mountains of footage, missing deadlines, going over budget and falling out of favour with the studios, but it also produced films with an energy, rhythm and edge that distinguishes them from their contemporaries and elevates them beyond genre conventions.



The key to all of Elaine May's work can be found in a realisation she had when she was part of the Compass Players: that every scene between two people is a negotiation, a fight or a seduction. This was the basis for her work with Nichols as they developed their improvised two-handers, and it remained central to her films, all of which explore love and betrayal within a relationship. The husband plotting to murder his wife in *A New Leaf*, the newlywed ditching his bride for a more glamorous model on their honeymoon in *The Heartbreak Kid*, and longtime friends in *Mikey and Nicky* and *Ishtar* finding their loyalty to each other tested under extreme circumstances. While May and her daughter Jeannie Berlin portrayed memorable female characters in *A New Leaf* and *The Heartbreak Kid*, May's films are primarily stories about solipsistic men, with the nature of the male ego being a perennial fascination. Her men are driven by an unshakeable sense of entitlement and are completely lacking in self-awareness, and her films expose the insecurity, arrogance, deceitfulness and selfishness of her characters. Few filmmakers have consistently skewered the male ego so incisively, and in such an agonising yet hilarious manner.

Behind the scenes, Elaine May was instrumental as a writer and uncredited script doctor on such box office successes as *Heaven Can Wait*, *Reds* and *Tootsie*. As a woman in a man's world, however, May has ultimately found her own profile sidelined and dismissed by an industry that has frequently celebrated and indulged the reckless behaviour of maverick male auteurs. When *Ishtar* bombed in 1987, May was left to stand alone with the film's failure hanging around her neck, while producer and star Warren Beatty quickly moved onto *Dick Tracy* and *Bugsy*. *Ishtar* proved to be the death knell for May's directorial career; it is rumoured that she had a hand in writing and/or directing the 1990 comedy *In the Spirit*, although – as has often been the case in her career – she has not taken any credit for it. She has continued to write, collaborating with Nichols for *The Birdcage* and the Oscar-nominated *Primary Colors*, and she has acted for Woody Allen in *Small Time Crooks* and *Crisis in Six Scenes*, but the fact that we haven't had any additional Elaine May films in the past thirty years feels like a grievous loss for cinema.

So here we are, with the complete directorial works of Elaine May having been largely neglected and forgotten. Only *A New Leaf* has received a Blu-ray release in the UK (*The Heartbreak Kid*, entangled in rights issues, remains completely unavailable anywhere), while only a handful of viable 35mm prints remain in circulation in the world. It's also noteworthy that there hasn't been a single book written about May and her unique films. There have been some attempts made to pay tribute to Elaine May in recent years – she was honoured by the Writers Guild of America in 2016 and she received the National Medal of Arts from President Obama in 2013 – but the best way to celebrate her remarkable, uncompromising comic genius is to watch her films, and make them available once more for audiences to discover.



A NEW LEAF

Friday 21 September, 6.30pm

1971 / Paramount Pictures / 102 mins.

Written and directed by Elaine May, based on the story "The Green Heart" by Jack Ritchie
Starring Walter Matthau, Elaine May, George Rose, James Coco, Doris Roberts, William Redfield

The version of *A New Leaf* that we are watching this weekend is not *A New Leaf* as Elaine May originally envisioned it. Her adaptation of Jack Ritchie's short story *The Green Heart* originally came in at three hours and included two scenes in which Henry Graham (Walter Matthau) successfully murders secondary characters, which alarmed Paramount head Robert Evans so much he ordered another editor to chop it down to a more commercial 102 minutes. She took Paramount to court in an attempt to get her rights as the director recognised or to get her name taken off the film. "It's such a nice movie," the judge told her before ruling in the studio's favour. "Why do you want to sue?"

That judge may have been glibly dismissive of May's directorial intentions, but in a sense he was right: *A New Leaf* is a nice movie, surprisingly so given the cynicism at its heart. This is a film about a man with no conscience and no values other than his own wealth who is plotting the murder of a rich botanist (played by May) in order to reclaim his place among the elite, and yet by the end of the film we are utterly charmed by it. "The nice thing is to make an audience laugh and laugh and laugh, and shudder later," May told *The New Yorker* in 1961, and her work always pulls between these endearing and repellent aspects, with the casting in this film going a long way to sweeten the bitter pill. There is something inherently endearing and funny about Matthau - *The Odd Couple*'s slobbish Oscar - putting on such debonair affectations, while May's guileless and sincere performance as the hopelessly klutzy Henrietta, partially based on her own idiosyncracies, is irresistible. Cinephile treasure hunters may continue to dream about stumbling across *A New Leaf*'s missing reels some day and restoring the film as May intended, but in the meantime the version we have is pretty close to a perfect comedy.

The rights for "A New Leaf" were licenced through Park Circus. A print proved much harder to come by. A showing at the Irish Film Institute in 2016 was screened from Blu-ray after the 16mm print they originally sourced proved to have turned "radioactive pink." We have imported a rare LPP archive print held by Paramount Archive in the USA.



THE HEARTBREAK KID

Saturday 22 September, 6.30pm

1972 / 20th Century Fox / 106 mins.

Directed by Elaine May / Written by Neil Simon, based on the story "A Change of Plan" by Bruce Jay Friedman
Starring Charles Grodin, Cybill Shepherd, Jeannie Berlin, Eddie Albert, Doris Roberts

Written by Neil Simon, based on a short story by Bruce Jay Friedman, *The Heartbreak Kid* is the story of a man (Charles Grodin) who falls in love with a woman (Cybill Shepherd) he meets while honeymooning in Florida with his new bride (May's daughter, Jeannie Berlin). The set-up is pure screwball, but May executes it as an excoriating and excruciating study of vanity. Simon's screenplay traverses many of his signature themes and, though it was shot word-for-word, May's touch is particularly pronounced in the way she accentuates Simon's tragicomic outlook, using long takes to draw out the more discomfiting elements. (It's a bleaker, more caustic slant than the 2007 remake with Ben Stiller, which follows May's version to a point before diverging into gross-out comedy.)

The Rothian idea of a Jewish man in pursuit of the WASP princess is very much Simon's milieu, but May casts it in a different light, betraying a woman's fear of being pushed aside in such circumstances. The way May mines comic dividends from personal female anxieties is often overlooked, especially given how prominent the skewering of the male ego is in her films, but it's a potent undercurrent in *The Heartbreak Kid*. The casting of her daughter is also revealing in this respect, and is something that resonates in 1990's *In the Spirit*, a film starring the pair and written by Berlin.

The thematic overlaps with *The Graduate*, directed by May's former sparring partner Mike Nichols, are notable, but critic Richard Brody argued that Howard Hawks's *Bringing Up Baby*, the urtext of the American romantic comedy, would be a more apt comparator. Firmly rooted in Thomas Jefferson's ideal of the pursuit of happiness, the romantic comedy is, like the western or the gangster picture, the quintessential American genre, and many of May's cultural reference points in *The Heartbreak Kid*, from *Portnoy's Complaint* to *The Great Gatsby*, are testament to this. Like Albert Brooks' *Modern Romance*, May treats the romantic pursuit not as a pure, noble exercise, but rather as the selfish folly of a stupid, egotistical man, resulting in a film which operates as a thorough dismantling of the traditional romantic comedy, engaging with the tropes and methodically tearing them apart.

Rights for "The Heartbreak Kid" have lapsed from 20th Century Fox and the film is currently unavailable on DVD or Blu-ray in any territory. Academy Film Archive in Los Angeles produced a new 35mm print within the past decade but it is unavailable in the UK due to circulation restrictions. We almost imported a Swedish Film Archive print with Swedish subtitles but ultimately sourced an ex-television transmission print held by the British Film Institute archive.



MIKEY AND NICKY

Sunday 23 September, 4pm

1976 / Paramount Pictures / 106 mins.

Written and directed by Elaine May

Starring John Cassavetes, Peter Falk, Carol Grace, Ned Beatty, M. Emmett Walsh

Mikey and Nicky may initially look like an outlier in Elaine May's body of work but in fact it was a long-gestating passion project for her, initially taking shape as a potential stage play in the 1950s. This is May's darkest film, and the one where her pitiless examination of masculine behaviour doesn't come with the protective buffer of comedy. Mikey (Peter Falk) and Nicky (John Cassavetes) are small-time gangsters whose lifetime of memories and resentments come to the fore during one long, panic-stricken night. Nicky knows that there's a contract out on his life and he reaches out to his only friend, but Mikey is actually the one fingering him for the mob; once again the theme of betrayal comes up in an Elaine May film, but this one cuts deeper than most because the central relationship – which is rife with moments of affection and anger, companionship and rejection – is one of the most complex and brilliantly acted in cinema.

The whole film has a sweaty, anxious energy, with an undercurrent of impending violence. It takes place over one long night of the soul but was shot in two instalments, in the summers of 1973 and 1974, to accommodate Falk's *Columbo* schedule. The budget ballooned from \$1.8million to \$4.3million as May shot around 1.4 million feet of film - famously, more footage than was shot for *Gone with the Wind*. After a two-year editing process Paramount again lost patience. They cobbled together a slapdash version of the film and dumped it in a handful of theatres at the tail end of 1976, and it was only when May completed a new cut some years later that many critics who had dismissed the film upon its original release hailed it as one of the best of the decade. It stands now as one of the great, tragic films about friendship, about men, and about what it means to love someone and yet to turn your back on them in their hour of need.

Rights for "Mikey and Nicky" were cleared through Westchester Films in the United States. A new 35mm print was produced within the past decade by New York's Museum of Modern Art but Elaine May was unhappy with the colour timing and it is not currently in circulation. A print was listed in BFI internal documentation, and then reported lost, and then ultimately found, and we're pleased to have sourced this print for our screening. We believe it to be a release print from the original UK release in 1984.



ISHTAR

Sunday 23 September, 6.30pm

1987 / Columbia Pictures / 107 mins.

Written and directed by Elaine May

Starring Warren Beatty, Dustin Hoffman, Isabelle Adjani, Charles Grodin, Jack Weston

The legend of *Ishitar's* notorious production not only preceded it, it damned it. Upon release in 1987, the now infamous stories from the set – from May's arguments with cinematographer Vittorio Storaro to the vastly inflated budget – led many to dismiss it sight unseen, with the film reduced to a punchline; shorthand for ego-inflating Hollywood excess. "Just about everyone I've ever met that makes a face when [*Ishitar*] is brought up has not seen it" co-star Dustin Hoffman said in 2003. May herself echoed the point in a Q&A with Mike Nichols in 2006: "If all of the people who hate *Ishitar* had seen it, I would be a rich woman today".

30 years later, the absurdity of the film's reputation is self-evident. May's most underrated and misunderstood work, *Ishitar* is a comedy in the Hope & Crosby mould, following two musicians, played by Hoffman and Warren Beatty, who become unwitting pawns in a diplomatic crisis after agreeing to play a concert in Morocco. While many of the stories around the film were true – May and her two stars all had final cut, for example – the way many were presented and proliferated reeked of sexist double standards (many critics focused on the way May dressed when shooting in the sweltering Moroccan desert) and sadly encapsulated the lot of the maverick female auteur in film culture.

While on the surface *Ishitar* is May's silliest film, it also marks the culmination of her morbid interest in unchecked male egotism, as her gaze shifts from the vanities and neuroses of her protagonists to those of the establishment itself, depicting a CIA that's blundering its way through the Middle East. In an essay for *Sight & Sound* magazine, Brad Stevens intriguingly attributed the film's critical drubbing over the years to its takedown of American exceptionalism. Perhaps today, after three more decades of questionable military involvement in the region, audiences will be primed for its attempt to satirise Reaganite foreign policy and American imperialism. As Dustin Hoffman proclaimed during the presentation ceremony for Warren Beatty's AFI Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008, "*Ishitar* shall rise again!"

There have been several versions of "Ishitar" available since its original release in 1987. The original theatrical version was 107 mins, which was cut for language by a few seconds from its US release to achieve a PG classification in the UK. Elaine May reworked the film for a Director's Cut in 2013 which runs two minutes shorter than the theatrical version. This is available on DCP and is the preferred distribution version of Park Circus, but through negotiation we were able to licence the rights through Park Circus and source a 35mm print of the UK theatrical cut from the BFI.

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