

Love's Final Irony

John Barrymore and Carole Lombard
in *Twentieth Century*

But there is one side of acting that has always stirred me . . . This is the superiority of the actor over reality . . . Of the few actors that I have known who had the genius, I admired most Jack Barrymore . . . he was the greatest actor of my time.

—Ben Hecht (*A Child of the Century* 431)



ASPIRING ACTRESS MILDRED PLOTKA—Carole Lombard—is crying. Theatrical impresario Oscar Jaffe—John Barrymore—has broken her down. Poor Mildred is to play Mary Jo Calhoun in Jaffe's latest production, *Hearts of Kentucky*. In this play, she is to assume the stage moniker "Lily Garland," the dreamt-up name of the star Jaffe would like Miss Plotka to become. But she can't get the cry right. Blocking and directing her movements on the stage with zig-zagging chalk, Jaffe has made sure Mildred knows where to stand. But she doesn't yet know how to project her voice and body theatrically. When her character's character is to react to her father's death, Lombard raises her hands to her throat and gazes up at the heavens with a subtlety only a film camera could register. And Howard Hawks's camera does register Lombard's



Figure 1.1. John Barrymore, Carole Lombard, and performance pedagogy: *Twentieth Century* (Columbia, 1934).

perfectly expressed manifestation of what is, in the context of Jaffe's theater, Mildred's performative failure. But, of course, in the world of *Twentieth Century* (1934), Mildred is not rehearsing for a movie. Mildred must project loudly enough to be heard in the back row. So Barrymore expresses Jaffe's exasperation with her by providing a model of the performance Mildred herself cannot at this point achieve. As Lombard raises her hands to her throat, Barrymore stretches his outward, in exaggerated counterpoint to her bound gesture and in the direction of the not-yet-present audience toward which Lombard's character will need to project on opening night. Slamming his script to the floor—in frustration, yes, but also to create an example of the kind of aural effect, heard throughout the theater, Mildred cannot yet successfully produce—Jaffe finally drives her to tears, tears more genuine than anything so far expressed in the rehearsal. And with this, Jaffe discovers, Mildred might yet become an actress. The discovery here, however, is not the tears themselves; Jaffe is uninterested in naturalism. What he wants is to bring those tears to surface, and to amplify surface loudly and beautifully enough so as to reach every row of his audience. He does not mine Mildred for tears because he wants reality; Jaffe wants to raise Mildred's tears above reality. When

she successfully transcends the prosaic, Jaffe will know he has found his actress. And she is close to that transcendence here—Jaffe knows now he has something to work with. So he offers a touching appreciation: Barrymore cradles Lombard's tear-stained face in his hands, guides his finger along Lombard's left cheek, the cheek bearing an ever so slightly perceptible scar, and lightly pinches it (figure 1.2).

This little, intimate gesture is touching, and in its own quiet way, is also above the ostensible “reality” of the scene. For all of Barrymore's broad gesticulating and dramatic shouting in the preceding moments—for all of Jaffe's demands that Mildred project herself to the back row—this little caress of the scar on Lombard's cheek could only be detectable to a closely positioned camera. This gesture reminds us that while Jaffe and Lily are creatures of theater, Barrymore and Lombard are finally creatures of cinema, who touch us and make us laugh because the camera, piercing through their characters' theatrical pretensions (without invalidating them), guides us to the authentic, human hearts beating through their self-conscious commitment to a performative life. Because tricks of



Figure 1.2. John Barrymore, Carole Lombard, and the raising of tears above reality: *Twentieth Century* (Columbia, 1934).

photography and positioning often make the scar on Lombard's left cheek less than salient in her movies, it only becomes a part of her character when our attention is directed there (and when we are prepared to notice it). In this shot, Barrymore draws our eye there, guiding his fingers across Lombard's cheek with a quiet tenderness. Yet the scar serves no role in *Twentieth Century's* narrative; unlike most facial expressions, which work to convey psychological content, Carole Lombard's scar does not serve as a sign of character interiority. (Is it even really Mildred's scar? If so, how did she get it? The film doesn't tell us. Perhaps actors can possess features that their characters do not.) That Barrymore's gestures should direct us, cinematically, to the surface of Lombard's skin, then, rather than the inner life of the character she is playing, is key to the meaning of *Twentieth Century* as experienced.

William Rothman writes, in his characteristically brilliant book *Must We Kill the Thing We Love?*, that something troubles him about this frequently missing interiority in Lombard's screwball performances. He asserts that Lombard's characters lack the rational, inner life of, for example, Katharine Hepburn's Susan Vance in *Bringing Up Baby*. For Rothman, *Bringing Up Baby's* "close-ups of Susan (that is, of Hepburn) reveal that she is not really, or simply, the screwball she appears to be. Playing a screwball is internal to Susan's perfectly rational plan to keep David close by her side until he realizes he has fallen in love with her" (67). Of Lombard's screwball roles, only in *Twentieth Century* does Rothman find a brief moment of inner rationality guiding her "screwiness," pointing to a moment late in the film in which Lombard's Lily responds to Barrymore's gesticulating with a thoughtful, self-aware close-up. If, for Rothman, close-ups in screwball are opportunities for the performer, elsewhere entertaining us in long-shot with irrational behavior, to convey a thoughtful inner life, he argues that in Lombard's other screwball classics, Gregory La Cava's *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and William A. Wellman's *Nothing Sacred* (1937), there is no sign of this guiding intelligence. "When Carole Lombard plays screwballs," Rothman writes, "these characters really are 'screwy'" (67).

In Rothman's sensitively philosophical hands, he uses this notion to give us revelatory readings of other films and screen heroines. But Lombard's special kind of "screwiness" is finally readable as psychological failure only if rationality and thoughtfulness are *all* we expect to find in close-up, and if giddy, goofy pleasure is severed from the interior meaning it might potentially project. Lombard's rationality, in other words, takes on a delightfully screwy form, one perhaps easy to mistake as entirely unhinged. An early scene with William Powell in *My Man Godfrey* suggests this idea. Lombard's Irene Bullock encounters Powell's Godfrey at a city dump. He is a "forgotten man"—one of the Great

Depression's unemployed. Irene is at the dump to claim him as a prize—as part of her high society's absurd “scavenger hunt,” she is to find a homeless man to win the trophy. This scene contrasts Lombard's character with her sister, Cornelia (Gail Patrick). Cornelia speaks to Powell's Godfrey in a condescending inflection of voice, treating him as an object when she offers him five dollars to return to the hotel lobby as proof she has found the “forgotten man” necessary to win the scavenger hunt. Lombard's Irene is there, at least initially, for the same purpose as her sister. Details of performance and costume, however, align our sympathies with Irene. For one, while Cornelia is wearing a dull black dress that absorbs the surrounding light rather than reflecting it, Lombard's shimmering silver gown (like her scar, another of the details that draw our attention to the surface of her performing body) both accepts and reflects light, and is reflective of her more generous and humane attitude toward Godfrey (even as it continues to align her with the largesse of a more privileged social class). Powell's movements toward Lombard parallel his earlier approach toward Gail Patrick, as he corners her to the edge of the frame just as he had cornered Cornelia into an ash pile. Here, the contrast between Powell's face (cloaked in low-key shadow as he confronts Irene) and Lombard's dress, sparkling and shimmering in the moonlight as she backs up to the right side of the frame, is vivid. As the scene goes on, Powell's Godfrey, at first impatient with her to leave, changes his mind, and tells her to sit down. When Powell asks her if she is a member of the “hunting party,” Lombard says, quickly: “I was, but I'm not now.” Before she can give any reason justifying this sudden abandonment of the scavenger hunt, Irene moves swiftly onto her next observation, at her amusement of Godfrey's cornering of Cornelia into the ash pile: “I couldn't help but laugh. I've wanted to do that since I was six years old.” Recollecting the moment which has just passed, she bursts out laughing; but what makes the moment funny is not Irene's recollection itself (Godfrey's pushing of Cornelia into the ash pile was actually not that funny, to us), but the physical manifestation Irene's giddiness, as incarnated by Lombard, takes: the staccato, high-pitched laugh; the convulsions of her head as she snickers, accompanied by the playful bob of her curly bangs, which float above her forehead (figure 1.3); and the covering of her face with her gloved right hand, as if to suggest that any facial expressions which Lombard/Irene might be revealing here (and which are temporarily masked by the hand) are less important than the sheer physical convulsion of a woman delighting in her own capacity to regard events in her world with good humor (figure 1.4). And despite the fact that Powell's pushing of Gail Patrick into the ash pile is not particularly funny, Lombard's delightful physical orchestration of her character's own giddiness is. The performance guides



Figures 1.3 and 1.4. Carole Lombard floats and bobs with William Powell in *My Man Godfrey* (Universal, 1936).

us to the realization that what is delightful here is not what Lombard is laughing at but how Lombard is incarnating laughter, how her physical orchestration of laughter makes her viewer giddy in turn.

Powell's steady gaze and disapproving frown convey his character's impatience with all this. Powell's performance, in fact, confirms the use of the close-up as traditional revelation of psychological rationality and thoughtfulness, and stands in contrast to Lombard's. Where Powell's Godfrey wants to slow down and have, as he puts it, "an intelligent conversation," Lombard giddily jumps into the next moment, the next observation, the next source of laughter and joy. Lombard's character does not lack for inner life or thoughtfulness. Rather, she almost has too much inside her to express; she jumps breathlessly from one observation to the next, and through the art of this performance Lombard's own ability to translate a bubbly, vibrant interiority immediately into external behavior, onto the surface of her skin, is conveyed with brilliance.

For those who would need proof of rather more traditional thought in Irene, however, that is present in the scene, too. At the very beginning of the scene, having witnessed Cornelia's abhorrent behavior toward this homeless man, she has already made the decision to abandon the scavenger hunt. Later, she will confirm in dialogue that she is no longer willing to engage in such unethical behavior:

IRENE: I've decided I don't want to play any more games with human beings as objects. It's kind of sordid when you think of it, when you think it over.

GODFREY: Yeah, well, I don't know, I haven't thought it over.

Here Irene realizes Cornelia's treatment of Godfrey is unethical. Throughout the film, as if to demonstrate the content of this revelation, Lombard will work to convey her character's authentic love for Godfrey. But this burning inner desire and thoughtfulness is, in the context of *My Man Godfrey*, less important than the way Lombard takes her character's inner revelation and translates it into the medium of screwball—a medium she helped invent. For Lombard's characters, inner life matters, but what matters more is the way interiority manifests itself into external behavior, as if performance itself were a lesson in how to chiefly inhabit a way of life physically, not in place of thinking but in light of one's thoughts.

What Lombard creates, then—and what she works to achieve alongside John Barrymore in *Twentieth Century*—is a demonstration that there is no necessary division between performer and form: where in most conventional films the close-up serves to enable the performer's conveyance of inner life, in screwball—and in Lombard's screwball films especially—the swiftly moving expressive surface of the actor (her gestures, her movements, her expressions) returns us repeatedly to the *mise-en-scène* around her, as if the very surface of her body were an inimitably creative intervention into the world as such, rather than merely an illustration of a scripted psychology. Lombard's characters have ideas, but rather than taking ownership of them (say, through a close-up, in which the furrowing of eyebrows or the lowering of lips might convey an emotional state and thus a clear possession of an emotion or idea by the character), she throws them immediately out into the social world, through the medium of her body, to see if they stick or to witness what delightful and productive trouble they might cause. Joe McElhaney has noted that, in Classical Hollywood cinema, actors were often the “driving force” of films (“Howard Hawks: American Gesture” 32), and this is certainly true of Lombard in her screwiest moments. As one Lombard biographer writes, “If a movie is an orchestration of component parts, then Carole Lombard is the glamorous conductor of the screwball concerto . . . She defined the screwball comedy's style and progression, and its character mirrored her own” (Swindell 304). In reading her performances for character, however, we fall into a potential trap; rather than guiding us inward toward the psychological traits it is in her (or her character's) unique possession to grasp, Lombard throws us giddily back onto the surface of her films, and of herself, insisting that her goofy and charmingly screwy gestures, movements, and expressions be experienced as part of the film's dynamic force, and of its force on us.

This idea returns us to Lombard's scar, and Barrymore's gentle caressing pinch of it: Barrymore's gesture guides us to the “surprise

enchantment” of the scar itself, and the star herself, who, when we open ourselves to her giddy movements across the surface of the screen, directs us to what it means to fully live like a screwball in light of one’s thoughts. This is not meant to devalue the thoughtful role dialogue and interiority elsewhere play in the genre, and the role thoughtfulness in screwball has played in Rothman’s (and Stanley Cavell’s) peerless interpretations of screwball form as philosophically significant. It is meant simply to remind us of the equally important point that those thoughts won’t matter much unless we first know how to inhabit them, that is, unless we know how to live like a screwball. Just as Barrymore/Jaffe teaches Lombard/Lily/Mildred how to position herself for the stage, Lombard tutors us not so much about what her films mean as how they feel, how the screwiest emotions first take shape and form on the surface of things before we can quite work through what they might mean for our inner lives or our social bearings.

There were few men in screwball comedy who could quite match Lombard in marrying the giddy surface of her gesturing and vibrations to the screwy surfaces of the films themselves. In *My Man Godfrey* William Powell’s character is never quite as delectably goofy as Lombard (and this is an odd aspect of Powell’s characterization in the film; his characters in *The Thin Man* films and *Libeled Lady* [1936], as the next chapter shows, can be thoroughly and giddily goofy). *Nothing Sacred* is another Lombard delight, too, but like Powell in *Godfrey*, Fredric March’s character in that film is not intended to inspire the same delights of viewing that Lombard does herself.

Indeed, the only time in Lombard’s career she would find a male match for her own delightfully comic performative style was with John Barrymore in *Twentieth Century*. This is because, unlike Powell in *Godfrey*, Barrymore responds to her movements with his own glorious, theatrical physicality, a physicality that renders immediately the thoughts and emotions of his character into joyous, bodily transcendence of whatever those around him, at any given moment, are prosaic and dull enough to understand or organize as “reality.” And his caress of the scar, in the aforementioned moment, is his tacit approval of Lombard as a worthy onscreen match. The scar bears the mark of the sheer contingency of their coming-together in this film, the lucky chance by which this filmed moment in *Twentieth Century* even came to exist; for the scar on Lombard’s left cheek reminds us of biographical events that might have precluded her from ever discovering, opposite Barrymore or anyone else, what giddiness her body discovers on the screen. Lombard suffered the injury leading to this scar in a car accident in 1926, shortly after she had won a leading role opposite Barrymore—who had approved her

casting—in a screen production of *The Tempest* (1928). In words written by Gladys Hall, but revised by Lombard herself before being approved for publication, we are told in some detail about

that Sunday afternoon when the young Carole went riding in a foreign-made car with Harry Cooper, son of a prominent Hollywood banker. They were driving through Beverly Hills. The car struck a bump. The catch of the removable seat unhinged. Carole was catapulted, face forward, into the windshield. The windshield shattered. And the beauty which was Carole's became a long, bone-deep, blood-masked gash from her upper lip to the middle of her left cheek. No anesthetic could be administered when the mangled face was sewn together. The surgeon at the Hollywood community Hospital—an emergency job was done on Carole, not the plastic surgery which has been reported—did not want the facial muscles to relax while he sewed up the wounds. Only a slight scar now remains of what was once wrecked beauty. But evidently there must be an inner scar, not so light, the result of those months when Carole moped about the house, sick at heart, believing that she must go through all her youth, all her life, unsightly in the eyes of men, her career ended before it had fairly begun. (Gladys Hall correspondence 7–8)

This is a scene from a horror story, actually lived, and pitched at a melodramatic level suitable for publicity. Yet this horror, which prevented Lombard from trying her chops at Shakespeare opposite Barrymore in the late twenties (she was quickly replaced in *The Tempest*), led to something else. Lombard lost her contract to Fox shortly after the accident; a subsequent string of performances in Mack Sennett pictures ended in a contract with Paramount in the late twenties, and a new direction in her career. When Barrymore lets his hand glide gently across Lombard's scar in the film they would eventually make eight years later, then, it is not only a gesture caressing this shared history (and of Lombard's own professional resilience, after her accident, which parallels Mildred's own in dealing with Jaffe). The gesture also reminds us of the temporary power the elder actor held in choosing his screen partner—for if the scar reminds us of Lombard's missed opportunity in *The Tempest*, it also reminds us that it was Barrymore himself who approved her as his co-star in the Shakespeare, just as he chose her to perform opposite him in *Twentieth Century*. If Barrymore is privileged to choose the one worthy of the opportunity to share in his filmic transcendence of prosaic

reality, it is Lombard herself who at the very least equals, through her own performative prowess in *Twentieth Century*, the theatrical authority signified by Barrymore's knowing caress of her cheek.



If the caress of Lombard's scar also reminds us of the benevolent power Barrymore held, in both 1926 and 1934, to select she who might match him, the way the caress is framed, composed, shot—the fact that it is framed, composed, and shot in a particular way—calls to our attention that it is Howard Hawks who crafts the proscenium upon which Barrymore and Lombard perform together. When Manny Farber describes Hawks's *His Girl Friday* (1941) as “a gymnasium of outrageous motion” (*Negative Space* 29) he is speaking of the rhythmic thrust of the film as a whole, and of how this vehicle is driven by the actors and engineered by Hawks the director (see also McElhaney, “Howard Hawks” 32). Hawks is, likewise, the engineer behind the “outrageous motion” of *Twentieth Century*—he deserves credit for what Farber calls the “gymnasium,” a film designed for actors. A biographer goes so far as to credit Hawks in this film with the introduction of “the screwball comedy, in which attractive players, one of them a major star, horsed around and bounced off one another in a manner normally expected only of comedians or supporting types” (McCarthy 197). One thread in this myth goes beyond creation of genre to suggest that Hawks, as a Svengali, created Lombard the comic actress; that she was one of the tough and tomboyish “Hawksian women” (Wise 111–19), like Lauren Bacall and Jean Arthur, who Hawks essentially “re-made” through his intervention. There is a little truth to this, of course. Lombard is funny only in moments in her earlier pictures (often in delightfully goofy gestures that have little to do with the often non-comedic plots, such as her sudden *plonking* of a box of delivered flowers onto the floor once Clark Gable enters the room in the otherwise mostly serious *No Man of Her Own* [1932]). By contrast, she is funny throughout *Twentieth Century*. What Hawks gives Lombard with this film is a cinematic vehicle wholly comprised of a chain of scenes that enable giddy moments—a gift not unrelated to the one Barrymore gave her through his selection of her as an screen partner, and very much like the one Oscar Jaffe gifts to Mildred Plotka, who directs Mildred into becoming “Lily Garland,” a persona that is soon fully under the actress's control once she becomes Lily, once she inhabits Lily expressively and, indeed, socially, as the star Jaffe so much wants her to become. And since this performance takes place in what may be Hawks's fastest film, it is not unimportant that

the bulk of her performance in *Twentieth Century* takes place on a train, a vehicle which is not unlike the experience of the medium of cinema itself in the rapid alternation and succession of quickly changing exterior views (see Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*)—a vehicle that plunges us along a track that is already set in its place, but which nevertheless, as we experience the ride it offers, opens us up to the unpredictability of the contingent, perhaps even the possibility of a chance encounter between two lovers meeting one another, after some years, again.

But before they can reunite on the train, they first must split up: and to even form a couple in the first place, Jaffe must teach Mildred how to inhabit their coupledness theatrically. To return to the opening scene, prior to the moment of the caress of the cheek: we join the rehearsed scene-within-the-scene in the middle of one of Mildred's lines. Lombard, initially, is facing away from the camera, in a long establishing shot, with Jaffe's entire troupe. Her movements and positioning are, to use the terminology Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke (192–93) encourage us to use in performance analysis, a combination of a bound and free-flowing gestures: although fixed in one position on the stage, Lombard nods her head and swings her hands behind her back freely, as if waiting to unleash the manic energy that will flow from her body in the film's second and third acts. This rehearsal is a hilariously disorganized shambles; much of the first ten minutes of the film will focus on Jaffe's efforts to shape this chaos into a production worthy of his name, and to turn Mildred into a star. But it is clear from Lombard's performance that her character is already quite ready to act (if quite unconscious, as of yet, of her ability to do so): Mildred is the only one to notice that the stage director miscounts the number of gunshots heard off-stage (two, rather than one), and, upon completion of the line, she notices that one of her supporting players, the actor who is to play Mary Jo Calhoun's brother, has failed to take up his correct position in the scene. A beat later, as the stage director informs the cast to rehearse lines until Jaffe appears, Lombard, otherwise fixed in a bound position, tugs repeatedly at the left side of her skirt, as if to express the nervous energy that her character is as yet unable to translate into a good performance in this badly managed rehearsal. Lombard's movements throughout the scene give us an initial sense of Mildred as a character who has yet to find the right supporting player, or the right of idea of a theatrical life, toward which her energy might be directed. She must find this before she can take to the train.

Cue Barrymore: Jaffe, alone, in his magisterial office, with only his secretary as company; the environment is decorated with medieval armor and painted mirrors. These rarified aesthetic objects complement

the aristocratic gestures and poses Barrymore uses to introduce Jaffe: as he speaks with an assistant about his inability to locate Lily Garland in the rehearsal, Barrymore leisurely leans, on the floor, against a pillow, signing some papers, casually adorning his left hand with a cigarette in between the fore- and index-fingers, a prop that suggests simultaneous care and indifference for the objects he holds closest to him. After the phone call, Jaffe prepares for his entrance to the rehearsal, and Barrymore conveys the care taken and self-admiration enjoyed by his character in his assured fling of a scarf around his neck while standing in front of a three-way mirror that affords Barrymore's character multiple gazes onto his aquiline, statuesque profile (figure 1.5). "The Great Profile" was, of course, Barrymore's moniker (so famous, indeed, was this profile, that rather than imprinting his hands into cement in front of the Chinese theater, he impressed his nose); and no doubt we are meant to read into this profile in *Twentieth Century* a further sign of Jaffe's achievement of aristocracy through success on the legitimate stage. But another key aspect of the Barrymore persona, subtending our understanding of Jaffe as a character, is a voluptuous weakness for women; and so it is



Figure 1.5. John Barrymore, in a moment of multiplied self-admiration, in *Twentieth Century* (Columbia, 1934).

important that, when Jaffe turns away from his own reflection in the mirror he should see before him, entirely by accident, the derriere of his bespectacled secretary, bent over in retrieval of documents Jaffe has left strewn all over the floor.

This book will, later, describe a moment in which Humphrey Bogart flirts with a similarly bespectacled young woman played by Dorothy Malone, in another Hawks film, *The Big Sleep*. Barrymore and the woman playing his secretary, an uncredited character actor named Gigi Parrish, generate no similar heat. This may have more to do with Jaffe than anything else; the potential of actual, prosaic sex, with an actual woman, in lieu of his preferred taste for the performance of love on a stage, wilts rather than intensifies Jaffe. After spying her bending over, Barrymore's voice lowers an octave and cracks in its delivery as Jaffe thanks the secretary for handing him his cane. Jaffe can walk just fine—Barrymore has his character bound out of the office with confidence—so the prop is here one more theatrical, aristocratic affectation that declares his desire for a life of pretend. And the cane also reminds us that, in the presence of a woman who is a part of a rather more boring normative world (with its shuffling of papers and other administrative duties), Jaffe will prefer the fiction of performance, and the performance of fiction. He will need the stage to realize his desire. "Lily Garland," who does not even yet know who she is, and who Jaffe has not yet even seen, is his fantasy, his dream; and he will only be able to fulfill this desire for an ongoing theatrical life—which requires for its transcendence of reality certain fixtures of that reality, including the secretary and also the presence of paying audiences willing to give Jaffe the benefit of their applause and approval—by creating her.

But is the desire only for her, for this eventual creation—or is it for theatricality itself, as a way of life, always in need of perpetual rediscovery? Jaffe, the film implies, has already been through a lot of actresses—professionally, certainly, perhaps also personally. The idea of the next actress is well in his head before he even begins working with Mildred Plotka; "Lily Garland" is a figure of his imagination not so much because she is the "perfect woman" (Jaffe does not suffer from placing women on pedestals, as Jimmy Stewart will, later, in *The Philadelphia Story* [1940]) but because she is a figure who will enable him to live his life theatrically, as a well-prepared show responding to the contingencies of whatever script is presented with dexterous gesture and vivid vocal elocution. And so it matters that, outside of the rehearsal space which opens the film, Carole Lombard is never actually seen performing Lily Garland performing Mary Jo Calhoun, the performance that, in the film's social world, makes Garland a star. Instead, the film only depicts the outcome

of this stardom: the struggle of Jaffe and Lily to retain the theatrical, entirely artificial but still palpably present energy that brought them together; and the performances of Barrymore and Lombard as keyed to their character's struggle to find new ways, always with the desire to avoid a simply normative life, to theatrically be. This elision ensures that performance, in this film, is kept off the stage, in a private world (or, at least, a social form that the two leads keep greedily locked away all for themselves, their only public viewers the assistants, maids, co-actors, and train riders privileged enough to glimpse something of their gestures).

This becomes clear in the apartment scene, which takes place some three years after Mildred has become Lily and after Lily has become a star. At the beginning of the scene, Lily is getting dressed for a party at a club, dedicated to her honor—"Lily Garland night." A doorbell disturbs her. She grandly swings the doors to her bedroom as if making her entrance onto a theatrical stage, her eyes wide open, and holds the position in a tableaux for a few seconds, as if standing in ready for the arrival of a new audience into her home. Her dressing gown hangs open (in a way frank enough to have been impossible, merely two months after the release of this film in May 1934, under the new enforcement of the Production Code), a sign perhaps of Lombard's own lack of inhibition in front of the camera but also of Lily's own willingness to turn over whatever private aspect of her life still exists to whatever adoring public might want to look at her. But Lily abdicates this theatrical posture almost as quickly as she has assumed it, bounding in an instant, past her maid, to the front door, to verbally chastise whomever beyond the door is interrupting her. The sudden, seemingly improvisatory quality of the movement toward the door is the result of Lombard's ability to characterize Lily as a woman who, at any moment, might be given to do just about anything. But always with a theatrical flair, for the gesture of the closing of the gown is itself quite theatrical, a declarative statement that this woman owns the means of her self-presentation and self-performance. This sudden change in character—one cannot imagine Mildred Plotka having done any of this in the first scene—is a sign not only of how successful an actress Lily has become, but already, in her indignation over this interruption of her preparation to spend the evening out, in her assumption of her own theatrical autonomy in her private life. Once she opens the door, and sees that it is not Jaffe, but rather his publicist, Owen (Roscoe Karns) who lies beyond the door, one realizes the extent to which Lily no longer quite needs Jaffe to pull off a scene. She can now inhabit a stage, indeed determine where and what that stage might be, all by herself.

The scene thus poses a question that will hover around the rest of the film. If Jaffe, and now Lily, are able to command theatrical author-

ity and generate viewer pleasure as individuals (Lily, from her various diegetic audiences within the film, and Jaffe, from his theatrical troupe of sycophants, and his eager actors; and Barrymore and Lombard, both separately and together, from us), why, after their impending rift, should they need to reconcile their coupledness? Since either one alone can inhabit the frame with a command of theatricality, what can they achieve together that they cannot achieve alone, as singular stars? Lily's very stardom, which continues after she leaves Jaffe, is itself a confirmation of the fact that she is interesting as a solo performer. A contrast in both character and performative style is, of course, evident from the opening of this film, where, as we have seen, Barrymore/Jaffe assumes a theatrical authority that Mildred (if not Lombard herself) is not quite ready to attain. But in the apartment scene there is an evolution in this contrast, whereby Lombard herself—and perhaps also Lily, to the extent that she is able to realize this achievement—begins to break away from the binary form of theatricality in which Jaffe instructs Lily in the opening scene. Jaffe, in those opening rehearsal scenes, assumes a division between audience and actor: The audience is something the actor must



Figure 1.6. John Barrymore, commanding our attention, in *Twentieth Century* (Columbia, 1934).

reach (through projection of voice and ostentation of gesture), but the boundary between them is never to become blurred. (It is his assistant, Oliver, played by Walter Connolly, whom Jaffe sends to the back row to act as an audience for Mildred's rehearsal; one can never imagine Jaffe, always close to the stage himself during rehearsals, deigning to remove himself from the lights.) To some extent Barrymore himself embodies Jaffe's own philosophy; as a traditional actor of the finest genealogical theater stock, and the grandest of cinematic presences, one can never quite conceptualize Barrymore gazing up to look at anyone else, so fully is he (certainly by 1934) unto himself. Jaffe, in a sense, reconfirms this when he does finally appear in the apartment scene a couple of minutes later, suddenly, in black hat and jacket, descending onto the scene like a villain in a silent melodrama and commanding the quiet attention of Lily without saying a word (figure 1.6). And he continues to carry on in the scene in this manner; as Lily begins to declare her dissatisfaction with his tyrannical monopolization of her life, Barrymore has Jaffe, silently, walk over to the window, open it, and gaze outside it, as if in contemplation of possibly jumping out of it.

James Harvey notes how Lombard, first in this scene but then throughout the remainder of the film, finds a way to subvert the presence of an actor and a character who demands a strict separation between actor and audience. As Harvey writes, "where Barrymore's hysteria is daunting, deranged, and wildly inventive, it's always a spectacle. Lombard's is an experience, something we don't just watch but get involved in too" (*Romantic Comedy in Hollywood* 120). I would question any intransigence in this binary—watching Barrymore play a theatrical ham turning himself into a spectacle is, of course, its own kind of experience. But what Harvey notices here, and what Lombard\Lily achieves in this scene in which she begins to carve out a space of performative autonomy from Barrymore\Jaffe, is that her audience is her lifeblood. Her devoted viewer, a devoted viewer of the cinema actor and not of the stage, delights in her slightest quivers (perhaps this is why Lily, after the rift with Jaffe, makes the decision to go into movies, after all); and her sudden movements, her most inspired subtleties of comic invention, will confirm that the cinema gives her the audience that she needs, that indeed would seem to need the most from her. Lombard's (and Lily's) audience, is, in other words, a modern audience, one that does not measure its favorite stars in terms of the heavenly distance that separates us from them (as Edgar Morin, for one, conceptualizes the relationship between viewer and a silent screen star; see *The Stars*, especially 1–26). Instead, this audience is itself involved with the everyday performance of life and wants to see from its favorite stars not mere filmic repetition of the quotidian which they already

perform but rather subtleties of expression and nuance adding a touch of difference and spice to the everyday. (Louise Brooks, in her writing on the cinema, divined something very much like this, acutely suggesting that for the successful actor “it is necessary to add eccentricities and mystery to naturalness, so that the audience can admire or puzzle over something different than itself”; see 64–65.) John Barrymore, a creature originally of both theater and silent cinema, of course, transcends the everyday in equal measure; but he doesn’t quite need devotion, or even cinephilia; his is a stardom predicated on, indeed, a great deal of distance, a distinction that separates. (That Barrymore would spend a good part of his late career poking fun at this “hammy persona,” in films like *The Great Profile* [1940] and *Playmates* [1941] does not lessen the distance between him and the viewer; if anything, the ironic posture makes the distance even more acute, more knowing.) This is not to say that Barrymore is not a grandly cinematic creature, but only that his cinematic qualities are perceived to a certain degree as a cinematic adaptation of an essentially theatrical actor to the photoplay. Lombard, by contrast, is, moment-by-moment, creating, inhabiting a new, modern woman within the bounds of cinema, and a new, modern brand of performance (screwball, still being initiated into the public consciousness after *It Happened One Night* [1934] a couple of months earlier in 1934). To some extent, though, she has no place in Stanley Cavell’s discussion of “the new woman” in *Pursuits of Happiness*, precisely because of how quickly Lombard/Lily moves beyond the instruction and education provided by Barrymore/Jaffe in the film’s opening scenes (in Cavell’s conception, the education of the women by the man takes place over the course of the entire narrative). To understand this performance, we must inhabit it ourselves, experience it, feel Lombard’s radiant goofiness in our bones—have her teach us, as she has perhaps been taught by Barrymore—thus dissolving the distinction, at least while the movie is playing, between our viewing and her being.

Jaffe’s trick, as Barrymore expresses it, is to turn the very contradiction of the stardom he has created for Lily—that she should no longer need him as a performative mate once she has achieved her own distinction and skill—into the very problematic of the scene and the ensuing rest of the movie. We last left Jaffe near the window, contemplating suicide. Barrymore walks over to the window, placing his hat and cape on a chair; he faces away from Lombard and from the camera. Facing away from the audience is a familiar acting move, after the late nineteenth century, to suggest psychological and interior depth (see William Archer, *Masks or Faces?*; and Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* 52). But what happens when the desire for rhetorical flourish *is* the content of psychology—when the very desire for theatricality, the desire for surface rather than interiority, is precisely

what the heart wants? Here, Jaffe's trick is to make the very distinction between Barrymore/Jaffe and Lombard/Lily as performers—his theatrical distance, Lily's improvisatory vitality—not a problem to keep them apart, but a dramatic conflict to be acted, to be taken as the departure for the very heartbeat of the performed life they might ongoingly share. After a beat, he returns to the window, now opening it, as if to signify less the sincerity of his possible suicide than a melodramatic transition in the scene. "What are you going to do?" Lily asks; having here become his audience of one, her question is less concerned with the actual possibility of his suicide than with her anticipation of the next narrative beat his performance is going to hit. "Nothing . . . while you're here," Jaffe says. The last line, and the gravitas with which Barrymore delivers it, punctuates Jaffe's point in the sequence. As long as they are together, the very contradiction ripping them apart (their performative distinction, and ostensible lack of use for one another once success has been achieved) might become the very subject whose dramatic content could keep them animated, in essence a subject that gives these two actors themselves as characters to play. And this is precisely what Lily, eventually, comes to admire: Jaffe's theatrical dexterity, nimbly jumping from one expressive mode (over-the-top comedy, in the film's opening scenes) to another (put-on melodrama with a touch of ham, in this one). So whether or not she "buys" what he is "selling" is not the point: it is not that Jaffe must convince Lily that he is really torn over her desire to leave him alone for the night, but rather that he can put on a good show for her, that he can be as good an actor for her as she has been for him. This is how he woos.

As Barrymore, in a one-quarter profile medium-shot, stands at the window, feigning contemplation of defenestration, he waxes nostalgic, pining for the experience of being so warmly welcomed in the city's theatrical community during his youth. Cut to Lily, who tries to sneak away. But Jaffe catches her tiptoeing, demanding she stay—not to "save his life," but because he has yet to finish his makeshift scene, and he needs his audience! Speeding things up, he foregoes the rest of his speech and pulls his jacket halfway down, as if he were about to finally kill himself. Lily stops him, and Jaffe pulls back, not convinced "to live" but rather waiting, for a beat, for her to join him on his "stage." And she does (lifting her fur coat above her shoulders as if preparing for a grand entrance on a stage), but only to change the trajectory of the scene. Calling Jaffe a "horrible fake," she amplifies a laugh and turns around to walk away from Jaffe just as quickly as she approached him. The camera now follows, effectively breaking the fourth wall of Jaffe's makeshift proscenium and matching Lombard's fluid movements with its own tracking. "You cheap

ham!" Lily admonishes. Where Jaffe ostentatiously changed the flow of the scene earlier, appropriating Lily's window as his theater and facing away from the camera in his declaration of performative autonomy, he now subtly answers her cue to answer the speed of cinema. Just as the camera tracks with Lily, Jaffe follows its approach to her, admonishing her, in a medium-shot, for her promiscuous dalliances with other men while pulling her fur coat off her shoulders to reveal the bare back that will be for all of these men to see. What Jaffe seems to be tacitly admitting here is that he is willing to follow Lily out of the theater, into the flux and flow of everyday life, as performed; he is willing to try and become the down-to-earth star that Lily became in movies. But if they are to proceed to this everyday life, they must still add some special distinction of theatricality, a little of that mystery and eccentricity to quotidian naturalness that makes stars interesting. Thus the very drama they create together, out of the clash of their personalities and the distinction between their performative styles, will be the subject of their ongoing performance. This is a dramatic conflict that will always ensure that these two will continue to grasp life as an opportunity for creativity and the full living through of a moment, unlike the rest of the world around them, which performs everyday life merely to go about business.

After their temporary reconciliation in the apartment, Jaffe has a private eye follow Lily to make sure she is not cavorting with other men; after Lily discovers this ploy, she punches the investigator in the eye, and makes her way for Hollywood on the Twentieth Century, Limited, the train that will take her to her success in movies. (All of this happens offscreen.) Some months pass—Jaffe finds another actress, but either she is not as good, or his direction of actors has lost its spark, its responsive mate. So Jaffe boards a train to New York in a desperate attempt to avoid his creditors in Chicago, the city where his latest play, a hopeless *Joan of Arc*, has failed. Lily is on this train too, heading back to Broadway to secure a contract with a rival producer; after winning over Hollywood, she wishes now to prove she can succeed on the New York stage without Jaffe, perhaps to further declare her performative autonomy and authority. Jaffe, however, seeks to restore their coupledness with a new theatrical contract. Upon entering her compartment, Jaffe finds only Lily's personal assistant, Sadie (Dale Fuller), who informs him she is taking a nap. But she's not. After a beat, Barrymore gazes away from Fuller, and into the washroom of the compartment (offscreen to us, visible to Jaffe). He spies Lily there, and decides to perform for her. Taking command of the center of the frame, in a pose that recalls the tableaux of many of his silent films, Barrymore lifts his finger in instruction to Sadie. But Sadie is not really his viewer.

Pleading that Sadie take care of Lily in his absence, Jaffe raises his voice in order to better direct his words to Lily, the offscreen presence toward which they are directed: “She’s very delicate!” Such words, of course, do not rhyme with the star seen earlier in the movie, nor the star persona of the actress playing her—Lombard, who had a tomboy’s childhood and a sailor’s mouth, was hardly delicate. Barrymore, though, through his gesture offscreen, understands the irony of his words, challenging his co-star to emerge from the wings, and express her comic strength. Now, through just a sliver of mirror fixed on the washroom door, Lombard is visible, watching the performance that Barrymore/Jaffe directs toward her assistant, but which is really intended for her.

He is, of course, also bidding to direct her again, trying to guide the trajectory of her movements and gestures to match his own. Barrymore, too, issues his authority over the performative content of the scene, taking charge of the frame in a comic variation on his melodramatic poses from twenties silent films. Of course, once again Barrymore’s command of the film frame reminds us that there is here a certain figural fullness to the actor at this stage of his career. For reasons owing to his legacy, he requires no co-star to give himself theatrical life and energy. Yet the very point of his performance in *Twentieth Century* is to play with this fullness: to use it as a gesture to invite another to achieve her own similar sort of stature, and to circle around the idea that a movie couple might find some sort of modern happiness through the sublime interconnection of their otherwise self-sufficient performative presences. At the very same moment in which he strikes this pose, then, he also makes the explicit admission that he is performing not for the purpose of establishing his own authority (which already exists), but to open a space, on the left side of the screen, for the imminent arrival of his co-star (and his most important viewer), and for the words, movements, and poses she herself brings. He feigns to sit down to wait for Lily to wake up; but when Lombard enters a beat later, he rises again. For the balance of the scene, Barrymore will now find himself in an equally responsive position, charged with creating expressivity that conveys the inherent theatricality of the romantic relationship he means to rekindle. She approaches: “What do you want . . . *scorpion?*” Barrymore (and Jaffe) hilariously anticipates Lily’s insult; right after she delivers the line, his eyebrows jut up with jagged alarm. Lombard conveys, with equal preparedness and timing, the way in which Lily is fully and equally prepared for the *bon mot* Jaffe is about to throw her way. “If it makes you any happier to *call me names,*” Barrymore intones, “*go ahead . . .*” Even before Barrymore can finish his sentence, Lombard is lifting her hands in comically feigned exasperation. “Oscar, you’re complete! The most