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# Old Hollywood: Tough Guys and Mad Dames

Rich Johnson

## Week 7

### **BARBARA STANWYCK: FEARLESS**

Barbara Stanwyck was born Ruby Catherine Stevens on July 16, 1907 in New York City. As one of Hollywood's most respected and prolific actresses, she starred in 85 films across a 60-year career. Her versatility as an actress led to a myriad of different performances from screwball comedies to classic film noir and vivid melodrama. Each role showcased her gift for portraying no-nonsense women; characters who often strived to make a place for themselves in a 'man's world' including iconic femme fatales and career women. Although she was a four-time Oscar nominee, Stanwyck never won, but later received an honorary award in 1982 for her "superlative creativity and unique contribution to the art of screen acting". Stanwyck passed away January 20, 1990 from congestive heart failure.

*Please refer to the reading list for a full reference of films.*

#### **Main:**

*Double Indemnity* (1944)

**Director(s):** Billy Wilder

**Studio(s):** Paramount Pictures

*Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948)

**Director(s):** Anatole Litvak

**Studio(s):** Hal Wallis Productions

*Forty Guns* (1957)

**Director(s):** Samuel Fuller

**Studio(s):** Twentieth Century Fox / Globe Enterprises

#### **References to:**

*Broadway Nights* (1929)

**Director(s):** Joseph Boyle

**Studio(s):** Robert Kane Productions



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***The Locked Door*** (1929)

**Director(s):** George Fitzmaurice

**Studio(s):** Feature Productions

***Ladies of Leisure*** (1930)

**Director(s):** Frank Capra

**Studio(s):** Columbia Pictures

***Baby Face*** (1933)

**Director(s):** Alfred E. Green

**Studio(s):** Warner Bros.

***Remember the Night*** (1940, preview December 31<sup>st</sup> 1939)

**Director(s):** Mitchell Leisen

**Studio(s):** Paramount Pictures

***The Lady Eve*** (1941)

**Director(s):** Preston Sturges

**Studio(s):** Paramount Pictures

***Meet John Doe*** (1941)

**Director(s):** Frank Capra

**Studio(s):** Frank Capra Productions (distributed by Warner Bros.)

***Clash by Night*** (1952)

**Director(s):** Fritz Lang

**Studio(s):** Wald/Krasna Productions (distributed by RKO Radio Pictures)

**Notes:**

*“Egotism — usually just a case of mistaken nonentity.” — Barbara Stanwyck*

Young Ruby

Barbara Stanwyck was born Ruby Catherine Stevens, July 16, 1907, in the ‘Mean Streets’ of Brooklyn. Over the course of her career she appeared in more than 80 films helping to define portrayals of the strong-willed female figure.

Ruby had a troubled childhood, having become an orphan at four years of age after her mother was killed when she was pushed off of a moving streetcar. Her father, unable to cope with the loss of his wife, then abandoned his five children.



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An early photograph shows the Stevens Family circa 1901 during happier times. You can see Kitty and Byron Stevens (Barbara-Ruby's parents), and sisters (left to right) Mildred, Mabel and Maude. Ruby and Byron Jr. were born years later after this picture was taken in Brooklyn, NY.

Stanwyck once said: "My father loved my mother madly and when she died, he went gypsy. I was raised by strangers, farmed out. There were no rules or regulations. Whoever would take me for five dollars a week, that's where I was. So I really didn't have a family. The tragedy was that there was never a family that had room for the two of us, Byron and me. The only game I can remember playing is the game of fighting."

She grew up a free spirit longing for liberty. She idolized her showgirl sister Millie and soon found a soulful catharsis in the art of dance, finding her muse, Isadora Duncan.

She was essentially raised by her sister who was a showgirl and, therefore, forced to grow up very quickly. A lot of the time she was left to fend for herself and, at the age of nine, took up smoking, which you would often see incorporated into her characters onscreen.

Early on became a Ziegfried Girl and played a cabaret dancer on stage in *The Noose* (1927). She had plenty of experience dealing with the brutal nature of the male sex in the industry. In one incident Al Jolson put a cigarette out on her chest after refusing him. Allegedly, according to biographer Victoria Wilson, at the age of 14 she had been abused by her sister Maude's brother-in-law. She also confided to a chorus girl friend that another incident in her mid teens had ruined her future chances for children. This left her with a deep-rooted cynicism which she often used to play her cards in keeping her dignity, if not her virtue.

She was married twice. First to Frank Fay (m. 1928; div. 1935) then to Robert Taylor (m. 1939; div. 1952). Biographer Axel Madsen says "unearthing the truth about [Stanwyck's] sexuality would remain impossible," but also notes "people would swear she was...Hollywood's biggest closeted lesbian." And most Hollywood historians admit there's something to rumors that Stanwyck's marriages to Frank Fay and Robert Taylor were studio-backed "lavender marriages" created to keep the closet sealed tight.

According to Helen Ferguson – a bisexual former actress, who became Stanwyck's press agent for many years – Joan and Barbara had adjoining properties in Brentwood. When Barbara's husband, Frank Fay, would get drunk & abusive toward her, Barbara would run to Joan's house, where Joan would console her. One thing led to another. "There's no doubt in my mind that Joan and Barbara were intimate on more than one occasion."

#### First appearances

Her stage name was inspired by a theatrical poster that read: "Jane Stanwyck in Barbara Frietchie".

She began to make the transition from Broadway to the silver screen in the late-1920s, trying her hand at acting in the film *Broadway Nights* (1927) as an uncredited dancer. Her first credited role was in the 1929 film *The Locked Door*.



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Although Stanwyck's career in film almost ended before it began with two unrecognized film roles under her belt, she managed to convince director Frank Capra to have a role in his film 1930 film *Ladies of Leisure*. The film garnered Stanwyck the attention that she desired.

*Ladies of Leisure* opened in April of 1930 country-wide and catapulted Stanwyck to stardom, much as *Pretty Woman* would later do for Julia Roberts. In both films, the actresses portray the token “hooker with a heart of gold” who falls in love with the millionaire who hires her and, accidentally or not, empowers her through love.

#### Leading lady

Many standout role followed through the 1930s to the 1950s including *Baby Face* (1933), *Remember the Night* (1940, preview December 31<sup>st</sup> 1939), *The Lady Eve* (1941), *Meet John Doe* (1941) with Gary Cooper and Fritz Lang's *Clash by Night* (1952).

To the men who worked in the crew, she was known as "Missy" and that endearment became her nickname.

#### Strong and dynamic

*“We went in this together and we're coming out at the end together.”* — Phyllis Dietrichson

In what is often considered one of the greatest film noirs, Stanwyck plays the definitive femme fatale. It tells the story of insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) who gets roped into a murderous scheme when he falls for Phyllis Dietrichson (Stanwyck), who is intent on killing her husband (Tom Powers) and living off the fraudulent accidental death claim. Prompted by the late Mr. Dietrichson's daughter, Lola (Jean Heather), insurance investigator Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson) looks into the case, and gradually begins to uncover the sinister truth.

Billy Wilder co-wrote the screenplay with famous novelist Raymond Chandler who defined hardboiled detective fiction. He did not get along with Billy Wilder threatening to leave the production numerous times.

*“I had killed a man, for money and a woman. I didn't have the money and I didn't have the woman.”* — James M. Cain, *Double Indemnity* (1936)

Based on the 1936 novel *Double Indemnity* by James M. Cain which, in turn, was based in the murder of Albert Snyder. Cain later admitted that if he had come up with some of the solutions to the plot that screenwriters Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler did, he would have employed them in his original novel. Chandler asked for at least \$150 a week and was surprised when he heard the studio had planned to give him \$750 a week.

According to IMDb, the film was nominated for seven Academy Awards, but lost out to *Going My Way* (1944). Billy Wilder was so seriously annoyed at Leo McCarey's sweep that when McCarey's name was called for Best Director, Wilder stuck his foot out into the aisle, tripping McCarey up.



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Wilder would get his revenge the following year when *The Lost Weekend* (1945) won four Oscars, while McCarey's *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945) only picked up one.

When Walter Neff first meets Phyllis Dietrichson, much attention is paid to her ankle bracelet ("anklet"). Urban legend states a married woman wears an anklet to indicate she is married but available to other men.

Stanwyck is wearing a blonde wig throughout the movie. This was the idea of Billy Wilder... when he suddenly realized how bad it looked, it was too late to re-shoot the earlier scenes. To rationalize this mistake, in later interviews Wilder claimed that the bad-looking wig was intentional. It only adds to her fatale image and, unless pointed out, isn't that noticeable. Production head Buddy G. DeSylva remarked of Stanwyck's wig, "We hired Barbara Stanwyck, and here we get George Washington".

Edward G. Robinson's initial reluctance to sign on was largely because he had been demoted to third lead. Eventually, he realized that he was at a transitional phase of his career, and was getting paid the same as Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray for doing less work.

Wilder's direction produces some impeccable shots and use of framing.

"The Screen Guild Theater" broadcast a 30-minute radio adaptation of the movie on February 16, 1950, with Barbara Stanwyck again reprising her film role.

Speaking of radio...

*"Operator, I've been ringing Murray Hill 35097 for the last half hour and the line is always busy. Will you ring it for me, please?"* — Leona Stevenson

This early home invasion movie sees Stanwyck playing Leona Stevenson, a controlling heiress confined to a wheelchair who overhears a conversation about a plan to kill a woman. Unable to leave her home or reach her husband (Burt Lancaster), and written off by the police, Leona struggles to uncover the truth through a series of phone calls that only lead her deeper into a mystery, which may involve her college rival, Sally (Ann Richards), and a scheme to sell pharmaceuticals on the black market.

From a screenplay by Lucille Fletcher, based on her 1943 radio play of the same name.

Another thriller, the film is an early example of the home invasion subgenre. Barbara Stanwyck found that sustaining that level of emotion all week long and then going home on the weekend was a draining experience. "Five days I was handling it, starting the next day's work where I'd picked up, sustaining it all, and then I had two whole days to relax and not to worry about the character, and I tell you it was strange," said Stanwyck. "It was really hard to pump myself up on Monday morning to try to feel that desperate tension."

A little piece of trivia: the jewel-clasped cigarette case Leona offers to Henry was Barbara Stanwyck's own. It was a birthday gift from Joan Crawford, one of her dearest friends.



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The film took 12 days to shoot her part. Stanwyck claimed that the terror she played in the bedroom scenes is actually what made her hair begin to prematurely gray. It *almost* paid off – she received her fourth nomination for an Academy Award for Best Actress on the film.

Co-stars Burt Lancaster.

Great use of title cards.

Again, as would be expected for the time, there is a great sense of shadow play throughout. For Stanwyck's scenes in her apartment, cinematographer Sol Polito utilized the confined spaces and dark shadows of the black and white photography to make the posh Manhattan apartment seem like her prison.

In 1981, in her home in the exclusive Trousdale section of Beverly Hills, she was awakened during the night by an intruder who struck her on the head with his flashlight, forced her into a closet, and absconded with \$40,000 in jewels.

Pushing gender norms

*"I was born upset."* — Jessica Drummond

Stanwyck plays the authoritarian rancher, Jessica Drummond, who rules an Arizona county with her private posse of hired guns. After a new marshal arrives to set things straight, the cattle queen finds herself falling, brutally for the avowedly non-violent lawman. With an already trigger-happy brigade of male archetypes, throw a female gunslinger in the mix and here you have a unique cult Western for it's time that stands shoulder to shoulder with Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* from 1954.

The working title was "Woman with a Whip". It's a classic adventure tale and, amongst a decade of noir and drama, makes for a refreshing change in the cinematic landscape of the era and Bogart's roles. This isn't the suave anti hero, but a shambling destitute character.

It was condemned in the US because of its brutal handling of the story, but praised in Europe for its stylistic vigor.

Stanwyck's stunt woman refused to be dragged by a horse, saying that it was too dangerous. Without further ado, Stanwyck did it by herself. She got some bruises and scrapes, but was okay. At that time, Stanwyck was 49 years old.

Marilyn Monroe wanted to play Jessica Drummond, but Samuel Fuller turned her down in favor of Stanwyck, who was always his first choice. Stanwyck's performance is iconic and Fuller's bold vision and innovative storytelling have left a lasting impact on the western genre which still influences to this day.

Looking at the pantheon of strong female protagonists, Stanwyck lead the charge.



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Some overlooked classics include: *Lady Eve* (1941), *Lady of Burlesque* (1943), and *The Furies* (1950), *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956) and *Titanic* (1953) in which, at age 45, had a four-year romantic affair with a 22-year-old Robert Wagner.

Final years...

Her last theatrical release was William Castles *The Night Walker* from 1964 co-starring her ex-husband Robert Taylor and written by *Psycho* novelist Robert Bloch.

As with a lot of Golden Age stars, especially female leads, Stanwyck went on to appear in a number of TV movies and TV series in her latter years, most notably *The Thorn Birds* from 1983 and the short-lived Dynasty spin-off, *The Colbys* (1985-1986), co-staring Charlton Heston. The series was her last onscreen appearance.

“*Just be truthful - and if you can fake that, you've got it made.*” — Barbara Stanwyck  
Stanwyck passed away on January 20, 1990, at the age of 82, from congestive heart failure and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease at Saint John's Health Center in Santa Monica, California. As she had requested no funeral service, her remains were cremated and the ashes scattered from a helicopter over Lone Pine, California, where she had made some of her Western films.