



## Dear Friend: *The Shop Around the Corner* and *In the Good Old Summertime*

When playwright Miklós László completed *Illatszertár*, it's doubtful it occurred to him that he had just written the blueprint for three Hollywood films and a Broadway musical. The play, which premiered at the Pesti Theatre in Budapest in March 1937, is a simple story examining the intertwined and volatile relationships of the employees of a small parfumerie in Budapest, including an elderly boss drawn to suicide by an affair between his wife and a young employee, and two clerks who are bitter rivals at work but have fallen in love through anonymous letters. While it is not well known today, many people will recognise its story of professional rivals who fall in love through letters from one of the adaptations: *The Shop Around the Corner* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1940); *In the Good Old Summertime* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1949); *You've Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1998); the Broadway musical, *She Loves Me* (1963) and its 1978 BBC television adaptation.

Much of the credit for the story's longevity can be given to Ernst Lubitsch, whose *The Shop Around the Corner* has provided the major inspiration for subsequent versions of the story. It is an enduring and highly-regarded film which succeeds in part because of the creativity and confidence with which it was adapted from the source, but it has also inspired re-adaptations which have yielded mixed results. Nora Ephron's *You've Got Mail* effectively does for the film what Lubitsch had done for the play, freely adapting the source to suit the author's style and another time and technology (e-mail). Robert Z. Leonard's *In the Good Old Summertime* is less imaginative, however, retaining much of the original story while tweaking plot elements and transposing it into the musical genre through the addition of songs and visual humour.

In this piece, I will concern myself with the two earlier films, both produced at MGM. Looked at in tandem, *The*

*Shop Around the Corner* and *In the Good Old Summertime* illuminate each other's achievements and flaws. The decisions taken by both sets of filmmakers in adapting their respective sources provide useful insights into the working methods of each, and the commercial contexts in which they operated.

### *The Shop Around the Corner*

Ernst Lubitsch was long an admirer of the Hungarian theatre, and it is unsurprising that he recognised the potential of *Illatszertár* almost immediately, purchasing the rights in 1938 after the property was turned down by MGM (Sabath 1979: 190). Having left Paramount the same year, Lubitsch intended to produce the film independently with Myron Selznick, using private capital and sharing the profits with screenwriter Samson Raphaelson (Raphaelson 1983: 269). Lubitsch and Raphaelson produced a script, *The Shop Around the Corner*, but when their plans fell through it found its way back to MGM where Lubitsch agreed to produce and direct the film as part of a two-picture deal which included *Ninotchka* (1939) (*Variety* 16 November 1938: 3).

The setting of *Illatszertár* was familiar to Lubitsch. He had worked as an assistant in his father's haberdashery as a young man, and had explored the subject in some of his earliest films.<sup>1</sup> In the early 1930s, he collaborated with *Grand Hotel* novelist Vicki Baum on a similar idea to be set in a department store, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that his work on the unfinished project laid part of the foundation for *The Shop Around the Corner*; Lubitsch described it as '*Grand Hotel* in miniature' and the phrase '*Grand Hotel* in a shop' was employed in publicity material.

A film rooted in reality was just what Lubitsch needed at this point. As the decade grew old he was losing touch with

his audience. The lofty insouciance of his wealthy characters seemed out-dated next to a thriving screwball genre which celebrated the rambunctiousness and social mobility of the middle class, and the conservatism of the Production Code encouraged contemporaries such as Frank Capra and Leo McCarey to invent yet more creative ways of keeping sex under the radar. Lubitsch's first real attempt at a screwball comedy, *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* (1938), was met with mixed reviews. As some began to question his ability to gauge the attitudes of depression-era audiences, Lubitsch acknowledged, 'No one used to care how characters made their living [...]. Now they do care. They want their stories tied up to a life. [...] Now he [the hero] must have a job [...] or else the fact that he doesn't work becomes the most important thing about him' (Paul 1987: 163).

As in the play, the film's predominant concern is the shifting relationships between the employees of the shop, here a leather goods store rather than a parfumerie. The central character, Alfred Kralik (James Stewart), must simultaneously repair a disintegrating father-son relationship with store owner Mr Matuschek (Frank Morgan) and take control of a volatile romance with co-worker Klara Novak (Margaret Sullavan), with whom he has unwittingly fallen in love through letters in which they refer to each other as 'Dear Friend'. Additionally, another employee, Vadas (Joseph Schildkraut), must have his comeuppance for an affair with Matuschek's wife, while Pepi (William Tracy) hustles his way up the career ladder from delivery boy to clerk.

*The Shop Around the Corner* was the seventh collaboration between Lubitsch and Samson Raphaelson. Raphaelson was often undervalued as a contributor to Lubitsch's work, portrayed more as a cypher for Lubitsch's genius than as a creative force in his own right, but it seems fair to say that their collaborations had a profound influence on Raphaelson's writing style. Initially breaking though with the self-described 'heartfelt, corny and dramatic' smash-hit *The Jazz Singer* (1927), Raphaelson discovered his ability to appeal to a more playful sensibility while working with Lubitsch on the dramatic *Broken Lullaby* (1932): 'At the time, neither he nor I suspected that I could write his kind of comedy [...]. From the first, I found that a certain kind of nonsense delighted him [...] he began actually using the stuff, to my surprise.' (1983: 24). Subsequent Broadway successes such as *Accent on Youth* (1934) and *Skylark* (1939) combined a Lubitschean frivolity and emotional detachment with the author's own witty, often self-referential style. Both plays concern characters who are entirely wrapped up in their work, but in a manner more informed by obsessive compulsion than economic necessity: in *Skylark*, the protagonist is forced to leave the advertising business when it threatens to destroy his marriage and discovers a new lease of life before he is drawn inevitably back to work. The characters are capricious, impulsive, prone to moments of spontaneous inspiration in which they plan to quit their jobs or leave their lover, before just as suddenly changing their minds again. These glib epiphanies are a far cry from the relentless pragmatism to which the characters of *The Shop Around the Corner* must adhere. In that world, even small acts of defiance or petulance are swiftly quashed as the real-world consequences are realised. With Lubitsch's guidance, the metaphysical restlessness which afflicts the characters in Raphaelson's plays becomes subsumed into the business of real life.

It is surely indicative of Lubitsch's working methods that all of his 1930s' films were based on plays, operettas, or novels. Like contemporaries John Ford and Howard Hawks,

Lubitsch seldom took writing credit on his films but was always heavily involved in the process, and the act of adaptation seems to have particularly suited his creative mind. Part of his directorial signature was his ability to compress time and events into visual devices, such as clocks, dinner plates or seasonal window displays, and it is feasible that such devices came more easily to him when they were necessitated by the adaptation of dialogue-heavy plays. Though *The Shop Around the Corner* does not display the kind of overt stylisation which characterised his earlier films, there are instances throughout where long dialogue scenes from the play have been pared down to the barest essentials (and imbued with wit in the process). Take this instance in the play, in which family man Sipos discusses his attitude towards work:

Sipos: Milli dear, when you're as old as I am and have family responsibilities, you apologize even when you've been insulted. And don't think it's cowardice ... it's because circumstances leave you no choice. And when you come to think of it ... what does it matter? In India thousands of people die of famine every day ... In China they ambush one another and pop one another off ... Now add to that ... that in a Parfumerie on Vaci Street in Budapest, the capital city of Hungary, Mr. Miklos Hammerschmidt, the boss called Mr. Lajos Sipos, the clerk, a thief ... so what? (László 1936)

The equivalent passage in the film (spoken by Pirovitch (Felix Bressart)) is far more compelling for its brevity and neat pay-off: 'The other day he called me an idiot. What could I do? I said, "Yes, Mr Matuschek, I'm an idiot." I'm no fool.'

Lubitsch clearly had no qualms when it came to reshaping theatre to suit the demands of cinema and he was not averse to making large structural changes. When adapting Noël Coward's *Design for Living* in 1933, Lubitsch stated, 'The cinema should not talk about events in the past. [...] I must show these things, but in their proper order' (Eyman 1993: 210). Lubitsch does just that in *The Shop Around the Corner*, adding an opening scene which introduces us to the characters and allows more time to develop their relationships. When Hammerschmidt is introduced in *Illatszertár* he is already consumed with jealousy towards Horvath, wrongly suspecting him of an affair with Mrs Hammerschmidt; Mr Matuschek has no such emotions when the film begins – perhaps just the barest hint of insecurity when he inquires whether Kralik enjoyed an evening spent in the company of him and his wife. In the play, Amalia already works in the shop, and does not appear until after Hammerschmidt has fired Horvath for supposed insubordination: she bursts into the scene in a fit of rage towards Horvath, with whom she has a history of quarrelling. The film introduces Klara sooner, as a vulnerable, unemployed shop-girl desperate to find a position. Clearly in dire economic straits, her timidity is such that she allows Kralik to peddle his sales pitch before she reveals her true intentions, causing some embarrassment on his part. As a 'meet cute' this is effectively understated, allowing a moment of empathy that is not coloured by their later antipathy. It is this moment that hints to us that, though they are soon fighting on the shop floor, there might be some chemistry. In *Illatszertár*, it is left to Sipos to remark that Horvath and Amalia's bickering may be driven by an underlying attraction – a clear violation of the movie maxim 'show, don't tell' that informs much of Lubitsch's restructuring.

While the 'Dear Friend' storyline was secondary to the store owner's marital problems in *Illatszertár*, here it is equally – if not more – prominent. We only become aware of the letter-writing after Horvarth is fired in *Illatszertár*, but we are just two scenes into *The Shop Around the Corner* when we find Kralik reading one of the letters to Pirovitch (Felix Bressart). Whereas the play offers us only a glimpse into the correspondence (a small passage about Horvarth loving Amalia like Knut Hamsun's Victoria), the film sprinkles passages throughout, giving us a sense of the characters' aspirations and ideals. Most importantly, Lubitsch and Raphaelson add a set-piece that has come to define the story and its adaptations, as the anonymous correspondents agree to meet in a café, only for the man to discover that the woman of his dreams is his hated co-worker.

The scene is not present in *Illatszertár*. Though Horvarth and Amalia have a similar date planned, we learn the following day that Amalia was stood up. She arrives at work feeling sickly and vulnerable, and this leads to an argument with Horvarth, who accuses her of being unlovable. Furious, she uses his letters to prove that she is capable of being loved, thus revealing herself as 'Dear Friend' (or 'Box 314', as he refers to her). The moment is played for surprise value; after their angry confrontation, Horvarth is floored at the implication that Amalia is in love with him without realising it. A subsequent exchange with a confused Sipos exploits the comic absurdity of the situation: 'She loves me.' 'Balash loves you?' 'Personally no, but basically yes.'

Though Raphaelson remembered in later years that 'Not one line of dialogue [from *Illatszertár*] coincides with the film' (Weinberg 1968: 231), some of the lines used in this confrontation scene do find their way into *The Shop Around the Corner* (evidence, perhaps, of Lubitsch's handiwork, given Raphaelson also claimed Lubitsch would not allow him to read the original play, to avoid any obligation to faithfulness [1983: 24]). Horvarth's accusations that Amalia has red hands and is 'cold and unpleasant like an old maid' are also used by Kralik against Klara. However, their argument has been re-framed within a sequence that lends it much greater poignancy and demonstrates Lubitsch and Raphaelson's talent for building emotionally-charged comic vignettes.

In Lubitsch's version, the man's realisation that he has been writing to his co-worker occurs before the argument. Their encounter is underpinned by the gloomy development that precedes it: Kralik has lost his job and can barely bring himself to face the woman he had hoped to marry. Having decided to break the date with a note, Kralik waits outside the café while Pirovitch tries to identify his date through the window, comically imbuing every detail with great import ('Kralik ... she's dunking') and struggling when it comes to explaining her identity ('If you don't like Miss Novak, you definitely won't like her'). It ends with a note of sadness, however: as Kralik peers through the window to confirm the revelation we see his shoulders drop in disappointment, and when he turns back it is with a sad, soft countenance that he elects to leave her waiting.

Following Kralik's departure, we find Klara alone inside the café, similarly inconsolable. A sympathetic waiter attempts to cheer her with a story about a similar girl who was stood up by an unimpressed blind date. It clearly has the opposite effect: the juxtaposition of the waiter's tactlessness with Klara's insecurity acts as a bleakly comic exchange, temporarily distracting Klara from loneliness before leaving her in an even greater state of despair. Her solitude is interrupted once more when Kralik has second thoughts

and returns to the café to meet her. It is a scene that, as we shall see with *In the Good Old Summertime*, could easily be played for laughs throughout. But here Lubitsch and the performers find the humour as small eddies in the melancholy coursing through the scene. George Toles has written of how Lubitsch's film has 'A persistent atmosphere of loneliness, whose ache is only fitfully relieved' (2010: 1). This is one such instance in which disappointments are thrown into relief by small moments of comedy.

The scene begins in an unhappily tactful manner, with Kralik's attempts to extend an olive branch politely rebuffed by a preoccupied Klara. His increasingly desperate efforts to placate her only succeed in making her more frustrated, resulting in her firmly asking him to leave. In a more dramatic rendering of the scene, this could be a cue for Kralik to try a greater sincerity, or to cruelly utilise his superior knowledge, but Lubitsch allows him a sly ingenuity: he pretends to leave, instead taking the seat directly behind Klara's, as if he imagines he can smuggle his goodwill in from behind. The image of the two quarrelling characters sitting adjacent to each other but facing in opposite directions is a delightful comic shorthand that is so effective it is echoed in every subsequent adaptation (even in publicity material for *You've Got Mail*).

This movement by Kralik is completely spontaneous and he continues to improvise his approach, unsure of the best way to get Klara on his side. This makes for an unpredictable exchange which threatens to turn spiteful at any moment. Kralik's efforts continue to annoy Klara, who attempts to provoke him by responding to his attempted geniality with the suggestion, 'I suppose you love me?' Kralik's turned back allows him to feign a bemused indifference – 'Why should I? What have you done to make me love you?' – as if he too simply wants to sit undisturbed at his table. A band striking up 'Ochi Chernye' ignites a shared memory of their first meeting, providing a stormily romantic counterpoint to their childish bickering. Kralik now settles comfortably into the role of antagonist, as if the music has transformed the exchange into an enjoyable verbal tango. He attempts to make light of the trivialities which comprise the rivalry between the two, dressing up his retorts in consciously emphasised formalities: 'I'd like to take this opportunity, Miss Novak, to inform you that I don't walk like a duck and I am not bowlegged'. Klara plays along with the mock seriousness of his statement, feigning an astonished 'Aren't you? Well I have information to the contrary'.

But just as it seems the two might be warming to this verbal sparring, Klara seems to side with the philandering Vadas, aggravating Kralik to reclaim the seat opposite her





and escalate the argument. He accuses her of being ‘Cold and snippy like an old maid’, and for a second the barbed humour with which they trade petty insults threatens to turn nasty. Klara’s pride won’t allow it, however, and she instantly responds, as Amalia did, that she has letters proving otherwise, written by a man ‘So superior to you that it isn’t even funny’. For a moment, Kralik’s face registers the supreme irony of this remark, but before we have a chance to savour the absurdity of this predicament, she intensifies the statement by calling him a ‘Little, insignificant clerk’. The comic tension that has built through the exchange swiftly evaporates, as Klara cuts through the charged bickering to expose the existential insecurity which Kralik had attempted to leave at the café door.



The shot choices emphasise the cruelty of this moment. The meeting is mostly filmed in lengthy two-shots, with only two occasions when Lubitsch switches to close-up, shot / reverse-shot cutting. Both of these are instances when Klara insults Kralik, and the manner in which they pierce into the rhythm of the scene emphasises how deeply her barbs are felt. Both occasions end with a close-up of Kralik’s wounded look, so that we leave with his reaction and not hers as our abiding memory. When he finally exits, the only insight we gain into Klara’s true feelings is so fleeting that it would be easy to miss. Lubitsch switches back to two-shot and, as Kralik stands up, hurt by her evaluation of him as a ‘Little, insignificant clerk’, an expression of anxious remorse flashes across her face. As he turns to say goodbye it quickly sets again into affected pride.

This delicate interplay between moments of comedy and sadness which makes this scene so affecting is entirely of Lubitsch and Raphaelson’s invention. It is a scene which feels essential: the impression is not of a scene imposed onto the original story, but rather moulded out of it, its elements twisted and re-shaped so that they are given new narrative purpose. The changes allow Lubitsch to explore the characters more fully, to find new depths in their interaction. In *Illatszertár*, Horvarth aggravates Amalia out of blithe ignorance – his antipathy motivated by superiority rather than insecurity and seeming cruel given her fragile state (‘We can manage without you for a few days. This is not an insult. I’m a man and you’re a girl. A man is always a better worker, especially if a girl has a cold’). Here, Kralik’s discovery of her identity, and Klara’s dismissal of him, are a devastating blow to his sense of self-worth. He ends up hurting Klara against his better instincts, driven by disappointment at finding her in the place of his romantic ideal. The effect is less bitter than bittersweet, crystallising

the paradox explored in the film’s second half: Kralik is able to perceive both the ‘Cold and snippy’ co-worker he has been fighting with and – at a stretch – the ‘Beautiful thoughts’ within. Kralik is able to explore these contradictory feelings by visiting a sickly Klara in her home the following day.

Like the café rendezvous, this scene has survived all subsequent adaptations as a crucial turning point in the central relationship. Unlike that scene, it is without precedent in the play, though it follows the general narrative thrust of Horvarth utilising a superior knowledge to win Amalia’s affections. While the café scene is the first time that Kralik has considered any romantic feelings towards Klara, this is the first time she has seen him as anything



other than an adversary. The tone is therefore much more upbeat, but a similar editing technique is used to make the point. The scene takes place in Klara’s bedroom and is again played primarily in two-shot: Kralik’s tall, mobile figure often dominates the screen whilst Klara’s small, tired body remains motionless under the bed sheets. Again Lubitsch cuts in to alternating close-ups to highlight the more pointed exchanges, but this time the final close-up is of Klara, pleasantly surprised at finding unexpected poetry in Kralik’s description of a wallet as ‘Quite romantic’, but adamant that a cigarette box would make a more suitable Christmas present for her ‘Friend’. This time it is Kralik’s reaction that we are left to discover in long shot – a short, wry smile as he concedes defeat on the matter – which sets this moment in contrast to the more melancholy resolution of the café scene.

The final major change in the ‘Dear Friend’ story is the resolution. In *Illatszertár*, Horvarth never reveals the truth to Amalia, preferring to build on the renewed geniality between them to develop a more grounded relationship. Lubitsch similarly recognises their real-life relationship as more meaningful than that forged in writing, but where László left the postal romance unresolved, Lubitsch successfully undercuts it in the final act by implying that there is a certain naivety, even hypocrisy, in their letters, by having Kralik tell Klara that the man of her dreams is in fact a chubby, balding, unemployed miser. ‘Are your eyes blue, are they brown?’ Klara writes early on. ‘What does it matter as long as our minds meet?’ Her horror at hearing Kralik’s less than flattering description suggests it matters at least a little, and when he finally reveals himself, her insistence that he prove to her that he is not bow-legged before she falls gratefully into his arms indicates that even small facets of physical relationships may be more appealing than any

high-minded notions of pure romance. It is typical of Lubitsch that even in one of his most earnestly romantic films he cannot resist a touch of irony.

The 'Lubitsch touch' for which he was renowned can be characterised as a sort of directorial elegance that often employed inventive visual ellipsis and indirect exposition. It is not much in evidence in *The Shop Around the Corner*, with the notable exception of the repeatedly discounted music box in the window, which serves to show the passage of time. Michael Walker suggests that Lubitsch's habit of implying meaning is a way of avoiding emotional intensity –



*The Shop Around the Corner: Two-shot framing keeps conversations private, emphasising character relationships*

but such intensity is essential to *The Shop Around the Corner* (1987: 43). Consequently, Lubitsch's unobtrusive camerawork works differently here. In most scenes, the dramatic content is shown through flat two-shots of characters in conversation. Close-ups are used judiciously, rarely employing shot / reverse-shot cutting, except to emphasise particularly dramatic beats, as in the café and bedroom scenes. When the camera does move it is usually to follow the actors, keeping them in opposing profiles so that the framing is refreshed without distracting attention from the characters.

This use of two-shot dialogues to convey the most important information has the effect of emphasising personal relationships and the privateness of individual exchanges. In one scene, Pirovitch is featured in a two-shot with Kralik as he muses that Mr Matuschek may be having marital troubles. It cuts to a medium shot of an interested Vadas, and the camera tracks with him as he walks over to join the pair – prompting Kralik to leave in disgust and thereby establishing a new two-shot. After Pirovitch refuses to be drawn on the matter with Vadas, it cuts to Kralik across the store, and Pirovitch enters the frame to restart their conversation. The decision not to allow the three to share the frame together emphasises the privateness of both exchanges and establishes that Pirovitch has quite different relationships with each party, an implication that might have been lost had all three figures been allowed to share the long shot.

The flatness and simplicity of the shots can be seen as articulating the relationships of all the characters. Only rarely does Lubitsch place the figures on different planes and when he does it is notably when the characters have different knowledge levels: Kralik peering at Klara through the window of the café; Kralik at the back of the bedroom watching Klara read his letter; and Kralik leading Klara around the store as he spins an elaborate fantasy about 'Dear Friend'. Even Mr Matuschek enjoys few privileges as far as the mise-en-scène is concerned, and the fact that Lubitsch most often prefers to situate players on the same plane of action may indicate a desire to emphasise the fundamental equality of the characters, regardless of workplace hierarchy.

The film's engagement with middle-class working life is singular for its time. Contemporary films with a workplace setting more often feature it incidentally, as a backdrop for some other romantic or personal fulfilment. In *The Shop Around the Corner*, by contrast, all of the action either takes place on the shop floor or can be seen as a product of the characters' working lives. Mr Matuschek's eventual redemption is a case in point, demonstrating the social and spiritual benefits with which Lubitsch has endowed the working environment. When he eventually gives up his wife and returns to the shop it is not as a retreat from real life, but as a homecoming: 'This is my home,' he tells the employees. 'This is where I spent most of my life.' Hammerschmidt, his counterpart in *Illatszertár*, makes the same admission, but with regret, acknowledging that his work has come to dominate his life, even to the point where it excuses his wife's infidelity. For him there is no redemption, only the sad admission that, as an old man, he has no other option. Lubitsch, though, makes a point of establishing the workplace as a beneficial social unit, able to provide emotional support just as much as the family, with Pepi's promotion to clerk after saving Mr Matuschek's life also demonstrating the social mobility and self-fulfilment it can accommodate. Even Klara and Kralik, who refuse to define themselves solely in terms of their work, appear to

accept the happiness and comfort that a stable job can provide.

*The Shop Around the Corner* was roundly praised by contemporary critics for its humane value system and light observational touch, and this sentiment remains intact. In a recent piece, Kent Jones praises the film's 'frank acknowledgment of human fallibility in the workplace' (2009: 50), while George Toles' analysis of the performances demonstrates how the actors 'divest themselves of the properties of specialness' (2010: 3) in order to inhabit a naturalistic milieu. Modern discussion tends to focus on the film's ability to capture the smallest of human emotions and its articulation of the petty jealousies and minor triumphs of working life. Many of these details are inventions of Lubitsch or Raphaelson not even suggested in the source material and the fact that they have become emblematic of the film's meaning is indicative of Lubitsch's extraordinary capacity to re-purpose existing material to his own ends. It is no mean feat: as we shall discover, the next adaptation of the film would be rather more circumspect in its reimagining of the story.

### *In the Good Old Summertime*

It took just nine years for MGM to tackle the story again, but the intervening period was long enough to see substantial change at the studio. Since the death of producer Irving Thalberg in 1936, studio head Louis B. Mayer had presided over an executive committee which oversaw all production and gradually developed a formula for turning out star-based vehicles which were heavily influenced by his more sentimental approach to filmmaking. Though Mayer did allow some filmmakers the creative freedom that Lubitsch enjoyed in 1940 – Arthur Freed's musical unit flourished creatively throughout this period and Albert Lewin wrote and directed a series of successful highbrow pictures – he was less concerned with prestige, as Thalberg and David O'Selznick had been, than with producing wholesome family films with strong commercial appeal to middle America. Though MGM's gross revenues had remained steady, profits had declined rapidly and, by 1948, were less than half what they had been in 1940 when *The Shop Around the Corner* was released (Schatz 1999: 462–465). It was clear that the studio would have to substantially reduce negative costs to remain competitive. Speaking at their 1949 sales meeting, Mayer announced that 'our entire efforts now are directed at producing the finest motion pictures at the most reasonable costs' (*Variety* 9 February 1949: 15).

It is unsurprising that's a culture that had become so fiscally and creatively conservative under Mayer's watch should produce abundant remakes, with the combination of proven formulas and decreased development time making them relatively low-risk propositions. Many of MGM's remakes were musicals; the addition, or updating, of songs and Technicolor production (standard practice for MGM musicals by this point), provided a saleable justification for revisiting the source material. Examples included *Easy to Wed* (Edward Buzzell, 1946), *Good News* (Charles Walters, 1947), *Summer Holiday* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1948) and *Nancy Goes to Rio* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1950). As with *In the Good Old Summertime*, neither *Easy to Wed* nor *Summer Holiday* started life as musicals. Their adaptation is symptomatic of MGM's reliance on the musical as something of a brand signifier around this time, with the lavishness of its high-end musical product and the critical and commercial success of Freed films such as *Meet Me in St Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944) and *On the Town* (Gene Kelly and

Stanley Donen, 1949) ultimately reflecting well on all the studio's output.

MGM's musical units operated semi-autonomously within the studio, under the supervision of producers Freed, Jack Cummings and Joe Pasternak. Pasternak was, and remains, in the shadow of his more acclaimed colleague Freed, but maintained an impressive commercial track record in his day.<sup>2</sup> He had originally developed *In the Good Old Summertime* as 'The Girl from Chicago' (in fact *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* reportedly started life as 'In the Good Old Summertime', suggesting that the title may have been a hand-me-down), and assigned directorial duties to MGM stalwart Robert Z. Leonard, whose accomplished career included two Academy Award nominations for Best Director but who has since failed to accrue any great plaudits.

In order to accommodate the change of genre, the setting became a Chicago music shop in an era when sheet music would be demoed by sales assistants, giving ample leeway for the inclusion of musical numbers. The 'Dear Friend' story remains largely the same, with Andrew (Van Johnson) and Veronica (Judy Garland) now the feuding lovers, but the troubled Mr Matuschek is replaced by the altogether more comical Mr Oberkugen (S.Z. Sakall), whose only real worries appear to be the condition of his prized violin and his inability to sell harps.

In terms of commercial appeal, *In the Good Old Summertime* perhaps owed less to its association with *The Shop Around the Corner* than to its similarities with *Meet Me in St Louis*, with the relocation of the action from Budapest to turn of the century Chicago ensuring it shared the same period costumes and old-fashioned charm ("In the Good Old Summertime" is compared to "Meet Me in St Louis" in previews, it's that good!" boasted an MGM trade ad in *Variety*). But where the earlier film had based its appeal more on its rich visual style and evocative story world than its simple plot, *In the Good Old Summertime* could rely more heavily on story appeal, drawing as it did from Lubitsch and Raphaelson's well-crafted script. And while Freed had relied on a mixture of rearranged standards and original music, the soundtrack to *In the Good Old Summertime* was almost entirely assembled from existing period songs – each inserted as a clearly delineated performance quite apart from the narrative, not the spontaneous bursts of personal expression that had characterised *Meet Me in St Louis*.

This lack of strongly integrated musical numbers may be attributable to the difficulty of re-envisioning *The Shop Around the Corner* in a more modern musical form. Rather than the music propelling the narrative, there is more often a sense that plot machinations are introduced merely to slip more songs in: Andrew's delay in delivering Oberkugen's violin serves as an excuse to showcase two more Judy Garland numbers with no significance outside of their own virtuosity. The film also imports multiple performances from classically trained violinist Marcia Van Dyke into the plot – but her inclusion is managed more organically, as she is integrated as a potential love interest for Andrew and provides a resolution to the violin subplot.

This is not to say that the music serves no narrative purpose, as some of the songs serve to reflect the emotional states of the characters. Veronica's heartfelt rendition of the standard 'Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland' evokes the fanciful relationship she is cultivating with 'Dear Friend' and the gradual arrangement of admiring staff around her performance forms her initiation into the group. Later, Andrew's sudden increase of tempo in accompanying her 'Put



Your Arms Around Me Honey' on piano becomes a challenge to prove that she can be as feisty as she is wistful, and the ensuing energy provides perhaps the earliest spark of physical chemistry between the two. There was an additional musical number excluded from the final cut: the comparatively modern 'Last Night When We Were Young'. A Garland favourite, this was intended to be sung after the disastrous restaurant rendezvous, as a broken-hearted Veronica reads an old letter in bed, and if included would have been one of only two contemporary musical numbers in the film and the only one to be presented purely as unselfconscious personal expression. Its eventual rejection, supposedly because it was too sombre in tone for a light-hearted romantic comedy (Fricke 2010: 273), could indicate that Pasternak's disregard of Freed's formal innovations was due more to personal taste than a failure of imagination.

The casting of the spirited Garland alongside the easy-going Van Johnson demonstrated a re-adjustment in the treatment of the two leads. Margaret Sullavan's nervous, wide-eyed Klara is a model of insecurity when first introduced, and it is only through her interactions with Kralik that we learn her vulnerability is what leads to her outward argumentativeness. Veronica is far more self-possessed and her search for work at the beginning of the film does not come from desperation, but determination. In an original scene, she cheerily confesses to her aunt, 'I don't think [Mr Larkin] likes me at all'. The acknowledgment of the tension between the two immediately makes her more sympathetic; where Klara might at first seem unlikeable, Veronica is simply 'unliked'.

George Toles asserts that *The Shop Around the Corner* is 'everywhere concerned with the contest between theatrical impulses and "unwanted" ordinariness in the characters' self-inflating performance of their lives' (2010: 1). Garland's performance does not reveal the same tension: 'theatrical impulses' are not so much succumbed to as embraced, through the many musical numbers showcasing her talent. Veronica is typical Garland – in equal parts wistful and strong-willed – and her ordinariness is not 'unwanted', but a component of the plucky girl-next-door image Garland had cultivated over many years. Veronica's insistence on referring to her work as a 'job' rather than a 'Poh-zish-ion' reveals her to be grounded and unpretentious – the only inflation comes in her over-romanticised ideas about 'Dear Friend'. This too is part of Garland's persona: the story's central theme of the conflict between an imagined perfect romance and the more complex struggles of reality is familiar from her roles in films such as *Meet Me in St Louis* and *The Pirate* (Vincente Minnelli 1948).

In *The Good Old Summertime*'s more theatrical bent is also revealed through a greater emphasis on physical comedy. Buster Keaton was then working for MGM as a gag man, and had been asked by Leonard to find a credible way of accidentally destroying a violin. Realising that only Keaton could perform the gag, Leonard gave him the role of Mr Oberkugen's nephew, Hickey. Characteristically inventive, Keaton took every opportunity he could to incorporate moments of comedy into his performance; a casual viewer might miss his turn in the background of the opening scene, in which he sneaks away from the other characters in unsuccessful pursuit of a pretty girl. Keaton also contributed other gags to the film, most notably the meet cute, in which Andrew literally bumps into Veronica outside the post office and for which he coached the two actors extensively. In Lubitsch's hands the first meeting between the pair had been a dialogue scene requiring the actors to shift carefully between tact, pity, envy and calculated survival tactics, but

here it becomes a slickly choreographed slapstick scene involving the escalating destruction of Garland's extravagant costume, and it is the earliest sign of the filmmakers' determination to treat the story more comically than Lubitsch.



Other moments of poignancy are transformed into broad humour. In *The Shop Around the Corner*, the discrepancy between the characters' romantic ideals and the actuality is never the subject of ridicule, aside from the obvious irony of the male character finding that he is competing against himself. Kralik's yearning for a 'Lovely, average girl', not 'Too beautiful' reveals a self-awareness about the folly of excessive romanticism, but this is not shared by Veronica, who, in preparing for her meeting with 'Dear Friend', declares that he is certain to be 'Tall and dark and terribly, terribly handsome ... and sort of sad'. The absurdity of her description is underlined by a dissolve to the fair-haired Andrew looking decidedly unhappy as he pulls on a starched shirt.

Even where the film borrows liberally from Raphaelson's script there is a change in emphasis which sets a different tone. The café scene – a restaurant here – is a case in point. Though it follows the same trajectory as the earlier scene, both the performance and staging reveal a less delicate sensibility, with the conflict between the two characters played much more broadly. From the outset, it is clear that Andrew's motivations differ from Kralik's: as he gazes through the window he displays not compassion, but mischievousness, and the gleeful smile with which he abandons his carnation in the snow demonstrates that he has some appreciation of the humour of the situation. Unlike Kralik, he has not lost his job, and he is well aware that his superior knowledge of the situation gives him the upper hand. His initial advances to Veronica are not as tentative and respectful as Kralik's – rather he is self-assured and somewhat blasé. Their repartee lacks the cruelty of Klara and Kralik's; Veronica echoes the idea that his heart is akin to a broken cigarette lighter (a 'broken metronome' in this case), but stops short of calling Andrew an 'Insignificant little clerk', settling for the decidedly more playful 'Counter jumper'. Here, Leonard only employs close-ups at the scene's beginning as a calculating Andrew weighs up the situation in the face of a defensive Veronica. The exchanges of hurtful comments for which Lubitsch had reserved his close-ups are now played in two-shots (although, this may be attributable to editor Adrienne Fazan – Leonard likely wielded less influence over the final cut than Lubitsch, given their relative status and the changes in studio management in



intervening years). The staging also echoes the change in tone. Where Lubitsch allowed the couple a private corner of the café, unbothered by other patrons, Andrew and Veronica's confrontation plays out in the middle of a busy restaurant, with background onlookers visibly enjoying the proceedings and both characters consciously tempering their histrionics to avoid embarrassment. The fragile emotions and bruised egos of the original have mutated into light farce and the scene ends not with a heart-breaking put-down, but with a moment of visual humour in which Andrew leaves with his trousers pulled up to his knees, publicly refuting any suggestion that he is bow-legged, much to Veronica's embarrassment. It is typical of a film in which opportunities for emotional engagement are so often raised merely to be side-lined again in favour of spectacle and triviality.

Leonard's direction is only partly responsible for this shift. The director employs many of the same staging decisions as Lubitsch, shooting a good chunk of the film in two-shot – even to the point where some scenes (like Oberkugen approaching in the background when Andrew refuses Veronica's request to speak to him) are almost identically staged. However, he is also more willing to pull the camera back and allow several characters to populate the frame. The preference for group shots emphasises the more familial bond between the employees, making them less prone to the petty arguments and rivalries of Matuschek and Company. When Matuschek berates his staff for their unwillingness to stay late, Lubitsch plays almost all of the scene in close-up on Matuschek, ending in a two-shot with Kralik as he focuses his anger. In Leonard's version, Oberkugen is



pictured with the rest of the staff grouped around him. Here, his anger is really nothing more than bluff, and the decision to allow the staff to share the frame around him demonstrates the comparative lack of threat he represents and the unity that this allows the more relaxed employees.

Much of the lightening in tone can be attributed to Goodrich and Hackett's script, likely under an adaptation strategy suggested by Pasternak. However, the patchy appropriation of dialogue from the original film – some passages copied verbatim while others are ignored – means that jokes in the film become orphaned. Oberkugen informing Veronica that there is no such word as 'impossible' in his shop is included, but the punchline of him telling her that getting a job is 'impossible' seconds later is missed. Likewise, a line from the final scene, 'Psychologically I'm very confused, but personally I feel just wonderful', has been appropriated without including the earlier set-up in which Klara had spoken of being 'Psychologically mixed-up' on finding herself attracted to Kralik. Seen without prior knowledge, these inconsistencies are not problematic, but when the film is viewed in light of *The Shop Around the Corner* there is always a sense that we are watching an echo of a superior work – as if the film is haunted by the memory of the original.

The scene in which Kralik / Andrew questions Pirovitch / Hanson on the cost of living for a man and his wife is a good example. When performed by Stewart and Bressart, the sketch is a perfect study of comic timing, with each performance pitched to find just the right beat in every line, but in the hands of Van Johnson and Clinton Sundberg the dynamic is significantly changed. In *The Shop Around the*





*Corner*, the scene begins with Kralik taking Pirovitch aside to ask him a personal question. Pirovitch is smoking a cigar and reading the newspaper when Kralik reveals that he is planning to ask for a raise. Immediately intrigued, Pirovitch pauses both activities and follows Kralik as he walks a few paces from the shop. 'Suppose a fellow like me wants to get married', starts Kralik. Pirovitch's eyes light up: 'Why that's wonderful! That's the best thing that could have happened to you!' Kralik is immediately defensive, raising a hand to prevent Pirovitch from interrupting with congratulations. He gets to the point: 'How much would it cost you to live? You and Mrs Pirovitch. Leaving out the children.' Pirovitch looks up with a sympathetic smile – 'Well, why fool yourself?' – and then lets out a delighted giggle and snort at the implications of this remark. Kralik presses the issue and Pirovitch assumes a serious face, chewing an invisible piece of tobacco: 'Well, it can be done ... yes, and very nicely'. He turns back to the store as he considers the matter, then suddenly pirouettes: 'Naturally, you can't be extravagant'. Kralik mirrors his movement so that he now occupies the opposite side of the frame, turning sideways as Pirovitch assumes a more open pose. The re-staging draws the focus towards Bressart's performance. As the questioning continues, Pirovitch is increasingly animated, shaking his head and waving his cigar as he tries to comprehend Kralik's thinking. Kralik is now standing quite still, with Stewart putting minimal emphasis on his lines, essentially feeding Bressart with set-ups.

Kralik: Well, suppose a fellow gets an apartment with three rooms – a dining room, bedroom, living room?

Pirovitch: [in disbelief] Three rooms? What do you need three rooms for? You live in the bedroom. [...]

Kralik: Well, where do you entertain?

Pirovitch: Entertain? What are you an ambassador? Who do you want to entertain? Listen, if someone is really your friend, he comes after dinner.

Pirovitch puts the cigar back in his mouth and turns to the paper as if to say that this is his final word on the subject. The scene is Pirovitch's, his enthusiasm for working-man's pragmatism puncturing a hole in Kralik's 'lofty' aspirations. Kralik gets the last word by rejecting Pirovitch's advice, but the boldness with which Pirovitch has challenged his pre-conceptions makes for a spiky comic confrontation.

The scene plays out in slightly abridged form in *In the Good Old Summertime*. Andrew and Rudy (Clinton Sundberg) are in the cloakroom getting ready for work.



When Andrew remarks, 'Rudy, this is gonna be a big day in my life', Rudy does not react but continues to put away his coat – so Andrew directly asks, 'Say, Rudy ... you mind if I ask you a personal question?' Although assenting, Rudy continues folding his scarf. 'Suppose a fellow like me wants to get married ...'. Rudy seems momentarily surprised, then beams and says, 'Oh congratulations'. His reaction lacks the verve with which Pirovitch rounds on his friend Kralik when faced with the same revelation. Andrew looks briefly exasperated, but doesn't assume a defensive position as Kralik did. The same line of questioning about dining rooms and entertaining is pursued – but the delivery is very different. Although Sundberg plays Rudy with a vaguely European drawl, his intonation is softer with a downward inflection – he seems almost disappointed by Andrew's enthusiasm. Sundberg's delivery lacks the hawkish precision with which Bressart finds the right beats in every line. Unlike Pirovitch, Rudy does not seem astounded by the audacity of entertaining guests, but has a hint of sarcasm in his voice at the line about being an ambassador. This line coincides with Leonard employing a similar re-staging trick to Lubitsch's, but where Lubitsch's camera movement gave Pirovitch the limelight to outline his philosophy, here the cut to a longer shot clashes with the delivery of the punch-line: Andrew moves across the frame obscuring our view of Rudy and forcing Rudy to turn and follow. The line lacks the finality of Bressart's delivery – which is unsurprising as the conversation doesn't stop there but continues along different lines. Indeed, throughout the exchange both actors are busy with other bits of business, folding coats, rolling up sleeves and so on. Whereas Pirovitch's activities had been halted by Kralik's request for advice, here neither of them seem to see the exchange as important enough to stop what they're doing. Rather than a lively exchange in which a supporting character offers a devastating challenge to the preconceptions of the lead, the scene plays as a good-natured but largely inconsequential conversation, lacking the emotional charge found between Kralik and Pirovitch.

Perhaps the most obvious signifier of the tonal changes that colour the whole film – diverging significantly from the source – is the rewriting of Mr Matuschek's character so that his tragically failing marriage becomes Mr Oberkugen's misplaced violin. Though Oberkugen shares some of the characteristics of Matuschek – his irascibility and mercurial nature – he is spared the indignity and personal pain to which the latter was subjected. Unmarried, Oberkugen enjoys a youthful romance with an employee, Nellie (Spring Byington) and they are engaged by the film's end. The



jealous hatred of Kralik that Matuschek nurtured is replaced by a comic misunderstanding in which Andrew endangers Oberkugen's Stradivarius violin, his most treasured possession. The nadir of the earlier storyline had been Matuschek's attempted suicide, which Lubitsch had placed off-screen to soften its macabre overtones. Here it is a highly visible moment of slapstick comedy in which Hickey destroys a violin that Oberkugen believes to be his own. Though the change of genre to musical comedy necessitates some alteration of the suicide storyline, the misunderstanding that takes its place is hardly engaging enough to justify the amount of screen-time it occupies, and the dramatic weight which it carries – leading to Andrew's dismissal and threatening his relationship with Oberkugen – seems disproportionate. Whereas Matuschek's story had provided a counterpoint to the trivial arguments of Klara and Kralik, Oberkugen's tantrum is nothing more than one of many petty squabbles played out in the film.

*The Shop Around the Corner* presents Mr Matuschek's employees as a sort of loose surrogate family, but here the implication is rendered literal. Mr Oberkugen is not only engaged to one member of his staff, but also employs his nephew as another, and the opening scene establishes that the group are also part of each other's non-working lives as they meet for a picnic on their day off. Andrew's romance with Veronica is also approached from a more familial perspective. When he visits her at home, the scene is staged in Veronica's comfortable living room, rather than in the intimate space of the bedroom, with the determined Garland cutting a more self-assured figure than the frail Sullivan. As with the restaurant scene, Leonard handles close-ups and two-shots differently to Lubitsch. Whereas Lubitsch cuts into the close-ups to emphasise the actors' emotional responses and growing mutual affection, Leonard draws the focus away from the individual performances, preferring to situate them in a two-shot which hints at the characters' burgeoning affections as they sit side by side on the sofa. The romantic spark between them is not ignited by an unexpected moment of poetry, but by the ease with which Andrew handles the neighbour's baby. As he boasts of his proficiency with child-care, the two cheerfully discuss their families. The implication, as far as Veronica is concerned, is not that Andrew is a romantic idealist like Kralik, but that he is surprisingly comfortable in the role of father, and the whole scene has an air of cosy domesticity. The suggestion is cemented by the final shot of the film, obviously occurring some time after their climactic embrace, in which they stroll through the park with their own child (a young Liza Minnelli) in tow. The workplace in *The Shop Around*



*the Corner* may have been the centre of the characters' worlds, but here it is portrayed more as an extension of the family than a viable social unit on its own.

By beginning and ending with picnics in the park, the film presents the characters as fully integrated into a happy, thriving community. Discussing the film's screenwriters, Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, Markku Salmi notes that 'their dreamland families of "Summer Holiday", "Father of the Bride" and "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" represent beautifully constructed studies of wish-fulfilment communities. I am only surprised that they don't seem to have had anything to do with "Meet Me in St Louis"' (1980: 22). While the use of the happy community as a wrap-around to the story may be a common trope in Goodrich and Hackett's writing, Salmi's last comment also alludes to the extent to which they were working within a value system rooted in Louis B. Mayer's conception of virtuous American family life. This happy alignment between Mayer's outlook and that of the studios contracted personnel was clearly no accident, but the product of several years of a management system which sought to impose a unifying sensibility upon the studio product and rewarded those who succeeded in promoting it. Joseph Pasternak echoed the prevailing attitude when he boasted that 'the only messages in my films were the kind thoughts the audience took home' (Bawden 1985: 67).

## Conclusion

*In the Good Old Summertime* fulfilled the goals of its producer, gaining commercial success and favourable contemporary reaction from critics and audiences, pulling in around \$3,400,000 from a negative cost of \$1,576,635. However, whereas *The Shop Around the Corner* continues to enjoy new analyses and critical appreciations, *In the Good Old Summertime* receives no such attention, even in studies of the MGM musical. The disparity in lasting appeal can be attributed both to *In the Good Old Summertime*'s merits as a standalone film and to its status as an adaptation: none of the subsequent adaptations have credited it as a source. Composer Jerry Bock, who adapted Raphaelson's screenplay for the stage as *She Loves Me*, even remarked that 'had we seen *In the Good Old Summertime*, it would have been far less appealing to us as a project' (Lambert 2010: 110).

As discussed, it is difficult for a viewer familiar with *The Shop Around the Corner* to watch *In the Good Old Summertime* without remembering where scenes have been played better before, or noticing omissions which turn lines into non-sequiturs. While Lubitsch and Raphaelson's innovations feel organic, even crucial, to the story, many of Goodrich and Hackett's changes feel superficial or poorly integrated. In transposing the film to the musical genre, well-crafted, deftly-played scenes like the 'cost of living' exchange have been reduced to filler material to create space for musical interludes which, while charming, are not sufficiently integrated to feel like anything more than diversions. One might assume that the removal of such a major subplot as Mr Matuschek's marital breakdown and attempted suicide would have prompted a substantial restructuring of the story, but the violin subplot is neither funny enough nor engaging enough to fill the dramatic vacuum. Instead, the gaps left by this omission have simply been plugged with more frivolity, more spectacle, more farce, and the prominence of narratively irrelevant showcase numbers in the latter half of the film reveals a paucity of new ideas which leaves the characters treading water.

This 'pick and mix' approach to the adaptation fails to do what Lubitsch did so well with the play – to take complete ownership of the material and mould it and re-shape it to suit his own ends. Whereas the dramatic elements of *The Shop Around the Corner* throw its comic elements into sharp relief, the descent into frivolity of *In The Good Old Summertime* creates the feeling that nothing is really at stake. Perhaps Pasternak's audiences did take 'kind thoughts' home with them, but the manner in which his film has slipped from public view over the years suggests those thoughts did not linger. Yet the story of two 'Dear Friends' in a little shop around the corner continues to enchant, tying itself to the lives of those who stumble upon it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Die Firma Heiratet* (Carl Wilhelm 1914), *Der Stolz der Firma* (Carl Wilhelm 1914) – in which Lubitsch acted – and his directorial debut *Schuhpalast Pinkus* (1916) all feature retail settings.

<sup>2</sup> An article on Hollywood producers in *Variety* informed that, in box office terms, 'Metro's Joe Pasternak was top man – and also the busiest. He was responsible for five films released during the year. They racked up a gigantic total of \$13,850,000 – about 6% of the aggregate gross of all 1948 pix that earned \$1,500,000 or more' (*Variety* 5 January 1949: 47).