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Figuring Jewishness in George Cukor's *A Double Life*

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ABSTRACT

This study considers the ways in which Jewishness figures in the production of the 1947 film *A Double Life*, contextualized within Hollywood director George Cukor's personal experience, film oeuvre, and the post–World War II era in which it was released. Issues of cultural assimilation and discourses of gender, race, class, and ethnicity are evident in film form, content, and especially process, including casting, direction, narrative, and visual design. From the film's mobilization of blackface to its condemnation of "ethnic" femininity, this little-studied, Oscar-nominated thriller about a murderous Shakespearean actor offers valuable commentary on Jewish identity and anxieties in mid-twentieth-century America.

In *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968*, Andrew Sarris states, "It is no accident that many of [George] Cukor's characters are thespians of one form or another."[1] Such insight is echoed and extended by multiple biographers, from Gavin Lambert (1972) and Gene D. Phillips (1982) to Patrick McGilligan (1991) and Emanuel Levy (1994), who find theater and theatricality central to the director's films as well as his life. Before moving to Hollywood, the young Cukor was a hopeful actor, a stage manager, and a director in New York. Upon arrival in California, his first position was as speech coach to actors entering the new realm of talking pictures. And in films throughout his career, theatrical performance plays a significant role. Cukor is well known for his screen

 Jewish Film & New Media, Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 2013, pp. 114–138.

adaptations of Broadway shows as well as depictions of Broadway, Hollywood, and a multitude of other stages on screen.

Theatricality also figures thematically in many of the films over Cukor's long career, with particular emphasis on identity as performance. The enacting of gender offers a central example. Whether the self is a playground, as in the gender-bending romp *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935) and the camp Western *Heller in Pink Tights* (1960), or a battlefield, as in the conformist, cautionary tale *A Star Is Born* (1954), the inclusion of formally staged scenes and casting of iconoclastic stars foregrounds performativity and the social construction of identity.[2] In films with overtly theatrical settings, we find a doubling of performance, visually and thematically, of sets within sets and actors playing actors.

When we bring such emphasis into the context of Cukor's forte as an actor's director, working intensively with his stars and even, as this study will show, investing his actors in his own experiences and perspectives to provide character motivation or to control performance, the effect is perhaps best described as thematic feedback loop. Hence we might contend Patrick McGilligan does not go far enough in titling his Cukor biography *A Double Life*, arguing for a split in Cukor between public and private selves that is analogous to an actor playing a role. Instead, we might attend the *performative* life of the director and his films.

McGilligan's title is also that of an award-winning 1947 Cukor film, one in which multilayered forms of theatricality and performative doubling are central. *A Double Life* (1947) is the tale of Anthony John (Ronald Colman), an actor who invests himself too deeply in his theatrical performance of the intense title role of Shakespeare's *Othello*, opposite his ex-wife, Brita (Signe Hasso), and goes mad. His personal jealousy over Brita's fiancé, Bill Friend (Edmond O'Brien), spills over into murder, but not of his ex-wife. Instead, he kills a young waitress, Pat Kroll (Shelley Winters), whom he takes as a lover and then strangles. John's life ends when he stabs himself on stage, a truly lethal performance of Othello's suicide. Theatricality and multifaceted doubling are plainly central to the film, from its title to the ways in which performance drives the lives of the characters and the characters drive the performance. There is also the doubled love object, where the disposable waitress suffers the fate the actor cannot bring to his ex-wife.

While McGilligan persuasively argues that Cukor's films often illustrate how "show business is a sanctuary for the misfit,"[3] and Cukor did live what may in some ways be called a double life, it seems most accurate to read doubling as

part of a larger system of multiply inflected relationships and identities that feed upon and back on one another. For example, the study of closeted homosexuality that drives much of McGilligan's perspective may be interpreted as downplaying the powerful impact of Jewish/immigrant heritage. The most productive and nuanced conclusions emerge when we bring together diverse facets of Cukor's life, a layered identity performance in a Hollywood context, akin to the theatricality feedback loop of his films.

We can begin to illustrate this effect on the psychological level, significant to the study of his films, by considering the connections between Cukor's gender (in part but not exclusively as a performed indicator of his sexual orientation) and ethnicity (in this case, Jewishness). In *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (1997), Daniel Boyarin takes up this topic directly. In the book's prologue, Boyarin describes how he discovered a "gentle, nurturing masculinity in the Jewish male ideal," a figure "whom a past dominant culture (as well as those Jews who internalized its values) considers contemptible, the feminized Jewish (colonized) male."[4] Cukor's biographers and the director himself in many interviews[5] make plain he did not share Boyarin's "dual commitment to radical reclamation of traditional Jewish cultural life/practice/study and to radical reconstruction of the organization of gendered and sexual practices within our society."[6] Nevertheless, his identity—as an internalized and sometimes externalized performance that impacted his directing in complex and subtle ways—is undeniably connected to such determinants as gender, race, class, ethnicity, and nationality. In particular, Cukor distanced himself from his Jewish/immigrant heritage and from the ways in which his "ethnic" masculinity might speak to his attitudes toward and enacting of his sexual orientation. And this performative distancing is evident in the intersection of textual and extratextual elements in Cukor's production of *A Double Life*.

A plot summary of *A Double Life* makes plain its distance from active concern with questions or representations of Jewishness. Moreover, Cukor never directed films with overtly Jewish themes or central characters, nor was he concerned with social issue or political filmmaking generally. Hence no attempt is made herein to argue that *A Double Life* is in some essential way "Jewish" because Cukor was, because one of the film's co-writers (Garson Kanin) was, or because Cukor cast a Jewish actress (Shelley Winters) as an ill-fated victim in the production. Instead, this analysis shares with Michael Rogin's project in *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* the contention that social meanings

and implications of Jewishness can be found even in films "that have no explicit Jewish theme."[7]

Certainly, there is no question that Hollywood provided a hospitable atmosphere for Jews because it was largely founded and funded by Jewish Americans.[8] In no interviews does Cukor opine that his heritage impeded his success. That said, Cukor often downplayed his background, arguing religion, like sexual orientation, was "best kept to oneself."[9] McGilligan is even more direct, noting that "Jewishness could be an impediment to assimilation. The submergence of his religious background, and to a lesser extent the downplaying of and humor about his Hungarian ancestry, were part of Cukor's camouflage."[10] Surely it was no accident that Cukor's goals of achieving success and popularity with mainstream America while downplaying social strife and rejecting message films meshed perfectly with the goals of Hollywood's creators.[11]

This does not mean Cukor was unaware of anti-Semitism, however. On the contrary, keen awareness arguably affected all of early Hollywood's Jews, themselves immigrants of the Jewish Diaspora or the children thereof. In interviews throughout his middle-age to later years, Cukor repeatedly referred to the importance of being a self-made man and a non-ethnic American. For example, Cukor disliked being mistaken for fellow Jew Adolf Zukor merely because of the similarity in their (foreign) surnames. He also decried his unprepossessing looks, for male handsomeness was linked not only with Hollywood standards (for actors and all who sought the celebrity spotlight, including directors) but also with the norms of white, upper-class appearance. In addition to Zukor, Cukor was sometimes confused with Jewish producer David O. Selznick, who also wore round glasses and shared Cukor's "ethnic" features ("kinky" hair, stoutness, full lips). Weight could be taken off with effort, and Cukor's later years were leaner. The rest of his features, however, were displeasing to him and arguably hampered his ability to distance himself from the gendered, ethnic identity (and link to millions of unassimilated immigrant Eastern European Jews) that he felt detracted from his personal success story.

Such distancing is evident in his criticism of those who did not share his perspective or practices. Consider the story Cukor shared in a late-in-life interview about Columbia studio head Harry Cohn. Cohn adamantly resisted casting Jewish actress Judy Holliday in the film version of *Born Yesterday* (1950), despite her enormous success on Broadway. Cukor had cast her in one of her first Hollywood roles in *Adam's Rib* (1949) and championed her as an actress and a friend

throughout her short life. Cukor bristled when Cohn labeled her "a fat Jewish broad," despite the fact that Cohn himself was Jewish. "That didn't matter," said Cukor. "He was still a bigot."[12]

The overt anti-Semitism of which Cukor accuses Cohn is less typical of Jewish attitudes toward identifiable manifestations of Jewishness in Hollywood than a general tendency to downplay Jewishness throughout the classic period (1930–1960). During the silent era, Jewish imagery and subjects flourished, from ghetto melodramas to Hebrew Bible epics. Lester Friedman identifies "approximately 319 features with recognizable Jewish characters" between 1921 and 1929.[13] Offensive Fagins and Shylocks in literary adaptations accounted for some of this number, but there was no avoidance of Jewish representation. During the classic era, however, Jews and Jewishness nearly vanished. Only after the fall of the Production Code and the eventual decline of the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Red Scare did Jewish imagery return to the big screen, eventually becoming not only a visible presence but a fashionable one.[14]

From the advent of sound through the 1950s, Jewish Hollywood—from its moguls and directors to its writers and actors—tended to avoid identifiable Jewishness in its films. "America was awash in a wave of nativism" during these formative years, and this significantly impacted "whether and how to present Jews on the screen."[15] Classical Hollywood's Jews can effectively be described as having "created their films and ruled their cinematic empire in a strange atmosphere of self-denial and détente, seeking, in most cases, to obscure their religion's orientation in the service of a largely Protestant viewing audience, mediated by a Catholic censor, Joseph Breen."[16] Thus Hollywood can be seen as "itself a means of avoiding Judaism, not celebrating it."[17] This is the environment in which George Cukor learned his trade and flourished as a director, and the context in which *A Double Life* was produced.[18]

To further elucidate this point, consider the multiple-Academy Award–nominated film's relationship to Jewishness alongside two other award-winning Hollywood films released the same year, Edward Dmytryk's *Crossfire* (1947) and *Gentleman's Agreement* (Elia Kazan, 1947). Of the three, only *A Double Life* contains no overt Jewish characters or themes. Each film began in the hands of a Jewish writer: Richard Brooks (born Ruben Sax) penned the novel on which *Crossfire* is based; Laura Z. Hobson wrote the novel and Moss Hart wrote the screenplay for *Gentleman's Agreement*; and Garson Kanin co-created the script for *A Double Life*. However, only *Crossfire* and *Gentleman's Agreement* address

FIGURE 1. George Cukor (left) with Ruth Gordon, Garson Kanin, and Ronald Colman (costumed as Othello). Author's collection.

the cultural anxieties, both directly referencing anti-Semitism in postwar/post-Holocaust America. Further reflecting the era, neither *Crossfire* nor *Gentleman's Agreement* was directed by a Jew.

A less superficial analysis, however, shows a more complex engagement with Jewishness in *A Double Life*. For one, the film is the first of seven in the "extraordinary artistic alliance" among Cukor, Garson Kanin, and Ruth Gordon during the postwar years[19] (see Figure 1). According to William Rothman, this collaboration in part represented one of the ways in which Cukor "explored various avenues for keeping alive the worldview of 1930s Hollywood."[20]

Within this framework, it is not entirely surprising that Jewishness emerges through a nostalgic mobilization of blackface in *A Double Life*. From early minstrelsy to Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* (Alfred E. Green, 1927) and beyond, Jewish-American male performers have had a significant relationship with blackface. Certainly, performing *Othello* is a far cry from acting in a minstrel show,

but racist cultural traces link them. As Dympna Callaghan argues in *Shakespeare without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage*, "Othello *was* a *white* man" when he originally appeared on stage.[21] Londoners of the era who identified emotional volatility as a "racial" characteristic of non-European peoples found it actively performed in *Othello*.[22] If we couple this insight with the knowledge that Shakespeare's plays were intended as mass cultural entertainment, an actor in blackface portraying the Moor functions similarly to Jim Crow, despite the clear differences of theatrical genre, culture, and era. Most basically, one can persuasively argue that black presence is equally lacking in the characters Othello and Jim Crow, originated as both were by white men within the context of a racist cultural framework.[23]

Of course, more complex questions may be asked about the relationship of Jews and blackface. Within the context of Broadway's Golden Age, for example, the editors of *Jewish American Literature: The Norton Anthology* (2001) ask: "Was singing in blackface a coarse form of ridicule, or did it express an affinity between the suffering of blacks and Jews? Was it a mask by which Jews could express their own woes, or was it merely a way for Jews to assimilate into the larger world of white racism?"[24] By contrast Michael Rogin (1996) emphasizes its function rather than its ethics, arguing that blackface "presided over melting-pot culture in the period of mass European immigration."[25] If "the performance of the white man's African American opens the door to the meanings of whiteness in the United States,"[26] it spoke loudly to European Jewish immigrants, who were not always considered natives in their home nations and arguably came to America, at least in part, for the opportunity to achieve such status. Rogin quotes James Baldwin on the subject: "Everyone who got here, and paid the price of the ticket, the price was to become 'white.'"[27] And two main cultural venues for rendering ethnic immigrants white—"that sorting-out procedure"—were minstrelsy and Hollywood.[28]

Interpreted within these parameters, blackface in *A Double Life* offers oblique commentary on the Hollywood racial crossdressing process that "moved settlers and ethnics into the melting pot by keeping racial groups out."[29] In particular the film is part of a postwar era in which the Hollywood box office was dominated by the "split halves of a single Ur-film": the social-problem film and the musical.[30] In 1946–47, for example, box office and Academy Award success was dominated by two films: *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), a tale of returning veterans, and *The Jolson Story* (Alfred E. Green, 1946), an idealized musical based

on the life of Al Jolson. The films are linked, argues Rogin, by the "omnipresence of race in the immediate aftermath of World War II,"[31] and it is in this cultural atmosphere that *A Double Life*'s blackface can best be explored.

Given interpretations of blackface as "coarse" expressions of "affinity" between blacks and Jews[32] or, even more broadly and radically, as respectful white acknowledgment of the significance of black culture and black perspectives,[33] it is important to read blackface as a form of racial drag. There are both destabilizing and regressive facets to drag performance, and Cukor frequently capitalized on the subversive potential through his repeated mobilization of theatrical settings and female-to-male crossdressing.[34] This said, issues of race, class, and sexuality may inflect and limit such subversiveness.

To illustrate such limits we can briefly explore Judy Garland's musical drag acts in Cukor's *A Star Is Born* (1954). In the number "Lose That Long Face," Garland dons a straw hat and freckles, illustrating a boyish and "trampish" mode of androgynous performance. She enacts a more stylish, "vampish" mode in "You Gotta Have Me Go with You," wearing a tuxedo jacket with sheer tights (instead of pants) that make her "both glamorous, sexy and one of the boys," similar in style to the drag of Dietrich and Garbo.[35] Between or beyond these two styles, however, Garland's character offers a rendition of Gershwin's "Swanee" in a full tuxedo with white gloves.[36] As an homage to Al Jolson, the drag act's potential challenge to gender roles comes at the expense of racist nostalgia that has particular significance to Jewish-American performers. Crossdressing here operates, as Brian Currid argues, within an "economy of racist exchange."[37] So too, arguably, does Colman's layered performance of Anthony John as Othello in *A Double Life*.

Cukor's primary concern for the film's success stemmed from having lost Laurence Olivier for the main role due to a scheduling conflict. He worried that Olivier's replacement, Ronald Colman, might not have the acting skills the part demanded. Cukor questioned actively whether Colman "had the danger and the madness for a great Othello, on the stage or in real life."[38] While this may be read apart from issues of racial crossdressing, it is worthy of note that, in later years, Cukor expressed admiration for Olivier's *Othello* (Stuart Burge, 1965), wherein traditional traits frequently identified as racist in actors' performances abound, including "near-meaningless roars, grunts, [and] gasps," tendencies to "roll their eyes and gnaw their lips," and "animal noises and panther-pacing."[39] Moreover, Cukor specifically felt the role demanded both a "sinister quality"[40] and a "sense

of the demonic,"[41] which Colman lacked. Such traits add a more specifically Jewish connotation to concerns over the portrayal in their links to historic and then-contemporary anti-Semitic discourse.[42]

In fact, Cukor ended up having to sell Colman on the role, for the actor equally doubted his ability to handle the material. McGilligan claims Cukor's method of persuasion involved telling the actor that "Gar[son Kanin] and Ruth Gordon have written an Academy Award-winning part" and that the three would "design the entire project around that target" for Colman.[43] The emphasis of the production thus narrowed to winning a white male actor an Oscar.

Such focus impacts the film far beyond the portrayal of Othello. Anthony John's motivation for murder, for example, is given scant attention. McGilligan describes how "the Kanins took as their premise a seasoned actor playing Othello who gets into his role not wisely but too well. The actor, Anthony John, gets so carried away by his murderous identification with the role that he strangles a pretty waitress."[44] Emanuel Levy adds only that this thin plot is "dealt with seriously rather than satirically."[45] Film historian Gary Carey argues the film "falls back on that insistent purple-prose treatment journalists use when faced with an extremely bizarre murder case" and concludes that its "portentous acting, writing, and directing" ensure "this theatrical murder shrivels into insignificant shoptalk."[46] In less verbose fashion, Carlos Clarens simply dismisses the project as "strictly B-film material."[47] Both critics rest their attacks on comparisons with films from 1945, with Carey opining that the murderous actor theme was far better handled in Marcel Carné's *Les Enfants du Paradis* (*Children of Paradise*, 1945) and Clarens claiming Cukor's film simply reused the premise of Max Nosseck's *The Brighton Strangler* (1945).

The latter comparison is both more precise and reductive, but also significant for addressing the ways in which *A Double Life* downplays the postwar-era setting it shares with Nosseck's low-budget RKO thriller. Both films do reflect the film noir aesthetic of the era, itself a product of German émigré directors, the majority of whom were Jewish refugees.[48] *A Double Life* may accurately be described as featuring a "dark, brooding atmosphere" and "cynical, somber vision" in the fate of its protagonist; however, its connection to the actual "disillusionment spawned by World War II and the period of uncertainty that was its aftermath"[49] is weak. Hence Gene Phillips's conclusion that the film is "characterized by an air of grim, unvarnished realism"[50] is questionable, especially given the emphasis on the privileged life of theatrical stars and a single actor's implausible slip into

psychosis.[51] In any case, the cynicism of the era is far more evident in German-Jewish emigrant Max Nosseck's film.

In *The Brighton Strangler*, the British actor protagonist (John Loder) invests himself in his current stage role as a murderer, the titular Brighton Strangler. When the actor receives a head injury during the London bombings, he believes himself to actually be the Strangler. The similarity to *A Double Life* is obvious, but the parallels are worthy of additional comment regarding motive. If what drives the protagonist in the Kanin-Cukor film to adopt his stage character's antisocial behavior can be called an "injury," it is not a physical wound but rather that of jealousy. His ex-wife, Brita, has moved on, finding love with another man, and he cannot bear the wound to his masculine pride. Jealousy is the primary link between Shakespeare's Othello and Kanin-Cukor's Anthony John. Sympathetic portrayals of the Moor—particularly in the modern era—often rest in considerations of Othello's status as a cultural outsider and the folly of his presumption that his military status would translate into respect in the social realm, a dashed expectation similar to that experienced firsthand by World War II veterans such as the Tuskegee Airmen. The film's superficiality of character and plot result in the racist spectacle. In this context, we may read Anthony John's injury metaphorically as the injury of race, of relinquishing whiteness in order to play Shakespeare's cultural outsider.

Contrasting the settings in which the injury takes place brings additional depth to interpretation. For *The Brighton Strangler*, bombing sets the stage, linking the protagonist's madness and violence to the madness and violence of the war.[52] No such cultural and historical context is provided for *A Double Life*, which takes place in the then-contemporary United States. Any overt traces of the war and its impact are ignored. Anthony John's madness might have been linked to such American war-related trauma as a returning soldier's PTSD or, through synecdoche, one American man's cultural guilt over the millions of lives lost at the hands of the Axis powers or the Nazis in particular. Given the choice of a British actor for the main character, even the London Blitz could have been recycled. Instead the film argues actively that it is solely the playing of Othello that drives his murderous rage.

Attention to Jewish nostalgia results in an even more subtle reading of setting. For Rogin, both silent and early sound films were marked by a displacement of anti-Semitism in the wider society onto generational conflict within the Jewish family (as seen, for example, in Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*, where resistance to the

Americanization of the Jew comes from the father, not the culture at large). Both the end of mass immigration and the destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust produced "nostalgia for a lost Jewish world."[53] *A Double Life* hints at such longing in its containment of conflict and violence within the domestic sphere.

Cukor's direction of Ronald Colman is another important facet of the film's relationship with Jewishness. The promise that the role was an Oscar-winning opportunity proved true. Colman won the Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role. While we might read the award as exemplification of Hollywood racism alongside validation of the claim that actors playing against type often win, there is far more to say when we explore the working relationship between Cukor and Colman.

Although McGilligan describes Cukor's preferred directorial stance as that of "the detached observer,"[54] he and other biographers acknowledge that almost the opposite seems to have proved true in practice, including Cukor's vicarious pleasure in shaping performances by investing himself in the actor, sometimes at very intimate levels. Thus more precise is Emanuel Levy's contention that, "in the final account, he expressed himself through—and identified with—his performers."[55] Or, even more provocatively: "Seemingly effortlessly, [Cukor] convinced them that he knew the characters they were called upon to play, and that he knew *them* [the actors], better than they knew themselves, and that what gave him such power was the fact that he knew himself so well that he could recognize in them a part of himself."[56]

Cukor's directorial relationship with Colman well exemplifies this process of identification. Director and actor had known one another for several years before Colman was cast in *A Double Life*, and Cukor respected him. Colman's style of acting may have been ill suited to portrayals of violent madness, but it was arguably well suited to what Clarens, with deprecation, calls "that recognizable middle-range of emotion which is [Cukor's] province."[57] If Colman's career was indeed "based largely upon his ability to play cardboard lovers with dependable charm" and "polished competence,"[58] he was also "the prototypical Englishman,"[59] which had great appeal for assimilationist Jews such as Cukor.

Above all, Cukor admired Colman's refined demeanor. The actor exemplified well the concept of a gentleman, which Cukor prized. As he told Boze Hadleigh late in life, "A gentleman is a man who tries to live according to his own code of achievements, behavior, and beauty. Nowadays, beauty is only referred to when talking of a face or body, but it used to be an outlook or a way of life."[60] Cukor

did all he could to live up to such personal "beauty." As William Rothman argues, "He knew, and mastered, the rules of proper behavior [i.e., upper-class etiquette] so as to assure that his manners never betrayed him when he was in the company of gentiles."[61] Given his insecurities over his appearance and heritage as well as his sexuality, Cukor achieved what McGilligan calls "compensation" through his demeanor, including "fervent Anglophilia," as reflected in his "adopting English spellings and the English style of personal salutation."[62] To this we can add his casting choices and general attraction to upper-class lifestyles. If immigration for European Jews meant access to what we now call "whiteness," in this formulation Anglophilia indicates the limitations, particularly visible in the form of envy.

Thus we can read Anglophilia in the casting of Colman (as fellow Englishman Laurence Olivier's replacement) in this American film (both in production and setting) as well as in the details of Cukor and Colman's daily working relationship. If Colman lacked the intensity of emotion Cukor wanted to see from him, this lack was precisely essential to Cukor's admiration for the actor outside of the film. As a hands-on actor's director, Cukor had to get Colman to shed his gentlemanly calm for the role. This was accomplished by freeing Cukor to focus almost solely on Colman during much of the production (see Figure 2). First, editor Robert Parrish and production designer Harry Horner were brought in by Kanin to be involved "in every stage of the production."[63] "Cukor came in—approved or disapproved—then disappeared into Colman's dressing room to work with him."[64] Next, in the dressing room, Cukor had to find a way to productively heighten and mold Colman's performance. "To put the actor in a homicidal mood," McGilligan describes, "the director talked to Colman at length about his [Cukor's] struggling early days as an actor in the United States."[65] In the interaction between Cukor and Colman, we thus see the Jew attaining access to the assimilated whiteness he craves through close work with a British "gentleman." This process shows how Colman could be made to display an emotional style culturally ascribed to ethnic immigrants and the working class, a style Cukor himself labored to shed in order to lay claim to a status his background and appearance betrayed. Once Cukor transferred what we might call an ethnic emotionality to Colman, it was displayed via the nostalgic blackface that immigrant Jewish performers donned regularly in earlier decades to demonstrate their assimilation.

While Anglophilia and blackface work together to highlight Jewish concerns at the heart of the creation of *A Double Life*, gender is also central. If racial crossdressing was primarily the métier of Jewish-American *male* performers,

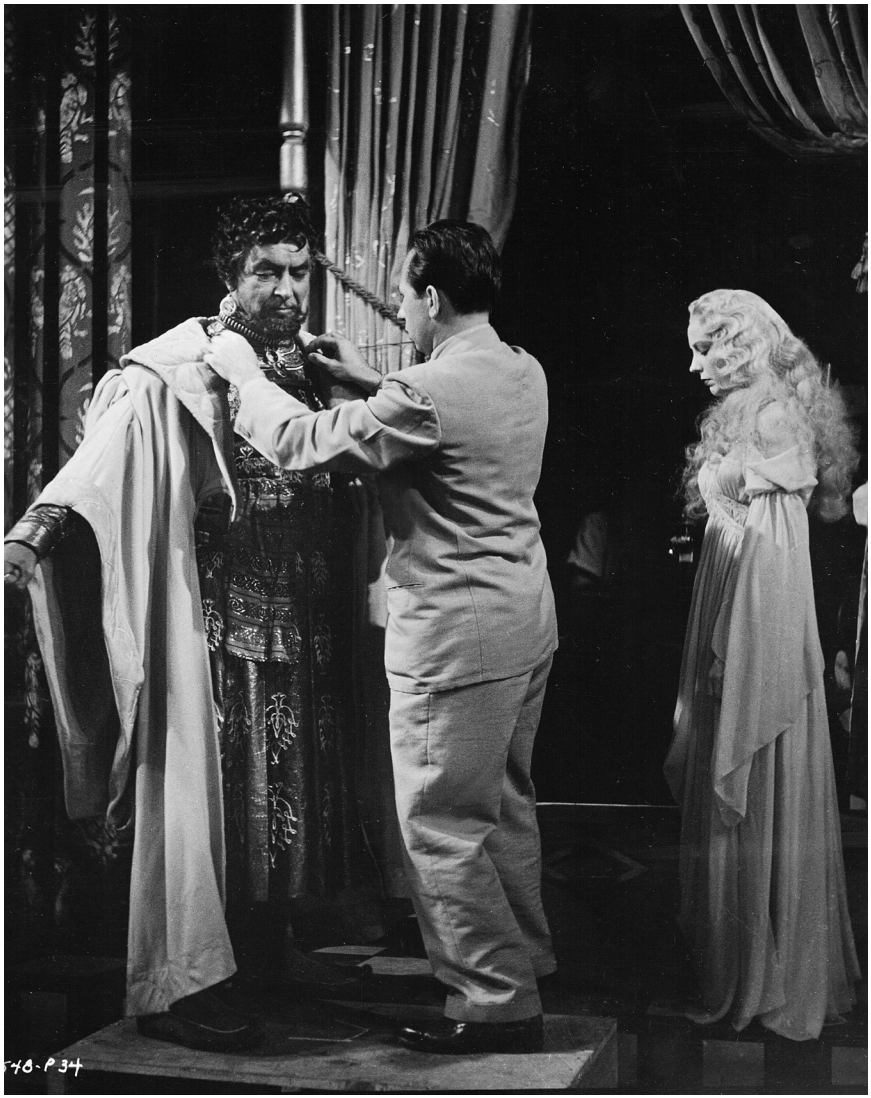

FIGURE 2. Cukor's investment in every detail of Colman's performance. Author's collection.

the relationship of these men to women also reflected assimilationist concerns. For example, *The Jazz Singer* (1927) shows that one of the primary means of assimilation and upward mobility is a Jewish man's attachment to a white, non-Jewish woman. It is the attention of the gentile Mary Dale (May McAvoy)

that drives Al Jolson's Jack Robin to success and the approval and applause of Broadway audiences-as-mainstream-America. Similarly, *A Double Life* features Signe Hasso as Colman's Desdemona and ex-wife, Brita. Where the name "Mary" signifies gentile identity in the former film, "Brita" (from the Latin, meaning "from England") reinforces the resonance of Anglophilia in the latter. But where *The Jazz Singer* contrasts the gentile love interest with the Jewish mother, arguing for a melting-pot assimilation for white ethnics (exemplified in the climactic blackface performance of "Mammy," sung directly to the *Yiddishe momme* on the Broadway stage he shares with Mary), *A Double Life* contrasts the lady actress with the trampy waitress (featuring an identifiably German surname, "Kroll"). Her role is to play (ethnic) audience for the actor whose blackface performance results in her murder. It is not surprising that Hasso opined that Cukor (who had previously directed Ingrid Bergman and Garbo) "loved Swedish women," finding them "extraordinary."[66] Such fetishization is a sexist manifestation of white envy, especially visible as the brunette Hasso portrays the sympathetic Desdemona with a long, voluminous platinum blonde wig (see Figures 2 and 3).

By contrast to the "refined leading lady," Winters's waitress represents "the category of earthy sexuality,"[67] linked in many ways to the inassimilable immigrant. Shelley Winters (originally Shirley Schrift) was herself a Jew, the child of first- and second-generation Austrian Jewish parents. Unlike Cukor, Winters did not downplay her background and was later known for several overtly Jewish roles, including Faye Lapinsky in *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (1976) and Belle Rosen in *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972). In addition, in 1950, she refused to film exterior shots in Germany for *I Am a Camera* (1955), "because she could not reconcile the thought of doing so with the image of her Holocaust-survivor uncle Yaekel."[68] She won the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her portrayal of Mrs. Van Daan in *The Diary of Anne Frank* (George Stevens, 1959). Pat Kroll in *A Double Life*, however, was Winters's first significant role in Hollywood cinema, and the non-Jewish character's connection to Jewish cultural anxieties is evident in multiple facets of the production, in ways similar to that of Colman's.

In working with Shelley Winters, Cukor again displayed his intimate directing style. If gender is most central to Anthony John's swing from (white/English) gentleman to (Jewish/immigrant) demon, it is most central to the film's women in the contrast between ladylike/Swedish Brita and working-class/ethnic Pat. Cukor labored intensively with Winters, exemplifying McGilligan's assertion

FIGURE 3. Ronald Coleman's John/Othello fulfills his dark destiny opposite Signe Hasso's pale, refined Brita/Desdemona. Author's collection.

that, "[d]espite all the words that have been written about Cukor's attachment to elegant high-society females, one might also note his keen feeling for the low types."[69] Study of this "keen feeling" may begin with the many pages biographies and interviews have devoted to recounting Winters's audition process. Encouraging

her to embody the "low type" is evident in Cukor making Winters "take off her bra and girdle, unpeel her false eyelashes, let her hair down, and scrape off her makeup."[70] When her audition did not satisfy, Cukor is said to have sent her to the park to read the entire script while he attended a meeting; he then had her rehearse with another actor before shooting the screen test. Because he feared that announcing the filmed take would make her nervous and spoil her performance, he shot her in rehearsal when she was unaware, troubling Winters but also earning her the role, of which Levy reports she declared, "God meant for me to play" it.[71] Superficially, we might interpret this process as Cukor being generous to the actress, in whom he saw promise. Yet in the contexts of gender, class, and ethnicity, Cukor's particular interest in and his manipulation of the young Jewish actress into the "low type" he sought are significant.

That Winters at this stage in her life shared at least some of Cukor's perspective on class and assimilationist ambitions is arguably present in her description of her depression during filming: "I used to go in the corner and cry because I wanted to look glamorous and he [Cukor] wouldn't let me. I was finally in a Hollywood movie and I looked awful."[72] "Awful" is hardly accurate. There is an intentional lack of Hollywood-style (i.e., upper-class) glamour, but there is traditional feminine attractiveness in the presence of makeup, bra, cinched waist, and styled hair (see Figure 4). Brita's highly coiffed chestnut hair and Desdemona's platinum tresses signify Hollywood beauty standards, while Pat Kroll's dishwater curls do not, to be sure. And Shakespearean costume is reduced to a waitress's uniform. However, it is the character's behavior—and Cukor's management of and perspective on it—that reveals the most significant contrast between the two female characters.

If young Winters cried over her character's appearance, it seems at least in part related to the direction process once she was cast. Cukor told Winters of her character, "I want the audience to know she is doomed right from the first time they meet her."[73] He qualified this with the acknowledgment that the waitress is "very pretty and open and ingenuous,"[74] but it is easy to read this as an effort to placate Winters, who had to reshoot her opening scene more than one hundred times before Cukor was satisfied. Such excessive—perhaps even obsessive—reshooting makes clear the character's ill-fated nature is her defining feature. Beyond this, Levy reports that Cukor scolded the inexperienced but bold actress and called her names such as "nincompoop" and "nothing" when she did not say her lines correctly; he even slapped her across the face.[75] According to

FIGURE 4. Shelley Winters's Pat Kroll, the "low" ethnic female. Author's collection.

Gene D. Phillips, Cukor—when asked directly whether such physical violence actually occurred—said ("with a twinkle"), "If I did I am sure she deserved it."[76]

Given this treatment, we must ask what dooms Pat Kroll narratively, and, given the disproportionate attention to the moment we meet the character and Cukor's treatment of Winters, what dooms her thematically and extra-narratively. The bleak destiny is explained overtly in Anthony John's succumbing to Othello-like mad jealousy. Within the larger context of this study, it is best explored via the character's low-class disposability and "open" perspective on sexuality.[77] Cukor may have described the character in compelling and tragic terms to Winters at the time of filming, but he called her performance "funny and sleazy" in an interview with Levy years later. Levy himself goes even further, arguing that Winters's portrayal makes her sexiness "disgusting."[78] Phillips erroneously identifies Kroll as a "prostitute,"[79] perhaps because Cukor allegedly told her to "watch the call girls who hovered near Hollywood's famous Schwab's drugstore, would-be stars who had slid downward into another kind of acting."[80]

That Kroll openly seduces John, inviting him back to her apartment for sex,

reveals her to be a fallen woman, and the noir style of lighting and setting emphasize her (deserved) fate.[81] John, too, is doomed by his act of murder; however, neither Cukor nor his biographers emphasize this facet of the character. Where Pat Kroll is static and sleazy, Anthony John is dynamic and suave. Sympathies depend on this distinction. In an interview with Gavin Lambert, for example, Cukor relishes the scene where John goes to Kroll's apartment and "it's not a question of whether he's going to lay her or not, but that *he*'ll decide *when* he wants to."[82] Adopting John's point of view, Cukor lauds the scene for possessing "a 'cool' that was rather ahead of its time."[83] In such a perspective there is obvious sexism as well as classism, echoed in statements beyond the context of this particular film, such as Cukor's regret that he could never rid himself of the label "women's director," opining that "even 'ladies' man' sounds better."[84] In addition to its reliance on sexism to mitigate homophobia, such a perspective also arguably relates to ethnic (Jewish) self-deprecation.

Cukor's treatment of Shelley Winters and the character she plays in *A Double Life* can ultimately be read as releasing Jewish anxieties upon a fellow Jew, and one who lacks masculine or star privilege. More broadly, the destructive path and pattern of assimilation is played out in the overall production and trajectory of the film. The Jewish director gains access to the white "gentleman" whose status he fetishizes. He imbues the figure with the painful struggles of assimilation, which manifest via blackface. The monster created by this infusion—this theatrical embodiment of Jewish ambition and anxiety—first destroys the inassimilable "low" Jewess, and then destroys itself. The only figures who (can) survive this tragedy are the "refined" white woman and her white "gentleman" fiancé, who actually solves the mystery of John's double life, perhaps signifying anti-Semitic hypervigilance. The former has already distanced herself, before the film begins, through divorce within the film's premise and Hasso's "extraordinary" Swedish femininity extra-textually, and the latter through his lack of direct involvement with the Jewish-identified characters.

Shelley Winters's Pat Kroll may be condemned as the representation of the working-class ethnic feminine type for whom Cukor did not want to be mistaken in any dimension. She is the disgraced outsider sacrificed to the hollow, well-mannered gentile. Yet this is not the only trajectory for Cukor's films. Cukor is known for his championing of strong female leads, for example, and by 1950 Cukor would be defending the "recognizable New York Jewish voice" of Judy Holliday in *Born Yesterday*, where the lesson for sympathetic, working-class

protagonist Billie Dawn is to "be herself, to think for herself, [and] to take pride in her voice."[85]

Ultimately, George Cukor was a highly successful product and producer of the American dream, with all of its melting-pot complexities and contradictions. He achieved fame and fortune in an assimilationist and homophobic environment despite being the child of Hungarian Jewish immigrants and gay. The majority of his films steer clear of what might have identified him with his personal life and heritage, and he was famous for hosting Sunday dinners for the cream of the Hollywood crop (always white, and often British). Nonetheless, study of *A Double Life*, which superficially seems a simplistic thriller, helps us to answer questions about Cukor and the culture in which he made his films, particularly in the immediate years after World War II. "What were the effects of being an outsider—an unattractive, Jewish, homosexual director—in a business that worshiped good looks and perceived its role as nothing less than defining and transmitting the American dream to millions of viewers in the United States and abroad[?]" asks Levy.[86] More broadly, how might Cukor's experiences and films offer examples of the complex anxieties felt by millions of Jewish Americans in Hollywood's classic period? However we answer such questions, study of *A Double Life* illustrates that the price of the ticket to "whiteness," well beyond the immigration boom, remained high indeed.

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Notes

1. Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 90.

2. See Elyce Rae Helford, "Theatricality and Female Drag in Three Films by George Cukor," *Feminist Media Studies* 14:4 (September 2014 [forthcoming]).
3. Patrick McGilligan, *George Cukor: A Double Life* (New York: St. Martins, 1991), 14.
4. Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xiv.
5. See Boze Hadleigh, *Conversations with My Elders* (New York: St. Martins, 1987), and Robert Emmet Long, ed., *George Cukor: Interviews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001).
6. Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, xiv.
7. Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 13.
8. See Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Random House, 1988).
9. Hadleigh, *Conversations with My Elders*, 138.
10. McGilligan, *George Cukor*, 6.
11. See Hadleigh, *Conversations with My Elders*; McGilligan, *George Cukor*; Emanuel Levy, *George Cukor: Master of Elegance* (New York: William Morrow, 1994).
12. Hadleigh, *Conversations with My Elders*, 152.
13. Lester D. Friedman, "A Forgotten Masterpiece: Edward Sloman's *His People*," in *Hollywood's Chosen People: The Jewish Experience in American Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi, Murray Pomerance, and Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 21.
14. See Henry Bial, "How Jews Became Sexy, 1968–1983," in *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).
15. Daniel Bernardi, Murray Pomerance, and Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Introduction," in *Hollywood's Chosen People: The Jewish Experience in American Cinema*, 7.
16. Wheeler Winston Dixon, "'A Rotten Bunch of Vile People with No Respect for Anything Beyond the Making of Money': Joseph Breen, the Hollywood Production Code, and Institutionalized Anti-Semitism in Hollywood," in *Hollywood's Chosen People: The Jewish Experience in American Cinema*, 53.
17. Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, 300.
18. It is important not to single out Cukor in this context, of course. Even the boldest studios fell prey to the pressures of the classic era. For instance, if early Warner films arguably emphasized a "vague underdog liberalism" and, at times, downright "messianism" related to Harry Warner's sensitivity to "racial and religious prejudice"

(Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, 139), they still excised the Jewishness of the main character in the film *They Won't Forget* (1937), based on the Leo Frank trial. Here Leo Frank is transformed from a Jewish factory boss—convicted by the testimony of an African-American janitor for the murder of a white Southern girl in Atlanta in 1913, then lynched two years later—into a Northern schoolteacher in the South falsely accused of rape. This "anti-lynching" film may be laudable as "brave" for its time (Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, 139), but it is also noteworthy for its limits. As Jeffrey Melnick argues in *Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), the film's primary "innovation" in popular cultural representations of the trial is "to ignore Frank's Jewishness altogether and suggest that the case was the final battle of the Civil War" (26), going so far as to substitute "Northerners" for "Jews" when the script directly quotes the original closing argument of the Frank trial (27). Most precisely, we may label this excision an engagement with "visible Jewish absence," echoing Michael Rogin's formulation in his consideration of blackface and Hollywood film in a different context. Such films are ultimately "significant not because of some invisible Jewish power operating behind the scenes, but rather because of the already racialized culture that immigrant Jews entered" (Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 13).

19. David Jarraway, "Cukor and Collaboration: Subjective Displacement in America's Postwar Years," *English Studies in Canada* 33:3 (2007), 32.
20. William Rothman, "Hats Off for George Cukor!" in *Hollywood's Chosen People: The Jewish Experience in American Cinema*, 105.
21. Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 76 (emphasis in original).
22. E. A. J. Honigmann, "Introduction," in *Othello: The Arden Shakespeare*, 3d ed. (London: Thompson, 2002), 20.
23. See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
24. Jules Chametzky, John Felsteiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Katherine Hellerstein, "The Golden Age of Broadway Song," in *Jewish American Literature: The Norton Anthology*, ed. Jules Chametzsky et al. (New York: Norton, 2001), 965.
25. Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 5.
26. Ibid., 27.
27. Ibid., 13.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 12.

30. Ibid., 169.
31. Ibid.
32. Chametzky et al., "The Golden Age of Broadway Song," 965.
33. See, for example, W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).
34. See Helford, "Theatricality and Female Drag."
35. Richard Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men," in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 168, 173.
36. Cukor did not, in fact, direct this scene, which occurred within the "Born in a Trunk" sequence that was added to the film as part of the studio's significant and, to Cukor's mind, disastrous reworking. See Ronald Haver, *A Star Is Born: The Making of the 1954 Movie and Its 1983 Restoration* (New York: Knopf, 1988).
37. Brian Currid, "Judy Garland's American Drag," in *Amerikastudien* (*American Studies*) 46:1 (2001), 131.
38. Gavin Lambert, *On Cukor* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1972), 199.
39. Honigmann, "Introduction," 20–21.
40. Levy, *George Cukor*, 163.
41. Lambert, *On Cukor*, 199.
42. The historical linking of Jews with the demonic is addressed in depth by Joshua Trachtenberg in *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Anti-Semitism,* 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002). And while Cukor seems to be addressing the performance of the murderous side of the Anthony John character, Shakespeare's Othello is referenced in such terms as well, even directly called "devil" by the villain Iago (I.i.), suggesting another Jewish-black connection in the layered implications of *A Double Life*. In addition, the term "sinister" holds particular Jewish significance. This term, from the Latin for left-handed, took on the implications of evil/demonic by the classical era, and this meaning accompanied its English usage. In *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema*, Nathan Abrams references the tradition of depicting Jews on the left-hand, "devil's" side of Christ at the Crucifixion in medieval art ([New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012], 217), for example. Modern anti-Semitic identification of the Jews with the term "sinister" can be found in texts from Winston Churchill's distinction between nationalist Jews and "the sinister conspiracy" of "International Jews" (i.e., Bolshevists) in "Zionism versus Bolshevism: A Struggle for the Soul of the Jewish People" (*Illustrated Sunday Herald*, February 8, 1920) to translations of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. The tradition continues to the present in neo-Nazi

discourse and equally in (Jewish) response to anti-Semitism.

43. McGilligan, *George Cukor*, 194.
44. Ibid.
45. Levy, *George Cukor*, 163.
46. Gary Carey, *Cukor & Co.: The Films of George Cukor and His Collaborators* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971), 110.
47. Carlos Clarens, *George Cukor* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1976), 80.
48. Catherine Portuges, "Jewish Immigrant Directors and Their Impact on Hollywood," in *Hollywood's Chosen People: The Jewish Experience in American Cinema*, 35.
49. Gene D. Phillips, *George Cukor* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 55.
50. Ibid.
51. Even as he references the noir bleakness, Phillips's description of the film's last moment argues for theater (and theatricality) as the true heart of *A Double Life*: "The film's final, unforgettable image is that of the curtains parting to allow the star to take his bows—while the spotlight reveals only an empty stage. The slow dimming of the spotlight beam into darkness thus signals the fading away of a once-great star in the theatrical firmament" (ibid., 55).
52. A compelling note on Jewishness and cultural context is that Nosseck also directed the little-known independent film *Singing in the Dark* (1956), one of the first Holocaust-themed American films. Another film where head injury determines the central character's fate, *Singing in the Dark* tells the tale of an amnesiac Jewish Holocaust survivor who recovers his memory and returns to life as a cantor. In many ways the film echoes and critiques the assimilationist tale of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), where Jewish ambivalence is rendered as a dangerous cultural amnesia.
53. Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 170.
54. McGilligan, *George Cukor*, 196.
55. Levy, *George Cukor*, 10.
56. Rothman, "Hats Off for George Cukor!" 93.
57. Clarens, *George Cukor*, 45.
58. Carey, *Cukor & Co.*, 110.
59. McGilligan, *George Cukor*, 195.
60. Hadleigh, "Introduction," 140.
61. Rothman, "Hats Off for George Cukor!" 96.
62. McGilligan, *George Cukor*, 6.
63. Ibid., 194.
64. Ibid., 195.

65. Ibid. The previously mentioned nostalgia of the film blends with Cukor's directing methods when we consider that Cukor used the old Empire Theatre in New York City for the scenes on stage, the very theater where Cukor himself worked in the 1920s (Phillips, *George Cukor*, 55).
66. Levy, *George Cukor*, 163.
67. Ibid.
68. Sonia Zylberberg, "Shelley Winters," in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* (*Jewish Women's Archive*), March 1, 2009, http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/winters-shelley.
69. McGilligan, *George Cukor*, 196.
70. Ibid., 195.
71. Levy, *George Cukor*, 165.
72. Ibid., 166.
73. McGilligan, *George Cukor*, 196.
74. Ibid.
75. Levy, *George Cukor*, 166.
76. Phillips, *George Cukor*, 56.
77. This is signaled in the very names of the characters: "Anthony," from the Greek, means flourishing, praiseworthy, and priceless; "John," from the Hebrew, means God's gracious gift, and emphasizes masculinity. Together, the doubling of masculine first names heightens the character's masculinity. A "john" is also slang for a prostitute's client, and thus acts to further degrade the ethnic Pat Kroll, whose Germanic surname and Irish-seeming first name may be read as ironically playing on the Latin for "noble" (Patricia/patrician). That a "john" is also slang for toilet may hint at the character's degradation as he is corrupted by contact with the low ethnic female Kroll.
78. Levy, *George Cukor*, 166.
79. Phillips, *George Cukor*, 54.
80. McGilligan, *George Cukor*, 196.
81. Though Kroll is no femme fatale, Phillips reflects a desire to condemn her, identifying the character as "a full-time waitress [. . .] and a part-time prostitute" (54). This reduces her interest in John to his pocketbook. By contrast, most reviewers and critics identify her as John's mistress. In the end, perhaps McGilligan's compromise position is most accurate, identifying Kroll as one of the types "who trade on sex in their misspent lives" (196).
82. Lambert, *On Cukor*, 200 (emphasis in original).
83. Ibid.

84. Hadleigh, "Introduction," 174.
85. Rothman, "Hats Off for George Cukor!" 107.
86. Levy, *George Cukor*, 6.