

Katharine Hepburn season February – March 2015



BFI Southbank today announces a season dedicated to one of Hollywood's most iconic actresses, **Katharine Hepburn**. Taking place from **1 February – 19 March 2015**, this season will feature 24 of her most famous films, including *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *The African Queen* (1951), *The Lion in Winter* (1968), *On Golden Pond* (1981) and an extended run of *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), re-released by the BFI in selected cinemas across the UK from February 13.

Hepburn worked with some of the greatest leading men and the most successful directors of the golden era of Hollywood, including **Spencer Tracy**, **Cary Grant** and **Howard Hawks**, and won four Oscars® for acting, a record which is yet to be bettered. She was brilliantly versatile and could handle serious drama or the lightest of comedies with a rare grace and charm, but she was best at portraying a new kind of fiercely independent woman.

Raised in Connecticut by wealthy, progressive parents, Hepburn began to act at college and her early years in the industry were successful and saw her win her first Oscar for her third film *Morning Glory* (1933). However, this period was followed by a series of commercial failures such as *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935), *Stage Door* (1937) and one of her finest films Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) opposite Cary Grant, with whom she would star in four films. Along with her reputed bossy demeanour and unfeminine image, these film failures led her to be labelled as box office poison. However, this unpopularity also ensured a degree of control over her career that saw her snatch back success on her own terms, and left a string of incomparably assured, complex and winning performances. She was also an undisputed fashion icon, whose trademark trousers, tailored shirts and trench coats were, at the time, completely revolutionary.

Hepburn's return to box-office success came in 1940 with *The Philadelphia Story*. The film was based on a stage play by Philip Barry, the leading role of which was specially written for Hepburn for the Broadway production. It was during her Broadway stint that Hepburn wisely acquired the movie rights which she sold to MGM in a deal that guaranteed her the lead role and the choice of director and co-stars. Hepburn scored a huge success in this role which set her back on course to becoming one of the most popular female stars in Hollywood history.

In the 1940s Hepburn was contracted to MGM, where her career focused on an alliance with **Spencer Tracy**. The screen-partnership spanned 25 years, produced nine films and led to a 25 year affair, which Hollywood has long been captivated by. Eight of the films they made together will screen during the season, including *State of the Union* (1948), *Adam's Rib* (1949) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), for which she won her second Oscar. In the latter part of her career Hepburn regularly appeared on stage and found a niche playing middle-aged spinsters, such as in *The African Queen* (1951), while her third and fourth Oscars came for *The Lion in Winter* (1968) and *On Golden Pond* (1981).

This dynamic talent blazed a trail for Hollywood women and gave us a delightful screen legacy. Without Katharine Hepburn, it's likely classical Hollywood would have seen far fewer autonomous, intelligent, self determining female characters. Hepburn fought for her roles to mean something, and would no more play the shrinking violet on screen than she could in life. Whether as a confounding screwball minx in George Cukor's deathless comedies, a hot-tempered foil to her real-life love Spencer Tracy in their warm and witty battle-of-the-sexes stand-offs, or as a wise, spirited matriarch in her rich run of later performances, Hepburn remains a uniquely challenging and lively screen presence.

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Press Contacts:

Liz Parkinson – Press Officer (Acting), BFI Southbank
liz.parkinson@bfi.org.uk / 020 7957 8918

Tim Mosley – Press Officer, BFI Southbank
tim.mosley@bfi.org.uk / 020 7957 8986

NOTES TO EDITORS:

PLAYING IN FEBRUARY

Season Introduction: Hannah McGill on Katharine Hepburn

As we commence our survey of one of Hollywood's greatest stars, writer and critic Hannah McGill delivers a richly illustrated talk, examining Hepburn's unique persona and career. While selecting her favourite performances from the season, McGill examines Hepburn's strength of will and her surprising autonomy, suggesting it would be considered radical for modern actresses to wield the same level of control over their career.

WED 4 FEB 18:20 NFT3

A Bill of Divorcement

USA 1932. Dir George Cukor. With John Barrymore, Billie Burke, Katharine Hepburn. 70min. 35mm. U

Hepburn is fresh-faced, bold and glamorous in her first screen role, as Sidney – a sharp, modern girl facing down a complex past. Sidney and her mother Margaret are both preparing to marry when Margaret's ex-husband, whom she divorced while he was institutionalised with shellshock, unexpectedly returns home. The resulting confrontation is melodramatic, but warm, sensitive and powerfully performed.

SUN 1 FEB 16:10 NFT3

TUE 3 FEB 18:20 NFT2

Christopher Strong

USA 1933. Dir Dorothy Arzner. With Katharine Hepburn, Colin Clive, Billie Burke. 78min. 16mm. PG

Christopher Strong was made before the Production Code clamped down on sex, and by one of the few female directors of the studio era. Hepburn's first star vehicle brings a hard, sophisticated edge to its tale of a self-

possessed aviatrix who becomes a mistress. It's also notable for the extraordinary silver moth costume, designed by Howard Greer, in which Hepburn's character first attracts the eponymous married politician.

WED 4 FEB 20:30 NFT3

SAT 7 FEB 16:00 NFT2

Morning Glory

USA 1933. Dir Lowell Sherman. With Katharine Hepburn, Douglas Fairbanks Jr, Adolphe Menjou, C Aubrey Smith. 74min. 16mm. PG

Smalltown actress Eva Lovelace, clever and confident but short on experience and humility, becomes an overnight success on Broadway, and faces the attendant thrills and woes – including the attentions of a trio of variably invested men. Hepburn won the first of her four Oscars® for this fervent performance, into which a degree of self-portraiture is customarily read.

THU 5 FEB 20:40 NFT2

SUN 8 FEB 16:00 NFT2

Little Women

USA 1934. Dir George Cukor. With Katharine Hepburn, Joan Bennett, Paul Lukas, Douglass Montgomery. 115min. 35mm. U

This lavish and loving adaptation of the Louisa May Alcott classic, about four sisters maturing in the wake of the Civil War, was a substantial hit; soothing Depression-bruised audiences with its old-fashioned wholesomeness. Sentimentality and piety are never far off, but the characters inspire real affection, and Hepburn's witty, complex tomboy Jo is unquestionably the star.

FRI 6 FEB 18:20 NFT1

FRI 13 FEB 20:40 NFT2

Alice Adams

USA 1935. Dir George Stevens. With Katharine Hepburn, Fred MacMurray, Fred Stone, Evelyn Venable. 99min. 35mm. U

Booth Tarkington's novel told of an insecure, working-class social climber – Hepburn is cast against type for once, but still connects astutely with the nervousness and naivety that stymie Alice's romance with the eligible Arthur (MacMurray). Still impressive for its tender take on class consciousness, the film was a success, and launched George Stevens as a major director.

Print courtesy of Academy Film Archive

FRI 6 FEB 20:30 NFT3

TUE 10 FEB 18:10 NFT3

Sylvia Scarlett

USA 1935. Dir George Cukor. With Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, Brian Aherne, Edmund Gwenn. 95min. 35mm. U

Hepburn is breath-taking in drag as she plays the disguised daughter of a runaway embezzler in this oddball period romp, her first pairing with Cary Grant. Though a flop at the time, it has since become a cult favourite – not least because of her on-screen clinch with female co-star Dennie Moore. Grant plays the con artist who becomes Hepburn's partner in crime.

Print courtesy of Academy Film Archive

SAT 7 FEB 18:30 NFT1

SAT 14 FEB 15:50 NFT3

A Woman Rebels

USA 1936. Dir Mark Sandrich. With Katharine Hepburn, Herbert Marshall, Donald Crisp, Doris Dudley. 88min. 35mm. U

Pamela hates the limitations of 1860s English society and suffers a succession of heartbreaks, until the women's suffrage movement – in which Hepburn's own mother was active – offers an outlet for her passions. As an unambiguously feminist heroine, Hepburn glitters with conviction, and is ravishingly dressed by Walter Plunkett (soon to costume *Gone with the Wind*).

Print courtesy of Academy Film Archive

SAT 7 FEB 20:40 NFT2

MON 9 FEB 18:20 NFT2

Quality Street

USA 1937. Dir George Stevens. With Katharine Hepburn, Franchot Tone, Fay Bainter, Eric Blore. 83min. 16mm. U

Based on a play by JM Barrie, this whimsical piece has Hepburn as a clever spinster who masquerades as a flirty teenager to win back her lost love. Screwball energy abounds, as well as interesting overtones in terms of Hepburn's image: it can be read as a comparison of the girly girl Hollywood wanted, versus the serious woman she was.

SUN 8 FEB 18:20 NFT2

TUE 10 FEB 20:30 NFT3

Stage Door

USA 1937. Dir Gregory La Cava. With Katharine Hepburn, Ginger Rogers, Adolphe Menjou. 92min. 16mm. U
Stage Door is a grit-in-the-greasepaint tale that still feels stunningly fresh and inventive, thanks to the loose, improvisational style and the frank and sympathetic female characters. It also made smart use of two stars with image problems: Hepburn, persistently disliked by audience and industry; and Ginger Rogers, ever the dance partner. As in *Little Women*, Hepburn shines as part of a predominantly female ensemble.

MON 9 FEB 20:45 NFT1

WED 11 FEB 18:30 NFT1

Bringing Up Baby

USA 1938. Dir Howard Hawks. With Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, Charles Ruggles. 102min. 35mm. U

Even if its disappointing initial performance confirmed her reputation as 'box office poison,' this is one of Hepburn's most enduring and beloved films. With storytelling and performances that feel at once precise and winningly chaotic, its screwball romance and surreal detail (a lost dinosaur bone; a pet leopard; Cary Grant in a negligee) remains fresh, funny and not a little sexually subversive.

SAT 14 FEB 18:30 NFT1

MON 16 FEB 20:45 NFT1

Holiday

USA 1938. Dir George Cukor. With Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, Doris Nolan, Lew Ayres. 95min. 35mm. U

Cary Grant plays an offbeat charmer engaged to a society belle (Nolan), but more drawn to her rebellious sister (Hepburn) in this assured and complex comedy. Beneath the banter is a thoughtful examination of the clash between personal desires and social expectations; and a terrific evocation of what it is to fall illicitly but utterly and genuinely in love.

THU 12 FEB 18:20 NFT1

SUN 15 FEB 16:00 NFT3

The Philadelphia Story

USA 1940. Dir George Cukor. With Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, James Stewart, Ruth Hussey. 112min. U.

A BFI release

Cukor's classic about a society wedding threatened by scandal is a highpoint of sophisticated Hollywood comedy. Adapted from Philip Barry's play, the film boasts peak-form performances throughout. Having divorced her irresponsible millionaire husband (Grant), the aptly named Tracy Lord (Hepburn) is about to wed a dull but dependable fellow. However, any hopes of privacy at the wedding of the year are dashed by the arrival of her reluctant ex and a pair of journalists (Stewart and Hussey) sniffing for a scoop. The rest of the Lord family don't help much either, for that matter. Donald Ogden Stewart's script sparkles with wit and pithy social comment, while the moonlit amorous shenanigans fizz with woozy eroticism.

FRI 13 – THU 26 FEB (CONTINUES IN MAR)

Woman of the Year

USA 1942. Dir George Stevens. With Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, Fay Bainter. 114min. 35mm. U

The first on-screen pairing of Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy sparked their personal relationship, and established a dynamic that would persist through many of the eight films in which they co-starred: a romance complicated by gender politics. Playing married journalists who clash over her ambition, independence and impulsiveness, they're thrilling together – despite a compromised ending that Hepburn hated.

THU 19 FEB 18:30 NFT1

SAT 21 FEB 18:30 NFT1

Keeper of the Flame

USA 1942. Dir George Cukor. With Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn, Margaret Wycherly, Forrest Tucker. 100min. 35mm. U

Keeper of the Flame is a weighty drama with structural shades of *Citizen Kane*, and it remains fascinating for its attempt to address the possibility of a rising American fascism. Tracy plays a reporter assigned to write a biography of a deceased national hero; Hepburn is the widow who knows the real story of what her husband's wealth and popularity did to his character.

TUE 17 FEB 20:40 NFT2

SAT 28 FEB 15:30 NFT3

The Sea of Grass

USA 1947. Dir Elia Kazan. With Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, Melvyn Douglas. 123min. 16mm. PG

Elia Kazan's second feature weds Hepburn's smart city girl to Tracy's moody cattle rancher, strands them on acres of New Mexico prairie, and puts them through the soap opera wringer. Melvyn Douglas is the Rhett Butler-ish rake who tempts her away from her marital misery. Narrow emotional possibilities contrast poignantly with an epic landscape, and Hepburn shows her growing range.

SUN 22 FEB 18:20 NFT1

FRI 27 FEB 20:40 NFT2

State of the Union

USA 1948. Dir Frank Capra. With Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn, Angela Lansbury. 124min. 35mm. PG

Hepburn plays the estranged wife of Tracy's Presidential hopeful, who returns to his side to help his campaign – despite his affair with a conniving media magnate (Lansbury). Capra's comedy-drama deftly weighed personal hypocrisy against political corruptibility. Playing a patriotic Republican actually helped the left-leaning Hepburn deflect the attentions of the House Un-American Activities Committee.

SUN 22 FEB 20:30 NFT2

FRI 27 FEB 17:45 NFT2

Adam's Rib

USA 1949. Dir George Cukor. With Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, Judy Holliday. 101min. 35mm. U

A particularly sharp and well-crafted entry in the Hepburn-Tracy battle-of-the-sexes, sees them as married but opposing lawyers. He's prosecuting a woman for the attempted murder of her husband; she's handling the defence. Soon, courtroom theatrics and genuine disagreement over the case come between them. Killer chemistry, exquisite supporting performances and a nippy script distinguish this as one of the greatest romcoms.

Print courtesy of Academy Film Archive

FRI 20 FEB 18:30 NFT1

THU 26 FEB 18:30 NFT1

The African Queen

USA 1951. Dir John Huston. With Humphrey Bogart, Katharine Hepburn, Robert Morley. 105min. PG

Unusual for its mid-life romantic pairing and risky location shooting, *The African Queen* remains one of classic Hollywood's best-loved action thrillers – and most legendarily tortuous filming experiences. Hepburn plays a spinster missionary drawn into unlikely heroics by Bogart's rough, boozy sea captain. It was her first colour film (and what colour – shot by Jack Cardiff), and it won Bogart his only Oscar®.

TUE 24 FEB 18:20 NFT2

WED 25 FEB 20:30 NFT3

SAT 28 FEB 20:45 NFT1

Pat and Mike

USA 1952. Dir George Cukor. With Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, William Ching, Aldo Ray. 95min. 35mm. U

This neat, supple Hepburn-Tracy vehicle allowed Hepburn to show off her redoubtable real-life sporting prowess, and was her favourite of their collaborations. She plays Pat, a golfer who shows real potential, except

when her fiancé is around to throw her off. Tracy plays the semi-shady promoter hoping to rid his protégée of her professional, and romantic, encumberments.

TUE 24 FEB 20:30 NFT2

SAT 28 FEB 18:20 NFT2

PLAYING IN MARCH

Summertime

USA 1955. Dir David Lean. With Katharine Hepburn, Rossano Brazzi, Darren McGavin, Isa Miranda. 99 min.

David Lean called this bittersweet, beautifully shot mid-life romance his favourite of his own films; it also started a love affair with Venice that would lead to his setting up home there. Hepburn plays an unmarried Ohio secretary who gets a crash course in love and its complications on a long dreamed-of solo holiday. Lean lets the film revolve around her delicate and passionate performance, which evokes with unforgettable grace a guarded person's submission to an overwhelming love.

DATES AND TIMES TBC

Desk Set

USA 1957. Dir Walter Lang. With Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn, Gig Young, Joan Blondell. 103 min.

Scripted by Phoebe and Henry Ephron, parents of Nora, this warm, good-looking comedy sees Hepburn and Tracy step into the computer age, clashing over office hardware rather than gender roles. She's the strict and sensible supervisor of a TV research department; he's the efficiency expert her company hires to advise on replacing human beings with room-sized chunks of new-fangled technology. What will he make obsolete first: her department, or her long-standing but marriageless relationship with her boss (Gig Young)?

DATES AND TIMES TBC

Suddenly, Last Summer

USA 1959. Dir Joseph L Mankiewicz. With Elizabeth Taylor, Montgomery Clift, Katharine Hepburn, Mercedes McCambridge. 114 min.

Gore Vidal penned this screen adaptation of Tennessee Williams' dark, strange and seething melodrama, which was lent special dispensation by the Production Code to openly depict homosexuality on account of the fact that it "illustrates the horrors of such a lifestyle". Living the lifestyle and suffering the horrors is frail Montgomery Clift; feeding the flames as his mother and procurer, an enjoyably monstrous Hepburn; and driven mad by witnessing all of it, Elizabeth Taylor, fiercely passionate and never more gorgeous.

DATES AND TIMES TBC

Long Day's Journey into Night

USA 1962. Dir Sidney Lumet. With Katharine Hepburn, Ralph Richardson, Jason Robards, Dean Stockwell. 174 min.

Hepburn won Best Actress at Cannes for her portrayal of a woman ruled by regret – and morphine – in this rich adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's play. A well-off family headed by Ralph Richardson's proud, flamboyant, bitter ex-actor – a take on O'Neill's own father – stagnates in its Connecticut summer home. Hepburn is his unhappy wife, Jason Robards and Dean Stockwell their feckless and drink-sodden sons. Hardly cheery, then, but a classy package, with cinematography by Boris Kaufman and music by André Previn.

DATES AND TIMES TBC

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

USA 1967. Dir Stanley Kramer. With Sidney Poitier, Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, Katherine Houghton. 108 min.

Hepburn and Tracy play oh-so-liberal parents who have their tolerance tested when their daughter (played by Hepburn's real-life niece, Katherine Houghton) brings home a black fiancé (Sidney Poitier). The film's pious racial politics are of course dated now, making it seem less of a daring statement; but its success was significant at a time when many US states still held laws against interracial marriage. This was Tracy's final film; he died only weeks later, and heartbroken Hepburn never watched it.

DATES AND TIMES TBC

The Lion in Winter

UK 1968. Dir Antony Harvey. With Peter O'Toole, Katharine Hepburn, Jane Merrow, John Castle. 134 min.

Throwing herself into work after the death of her soulmate Spencer Tracy, Hepburn won her third Oscar playing Eleanor of Aquitaine, from whose ancestral lines she was descended on two sides. Peter O'Toole is majestic as Eleanor's husband, Henry II, whose choice of successor is a matter of much family strife. Admired for its erudite dialogue and scurrilous, soapy take on the personal melodramas behind political change, the film also features the screen debuts of Antony Hopkins and Timothy Dalton.

DATES AND TIMES TBC

Love Among the Ruins

UK 1975. Dir George Cukor. With Laurence Olivier, Katharine Hepburn, Colin Blakely, Joan Sims. 100 min.

"Neither Larry nor I are dead yet," Hepburn said in 1972 when asked if she regretted not having worked with Olivier. This high-end TV production provided the chance. She plays a widow facing a delicate legal case, he the ex-lover who serves as although Olivier took some convincing - including a letter from Hepburn and George Cukor threatening to "blow our brains out" if he refused. "my happiest professional film experience"

DATES AND TIMES TBC

On Golden Pond

USA 1981. Dir Mark Rydell. With Jane Fonda, Henry Fonda, Katharine Hepburn, Doug McKeon. 109 min.

Notable for its near-the-knuckle casting of Jane and Henry Fonda as a chalk-and-cheese father and daughter, Ernest Thompson's adaptation of his own quiet off-Broadway play remains a reference point for low-key family dramas of familial division and reconciliation, as well as an acting masterclass. "It's about time!" Hepburn reportedly said of being cast with Fonda; always at her best with a fine co-star to spark off, she took home an Oscar, as did Henry Fonda and Ernest Thompson.

DATES AND TIMES TBC

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***** PICTURE DESK *****

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