



## **Adele Jergens- Queen of the 'B' Femme Fatales**

Adele Jergens did it all: model, dancer, pin-up girl, burlesque queen, glamorous starlet and femme fatale, bubbly comedienne and TV game show contestant. A classic blonde bombshell with undeniable sex appeal, she gamely endured such industry-standard cheesecake monikers as "The Fairest of the Fair," "The Champagne Blonde" and "The Girl with the Million Dollar Legs." But a closer examination of her diverse career reveals a considerable talent that frequently went unappreciated in her time. Many of her pictures-particularly her film noir bad girl portrayals- hold up extremely well, in large part due to her vitalizing performances. Adele Jergens was really the queen of the 'B' movie femme fatales

Born November 26th, 1917, Adele grew up in Ridgewood, NY, a working class Brooklyn neighborhood. The only girl among several brothers, she quickly traded in her tomboy athletics at the tender age of 13 when she won a dancing scholarship to the Alvertina Rasch Studios in Manhattan. She followed this with her stage debut two years later in a local Brooklyn musical. Upon graduation from Grover Cleveland High School, she did double duty as a chorus girl at the Brooklyn Fox Theatre and a model for the John Roberts Powers agency in New York City. Adele was extremely ambitious and wanted to make her own way in life; clearly a prodigy, she rapidly ascended the dual track of success on both the chorus stage and the modeling runway, "I remember very well the first \$35 I ever

earned," she told the Ridgewood Times in 1948. " I was 15 years old and I bought my first tailored suit. Nothing could hold me back after that."

She worked abroad, modeling in Rio, London and Paris. In between runway assignments, she could be found hoofing it as a chorine in several Broadway musicals including "Jubilee," (1935) "Leave It To Me," (1938) and "Louisiana Purchase" (1940). She appeared in contemporary press accounts as one of the fabled Radio City Music Hall Rockettes. Then her modeling career culminated with her winning the "Fairest of the Fair" contest at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Adele Jergens became the toast of Gotham.



By 1944, the allure of Hollywood beckoned and Adele left The Big Apple for Tinseltown. The historical record is somewhat hazy on the beginnings of her film career. Nearly every account lists her screen debut as "Together Again," (1944) a lighthearted Columbia comedy starring Charles Boyer and Irene Dunne. However, Jergens' first screen appearance was actually an uncredited bit part in "Jane Eyre," released by Fox in April of 1944. One contemporary writer mentions her return to Broadway, "after a fruitless year at Twentieth Century Fox..." Whether Adele signed a contract with Fox and was allowed to languish for some time or was loaned out for "Jane Eyre" after signing with Columbia is unclear. What is certain is that Jergens was working on Broadway as Gypsy Rose Lee's understudy in "Star & Garter," when she inked a Columbia movie contract in 1944.

Her discovery by a Columbia agent while filling in one night for an ailing Gypsy Rose is the stuff of Hollywood legend and press agent dreams. As Adele admitted some years later, " You know how those jobs are. All I did was stand around back stage just in case Gypsy became ill. But those things I thought only happened in the movies--where the understudy proves to be a hit, wins a Hollywood contract..." A less enthusiastic explanation is that Columbia was

looking for someone to play a strip tease dancer in "Together Again," and gave her an audition because she was a known commodity in New York. But by whatever device, Adele had gotten her big break into pictures and resolved to make the most of it.

Jergens' next screen appearances for Columbia included a bit part as a showgirl opposite Rita Hayworth in "Tonight and Every Night" (1945), and a bigger role in "Black Arrow", a low budget Western serial directed by the prolific Lew Landers. The latter role allowed Adele plenty of screen time for studio boss Harry Cohn to give her a close once-over. Cohn initially wanted to develop Adele's career to use her as a counterbalance in managing his intermittently troublesome superstar, Rita Hayworth.

Consequently, Columbia pulled out all the stops in putting together Adele's next film, "A Thousand and One Nights" (1945). Adele had the second female lead in this major Technicolor production, playing Princess Armina to Cornel Wilde's Aladdin. Although she did have to share the spotlight with lissome Evelyn Keyes as the Genie, Columbia's publicity department spared nothing on promoting the picture and lavished attention on Adele. "A new glamour item has been added to the Columbia lot", the studio trumpeted. The resultant publicity campaign included cranking out cheesecake publicity pictures of Jergens and puff magazine stories--including one about young men who dream of living on a coral isle with "the Blonde from Brooklyn."

"A Thousand and One Nights" was a smash hit and so was Adele Jergens. Complimented by Time Magazine for her performance and deluged by letters from lovesick GIs, Jergens became one of the most popular pin-up girls during the final year of World War II.

(A more cynical angle to the Jergens PR buildup was offered years later by her co-star Evelyn Keyes, who averred to author Doug McClelland in Forties Film Talk that, "... Adele really hadn't done that much in films then, mostly show-girl stuff, but someone--I don't know if it was the producer, the director or Harry Cohn himself--had the hots for her and was seeing to it that she got all the attention as we filmed." Based on Keyes' own intimate relationship with the mercurial Cohn and her first-hand knowledge of Hollywood's sexual politics, her insights shouldn't be dismissed out of hand.)

But Adele's career began to lose some steam after initially highballing it off the starting line. Whether Harry Cohn lost interest in Jergens when Rita Hayworth became a non-issue, or he simply did not believe in Adele's screen presence and front-line marketability is not known. The tempestuous mogul was notoriously single-minded about what he wanted out of his contract players and frequently kept his own counsel.

On the heels of "A Thousand and One Nights", Jergens was given another second lead in a predictable formula comedy, "She Wouldn't Say Yes," (1945) in which her love interest, Lee Bowman, becomes progressively involved with psychiatrist Rosalind Russell. While a legitimate A production, this role for Adele was a pretty thankless part in a film that added little professional luster to any of the participants.

The balance of Jergens' work with Columbia Studios during the 1940's was a smattering of small or supporting roles in "A" pictures, and leads in "B' films. As Adele honed her acting skills, she carved out a respected niche of professional competence. Typically, she played off her lip-smacking sex appeal in comedies such as "The Corpse came C.O.D.," (1947) "Down to Earth," (1947--again opposite Rita Hayworth) and as Red Skelton's most alluring customer in "The Fuller Brush Man" (1948). Her other turns were as femme fatales or star-crossed women from the wrong side of the tracks in "The Woman from Tangier," (1948) "I Love Trouble," (1948) and "The Crime Doctor's Diary" (1949).

A couple of her most notable films from the late 40's were "The Dark Past" (1948) and "Ladies of the Chorus" (1948). The former is a tense film noir with psychiatrist Lee J. Cobb putting prison escapee William Holden "on the couch" to defuse a hostage situation at a lakeside resort. Adele adeptly portrays a straying wife on vacation whose love for her husband rekindles during the crisis. "Ladies of the Chorus" (1948) is a cheap potboiler with musical numbers inexplicably directed by noir and action master Phil Karlson. This picture remains an interesting footnote in movie history, as it contains both Marilyn Monroe's first significant screen appearance *and* Adele's performance as Monroe's burlesque dancer mother! Only 9 years older than Monroe, Adele was effective in a gray wig as she attempted to prevent Marilyn from repeating her own character's mistakes on the burlesque trail. Jergens accepted this and similar far-fetched roles with the professional detachment of the accomplished actress she had become.

Late in life, Jergens reminisced about her Columbia years with a Realpolitik view that reflected a cogent understanding of the studio system and her own career at that time. "I was under contract at Columbia for about five years. I liked working there very much. It was my home studio and I knew everyone and everyone knew me. Everybody was very nice, but they worked us very hard. I only recall one film in which we were able to rehearse."

"They would put me in three pictures at one time but I didn't mind," she laughed. "I enjoyed it, and besides, it was a steady income. Columbia was really a learning experience for me. I had been on the stage but never acted in films before. I was learning with each movie I made, even though many were 'B' pictures."

After completing her contract with Columbia in 1950, Jergens began to free-lance and found that she was in great demand. Striking while the iron was hot, she

completed ten films in 1950, several of which constitute her best film work. After surviving Leo Gorcey and the Bowery Boys in "Blonde Dynamite" (1950), Adele signed on to work at MGM with director Anthony Mann for "Side Street"(1950). Farley Granger stars as a stone-broke messenger who succumbs to temptation and steals \$30,000 from a lawyer. The lawyer, a blackmailing shyster running a honeytrap racket, is using Adele to fleece Wall Street swell Paul Harvey. As Lucille "Lucky" Colner, Jergens is alluringly decked out in a flowing negligee with an appropriate dollar sign where her heart should be located. Lucille's luck has a short shelf life as she ends up floating face down in the East River with the crooks heading after the hapless Granger. "Side Street" is a suspenseful, top-flight film with great New York City location photography. Adele's role was brief but important, and added to her reputation as one the most dangerous dames on screen.

Jergens signed up at RKO for director Richard Fleischer's "Armored Car Robbery" (1950). This tight 67minute film is one of the best B movies to come out of Hollywood. Adele plays (again!) a burlesque queen; this time she's Yvonne Le Doux, a sexy femme fatale with ice water in her veins. Yvonne is inconveniently married to small-time crook Benny McBride (Douglas Fowley). When McBride joins up with ruthless gangster Dave Purvis (William Talman) and his gang of thieves to pull off an armored car stick-up, Benny isn't aware Yvonne is already two-timing him with Purvis. When McBride is wounded during the getaway, Purvis finishes him off and decides to keep the entire haul, taking it on the lam with Yvonne. A subsequent scene has the depraved couple in a hot clinch celebrating both their sudden wealth and Benny's demise. Yvonne dismisses her late husband with all the sentiment of a black widow. With John Law (the relentless Charles McGraw) closing in, the film's denouement finds Le Doux bereaved for a second time when Purvis gets filleted by a airplane propeller, leaving bloodied banknotes scattered on the tarmac. Adele's outstanding performance in this picture solidified her professional reputation and also gave her the opportunity to strut her stuff on the stage during a brief burlesque number.



Adapted from Jo Pagano's novel, "Sound of Fury," a.k.a. "Try and Get Me," is a little known and under-appreciated fact-based film independently produced in 1950. Director Cy Endfield uses an actual 1933 lynching in San Jose CA to construct an incredibly gutwrenching story of two men who commit a horrific crime, get caught and are subjected to an equally horrific aftermath. All the



performances in this film are top-notch, most notably Lloyd Bridges as one of most despicable heavies ever. Adele was perfectly cast, with Variety commenting that..." Adele Jergens as Bridges' girlfriend is the personification of all sexy blondes." The Variety reviewer accurately predicted this film's critical success and resultant

death at the box office. "Try and Get Me" was truly a film ahead of its audience.

Adele's film career continued to thrive during the early 1950's. While most of her appearance in the mega-musical "Show Boat" (1951) was either microscopic or ended up on the cutting room floor, her parts in the Goldwyn film noir "Edge of Doom" (1950) and "Sugarfoot" (1951), an oater with Randolph Scott, constituted an estimable doubleheader. "Abbott and Costello meet the Invisible Man" (1951) at Universal proved to be a resounding hit for the durable comedic duo; As Boots Marden, Adele provided some scenic distraction from Lou's manic antics with the invisible man special effects. Another major role for Jergens found her in a galaxy far, far away from Brooklyn, playing the kissin' cousin Gladys opposite tenor Robert Merrill in the countrified musical "Aaron Slick from Punken Creek" (1952). This major production, headlining the improbable duo of Alan Young and Dinah Shore, was an attempt by Paramount to cash in on MGM's successful musical cycle during the final days of the big studio system. Despite an energetic effort by the cast, this film proved difficult to publicize and foundered at the box office.

Also starting in 1950. Jergens experienced concurrent success in the new medium of television when she became a regular on Mike Stokey's Pantomime Quiz. Some of these early kinescope shows survive and it is fascinating to watch a bright and animated Adele more than hold her own in a competitive charades contest with such quick-witted luminaries as Vincent Price, Hans Conried, and Howard Da Silva. Adele became so identified with this program that she was awarded one of the first Hollywood Walk of Fame Stars, at 7046 Hollywood Boulevard, for her work in television. She also made numerous guest appearances on TV during the 1950's, including Racket Squad (1952), Ford

Theatre (1953), Regal Theatre (1954), I Married Joan (1954) and the Burns and Allen Show on Dec 10, 1956, probably her last television appearance.

Adele had met and married actor Glenn Langan back in 1949. After taking a year off in 1953 for the birth of their son, Tracy, Adele got back on track with several middling B films and a supporting role in "The Cobweb" (1955), a big, all-star A production directed by Vincente Minelli. Unfortunately, "The Cobweb" was a box office flop. Still vivacious but pushing 40, Adele began to find good roles harder to come by.

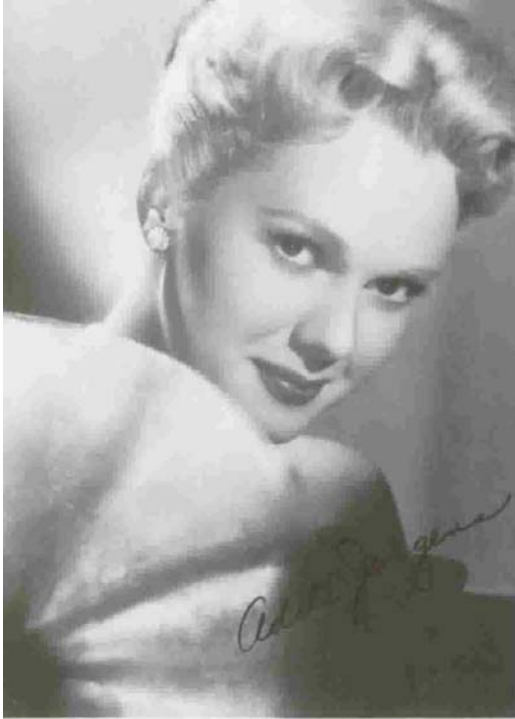
Her final two pictures were emblematic of the ongoing metamorphosis of the movie industry during the mid 1950's. B films and second features had given way to television and were being phased out by many of the major studios. Many of the second tier pictures being produced were independent films, serving up increasingly lurid products to a Saturday night drive-in audience dominated by teenagers. This transformation made the personal transition from femme fatale and ingenue roles even more difficult for Jergens as she had never attained legitimate star status. She was simply not finding many choice parts. She played a former stripper in the Roger Corman sci-fi cheapie, "The Day the World Ended" opposite Touch (Mike) Connors and her last picture, "Girls in Prison" (1956) featured Adele as a tough-as-nails convict in a cell with a framed innocent, a psychotic killer and, of course, a lesbian. Even though this film can be viewed the modern day prism of high camp, (Jane Darwell as the aged prison matron flirts with a minister, played by Richard Denning!) it is pretty painful to watch now and must have been wretched back then. Adele decided that the game wasn't worth the candle anymore and pulled the plug on her film career to be a full-time Mom and homemaker.

Adele and her husband Glenn Langan lived first in Encino, and then settled in Ventura County near Camarillo. A devoted couple, they raised their only child, Tracy, with Glenn becoming a real estate broker while intermittently continuing his acting career until the early 1970's. In a 1976 interview with Jess L. Hogalin from the Hollywood Reporter, Adele expressed a desire to get back into acting after, "... spending so many years in retirement". Unfortunately, nothing ever came of it.

With the inevitable march of time came sorrow for Adele. Glenn Langan died of cancer at the age of 74 on 19 January 1991. Adele moved into a retirement community in Camarillo with son Tracy close by working at Panavision Films, but Tracy unexpectedly passed away from a brain tumor in 2001, leaving Adele "much bereaved and diminished" by the loss of her only child.

I had scheduled an interview with Adele Jergens for the first week of December 2002. It was a shock when I was informed of her death on November 22, 2002, just four days before her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Adele Jergens leaves a unique and accomplished legacy in motion pictures. She could sing, dance, strut, jaw and flat-out act with the best of them. To me, she will always epitomize that bygone film noir era of hard-boiled repartee, sleek fedoras, and sequined spangled burlesque girls. For better or for worse, she was *the* gorgeous gal that the heavies and hard cases just had to have along for the ride.





**Alan K. Rode**