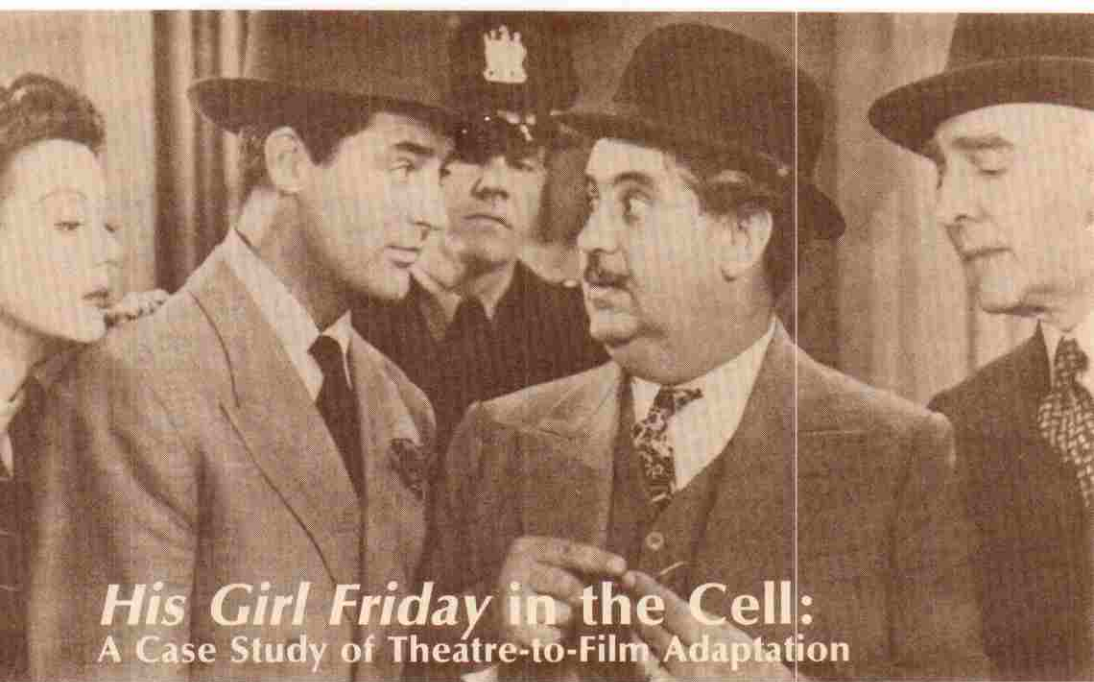




His Girl Friday in the Cell: A Case Study of Theatre-to-Film Adaptation

Clearly central to the task which director Howard Hawks sets himself in adapting Hecht and MacArthur's *The Front Page* into his own film, *His Girl Friday*, is the need to reformulate the central character, Hildy Johnson. Hawks has both begun this reformulation and compounded its difficulties by opting to present Hildy as a woman rather than a man. To bring to fruition this initial switch, while retaining the broad outlines of the stage play's plot, Hawks must justify his new Hildy in terms of the demands levied by Hildy's role in the original play. Specifically, he must make his female Hildy believable as what her opposite, Walter (Cary Grant), dubs her in the film: "The best newspaperman I know." At the same time he must establish her as a recognizable, 1940 romantic lead. Hawks seems to aim at building his essentially new comedy around the special irony of a Hildy who is both. That the resulting character may prove to be of a type—the sophisticated, strong-minded career woman Rosalind Russell often portrayed in such films—will only confirm Hawks's success. It is no argument against the peculiarity of the problem to this situation. Hawks, producer and director on *His Girl Friday*, inherits a stage plot turning upon the irreconcilability of professional and romantic life for its (male) Hildy. To transmute that story into romantic comedy on film, he must retain a measure of conflict but finally cause romance and professional obligation to converge. Hawks saw that a female Hildy might accomplish this fusion—but once brought into being, she *must* do so for the comedy to work at all. Thus arises Hawks's central task.

To assess his approach to it, we naturally would look for scenes that focus intimately on Hildy's character. One such scene ensues when Hildy seeks out the condemned man, Earl Williams, for an interview in his prison cell. Hawks's great success in this scene is the creation of an integrated Hildy who is credibly "a great newspaperman" precisely *because* she is female—and conversely one who, as newspaperman, is exactly the woman to succeed in the hard-bitten newspaper world, in Walter's life, and in the pivotal role of Hawks's newly forged romantic comedy. Stylistic analysis of the brief scene yields much insight, not only into Hawks's particular strategies but also into the larger issues involved in adapting a theater comedy of one *genre* into a film representative of another.

The "cell" scene does not appear in the stage version. This fact itself, linking the scene with other important sequences written new for the film, makes it characteristic of Hawks's transmutative work. Predictably, given the task as outlined, most of the new material occurs in the first, largely expository half of the film, when characters are established. The cell scene occurs at an important point near the end of this first half. Reasons for its appearance lie in the logic of Hawks's new plot. The Hildy of *The Front Page* falls back into reporting by instinct, in a reflexive response to the crisis of Earl Williams's jailbreak. Walter, to that point, has done nothing to persuade Hildy to come back to work. His incessant browbeating and his single attempt at trickery have earned only Hildy's vow to "walk right up to you and hammer on that monkey skull of yours." Hildy first betrays reportorial instinct only some time after this exchange. By contrast, Hildy's visit to Earl Williams in the film follows from Walter's conniving. Hildy here shows more of conscious calculation than bombast and instinct. Also, of course, she appears manipulable, but this trait derives from her weddedness to newspaper work—and, implicitly, to Walter, who is altogether more visible to us in the film than in the play. As is quite opposite in the play, Walter's influence at this point is that of newspapering. Hildy succumbs to both with the same act. The convergence begins.

On the face of it, therefore, the cell scene presents a conscious, more commanding Hildy, one who is on more intimate terms with Walter and thus subject to the grip of her profession through him. The "monkey skull" line does return later to remind us of the story's central conflict. But an eventual resolution of that conflict, something we are not given on stage, has been hinted at in this interweaving of Hildy's romantic and professional predilections.

Stylistically, the cell scene furthers these effects at deeper levels. Composed of eight shots neatly divisible into groups of four, with each half-sequence forming a unity in time, its central action proceeds by showing Hildy's command of situations—her professionalism—and then integrating that commanding quality with compassion: a compassion derivable in part from the ability to command, and in part from Hildy's distinctly "feminine" character.

The first four shots work principally to show her authority. Heretofore, the film has not shown her functioning as newspaperman, nor in any newspaper setting other than the office. But it is "on the beat" that Hildy will unfold as a reporter. (Significantly, the whole sequence takes place between scenes in the newspaper office and in the Criminal Courts press room. By embedding the scene solidly within these journalistic settings, Hawks underscores its key position as a setting for Hildy's action in that world.) Hildy is discovered in the doorway to the prison foyer at the fade-in. She is already there, in our first view of this world, and, by implication, has been all along. Lighting from an off-camera window highlights her in contrast with the guard, Jacobi, who sits in shadow at his desk. She is prominent here; this is her natural element.

That the guard must turn his head from the side opposite Hildy to come to face her is also worth noting. As the second shot brings us in closer, he is about to turn away again, backside to her, as her interview request ends in her assured, perfunctory, "How about a little service?" The fact that her bribe forces him to turn around once more, unnatural though the movement has come to seem visually, shows us her magnetic hold on him—and implicitly, on the whole system. Hildy does not miss a beat during this bit, which occupies the rest of the shot. With virtually the same movement that brought her through the door, she lifts the bribe from her handbag, drops it, stoops to

pick it up and, in the process, carries through the dialogue: "Oh, say, is this your money?" "Don't think it is. . . ." "Twenty bucks." "Well, it just may be." "That's what I thought." It is all one motion, a single, coordinated sentence. She has been certain from the moment she entered what to do, ritualistically, each second.

Hildy's left hand still clutches gloves and a handbag, as it did the moment she entered. Thus, the same hand that just effected the bribe now pushes Jacobi from his chair, and the words again coordinate: "C'mon, I'm in a hurry." Her attitude is not the pushiness of one anxious or uncertain about getting her way; it is the total assurance of one so practiced as to be able to carry on automatically—with one hand, so to speak.

We must pause here before other elements that influence the larger comedy. The ease with which Hildy bribes Jacobi underlines not only her strength, but the whole system's weakness—particularly that of the yet-to-appear Mayor and Sheriff. The sweep of Hildy's hand to the floor and back with the money just as easily sweeps aside the Sheriff's authority (in this case, to keep her from seeing Earl Williams). Subtextual play and comic undercutting of this sort work importantly, we will discover, throughout this scene.

Also, we notice that Jacobi is reading a newspaper when Hildy arrives. Newspaperdom, as noted, permeates the setting; that is the setting's point. But the pencil in Jacobi's hand further suggests what *type* of newspapering is involved. A good guess would hold that Jacobi has been busy with a crossword puzzle. The image will be repeated later in the press room, where a dangling newspaper in one reporter's hand shows a comics page to the camera. Jacobi's nonthreatening nature comes home to us as we spot this, but, more importantly, so does that of this whole world. However seriously it may present itself, even on death row the world of Hildy's profession finally appears containable, "fun," lightheartedly comic.

Moving through a barred door into the cell area in Shot Three, Hildy resumes the motion, only briefly interrupted by the inconvenience of the bribe. Her speech and tone are continuous with what has gone before: "Hey, Joe, open up here." Waving aside Jacobi's last protest, she strides in. Her movement up until now has been from right to left, an unnatural direction visually. Death row is an unnatural place. Yet Hildy shows no consternation; the surety in her step overcomes our visual difficulty, as her assured manner generally takes command of, even redeems, this otherwise alien world.

Shot Four develops this last theme. It is a high-angle shot embracing the whole cell room, and thus delimiting it to stand clearly apart from us. We see it from an unlikely angle that gives us a commanding, all-encompassing overview. The effect of the angle is our sense both of alienness and of the fact that this world *can* be encompassed. It sets us up, as have foregoing shots, to witness Hildy take command. Hildy's ability to move, her efficacy, again overcomes a visually unnatural image, and her movement becomes firmly established as a metaphor for control. It stands in contrast both with the stark, unmoving angles and lines and the long shadows of the cell room—dominated by Earl's cage-like enclosure—and with the severely circumscribed, inefficacious "movement" of Earl within the cell, or of the mechanically pacing guard in the background. Hildy moves assuredly where movement otherwise is absent or confined.

Her name, she tells Earl, is "Johnson," a reminder of her professional, unmarried, pre-Bruce Baldwin (Ralph Bellamy) condition. But she addresses her subject as "Earl." Later, her personal touch will seem almost maternally patronizing. That there is in this attitude a contrast between herself and Earl, one as great as the difference in their respective abilities to move, is

emphasized by Earl's ironic assent to the interview: "I haven't anything else to do." Hildy, we are certain by now, has much else to do in this film. As proof, the first half-sequence ends with reminders of her composure, as we saw it at the outset. Still clutching objects in her left hand, Hildy executes another deft sweep with her right as she pulls over a chair. The shot fades with her again in motion, stepping toward Earl.

The second half-sequence continues to show Hildy dominate; but now, as the last shot presaged, it reveals her dominance as a force of quiet strength, enabling her to lend others her support in a sympathetic, "feminine" fashion. Her manner is thus distinguished from that of fellow "gentlemen of the press." Hildy's command becomes empathy, as she works to command Earl *for his own benefit*. This further elaboration of her character supplies an "equals" sign between her femininity and her capacity to be "a great newspaperman." The sequence begins with a fade to a two-person close shot—the first close-up in the cell scene. Visually the tone has changed, quieted; Hildy's movement, emphasized in the preceding series of medium and long shots, largely ceases. Despite the heavy cell wire between them, a clear sense of intimacy appears in this close view of Hildy and Earl. The two are visually pushed together by the solid cell door that frames them on the left. Molly's picture in triangulation on the wall behind enhances this sense of intimacy and of a specifically personal bond, a bond based on *feminine* warmth. When she speaks, Hildy seems to have lost the briskness in her voice. She projects a nearly maternal sense of peace and reassurance.

Both other clues remind us that Hildy still commands the situation. Her profile stands in the foreground, fully lit, higher in the frame than Earl's face, and prominent. It stands out against her own dark clothing. Earl's downcast visage, by contrast, seems of a piece with his drab prison outfit. This is the first shot in the film to present Earl at close range, and everything in actor John Qualen's appearance, right down to his little mustache, reassures us that he is harmless, no match for Hildy, and only comically conceivable as the "Red menace" the Mayor's and Sheriff's hysterics make him out to be. Earl's eyes draw us downward to reveal, moreover, that movement still exists. Hildy's hands finger a pack of cigarettes. As movement on her part has come to represent assurance and control, we here sense Earl's awareness of that control—a reminder of it also for us.

In every respect, the dialogue that commences during this shot reinforces the irony present in visual signs of Hildy's and Earl's relative strength. It begins with Earl's protestations to sanity, a self-characterization we would be the last to deny him. If anything, he is banal normalcy run riot, and every bit the "tough luck" character to find himself fired after twenty-two years on the same job. Hildy, who evidently has him all figured out, affirms this impression. When she asks, "You didn't mean to kill that policeman," she need not look at Earl to read an answer. She assumes it, like a forgiving mother toward a child who has misbehaved. In fact, throughout the scene she rarely lets Earl finish a sentence. Earl's response, "It's against everything I've ever stood for," insists on the absurd premise that he has ever "stood for" anything. "It's just—just the world." (Earl, of course, begins to seem a parody of the Marxist the Mayor and Sheriff want us to believe he is. Here he offers a quasi-doctrine of social conditioning for crime.)

But above these contrasts, the intimate bond between Hildy and Earl draws certain equations between the two. Earl's reference to "the world," a world this scene has been exploring, may implicate Hildy even more than Earl. The suspicion rises that Earl is a "foil" for Hildy. We might reasonably expect it to rise further.

A first visual confirmation that it does so appears in the next shot, which simply mirrors the preceding. Earl comes into the foreground; Hildy's face remains dominant, but the camera now has captured her in Earl's world, through the bars. To cement the bond, Hildy and Earl exchange a cigarette through the cell wire. Had we begun viewing at Shot Five, we might not now know which of the two sat *inside* the cell. Nor does it finally matter. Earl will be free, and Hildy, in the end, will not be—or, she will realize her subconscious choice not to be. That choice is inescapable. She is "imprisoned" herself, though in a world that, as a prison, fails to be very threatening. As a tag to the shot, Hildy calls her femininity to mind again by apologizing for the lipstick on her cigarette.

The scene's last two shots serve as a compressed re-emphasis of the themes thus far developed. Shot Seven, a visual return to Shot Five, makes circular the mini-sequence between Hildy and Earl, just as the final shot closes off the whole scene with another long view of the cell room. The "produced for use" bit completes Earl's depiction as a parody of both a Marxist and a murdering gunman. It comically undercuts the hysteria that later will attend his escape. It is itself the victim of subtextual play focused on the cigarette, which the non-smoking Earl remembers to hand back to Hildy, who crushes it to the floor *unused*. Intimacy also culminates in Shot Seven in the admiring of Molly's picture. As the first stimulus to animate Earl, this exchange suggests that the kindness of women is indeed his life and salvation.

As they rise in the final shot, we notice something we now expect: a visual mark of Hildy's entrapment. She is framed against the barred wall *afrent* the foyer, and even the chair she pushes back, again with one hand, is backed in a way that suggests "bars." Earl's line is, "Goodbye, *Miss Johnson*," another reminder. Hildy is straight, and again brisk and deft, but her glance back at Earl before leaving shows that the bond remains. Her final line, "Good luck"—a favorite with Hawks—was the sort of farewell given aviators in World War One before they undertook dangerous missions. It indicates that the bond is one of collegiality; that, again, Hildy belongs in this professional world. A fade denies us the chance to see Hildy outside the cell room, since, the film says, her existence outside this world really is irrelevant.

Is Hildy not herself "produced for use"—her proper "use" being the newspaper business and married life with Walter? We are led to believe by this scene that she is as stuck here as Earl, and as at home in this incarnation as he comically seems amid his cell's drab but human furnishings. But Hildy does more than passively fit. The composure, command, and compassion she lends the situation work redemptively on her world to make it a fit little "home." If redemption themes are the basis of comedy, the cell scene, in less than three minutes' total running time, has established a comic vision for the whole film. In its own composure and its concentration on two persons, the scene models sanity and humanness of a kind needed for this film, and altogether absent from the frenetic action of *The Front Page*. It discloses Hildy in the integrated wholeness of her being, thus rendering credible her character itself and her eventual reunion with Walter. It shows that the romantic and professional dimensions of her being each help realize the other. As a paradigmatic case of theatre-to-film adaptation, it helps soften and knead the unrelentingly caustic, crazy stage comedy into a proper romantic-comedy shape—exactly what Hawks meant the "feminizing" of Hildy to do in the first place.