

CARRIE RICKEY

***Mean . . . Moody . . . and Magnificent!: Jane Russell and the Marketing of a Hollywood Legend* by Christina Rice**

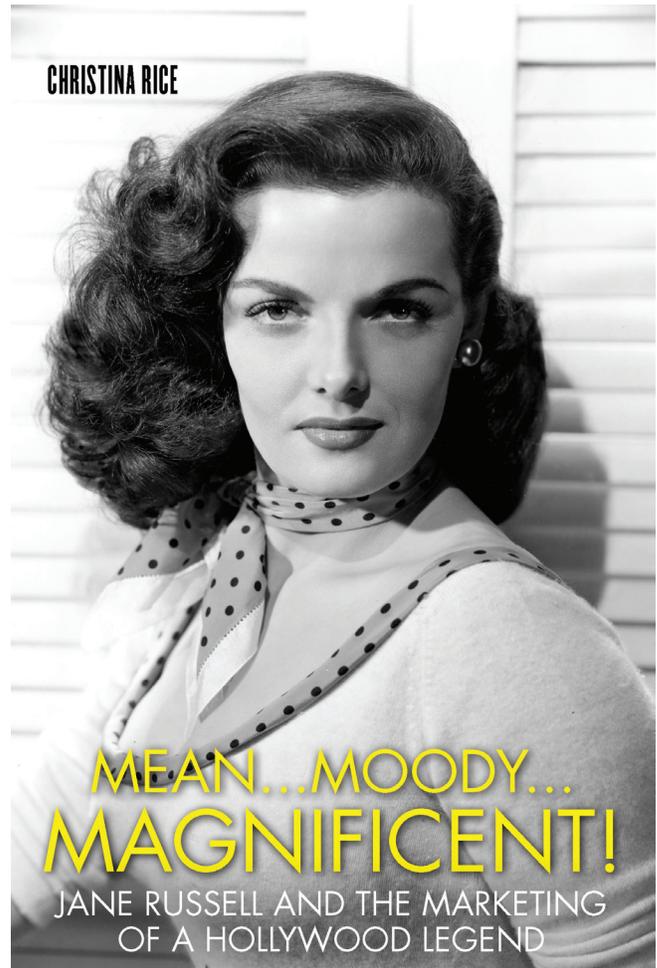
“Culture is the ability to describe Jane Russell without using your hands,” joked Bob Hope, her costar in *The Paleface* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1948), in which her buxom figure likewise was the subject of similarly suggestive humor.

She was not the greatest of screen actresses. Still, from the late 1940s through the 1950s Russell projected a near-irresistible persona: the no-nonsense gal, quick-witted and playful, hunting for a man who appreciated those qualities rather than her cup size. Because of their shared sleepy eyes and epic shoulders, she was perfectly matched opposite Robert Mitchum in the noirish comedies *His Kind of Woman* (John Farrow, 1951) and *Macao* (Josef von Sternberg and Nicholas Ray, 1952). Her straightforward humor was a delicious foil to Marilyn Monroe’s circuitous intrigues in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953).

Christina Rice is a sympathetic biographer who understands Russell and her context in all their contradictions. Russell, a sex-positive devout Christian who thought homosexuality was unnatural, nonetheless could enjoy a drag performance satirizing her and Monroe in *Blondes*. Russell was a lifelong Republican, but also a staunch supporter of child-welfare programs. When a botched illegal abortion left her unable to have biological children, she became an outspoken advocate of adoption, lobbying to change restrictive adoption laws in the United States. Equally important, Rice understands how Russell negotiated her role as a sex-pot in an industry that promoted family values while lacing them with as much sexual content as it could get away with.

Rice’s title choice—*Mean . . . Moody . . . Magnificent!*—refers to the publicity for *The Outlaw* (Howard Hughes, 1943), which centrally displayed Russell’s cleavage. Rice provides an enjoyable analysis of the duality this produced: it was a marketing campaign for a movie that didn’t make back its investment but nonetheless made Russell’s career. The title of the book is also remarkable as a way to frame the biography of an underappreciated screen personality.

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Daughter of a former stage actress, Russell grew up a tomboy in Burbank, easily holding her own in a house with four rambunctious younger brothers, yet she enjoyed modeling and posing for portraits. When a photographer encouraged her to screen-test at Paramount, she was rejected for being too tall. (She was five feet, seven inches.) At Fox, she was told she was not photogenic. Still, her innate self-confidence, Rice says, was perhaps the most important of her assets. “Jane got along famously with men, not only because of her looks, but because of her ability to be so at ease with them” (27). Howard Hughes may have marketed her as two colossal breasts with a woman attached, but she knew who she was: a good-humored gal among sex goddesses and drama queens.

Between takes on the set of *The Outlaw*, her screen debut, she obligingly struck suggestive poses for the news photographers. After one asked her to put on a low-cut satin nightgown and bounce on a mattress, though, she lost

her sense of humor. She sought consolation from the film's original director, Howard Hawks, who was also something of a surrogate father figure since her own father had died. He did not console: "If someone asks you to do something that's against your better judgment, say NO!" he thundered (3). It was the best advice she ever got.

Producer Howard Hughes would interfere so much with the production that Hawks decamped, telling him to direct it. Once Hughes took over the reins, the movie, budgeted at \$400,000, ended up costing \$3 million more. An eight-week shoot grew into a nine-month reshoot, giving Hughes time to design a seamless, cantilevered brassiere that would do justice to Russell's assets. When production wrapped in 1941, Russell thought her job on the movie was over. The film premiered in 1943 but was not released nationally until 1946. For Russell that meant three more years of posing provocatively for photographers.

Hughes hired Russell Birdwell, hot off the success of *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), to handle the film's campaign. Photographer Gene Lester, the one who asked Russell to don the satin nightgown and bounce on the bed, recalled Birdwell's marching orders: "Howard just signed a girl with the biggest chest in Hollywood. We want her boobs publicized. We don't care how you do it, just as long as you get her cleavage showing" (64). When the actress saw a color picture of herself on the cover of a magazine—lugging a water bucket in each arm to rhyme visually with her décolletage—she was mortified.

Russell appeared on the cover or in the pictorial spread of magazines like *Click*, *Pic*, and *Life*, which attracted mass readership. To appeal to a classy readership, Birdwell brought in artists like illustrator James Montgomery Flagg (creator of Uncle Sam World War I posters) and glamour photographer George Hurrell. The latter's Kodachrome shots of Russell in a haystack, clad in an off-the-shoulder peasant blouse, became an *Esquire* gatefold (forerunner of the *Playboy* centerfold). In the public imagination, the perception was that Russell was inviting partners for a roll in the hay.

Before the production had even wrapped, Joseph Breen, enforcer of the Production Code Association (PCA), had previewed footage and sent Hughes an itemized list of thirty-seven required cuts that would minimize Russell's endowments and earn Code approval. Naturally, Hughes appealed. If you've seen *The Aviator* (Martin Scorsese, 2004), then you know what ensued. The producer and a UCLA mathematician went to New York to prove to Breen's employers, the Motion Picture Producers and Directors of America, that Russell's décolletage was no more revealing

than that shown in Code-approved pictures. In front of photographic blow-ups of Russell alongside those of Loretta Young, Madeleine Carroll, and Rita Hayworth, the mathematician produced calipers from his pocket and measured the exposed cleavage to "prove" that Russell's was not more revealing. Never mind that her breasts were significantly larger than those of the other actresses; never mind that the images of Russell crossed the line from sexy to salacious.

The MPPDA board sided with the PCA and ruled that "*The Outlaw* was in violation of the Code and not deserving of a certificate of approval." Yet, the calipers stunt was successful enough that the number of required cuts was reduced to six (84).

It wasn't only Code violations that stood in the way of *The Outlaw*'s timely release. It was also that Hughes was preoccupied with developing planes for the war effort. Moreover, the eccentric mogul felt that the longer he delayed the release of *The Outlaw*, the more valuable a property it would be. When the film had its premiere in San Francisco in 1943, Birdwell had Hurrell's shots of Russell in the hay retouched to look even more provocative. Billboard images of Russell in a ripped bodice, skirt hoisted up almost to her equator, were all around the city.

In 1946 Hughes finally decided to release *The Outlaw* nationwide. "Even though the publicity for the film, which was focused on Jane, had been rolling out for a full five years, Hughes and Birdwell were just getting started" (94). "What are the two great reasons for Jane Russell's rise to stardom?" asked an illustrated newspaper ad (94). The cleavage on view was meant to render this a rhetorical question, even though the ad itself offered the answer: "[S]he's daring and exciting."

By 1947, when Russell's seven-year personal contract with Hughes was about to expire, she could have signed with a studio and made more money, largely because of the brand recognition she now had, but she loyally repped with Hughes. The ad campaign may have mortified her, but Hughes never came on to her or meddled with her private life, unlike moguls at other studios. During the war, Russell wed her high-school crush, football player Bob Waterfield, without any intervention from Hughes himself. Rice mentions that Hughes had a scene from *The Outlaw* of Russell leaning over Billy the Kid (Jack Buetel), her upper breasts filling the frame, made into a loop and watched it often.

Whether or not Russell knew about his fetish, Rice does not say, although the actress had to know he was obsessed with breasts. Rice does include passages from an eight-hundred-word memo from Hughes to the costume designer of *Macao* suggesting a demi-brassiere that would

make Russell's nipples under a metallic dress seem more "realistic"—a euphemism for "erect" (150).

Russell's second contract gave her the right to pursue her own cabaret and recording career, which she did. She had a pleasant, playful voice—listen to her songs in *His Kind of Woman* or *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*—and music gave her professional latitude, which is something other studios may have not permitted.

She and Waterfield adopted a daughter, Tracy, the first of their three children, in 1951. She wanted a big clan like her family of origin, but in the 1950s adoption was a bureaucratic, top-secret affair. Later in 1951 when Russell was in Europe, she toured orphanages with an eye to another adoption and was horrified at the conditions. She couldn't adopt a foreign child without congressional approval. In London a destitute Irishwoman offered the performer her fifteen-month-old. With a private adoption of Tommy, Russell facilitated what is now known as open adoption. When Tommy was of age, she made sure that his birth mother met her son, common practice today. This experience, writes Rice, helped Russell find her life's calling (174).

Though she had strayed from the fold of her family's nondenominational Christian practice at eighteen, Russell would soon return, having little trouble reconciling faith with her public image. She participated in her mother's Bible meetings, helped start the Hollywood Christian Group, and with her brothers helped build the Chapel in the Canyon (in Topanga Canyon), where Roy Rogers and Dale Evans went every Sunday.

Though they were married for twenty-five years, the Russell-Waterfield marriage was volatile. There was the time they were in Las Vegas, where Russell was premiering *The Las Vegas Story* (Robert Stevenson, 1952), and went to hear Ben Blue. He joked mercilessly about Russell's anatomy, something she rolled her eyes at. Waterfield could not, not this time. She gripped his hand, knowing that if he reacted, the publicity would be as bad as Blue's humor. To stop the fuming Waterfield, Russell grabbed a fork and ran it down his cheek. When they returned to their hotel room, she apologized and he decked her, resulting in a black eye and swollen jaw that had to be covered with makeup the following day. In Russell's memoirs, she blamed it on the alcohol. Rice, however, quotes a ghostwriter of said memoir who observed that football wives were "all battered women" (180).

In 1952 Howard Hawks called up Russell and said, "Janie, I have a story for you." She immediately asked, "When do we start?" (184). The story was *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and although Russell was top billed and received

a star salary (\$200,000), the blonde was Marilyn Monroe in her first leading role. Hawks correctly guessed brunette and blonde would be great contrasts—and that the seasoned Russell would bolster the insecure Monroe, which Russell did, getting her to set on time.

They were contrasts in more than hair color. "Sensing Monroe's inner turmoil, Jane even invited her co-star to attend a session of a Hollywood Christian group" (192). Monroe attended, but it wasn't her sort of thing. Much later Monroe, who adored the older star, the closest thing she had to a big sister, would say, "Jane tried to convert me to religion and I tried to interest her in Freud" (192). Freud didn't interest Russell. As the two women prepared to leave their footprints in the forecourt of Grauman's Chinese, Monroe joked that instead they should immortalize certain body parts, "Jane by bending over into the wet cement and Marilyn by sitting in it" (196).

By 1952–53, Russell had segued into work closer to her heart. Though she continued to make films until 1970, her biggest successes were behind her. She was still haunted by the European orphanages and the US restrictions on foreign adoption. "Rather than obtain a special act of Congress for one child," said Russell, "I vowed then and there to at least try to get our country's doors open for homeless children" (220). Her timing was propitious. The Korean War had produced thousands of orphans and as many American GIs who wanted to adopt them. She flew to Washington to speak to members of congress and advocate for a bill that would allow five hundred children under the age of six to be adopted by military personnel. It wasn't the sweeping legislation she sought, but it was a start. Two months later, the bill passed, the first of many for which she lobbied.

This first small step turned into great strides when her International Adoption Association joined forces with the International Social Service, and she founded the World Adoption International Fund (WAIF), its fundraising arm. Over its forty-five years, the WAIF placed forty thousand children in families in the United States. Russell got her employers to match her contributions dollar for dollar, and recruited other Hollywood adoptive parents, including Bob Hope and Roy Rogers, on board. Unbeknownst to Howard Hughes, the Hughes Tool Company bought tables for her annual fundraisers.

Though her acting career diminished, not so Russell's activism. During the Carter administration, Russell testified before Congress to save the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980. It passed unanimously, but before it could be enacted, Ronald Reagan took office. David

Stockman, head of the Office of Management and Budget, was opposed to social safety nets and froze its appropriation. Russell went to Washington to meet with Republican lawmakers. “I don’t know whether I’m a left-wing Republican or a right-wing Democrat,” she said, emphasizing that she was *for* kids. The funds were unfrozen.

Rice sums up Russell as “a Hollywood sex symbol who studied the Bible when the cameras weren’t rolling,” a world-famous movie star who wasn’t a top box-office draw, and “an advocate of orphaned children who aligned with a political party that challenged the social programs she championed” (310). All true. But none of these dichotomies crystallize Russell’s singular screen presence. For years I’ve wondered why watching her films makes me feel so ridiculously cheerful. Maybe it’s because Russell projects that self-contained resourcefulness I admire in prewar Barbara Stanwyck—and does so in a postwar context when actresses were consigned largely to marriage-minded or helpmate roles. Russell’s persona strikes me as being against the grain for her time—in fact, precociously modern. Never mind that Hughes sold her as Moody, Mean, and Magnificent. What I love her for is more along the lines of Comely, Comic, and eminently Capable.

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SUDHIR MAHADEVAN

***Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* by Debashree Mukherjee**
and
***Dancing Women: Choreographing Corporeal Histories of Hindi Cinema* by Usha Iyer**

Two groundbreaking new books on Indian cinema have been published in the past year, authored by Debashree Mukherjee and Usha Iyer, respectively. Together, the two books span the pre- and postindependence periods of Hindi-language cinema from Bombay.

What should be studied when studying the making of movies, asks Debashree Mukherjee in *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City*, her inexhaustibly rewarding account of Bombay cinema as it transitioned to sound and strived toward the establishment of an industrial basis for the production of movies. As a former film-industry professional herself, Mukherjee presents the history of Bombay cinema through the “somatic and ethnographic lens” (33)

of her own work experiences in Bombay (now Mumbai), using her “first-hand experience . . . as a sensory route into the past” (37).

Bombay Hustle therefore is not an account that settles for the stability of “industry,” “systems,” or “modes of production” as constructs. Instead, Bombay cinema between 1929 and 1942 (roughly the years covered by this book) is described by Mukherjee as a “cine-ecology,” an agglomeration of people, technologies, material practices, urban locations, and sensations that together constituted the cinema as lucrative ideation, alluring spectacle, and back-breaking work.

Mukherjee searches for “the life of cinema” and the “everyday meanings of cinema as filmmaking” (186). Her study underscores, in her choice of words, the volatility, precarity, and speculative nature of filmmaking, and the energy, depletion, and sometimes fatal struggles of those who found themselves pulled in by the allure of the cinema. The result is a profoundly empathetic study that brings alive the endless hustling (hence the title), the “jostle and push” that characterized Bombay cinema and Bombay the city alike (4).

In the first part of the book, “Elasticity: Infrastructural Maneuvers,” Mukherjee describes a “cine-ecology” of film production characterized by intense speculation and risk taking, as well as by hitherto unnoticed technologies of organization and rationalization that have been obscured by subsequent characterizations of the film industry in India as chaotic and disorganized. In the process, Mukherjee corrects lazy and unfavorable comparisons with the mature oligopoly of the Hollywood studio system.

She also answers long-pending questions of why Bombay became the preeminent and first major center of film production in India. It was not solely because of the language of its movies (Hindi-Urdu), as popular and academic accounts often contend. Rather, part of the answer lies in the thorough “financialization of everyday life” under way in Bombay, as indigenous bazaar traders betted on cotton-futures markets while Bombay’s elites engaged in corporate-shares trading. Both forms of speculation saturated the cine-ecology. Cotton merchants invested in film. Studios organized themselves on corporate lines while drawing on indigenous credit markets for loans to pay dividends to shareholders. So literal were the connections (described in fascinating detail) between speculation and filmmaking that film magazines carried cotton prices, and the films of the period routinely featured villains who were paper-savvy gamblers, swindlers, insurance agents, stockbrokers, race bettors, and the like.