

# Richard Schickel

Author, *Clint Eastwood*

# George Cukor

## The Interview







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GEORGE CUKOR: THE INTERVIEW

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## GEORGE CUKOR: THE INTERVIEW

George Cukor lived with more self-conscious taste than any of his colleagues, and I don't think I had ever been in a home more enviable than his. Hidden behind a high blank wall on a not overwhelming plot, not far up in the Hollywood hills above the Strip, it rambled comfortably around handsome Romanesque gardens alive with color but planned in such a way that you were unaware of the planning. In that sense, the gardens were rather like his best films – and, I remember thinking later, that it was amusing that the art director precisely duplicated the exterior of Cukor's home as the principal setting for one of his films, *Something's Got to Give*, the movie left unfinished when Marilyn Monroe was fired from it shortly before she died.

The interior was a succession of large, dim, comfortably furnished rooms. In the living room, where we photographed our interview with him, a Rouault glowed on the wall behind him. In the library, where he served a light lunch after we had finished the interview, he kept a collection of books autographed by his large circle of literary and theatrical friends - among them Somerset Maugham, Aldous Huxley, and Noel Coward. His taste in literature ran toward the English moderns, and he was, at the time, mulling over the possibility of making a film based on the life of Virginia Woolf.

Unfailingly gracious in manner, Cukor nevertheless displayed a toughness of mind and spirit that I found enormously attractive. When I spoke with him in 1973, he found it difficult to say precisely what it was that set him apart as a director, precisely how he achieved what he had achieved - an unparalleled succession of entertainments that showed him as a master of dry comedy, strong melodrama, and warm romance. Of all the directors I knew, it seemed to me that Cukor had entertained the widest range of the Great Audience. By and large, his pictures excluded no one man or woman, child, or old person, no matter how sophisticated or unsophisticated in taste. His movies, for the most part, could be appreciated (no, *liked*) at one level or another by just about everyone.

There was an irony in this, for he had a reputation in the industry as limited, frequently being dismissed as a “woman’s director.” That’s a fair example of the kind of stupidity about its own work - and its most gifted workers - that has so long afflicted Hollywood. Did they really imagine that *David Copperfield* - that robust and brilliant adaptation of **Charles Dickens’** novel featuring **W.C. Fields’** most endearing performance - appealed only to women? Or that men were exempt from the charms of *Pat and Mike* and *Adam’s Rib*, the wonderful **Spencer Tracy-Katharine Hepburn** comedies? Or that the **Philip Barry** plays that Cukor so expertly adapted to the screen<sup>1</sup> - The *Philadelphia Story* and *Holiday* – didn’t speak to the masculine sensibility? Perhaps this misconception was due to the fact that so many women - **Greta Garbo**, Hepburn, **Judy Holliday**, **Joan Crawford**, **Judy Garland**, among others – gave some of their best performances for Cukor. But Fields, **Cary Grant**, **James Mason**, Tracy, **Ronald Colman** *et al* were never better than in films directed by Cukor.

Cukor had extensive experience on stage handling literary material and dramatic actors before coming to the movies.