

A Letter to Three Wives (1949)

"If he wants me, he can come inside for it. I'm not a drive-in." I'm paraphrasing, but those words are stated on New Year's Eve by Linda Darnell's character in Joseph Mankiewicz's charming and slightly under-appreciated gem, *A Letter to Three Wives*. Darnell is one of the titular spouses who has an errant husband and a shaky sense of herself. She and two female friends have what seem to be idyllic marriages, but each one has the threatened rival in the presence of "Addie". Addie, we learn, has run off with one of their husbands and the film explores a day in which all three wives ponder if it's their husband who has left and will they find an empty side of the bed when they get home. How they discover if their better half is still cohabitating with them is not something I'll reveal. It's a charming payoff and remarkably sensible in its revelation. Like the letter from Addie, the "answer" needs to be read by you, the viewer with its intended impact.

Jeanne Crain and Ann Sothorn are the other two wives. Crain's character is a former WAC and post-military service, we learn she has settled back into domestic life and she has all the confidence of a wet napkin. We learn she was a farm girl before WWII called her into service and when her character is introduced to us in great flashback detail, we see her struggling with a dress, her appearance and her lack of elegance. This would have troubled many women in the era of this film.. privately, it probably still troubles wives today. Sothorn's character is clearly the more independent and contemporary of the trio, working in radio as a writer of melodramatic programming and clearly ahead of her time, given her feministic status as breadwinner in a post-WWII household. She's perhaps the woman of the future in a time warp. It's a statement to her performance (and the strength of the movie's cast) that we have minimal impact by Kirk Douglas as her schoolteacher husband. He was to become Spartacus in 1960. Here he is largely a supporting soldier to this domestic battle.

Darnell's presence is fascinating in this film. As a film actress, she rarely played substantial roles and seemed to be cast for her mature beauty and stunning appeal. Her private life was clouded with excessive drinking, unhappy marriages and ultimately, mental anguish. She succumbed to a tragic death in a fire as she was mounting a potential comeback in 1965. A good deal of her life she was mentored by an older man, whom she married and her character in *Wives* seems to mirror traces of some of her own life arc. It is my opinion she is the craftiest of the "wives". She has the most appeal and yet, the one whose husband is the least attractive, physically and personally and yet probably couldn't wait to pull the car into her drive-in. Her scenes with her screen mother and family are priceless.

Two Oscars went to this film. It is not a film that is hailed as a major milestone, other than giving Mankiewicz the first two of four back-to-back screenwriting/directing Oscars. His follow-up in 1950, *All About Eve* is more popular, better regarded and timeless. It is largely hailed as a witty and knowing classic, but *Wives* has some germination of what was to come, both for the creator and its stars.. and dare I say, wives everywhere.