

# Twentieth Century

USA | 1934 | 91 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Howard Hawks
<b>Screenplay</b>	Ben Hecht/Charles MacArthur/Gene Fowler/Preston Sturges (based on Charles Bruce Millholland's play "Napoleon of Broadway")
<b>Photography</b>	Joseph H. August
<b>Music</b>	Louis Silvers

## Cast

<b>Oscar Jaffe</b>	John Barrymore
<b>Lily Garland</b>	Carole Lombard
<b>Oliver Webb</b>	Walter Connolly
<b>Owen O'Malley</b>	Roscoe Karns

## In Brief

Oscar Jaffe is a successful Broadway director; Lily Garland, one of his stars. But when she leaves his direction, his success goes with her. When he recognizes her aboard the Twentieth Century Limited, the train that both of them are riding, he tries to get her back for a new show. But accomplishing that feat isn't as simple as he had thought.



Howard Hawks' *Twentieth Century* is a hilarious story about people who "are only real in between curtains," who only exist as actors playing roles rather than people with real lives. When the egomaniacal Broadway director Oscar Jaffe (John Barrymore) first meets his new starlet (Carole Lombard), he dispenses with her old name and gives her a new, more glamorous one, Lily Garland, then immediately tells her that's she no longer Lily Garland, but should instead inhabit her role in the play completely. Within the space of a few minutes in Jaffe's company, she has become two layers removed from her original self, an actor playing an actor playing a part. "You are no longer Lily Garland," he howls to her, waving his hands dramatically, as though she had already become too invested in a name he'd given her only minutes before. It's a prophetic moment, because before too long the young girl — previously a lingerie model with no acting experience — is the biggest star on Broadway, as well as Jaffe's lover and his meal ticket, driving his plays to mammoth success. But the film is not a love story, at least not in any ordinary sense, despite the romance between the director and his greatest star. Instead, Hawks treats the story like a tongue-in-cheek melodrama, a melodrama that realizes its own essential mawkishness and silliness, and amps up the ham accordingly.

Indeed, ham is hardly an adequate word to describe what Barrymore and Lombard do with these performances. They're playing characters who are always acting, who think of ordinary encounters as "scenes" to be played, and the people around them as extras in the grand epic of their own lives. They treat emotions like notes to be hit and held, pulling out a bit of anger here, a touch of suicidal angst there, screams and cries and moans like melodies to be wrung from their throats. They write their own speeches as they talk to one another. There's no such thing in this film as a simple conversation: everything is an oration, the two sparring lovers trading monologues and orchestrating curtain-calls even when there's no audience except one another. In an odd, masochistic way, it's obvious that they're perfect for each other, though Jaffe drives Lily away with his dictatorial nature; the last straw is when he hires a private

detective to spy on her. So Lily heads off to Hollywood to become an even bigger star, while Jaffe flounders, his plays failing miserably in her absence. It's hard to blame Lily for leaving this blowhard, though the great irony — Jaffe might say "the final irony," as he does at several points — is that before she leaves he succeeds in making her just like him. The result is that she's not happy unless she's performing, and she's dissatisfied with men who lack a sense of drama: she is infuriated when her new beau (Ralph Forbes) has the temerity to walk out on her before she finishes her great speech telling him to leave.

Hawks has the perfect sensibility for this florid material, realizing that there's a very fine line between melodrama and comedy, a line that can be easily erased when it needs to be. This isn't the camp humor that sometimes arises from particularly pungent melodrama, but a comedic sensibility that is completely immersed in the story and the characters. These characters are just inherently funny, and Hawks is perfectly attuned to the rhythms that accentuate this humor. He knows to linger on Jaffe's melodramatic exits long enough to catch the trailing of the director's hand along the door on the way out, a conscious gesture meant to draw attention to its tortured grip on the doorjamb. Hawks also knows when to pull in for closeups, to catch Barrymore's arched eyebrows and the facial contortions that indicate Jaffe's hammy acting. Barrymore has a tricky part. He can't just be a ham, but has to play a character who's a ham. As a consequence, there's a self-consciousness in his performance that adds a meta-layer to the film: it's perfectly possible to laugh at Jaffe's absurd histrionics and still realize that Jaffe himself takes all of this seriously.



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For her part, Lombard keys her performance to match and exceed Barrymore's wherever possible. In the best of their scenes together, it's like watching a duel to see who can be more ridiculous, more melodramatic: the first actor to give in and let a genuine, believable emotion show is the loser. This is the nature of the relationship between Jaffe and Lily. There's a core of love there somewhere, and certainly mutual respect for one another as artists, but there's also a competitive spirit, a sense that they're performing for one another, trying to outdo one another, to craft the grandest, most showstopping performance, the piece of acting genius that will silence the other with awe. Again, these scenes also function on the meta-layer, where Lombard and Barrymore are engaged in a similar duel of acting prowess, their voices overlapping in Hawksian style, fighting with one another for control of the scene. They're hilarious and irresistible together, and only Hawks could make such a pair of shrill, overacting brawlers so compulsively entertaining.

The absurdity of the melodrama is also accentuated by a pair of pitch-perfect straight men, Jaffe's loyal assistants Webb (Walter Connolly) and O'Malley (Roscoe Karns). These two play off of their boss brilliantly, rolling with his punches and setting up his craziest moments with their own straight-laced reasonableness. The scenes between them are masterpieces of balance and subtlety, with Hawks capturing Jaffe's manic over-emoting and his lackeys' exasperated stoicism in the same frame. In one scene, Jaffe paces back and forth frantically, orating about his plans for his next great scheme, while O'Malley sits off to the right side of the frame, a bemused smirk on his face, furtively nipping at his ever-present bottle to steel himself against his boss' megalomania. In another scene, Jaffe has fired Webb (one of many

times he does so) and then completely forgotten about it as he goes on directing the play. Webb comes storming back in a few minutes later to return the combination to the safe, and Jaffe, almost without even looking at him, asks why he's bothering him with such trivialities during rehearsals. Hawks stages the scene as a two-shot, with Jaffe facing the camera and Webb just behind him, flustered and nonplussed by his boss' volatility. Jaffe's melodramatic flailing is foregrounded, while Webb provides a subtle background element, a quiet comedic counterpoint to the shot's main focus. The film works so well because, in small ways like this, Hawks makes himself complicit in Jaffe and Lily's egocentric worldviews: he makes them the grand players they demand to be, and celebrates their ridiculousness and humor in every moment of the film.

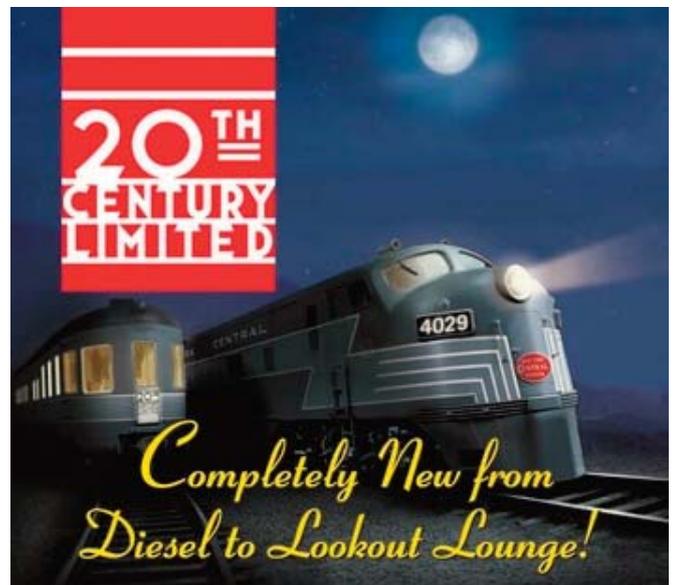
- Ed Howard

## 20th Century Limited

The 20th Century Limited was an express passenger train operated by the New York Central Railroad from 1902 to 1967, during which time it would become known as a "National Institution" and the "Most Famous Train in the World". In the year of its last run, The New York Times said that it "...was known to railroad buffs for 65 years as the world's greatest train". The train traveled between Grand Central Terminal in New York City and LaSalle Street Station in Chicago, Illinois along the railroad's famed "Water Level Route". The NYC inaugurated this train as direct competition to the Pennsylvania Railroad, aimed at upper class as well as business travelers between the two cities. It made few station stops along the way and used track pans enroute to take water at speed; after 1938 it made the 960-mile journey in 16 hours, departing New York City westbound at 6:00 P.M. Eastern Time and arriving at Chicago's LaSalle St. Station the following morning at 9:00 A.M. Central Time., averaging 60 miles per hour (97 km/h). For a brief period after World War II, the eastward schedule was shortened to 15½ hours.

The 20th Century was known for its style, which has been described as "spectacularly understated ... suggesting exclusivity and sophistication", as well as for its speed; passengers walked to and from the train on a plush, crimson carpet which was rolled out in New York and Chicago and was specially designed for the 20th Century Limited. "Getting the red carpet treatment" passed into the language from this memorable practice. "Transportation historians", said the writers of *The Art of the Streamliner*, "consistently rate the 1938 edition of the Century to be the world's ultimate passenger conveyance—at least on the ground".

Inaugurated on June 17, 1902 by patent medicine salesman turned passenger agent George Henry Daniels, the train offered a barbershop and secretarial services. The train arrived in Chicago at Union Station three minutes ahead of schedule. At that time, the trip took twenty hours, cutting four hours off the time previously required. The New York Times report laid great stress on the routine nature of the trip, with no special procedures being followed and no special efforts being made to break records. It stated that there "...was no excitement along the way," and quoted a railroad official as saying "...it is a perfectly practical run and will



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be continued," and the engineer (William Gates) as saying "This schedule can be made without any difficulty. I can do it every time, barring accidents."

In June 1905 the schedule dropped to 18 hours, but after more changes it reverted to 20 hours in 1912 and was unchanged until 1932. In 1935 it dropped to 16 hours 30 min each way, and to 16 hours flat in 1938 when lightweight cars took over.

In its heyday, regular passengers included Theodore Roosevelt, William Jennings Bryan, Lillian Russell, "Diamond Jim" Brady, the elder J. P. Morgan, Enrico Caruso, and Nellie Melba.

In the 1920s the New York to Chicago fare was \$32.70 plus the extra fare of \$9.60, plus the Pullman charge (e.g. \$9 for a lower berth), for a total charge of \$51.30, equal to \$643 today. For that you got a bed closed off from the aisle by curtains; a compartment to yourself would be lots more. In 1928, the peak year, the train earned revenue of \$10 million and was believed to be the most profitable train in the world. Also in 1928, Erwin "Cannon Ball" Baker, who eventually became the first commissioner of NASCAR, raced the 20th Century Limited from New York to Chicago in an automobile, beating the train.

In 1938, industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss was commissioned by the New York Central to design streamlined train sets in Art Deco style, with the locomotive and passenger cars rendered in blues and grays (the colors of the New York Central). The streamlined sets were inaugurated on June 15, 1938. His design was probably the most famous American passenger train of all time.

After the Second World War, a whole new trainset was commissioned which was pulled by diesel-electric locomotives. The new set was ceremonially inaugurated by General Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1948. It was this set that was featured in postwar films such as *North by Northwest* and *The Band Wagon*.

For much of its history before 1957 the all-Pullman train made station stops only at Grand Central Terminal and Croton-Harmon for New York-area passengers and LaSalle Street Station and Englewood for Chicago-area passengers. These traveled in as many as seven sections, of which the first was named *The Advance 20th Century Limited*. If trains ran on schedule they would pass halfway not far west of Buffalo Central Terminal. The tracks of the New York and Harlem Railroad were used from Grand Central to the Spuyten Duyvil and Port Morris Railroad, which it used to reach the New York Central's main line along the Water Level Route, north along the Hudson River and west to Buffalo, then southwest and west on the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railway along the south shore of Lake Erie, and north into Chicago, merging with the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad at Englewood. In case of track closures, alternate routes such as the New York and Harlem Railroad from New York to Chatham, NY and Boston & Albany Railroad from there to Albany, NY, or New York, West Shore and Buffalo Railroad between Schenectady and Buffalo could be used.

By the late 1950s, the train was in decline. On December 2, 1967, at 6:00 P.M., the half-full train left Grand Central Terminal on track 34 for the last time. As always, carnations were given to men boarding the train, and perfume and flowers to the women. The next day, it straggled into LaSalle Street Station in Chicago 9 hours 50 minutes late, due to a freight derailment near Conneaut, Ohio, necessitating a detour over the Nickel Plate (New York, Chicago and St. Louis) Railroad.

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