

Why did Wodehouse change his mind about the film?

“A Damsel in Distress”, study 3

Introduction

In 1930 Wodehouse was in Hollywood and worked for M-G-M during a year and just experienced frustration. He however gave Hollywood a new chance and returned there in the fall 1936. At first he worked for M-G-M again but left them in spring 1937 to work for RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum) Pictures with converting his own novel “A Damsel in Distress” from 1919 into a screenplay. He worked with this for 10 weeks from the end of May until August 14th 1937. RKO was one of the five major film companies in Hollywood. The producer of the film was Pandro Berman and Wodehouse worked together with him and with some other screenwriters.

When Wodehouse left the work with this film he seemed to be very pleased with his screenplay. And he also thought that the film would be good. Almost 40 years later, in 1975, he wrote a new preface to a paper-back edition of the novel. **Then he had a very negative opinion about the film!** He was not at all satisfied with how the film company had treated his story. He meant that the production “*was handed over to the hired assassins who at that time were such a feature of Dottyville¹-on-the-Pacific. The result was a Mess*” . . . “*The Manglers, as the official term was, proved worthy of the trust placed on them by the studio. The first thing they did was to eliminate the story and substitute for it one more suitable for retarded adults and children with water on the brain.*” (Wodehouse 1975, pp. 5-6 and Green 1981, p. 178). This is really startling! So, sometimes after 1937 he clearly abandoned his positive attitude and changed his opinion completely about this film! **WHY did he do that?? This is the question I will try to explore in this study.**

In his excellent book “P.G. Wodehouse and Hollywood” Brian Taves deals a little with this question. He is the only author I have found who comments on this.

“The disappointing box office results stung Wodehouse as well. This was not because of his involvement in its creation, but because his name had become a more prominent part of advertising and promotion than of any of his previous films, and far more than any other pictures he had worked on in Hollywood. Adapting his own original work to the screen was an opportunity he would never have again. Near the end of his life, in a new preface to a 1975 paperback edition of the novel, Wodehouse

¹ A “lunatic asylum”.

looked back on 'A Damsel in Distress'". . . "Wodehouse should have realized that *A Damsel in Distress* was sold to their public primarily as an Astaire vehicle (and to a lesser degree as one for Burns and Allen), not a Wodehouse adaptation; its commercial failure had to be accounted for as a passing disenchantment audiences had with the star, not the writer." (2006, pp. 94-95). According to Taves opinion the accusations in the preface were caused by Wodehouse's great disappointment with the failure of the film. This fits with the positive tone in his earlier letters to Leonora and Townend. If this explanation is the whole and only truth it would mean that Wodehouse was just fibbing when he wrote the accusations in the preface. But I can't find that Taves gives any "hard evidence" in his book to support this explanation and Taves doesn't either tell the reasons why he rejects Wodehouse's accusations. I don't find this totally convincing. At least I wonder if it is **the whole truth. I want to have a look at the possibilities that there was some kernel of truth in Wodehouse's accusations about changes in the screenplay he didn't approve of.**

The film

RKO wanted the story to be adapted to their big star Fred Astaire who was going to play the male lead. The novel is about a composer named George Bevan but in the film this was changed to a dancer named Jerry Halliday. Lady Maud was renamed to lady Alycia and a young Joan Fontaine was given this part. RKO also hired Gracie Allen and George Burns to give the audience these famous comedians, and new characters were added to the story for them. Also a lot of other changes were made in the story. In the study "Nine versions of a Wodehouse story" I have compared the film with the novel.

The main story is the same as in the novel but they are also *very* different and an interesting question is: How much of the film/screenplay is really a work by Wodehouse? What function did Wodehouse have in writing the screenplay? These circumstances are important for how Wodehouse felt about this new version of his story. In the film P. G. Wodehouse, Ernest Pagano and P. K. Lauren get credit as screenwriters, in this order. In Internet Movie Database (IMDb) two other names are added with the note "uncredited" and in Taves (2006, p. 166) they are mentioned as "contributing writers".

Wodehouse's thoughts about the screenplay, and the film in 1937

There are many and big differences between the film and the novel, much bigger than between the play and the novel! In this section I will show that Wodehouse was satisfied with the screenplay and the film during his work with it. So the rejection in 1975 shows that he really had changed his mind about the film and that this must have happened sometimes after he left the work with it.

In his autobiography "Over Seventy" (1957) Wodehouse devotes a chapter (pp. 160 – 166) to his Hollywood experiences. But in this chapter he only tells us about his work for M-G-M in 1930. He never mentions the visit in 1937 or his work at RKO. McCrum called the script "*Wodehouses screenplay*" (2004, p. 247) and Connolly observed "*He enjoyed this work immensely,*" (1979, p. 79). Taves wrote that the film was "*becoming a second, separate Wodehouse variation on the novel.*" (2006, p. 89).

Letter, July 13th, 1937 to Leonora: *“I must say it is altogether different working at RKO on a picture based on my own novel from being on salary at MGM . . . !” . . . “I like my boss, Pandro Berman, very much. He is the first really intelligent man I have come across here -” . . . “Everything is made very pleasant for me, and I like the man I am working with – a chap called Pagano. The way we work is, we map out a sequence together, then I go home and write the dialogue, merely indicating business, and he takes what I have done and puts it into screen shape. Thus relieving me of all that ‘truck shot’ ‘wipe dissolve’ stuff.” . . . “As far as I can gather, we are going to start shooting his picture in about a week. We have actually completed about sixty pages out of probably a hundred and fifty, but this isn’t as bad as it sounds, because we can write twenty pages while they are shooting two. There is a whole sequence laid in London which will take them at least ten days to shoot, I imagine, and they can be getting on with that while we are finishing the script.”* (Wodehouse 1990, p. 67, Ratcliffe 2011, p. 268 and McCrum 2004, pp. 245-246).

Letter, July 30th, 1937 to Townend: *“We started shooting the Fred Astaire picture ten days ago, and I have still about half of it to write!!”*(Wodehouse 1990, p 132)

Letter, August 13th, 1937 to Leonora: *“I finish my job on the ‘Damsel in distress’ tomorrow, after ten weeks all but two days,” . . . “I only expected to get a couple of weeks polishing the existing script. But that script turned out so badly that they threw it away, and I and another man started doing a new picture from the bottom up, following the story of the book pretty closely. But much better is the fact that I have really come across with some good stuff,” . . . “It was a very pleasant job as I was working under a producer, Pandro Berman, who really has got intelligence, taste and everything. I think the picture is going to be good.” . . . “I think I have made a big hit in my work on this picture.”* (Wodehouse 1990, p. 69).

Letter, September 4th, 1937 to Townend: *“I don’t like doing pictures. A Damsel in Distress was fun, because I was working with the best director here – George Stevens – and on my own story, but as a rule pictures are a bore.”* (Wodehouse 1954, p. 99 and Jasen 1975, pp. 155-156).

Ernest Pagano was a film veteran who apparently took care of everything technical. From the letters it is clear that Wodehouse liked the work and regarded the screenplay as **‘his’** work. It seems probable that the dialogue in the film to a considerable part is Wodehouse’s work (with exceptions for dialogue between Burns and Allen). It is clearly Wodehouse’s opinion that the script just before he left the work was *“following the story of the book pretty closely”*! Still, as shown above, there **are** big differences between the **finished film** and the **novel**! The shooting of the film was not at all finished when he wrote those letters. So his opinion in this letter **must refer to the screenplay as it was mid-August**. When he left the work August 14th five weeks of writing screenplay remained and still many more many weeks of shooting, **so he can’t possibly have the finished film in view** when he wrote the letter.

Wodehouse must have accepted many changes in the screenplay as necessary. In August 1937 he obviously didn’t think that the changes that were made distorted his story too much. He never mentioned in his letters any objections against the revisions of the story. Wodehouse didn’t either mention any other co-writer than Pagano.

The words “*my own story*” and “*my work*” in the letters show in my opinion that he regarded the screenplay as **his story** and to a high degree a result of **his own work**.

I think we can regard Wodehouse as the main screenwriter, also to new scenes, and to at least some new dialogue. The sentence “*I have really come across with some good stuff*” in the letter to Leonora August 1939 reasonably refers to new scenes and new lines. However, as Burnip (2011) notes in a very interesting article: “*Wodehouse was one of several (credited and uncredited) writers who worked on the script, neither the first nor the last; **it may be significant that the work on the script continued for five weeks after he finished.***” (Bolds by me).

In the light of Wodehouse’s negative opinion of the released film in 1975 a very interesting question is: **What happened to the screenplay during the five weeks between August 14th, when Wodehouse left the work, and September 25th when the script was finished? Can it have been some changes made that Wodehouse didn’t approve of and really couldn’t accept?**

His change of opinion

In August 1937 he liked “his” screenplay and wrote about the film: “*I think the picture is going to be good.*” In the new preface to the novel 1975 he instead wrote that the production of the film was handed over to “*hired assassins*” and “*manglers*” and that the result “*was a mess*”. **WHY** did he change his opinion so radically? Which persons he referred to as *assassins* and *manglers* he didn’t say, but he **obviously now disliked the film**. He ended the preface: “*It might be supposed that after all this I should find it difficult to re-read *A Damsel in Distress* with the enthusiasm which I bring to some of my old ones, but this is not so. I tell myself that this is not its fault that it was made a hissing and a byword, and you will frequently find me curled up with it. ‘Darned god stuff’ I say to myself.*” (Wodehouse 1975, p. 6). He admits that he “*was involved in the shooting of ‘A Damsel in Distress’*” but gives no information about how he was involved and about his contribution to the screenplay. He just dissociated himself from the film but still liked the novel! **How come? Is there any truth in his accusations against the film company about bungling his story?**

Adaptations of a story when it was transformed into a screenplay was nothing new to Wodehouse in the 30-ies, and his previous experiences in the movie industry (M-G-M) was far worse. Wodehouse was very pragmatic on the recycling and adaptation of his stories to other forms; either the adaptations were made by him or by others. A new medium means other demands on plot and dialogue, and I can’t find anything in his letters that he, at the time when the film was made, had any objections to the adjustments. So the fact **that** it was necessary to make changes was probably no problem for Wodehouse. If there is a kernel of truth in his preface, then it must be a question of **which** changes he had in mind when he talked about “*mangling*” and **how** the changes were made. Wodehouse did never explain **why** he at first was so pleased with the film (or really the screenplay) but later on so disappointed, so the only thing that remains is to form some hypotheses and theories.

Possible explanations?

Could Wodehouse have disliked the changes that were made already while he was working with the script? Hardly! If this was the case he in his **private letters** just pretended to be happy about the film and his work. I can see no reason for this and find no support for this suggestion. **He changed his mind sometimes after August 15th.**

Suppose that Wodehouse discovered the weaknesses in the film some time later, perhaps after he learned about the reception from the public and had seen the released version of the film? It was released in USA November 19th three months after Wodehouse left the job, and after he had returned to Europe. **It was certainly no success.** Perhaps he was influenced by reviews? *“The picture turned out to be the first flop of Astaire’s Hollywood career;”* (Green 1981, p. 177). The common explanations of the failure I find in the books are 1) that the public missed Ginger Roberts as Fred Astaire’s partner and 2) that the casting with Joan Fontaine as female lead was a mistake since she couldn’t dance and was not a good comedian. *“Unfortunately, in a piece of casting so absurd as to make any story about Hollywood inanities believable, Joan Fontaine was given the starring role against Astaire. She was a fine actress but neither a singer nor a dancer. Predictably this damned the film to faint, almost inaudible, praise –”* (Phelps 1992, p. 176). Nowhere have I read anyone giving Wodehouse and the screenplay the blame for the failure. In the preface 1975 Wodehouse however regarded the film as *“a mess”...“more suitable for retarded adults and children with water on the brain.”* The low intellectual level of the film, which Wodehouse here claims, is NOT an explanation given by anyone else.

This harsh opinion he expressed about a film that he had participated in making and that he at first was very satisfied with. A common way to justify a disappointment and a negative opinion about something one has participated in is to put the blame on somebody else, to look for a scapegoat. In the preface Wodehouse puts the blame on others and claims that they bungled “his” story. **Are these accusations by Wodehouse just fibbing? Does he try to put blame on others, or is there a kernel of truth in his accusations?**

Taves wrote *“The disappointing box office results stung Wodehouse as well. This was not because of his involvement in its creation, but because his name had become a more prominent part of advertising and promotion than of any of his previous films,”* . . . *“Adapting his own original work to the screen was an opportunity he would never have again.”* (2006, pp. 94-95). Taves’ comments on the 1975 preface: *“Wodehouse should have realized that A Damsel in Distress was sold to their public primarily as an Astaire vehicle (and to a lesser degree as one for Burns and Allen), not a Wodehouse adaptation; its commercial failure had to be accounted for as a passing disenchantment audiences had with the star, not the writer.”* (2006, p. 95). Taves explains the accusations in the preface as caused by Wodehouse’s great disappointment with the failure of the film. It was a blow to him personally especially as his name was used in the marketing and after this failure no film maker would use his services again. If Taves’ explanation is the whole and only truth it would mean that Wodehouse really was fibbing when he wrote the accusations in the preface. This explanation fits with the positive tone in his earlier letters to Leonora and Townend.

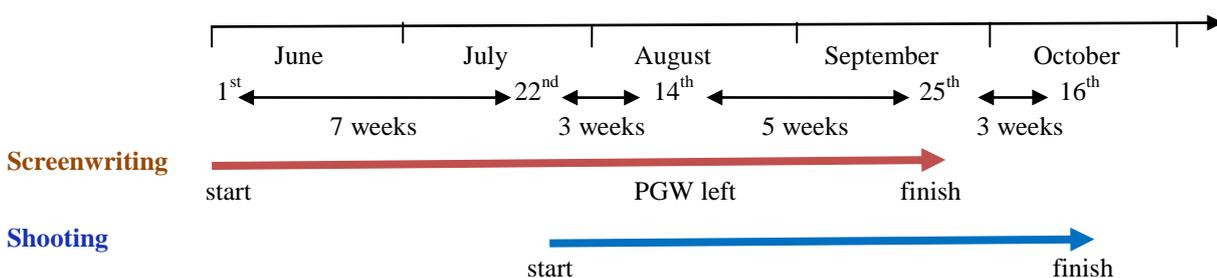
But, I don’t find this explanation totally convincing, at least I wonder if it is **the whole truth**. Why should the lack of public success and the criticism from others cause such a **radical change of his own**

opinion about a work he earlier expressed satisfaction with? Naturally he was disappointed that the public didn't love the film. But is this enough to make him denounce the film and even claim that it is not his creation? I can understand a certain disappointment that he wouldn't get another chance to make a film, but on the other hand, according to his letters he at that time was fed up with Hollywood. Right then didn't *want* to stay to make more film work. Taves (2006, p 94) refers to an unpublished letter from November 16th 1937 where he is considering a return to Hollywood. In other letters it seems that he perhaps can consider to work for Hollywood, but certainly not to live there. It is however a possible explanation that he, bitter by disappointment, fibbed in the new preface. If it really was Wodehouse's screenplay, with the plot as it was in August 14th, that was filmed, then he just made these accusations up. The other possibility is: **Some changes he didn't like were really made during the last five weeks of screenwriting, when Wodehouse had left the work.** In that case: Which changes?? I can't find anything about this in the sources available to me.

Let's try the possibility that "his" screenplay was distorted in some way. If changes were made it makes both his first enthusiasm and his later very negative judgment quite understandable. It means that 1975 he still regarded not only the novel but probably also "his" screenplay as good, but it was then bungled by others so **the film** deviates in important aspects (for Wodehouse) from "his" screenplay. If this is true it means that he **didn't change his mind about his original script** but only about how it was distorted during the last five weeks of the screenwriting. The finished film became something else than he had expected from "his" screenplay. In this case it is natural that he didn't consider the flaws in the film to be his fault even if he perhaps is exaggerating the handling by the film company in the preface.

There are circumstances that **talk against this theory:** The production planning of the shooting of a film is normally based upon a finished screenplay. There are always big interdependencies between different scenes in a film. Every scene must fit into the total plot and **it is not possible to make changes in scenes in the later shootings as they normally have impact on scenes already recorded.**

But the production of this film was evidently handled a bit differently than other films! Taves tells (2006 p 89) that the shooting took place from July 22nd to October 16th and the screenplay was not finished until September 25th. It means that the shooting started **without** a production plan based on a complete screenplay. In the letter to Leonora July 13th Wodehouse wrote: *"As far as I can gather, we are going to start shooting his picture in about a week. We have actually completed about sixty pages out of probably a hundred and fifty, but this isn't as bad as it sounds, because we can write twenty pages while they are shooting two. There is a whole sequence laid in London which will take them at least ten days to shoot, I imagine, and they can be getting on with that while we are finishing the script."* In the letter to Townend July 30th Wodehouse wrote: *"We started shooting the Fred Astaire picture ten days ago, and I have still about half of it to write!!"*



When Wodehouse left the project August 14th five weeks remained of screenwriting and the shooting was going on since three weeks with eight weeks still to go.

In this case the production plan for the shooting simply *cannot* have been based on a finished screenplay, but perhaps on a synopsis or a draft. **Everything was *not* settled in detail *before* the production started. The planning of the shootings must have been performed parallel with the screenwriting. As the screenwriting continued for five weeks after Wodehouse's leave and the shooting continued still some weeks after that, then I wonder: **wouldn't it be *possible* for other screenwriters in the team to make changes during that time?** Burnip seems to have the same opinion when he writes: “... *Wodehouse was one of several (credited and uncredited) writers who worked on the script, neither the first nor the last; it may be significant that the work on the script continued for five weeks after he finished.*” (Bolds by me) If Wodehouse considered the plot and all scenes to be complete in the screenplay as it was when he left the work, what did the other screenwriters do during the last five weeks of screenwriting? As we could see from his letter (July 13th) about the cooperation between him and Pagano there were lots of details for others to work out, for instance stage directions and other things that Wodehouse in the letter called “*puts it in screen shape*”. But I think that there might have been time enough also to rewrite scenes and put in new scenes that changed the later parts of the story as long as they didn't affect the scenes that were already recorded.**

Big changes are probably out of the question. But, **it can be a matter of opinion** if a change is small or big. Some changes were perhaps regarded as small and easy to make by the producers and the other screenwriters, but Wodehouse could be of another opinion. Suppose something, a scene or some dialogue, that he was especially proud of or thought was essential for the story, was taken away or changed beyond recognition? **I think this is *possible* in this case and it *could* provide a kernel of truth around which he built his accusations, even if he then maybe exaggerated to make his point.**

If this is true then Wodehouse didn't just fib in the preface, perhaps only exaggerated. I can definitely not prove that Wodehouse's accusations in the preface were not just fibbing, but I think there are reasons to doubt that it is the **whole truth**. Normally the screenplay and the film is 100% the same, but I'm **not** convinced about that in this case. At least it seems questionable that the screenplay that Wodehouse left August 14th is what was filmed. It would really be interesting if the screenplay is saved in some archive and could be compared to the film, and also if it is possible to identify Wodehouse's and his co-writer's contributions to the screenplay. If some diary from the shootings is kept in an archive it could also be very interesting!

Some ideas about changes in the screenplay after August 14th

1) One thing especially struck me when I compared the 1937 film with the earlier versions of this story: The ending is quite different. In the novel there is a key scene at the end when Maud meets her previous American lover and her eyes are opened. This scene is retained, close to the original, in the silent film from 1919 and also in the play from 1922. In the 1937 film this scene is omitted, and instead Alyce just changes her mind earlier in the story, and for unclear reasons. Taves writes: “*The film dispenses completely with the climactic meeting with her previous lover*” (2006 p 93). It seems

reasonable that Wodehouse regarded this scene as an important part of the plot. The new ending makes Maud more capricious, more fickle. **Could the omission of this scene in the screenplay have been made after Wodehouse left the work at RKO?** If this was the case it could be a significant “kernel of truth” and a cause to Wodehouse’s discontent. It’s an interesting thought and could explain Wodehouse’s accusation for bungling. How big changes would it be?

The original scene with the meeting occurs at first in the end of the novel/play. The first scene in the released film that is affected if the ending is changed, occurs shortly after the middle of the film (in chapter 20 of the 35 chapters on the DVD). Also scenes in chapters 21 and 22 are affected and a little in some later scenes. If this hypothesis is true then these scenes (which include the only dance scene with Astaire and Fountaine) must have been recorded during the last eight weeks of shooting. It seems *possible* that the shooting hadn’t reached the scenes in chapter 20-22 on August 14th, and it seems possible that it would have been enough time for rewriting and shooting those scenes.

Of course this is just a “theoretical” exercise, and in reality it depends on in which order different scenes were shot. Sometimes the shooting does not at all follow the order of the scenes in the film. In the letter July 13th Wodehouse wrote: *“We have actually completed about sixty pages out of probably a hundred and fifty, but this isn’t as bad as it sounds, because we can write twenty pages while they are shooting two. There is a whole sequence laid in London which will take them at least ten days to shoot, I imagine, and they can be getting on with that while we are finishing the script.”* This was written one week before the shooting started. From this letter it seems probable that Wodehouse started to write the screenplay with the first scenes of the story and that the shooting accordingly started with scenes in the beginning of the film. The last scenes in the screen-play/film were probably written last, and the shootings during the eight last weeks, when Wodehouse had left the work, were probably mostly devoted to the scenes in the last half of the film.

Maybe this change of ending is a too big change to be realistic? For instance the dance scene with Astaire and Fontaine as lovers would not fit with the original ending. I have not seen any facts about how much of the script and which chapters of the script that were shot before and after August 14th. It would be very interesting if there are diaries from the shooting left somewhere in an archive! **This is an interesting hypothesis. I think I may be possible but there are no” proofs”**. It would be interesting if new facts could be presented to corroborate or reject it.

2) One of the additions in the film compared to the novel seems to me more dubious than the others. Most additions are numbers with Astaire and scenes for Burns and Allen, but this one isn’t. I mean the butler Keggs’ inner urge to burst into opera arias. It seems that someone thought that Keggs character ought to be funnier and invented something extra and so the scenes where he sings opera were added. Even if Keggs is a manipulative character and tampers with the sweepstake he is mainly a dignified butler. With this additions I think he loses all dignity as a butler. Personally I don’t find this opera-mania very funny, just odd, not to say silly, and I would be surprised if this is an idea by Wodehouse. To me this is another candidate to be a change made after Wodehouse left the screenwriting. The additions to give Keggs this urge would not demand very big changes. Only the beginning of chapter 20 and chapter 29 would be affected.

These two deviations from the novel are my first-hand candidates for changes that, if they were done by others during the last five weeks of screenwriting and without Wodehouse's consent, very well could have made him upset, but there are also other 'candidates'.

Final comments

IF there is some truth in the hypothesis about some late changes in the screenplay which were important to Wodehouse, it is still impossible to say which changes it could have been. My suggestions above are just suggestions, hypotheses, which I find **possible**, but I have found no facts to support that they give a true picture of what really happened. Further research in other sources would be very interesting! **I think anyhow that it is possible that there is a kernel of truth behind Wodehouse's accusations.**

There are also other questions without answer around this preface:

- **When** did he reject the film? Probably earlier than 1975?
- **Why** didn't he speak out of his discontentment earlier than 1975?
- **Why** did he speak out at all? **Why** didn't he keep silent?

I can't imagine that it took almost 40 years before he changed his mind. Did he have reasons not to speak out earlier? Perhaps he choose to keep silent for long time just because he didn't want to offend some persons involved in the production of the film that were still alive? But if he had kept silent for so long time, why didn't he continue his silence? If he wanted people to forget the film or his involvement in it he should have kept his silence. These are very interesting questions but probably we will never get answers to them.

I suppose that the only possibility to get a better picture about what happened is further research in archives that are not available to me, and I don't know even if there is any archive material that could illuminate these issues. So without "new" facts we are left with opinions, hypotheses and theories.

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