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TO BE OR NOT TO BE

1942, Ernst Lubitsch, USA, 99 min.
With Carole Lombard, Jack Benny,
Robert Stack

4:00

Lombard's arresting performance in **TO BE OR NOT TO BE** was to be her last, for she died in a plane crash two days before the premiere.

Although for the past five decades Lubitsch's film has received the accolades of critics like Leonard Maltin, who called it, "a brilliant topical comedy whose wisdom and humor transcend the passage of years," it never found favor with its original audience, and the tragic and untimely death of the star didn't help. One of Hollywood's few comedies (which included Chaplin's unpopular **THE GREAT DICTATOR**) lampooning the Nazis, **TO BE OR NOT TO BE** was considered tasteless and even offensive by an uneasy public in the early days of World War II. But despite its light tone and madcap comedy elements, the film was a political satire with a serious message. Set in Poland in 1939, the story concerns a Warsaw theater troupe headed by a hilariously pompous Jack Benny as actor Joseph Tura, and Lombard as his wife Maria, a popular songstress. After their anti-Nazi satire "Heil Hitler" is banned, the company is performing a lackluster "Hamlet" (imagine Benny as the Danish prince) while Maria considers some backstage hanky-panky with a handsome Polish RAF pilot (Stack). Love-sickness leads to the unexpected, namely the discovery of a Nazi plot to destroy Warsaw, which the actors gamely attempt to derail, using all the illusions and artifice of their profession. Screamingly funny one minute, filled with pathos the next, **TO BE OR NOT TO BE** combines the perfection of the "Lubitsch touch" with the awesome authority of the comedienne Lombard at the height of her powers. (BS)