



# GIVING BIRTH TO A CLASSIC

Pictured above: William Holden, Judy Holliday and Broderick Crawford

Garson Kanin's *Born Yesterday* is an all-American comedy that was conceived abroad. While stationed in London during World War II, Kanin began writing a play for his friend, movie star Jean Arthur, that combined elements of Shaw's *Pygmalion* with a comical exposé of governmental corruption. The premise of the piece was to show that any one person has the power to facilitate change, and in order to illustrate this point dramatically, Kanin created a protagonist, Billie Dawn, who is unpolished, uneducated, and unaccomplished.

Returning to New York after the war, Kanin found a likely producer in Max Gordon, who was suffering through a dry spell despite having a number of Broadway hits under his belt, including *The Band Wagon*, *The Women*, and *My Sister Eileen*. Gordon thought Kanin's script had potential, but he was leery of working with Jean Arthur, whose reputation as a difficult Hollywood diva preceded her. Coincidentally, Arthur herself was less than thrilled at the prospect of playing Billie Dawn, but at Kanin's insistence, she agreed to take

the part with the following demands: \$2,500 per week plus a percentage of the gross, a personal hairdresser, a chauffeured limousine, and final approval over advertising and the hiring of key personnel.

The play's leading male character was a gruff and uncouth junk tycoon named Harry Brock, whose abrasive personality was modeled on the tough-talking president of Columbia Pictures, Harry Cohn. Kanin had offered the part of Harry Brock to Broderick Crawford, who declined (although he would end up playing the part in the 1950 film). All other attempts to secure an established actor at a reasonable price had also fallen short. Running out of options, Gordon and Kanin decided to take a chance on Paul Douglas, who at the time was better known as a sportscaster than an actor. Although he was light on experience, Douglas auditioned well and his comparatively meager salary demands helped to offset the huge expense associated with hiring Jean Arthur.



Pictured: Melissa Pritchett. Photo by T. Charles Erickson

Like many plays, *Born Yesterday* was still very much a work in progress when the production opened in New Haven for its first week of previews, with similar engagements slated to follow in Boston and Philadelphia. Local critics gave the play mixed reviews, noting that the comedy was uneven and the story fell apart halfway through the second act. While Arthur's performance drew a rather tepid response, newcomer Douglas was praised as a revelation.

Trouble was also brewing behind the scenes as Arthur's list of demands and complaints grew daily. She particularly hated the fact that her co-star (whom she clearly detested) was getting better notices, plus she was insisting on major script changes to accommodate her "acting style." After only a few performances, Kanin received a note from his former friend asking him to permanently replace her.

At this point, the chances of *Born Yesterday* ever reaching Broadway seemed remote at best and gossip columnists picked up the scent of desperation as the show headed for Boston. Somehow Max Gordon managed to convince Arthur to remain in the cast and Kanin began to surreptitiously search for another actress. Among the front-runners were June Havoc and Kanin's wife, Ruth Gordon, neither of whom were available. Five others were approached about taking the role, but all turned it down.

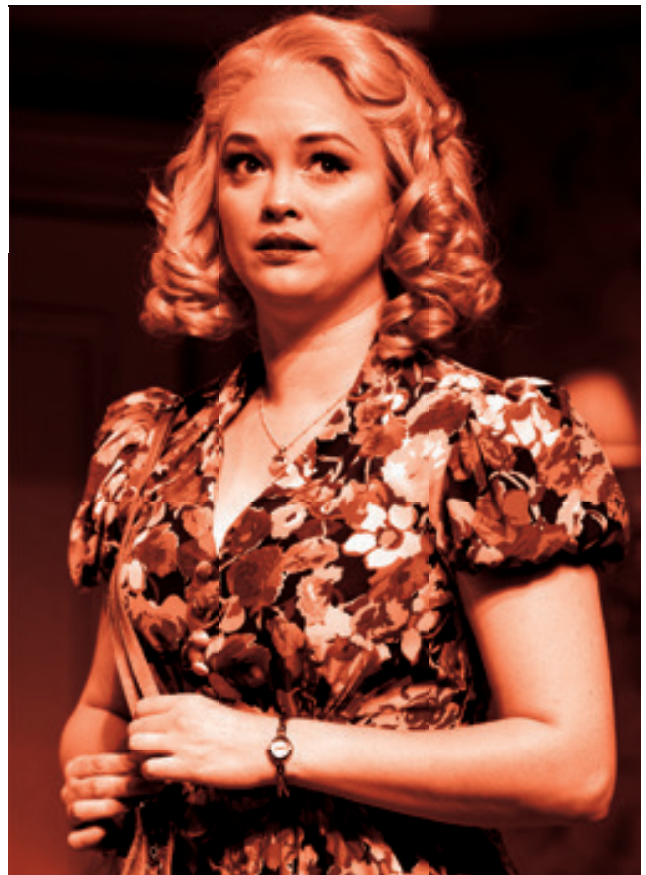
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The week-long Boston run had its peaks and valleys as Kanin reworked the script. With each performance, Paul Douglas gained confidence and became more dynamic. Jean Arthur opened the run, but fell ill mid-week and her understudy, Mary Laslo, was forced to take over. With the Philadelphia engagement fast approaching and Arthur's health in jeopardy, finding a permanent replacement for her was Kanin's top priority.

The name Judy Holliday was first suggested to Kanin back in New Haven by the show's wardrobe designer who spoke glowingly of Holliday's supporting turn in the Broadway production of *Kiss Them For Me*. Kanin had seen her perform with Adolph Green and Betty Comden in their nightclub act, *The Revuers*, but had dismissed the notion of casting her in his play. By this time, however, he was getting desperate, and he set up a meeting with her in New York. Holliday was desperate, too, having been out of work for six months, so Kanin returned to Philadelphia with a possible "Plan B."

The next morning, Jean Arthur failed to appear at rehearsal, and before long, Kanin and Gordon received word that she was leaving the show immediately due to "nervous exhaustion." Without a leading lady, the show couldn't open. Gordon had begun making plans to close the production for good when Kanin

Pictured: Melissa Pritchett. Photo by T. Charles Erickson





suggested at least playing out the Philadelphia engagement with Judy Holliday in the lead. "That fat Jewish girl from *The Revuers*?" asked Gordon. "But she's funny and a helluva good actress," Kanin argued.

An SOS went out to Holliday, who arrived later that afternoon. She was met at her hotel by Kanin, who handed her a script and told her to read it through once before deciding whether or not she thought she could handle the role. Two hours later, Holliday agreed. Her only question was "When do I start?"

"Whenever you're ready," said Kanin. "Saturday night," said Gordon.

Looking thunderstruck, she shook her head in terror and cried, "I couldn't!" This meant that she would have to learn the entire part in four days instead of the customary four weeks—a daunting task for even a veteran actress, let alone one attempting her first major stage role. Although she pleaded with Gordon for more time, word had gotten out that Arthur was out of the show and folks were already lining up at the box office demanding refunds. There was no other choice.

On Saturday, January 12, 1946, the curtain went up on *Born Yesterday* at Philadelphia's Locust Street Theater. Those who braved the harsh winter weather to see a troubled play

starring three relative unknowns were justly rewarded for their trouble. By all accounts, Judy Holliday gave a nearly flawless first performance, and although she managed to hold her herself together while onstage, she would burst into tears between each scene. The enthusiastic response of both audience and critics confirmed that Kanin and Gordon had found their new Billie Dawn.

*Born Yesterday* had its Broadway premiere at the Lyceum Theatre on February 4, 1946, where it played to sold-out houses for almost four years. Judy Holliday (who rarely missed a show during that time) took her final stage turn as Billie Dawn on May 24, 1949, and headed for Hollywood to reprise the role on film. Ticket sales fell off sharply following Holliday's departure from the cast, and after a history-making run of 1,642 performances, *Born Yesterday* closed on New Year's Eve 1949.

This article is largely excerpted, with the author's kind permission, from Glenn McMahon's essay on the Judy Holliday Resource Center website [[www.judyhollidayrc.com](http://www.judyhollidayrc.com)]. McMahon's sources include *Hollywood* by Garson Kanin (Viking, 1974), *Judy Holliday* by Will Holtzman (Putman's, 1982), and *Judy Holliday: An Intimate Life Story* by Gary Carey (Seaview, 1982). Courtesy of South Coast Repertory Theatre.

Pictured: Stephen Pelinski as Atticus in the Resident Ensemble Players' production of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Photo by Paul Cerro.



Pictured: Jay Sullivan. Photo by John Everett

