

THE PAJAMA GAME

Directed by George Abbott and Stanley Donen
Produced by George Abbott and Stanley Donen
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 1957

Almost nobody cares about this movie. There's a reason for that. It fails over and over and over again. First, Doris Day is paired up with John Raitt as her love interest. John Raitt was not and never became a star. He's a good actor, but he doesn't have the 'star' presence. Maybe the problem is that he seems uncomfortable in front of the camera. So immediately his character is outmatched by 'Babe' Williams since she is played by Doris Day, a star then and always. Dean Martin, Marlon Brando, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and Rock Hudson were considered for Raitt's role, but with a typically constricted Warner budget, Day's \$250,000 salary precluded complimentary star power.

Raitt has a good scene where he browbeats a derelict employee, but a few minutes more into the film he's using his important position to invite labor leader 'Babe' Williams to his office for a private chat! Why can't he remain disciplined and resolutely aloof? This scene makes him look sleazy and venal. And she, to her discredit, doesn't call him on it. So both leads take a hit, and badly.

All fourteen of the principal cast members—except Doris Day—were imported from Broadway, where 'The Pajama Game' was a smash hit. Newcomer Bob Fosse's innovative Broadway choreography also assured him a major role in the filming. The musical's book was co-written by George Abbott, but while he is credited as a co-director, he apparently was rarely seen on set. Stanley Donen rushed the film to completion twenty-two days ahead of schedule, exhausting the cast and crew.

But even though the transition from stage to screen was not without its challenges, the movie's flaws are present in the stage musical. The songs are tuneless and go on too long. Promising ideas such as Myron Hasler's secret ledger books, Babe's firing, and Sid lying to get the job totally collapse when none proves consequential.

And how are we supposed to accept a scene where a drunk man is encouraged to throw knives at people, while surrounded by co-workers at a company picnic? And how can we accept that the star volunteers with an apple on her head, one of the dumbest things anybody could ever do, simply because she had a tiff with her would-be lover?

There's more going on here than in a story like that in *Grease*. The union's demands provide a foundation for the lovers to quarrel, while in *Grease* we merely have a string of unconnected episodes like the dance-off and the jalopy's restoration. But *Grease* never strayed too far from Sandy and Danny. *The Pajama Game* lets the ancillary characters have too many songs, too many quirks, and too many interests apart from the strike. If the other characters were concerned exclusively with the union's grievances then we'd have a better foundation for the conflict between the leads. Instead we get detoured with extraneous junk like Hinesie's suspicion of Gladys (a distraction best exemplified by the song "I'll Never Be Jealous Again").

The best things in the film are Doris Day's mournful supine solo on the reprise of "Hey There," the stylish 'beat' imagery of "Hernando's Hideaway," and the choreography of the big opener, "Racing With the Clock," with the seamstresses waving pajama shirts like battle flags. But other songs fail, like "I'm Not At All In Love" (which, in its message that falling in love can be a blow to one's pride, is just a pale imitation of "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair" from 'South Pacific'), and "There Once Was a Man" (which has no set-up, coming right on the tail end of "Small Talk," and consists of the two leads competing to see who can sing the loudest).

This film is a shocking disappointment, and the contrast between this simplistic, plodding bore-fest, and the sophisticated, daring *Pillow Talk* which Day made just two years later, is startling. Admittedly, the film does end well, with the mild shock of the leads sharing a pair of pajamas. But this conclusory scene feels like a coda rather than part of the story, probably because such a bodacious production staged solely for the benefit of the employees seems wildly improbable—yes, even for a musical. (This is the same problem with "Steam Heat," incidentally.)

The whole story, and its telling, seems manufactured. The stitching shows. We sit, waiting for the two leads to get together, knowing they will, and have to listen to an hour's worth of griping from unsympathetic characters about how they deserve to be paid more for jobs nobody forced them to take in the first place. The musical mechanics of it all—the choreography, production design, and at least some of the music, work well. But the story is full of padding; the bizarre androgynous secretary, Gladys Hotchkiss, almost takes over the story in its second half; and while the whole enterprise, with its illogic, fun, and overabundance of artificially show-stopping numbers, seems to be a paean to Broadway magic, it doesn't fly as a film. In the end, all we have are high expectations and missed opportunities.

On the heels of this film's box office disappointment, Doris Day would launch herself into a new, and even more successful, phase of her career. The days of the contrived, any-excuse-for-a-song musical had passed.