‘I’ll Have Another Piece of Beer!’
Irene Dunne, Alcohol, and Joy of Living (1938)

What was the cultural context for Irene Dunne’s drunkenness in screwball films?

Women and Alcohol in 1930s America

Post-prohibition, books advised women on how much alcohol to drink.

The title of Virginia Elliott’s Quiet Drinking (above) implied that women should drink inopportunely.

A 1938 poll claimed ‘a majority of the women of America’ would teach daughters ‘never to drink’, and opposed ‘having women drink in public’.

‘The New Irene Dunne’

By the mid-1930s Irene Dunne was known for historical films and melodramas.

The 1936 screwball comedy Theodore Goes Wild rejuvenated her career, modernising her stardom.

In both Theodore Goes Wild and The Awful Truth, Dunne performed public drunk scenes.

From 1936-1942, 50% of Dunne’s films were screwballs, including Joy of Living.

Joy of Living (1938)

Maggie (Dunne) is a successful actress with a parasitic family.

She meets Dan (Douglas Fairbanks Jr.), a wealthy socialite who deems her too serious and career-focused.

Annoyed by Dan, a sober Maggie (above) joins him for a night out at a beer hall.

Marjorie Hills and feminine drinking

Maggie’s behaviour in Joy of Living linked Dunne to the influential ideas expressed by contemporary self-help author Marjorie Hills on female drinking (right) in her best-seller Live Alone and Like It (1936).

Hills explained, ‘even a perfect lady is occasionally somewhere between [drunk and sober...]’ Sensations that you keep to yourself are all very well, [...] obvious results of a lack of discretion are, frankly, disgusting.

Hills would have condemned Maggie’s ‘obvious’ behaviour, but Dunne’s performance suggested public drunkenness was enjoyable for women.

Censorship and Criticism

Censors classified the film as ‘an adult picture’ due to ‘excessive drinking’, barring children.

Variety called the drunk scenes an ‘inebriate orgy’.

Exhibitors claimed audiences disapproved: ‘nothing humorous about a woman slightly intoxicated’.

A Picturegoer reader noted, ‘Dunne very nearly sacrificed her reputation for dignity and graciousness in “being drunk and disorderly.”’

By engaging with public female intoxication, Irene Dunne continued the screwball modernisation of her screen persona, flouting her ‘ladylike’ reputation.

Censors, reviewers, and fans evidently found Dunne’s drunk scenes controversial.

However, Joy of Living clearly linked feminine independence to alcohol, implicitly arguing for women to break free of constrictive social mores.

Conclusions

At a Hawaiian bar, the couple continue drinking, and Maggie plays a game where she slaps Dan repeatedly.

Her dishevelled appearance (above) contrasts strongly with the start of the night.

This night out leads to Maggie’s independence from her family.

Joie of Living clips:
https://vimeo.com/522492266

References

7. Ibid., 116.
10. Film Preview: Joy of Living. 17th March 1938.

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