

Program note for **Pinewood Dialogue with Jennifer Jason Leigh**
and screening of ***Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle***

November 23, 1994

Event: *An Evening with Jennifer Jason Leigh*

MRS. PARKER AND THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

*Fine Line Feature, 1994, 123 mins., 35mm print courtesy of Fine Line Features
Directed by Alan Rudolph. Written by Alan Rudolph and Randy Sue Coburn. Produced
by Robert Altman. Photographed by Jan Kiesser. Edited by Suzy Elmiger. Original
score by Mark Isham. Production Design by Francois Seguin.*

*With Jennifer Jason Leigh (Dorothy Parker), Matthew Broderick (Charles MacArthur),
Campbell Scott (Robert Benchley), Peter Gallagher (Alan Campbell), Jennifer Beals
(Gertrude Benchley), Andrew McCarthy (Eddie Parker), Wallace Shawn (Horatio
Byrd), Martha Plimpton (Jane Grant), Sam Robards (Harold Ross), Lili Taylor (Edna
Ferber), James LeGros (Deems Taylor), Gwyneth Paltrow (Paula Hunt), Nick
Cassavetes (Robert Sherwood), Heather Graham (Mary Kennedy Taylor), Stanley
Tucci (Fred Hunter), Keith Carradine (Will Rogers), Jane Adams (Ruth Hale), and Jon
Favreau (Elmer Rice).*

From review by Todd McCarthy, *Variety*, May 16, 1994:

A striking performance by Jennifer Jason Leigh provides the centerpiece for *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle*, a highly absorbing but naggingly patchy look at the acerbic writer Dorothy Parker and her cohorts at the legendary Algonquin Round Table. World premiering at the Cannes Film Festival in advance of its skedded fall commercial bow, Alan Rudolph's latest dramatic mosaic is a natural sibling to *The Moderns*, his previous examination of a 1920s artistic milieu, although one with more heart, trenchant drama and deftly realized characterizations.

Like the director's other films, this beautifully made period piece will not be an easy sell, but strong notices and a push to revive interest in Parker among students and the sophisticated public could give it a fighting chance. Miramax owns foreign rights.

Parker was one of the first American female writers to develop a critical voice that was respected equally with those of her illustrious male colleagues among Gotham

literati, and a wit who arguably outshone them all. She left behind a legacy of often lacerating theater and literary reviews, tart poetry and numerous screenplays (including the original 1937 "A Star Is Born") that still makes compelling reading, which is why *The Portable Dorothy Parker* has never been out of print since it was first published in 1944.

But there has always been a sense of unrealized potential. It is the contrast between the sadness and disappointment of Parker's personal and creative life, and the exhilaration of important friendships and glittering social swirl, that gives this film its poignance.

Screenplay by Rudolph and journalist Randy Sue Coburn begins with Parker (Leigh) in Hollywood in 1937. Drenched in weariness and evident self-loathing for having sold out (many of her old cohorts would do the same), she is prompted by a young admirer to reflect on the "colorful" days beginning 18 years before, when American cultural life was defined by a relatively small group of artists and writers (quite a few of them critics) in New York City.

And colorful they were, Parker admits, although many other details of her life spoke of messiness and desperation. Returning from the war, her husband, Eddie (Andrew McCarthy), reveals himself to be a morphine addict, and hardly Dorothy's match upstairs. At *Vanity Fair*, she and other writers, including Robert Benchley (Campbell Scott), wear their salaries around their necks to protest measly wages, and she is fired.

Against the backdrop of the Jazz Age, and Mark Isham's suitably jazzy score, the ever-changing crowd lunches, drinks, hangs out and vacations together -- and sports its share of romantic complications. Separated from Eddie, Dorothy launches into a passionate affair with rakish newspaperman Charles MacArthur (Matthew Broderick), but it ends badly for her when he can't curb his appetite for actresses even after they're engaged.

At the heart of the picture, however, is the intense but carefully platonic friendship between Mrs. Parker and Mr. Benchley, as they nearly always call each other. Their lovely intimacy lends the film an emotional purity that stands in relief to Parker's

unsatisfactory other relationships.

Anchoring it all is Leigh's superb performance. With her arch, artificial-sounding accent (patterned after recordings of Parker's own voice), she takes a little getting used to, and some of the readings are sufficiently indistinct that some tweaking or even re-looping could be called for to make her dialogue completely comprehensible.

But the actress gets stronger as Parker grows older, and her delivery of the writer's acid remarks is stinging but natural. Praised to the skies by critics in recent years, Leigh here hits her career summit thus far.

Shot in Montreal, pic is a real treat visually. Jan Kiesser's outstanding widescreen lensing alternates between intense black-and-white for the framing story and lustrous color for the principal sequences. Francois Seguin's highly resourceful production design, careful location work and notably natural, unclichéd costumes by John Hay and Renee April all contribute to an indelible sense of time and place.

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of screenings and discussions with significant creative figures in film, television, and digital media, as supported with a generous grant from The Pinewood Foundation.

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