

Going the Distance: Top 10 Real-Life On-Screen Couples

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 2, 2010 - 9:46am

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CHICAGO – The personal life of an entertainer shouldn't be of any entertainment value, regardless of how celebrity gossip columns and the paparazzi would like to convince the general public otherwise. Who cares if two famous people have chemistry if it doesn't show up onscreen? Yet when a real-life couple stars in a film together, it's nearly impossible to watch them without wondering how much truth is reflected in their cinematic relationship.

That's exactly what many moviegoers will be contemplating when they watch Nanette Burstein's new Apatow-influenced rom-com, "Going the Distance," which pairs two stars whose on-again, off-again relationship has been heavily publicized. Whether Drew Barrymore and Justin Long have tangible, engaging chemistry remains to be seen and judged by audiences willing to by a ticket. Until then, here is my list of the top ten real life on-screen couples: the good, the bad and the ugly.

10. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie



Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie

Photo credit: Fox

"Ugly" certainly wouldn't be the accurate description for this couple, who are perhaps the most famous in the media galaxy. At a time when larger-than-life movie stars are as rare as an original idea in Hollywood, Pitt and Jolie have somehow managed to sustain their global

popularity and bankability. The hype surrounding their work in “Mr. & Mrs. Smith” was overwhelming, to say the least, particularly because Pitt had reportedly fallen in love with Jolie on the set. Though Doug Liman’s action-comedy could hardly be considered a classic, it does feature two megawatt talents at the height of their sparkling charisma. “Brangelina” plays as a couple whose marriage is reignited once they discover each other’s secret identity: they are both assassins, hired by warring agencies. While the gags are heavily laced with dark humor, the film’s most violent sequence centers on the couple’s animalistic lovemaking. Sometimes unbridled passion can be the most satisfying special effect. It certainly satisfied audiences.

9. Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez

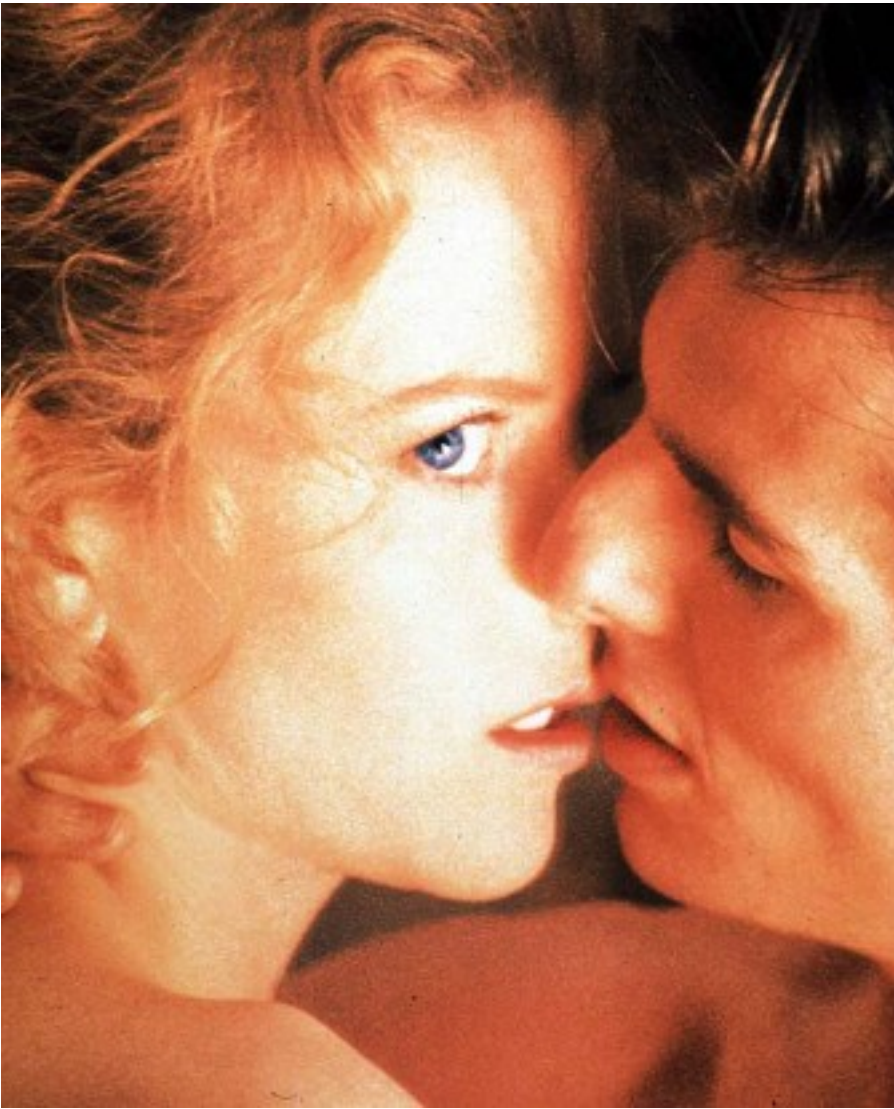


Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez

Photo credit: Sony

Here’s perhaps the most enduring example of what happens when a real-life onscreen couple fails spectacularly, both personally and professionally. Martin Brest’s 2003 disaster “Gigli” may be the polar opposite of “Mr. & Mrs. Smith,” yet some moviegoers may claim that it’s more fun, since the film’s truly bizarre awfulness is more original and memorable than the predictable pleasures of “Smith.” The short-lived romance between Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez garnered the usual media circus, resulting in the couple being dubbed the unholy name of “Bennifer” (though it’s certainly no worse than “Brangelina”). The debate over whether the two stars would possess onscreen chemistry proved irrelevant once Lopez’s character was revealed to be a lesbian. Yet the bigger surprise for audiences was just how deplorable the film was. Affleck was still awkwardly settling into the leading man mold, and he appears thoroughly ill at ease in his scenes with Lopez, who seems to be counting the hours until her paycheck arrives. And who can blame her? The plot is beyond ludicrous, the dialogue is offensively bad and the cast includes one howler of a performance after another. Justin Bartha may have damned his career with his sickening “Rain Man” imitation, while Christopher Walken and Al Pacino earn laughs of incredulity with their mere appearances.

8. Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman



Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman

Photo credit: WB

Like “Gigli,” “Eyes Wide Shut” is a film widely believed to have led to the break-up of its starring couple. Yet while Bennifer’s relationship amounted to little more than a fling, Cruise and Kidman had built a life together. Though they previously collaborated in two lackluster blockbusters, “Days of Thunder” and “Far and Away,” their work in Stanley Kubrick’s final project marked a new level of risk-taking, audacity and artistic accomplishment in both of their careers. The film grapples with themes that fascinated the auteur throughout his career, including the primal instincts of man, and how they navigate one’s behavior. Cruise stars as a doctor who embarks on a dreamlike odyssey of sexual obsession after discovering that his wife once fantasized about cheating on him. What psychological toll might a plot like this have on a couple, particularly while under the direction of a perfectionist like Kubrick? Late in his career, he would often force his actors to perform the same scenes over and over until they were practically drained of their humanity. Yet while Cruise spends a great deal of the movie looking dumbstruck, Kidman is flat-out riveting during her scant screen time, as she conveys her inner agony through the haze of drug-induced smoke.

7. Susan Buice and Arin Crumley



Susan Buice and Arin Crumley

Photo credit: Four Eyed Monsters

Perhaps the most honest cinematic log of a disintegrating relationship is “Four Eyed Monsters,” the modern mumblecore classic from Buice and Crumley. These romantically involved, twenty-something artistic types found an innovative method to distribute their low-budget 2005 film by building hype and generating a fan base online. The surprisingly poetic and poignant picture was based entirely on their own relationship, which began in a most unconventional way. Since Crumley was too shy to introduce himself to Buice in a straightforward manner, he began communicating with her solely through artistic means. Though the film has several moments of endearing sweetness, it is refreshingly

unsentimental of its depiction of two young adults struggling to forge a meaningful connection. Following the feature was a web series that continued the couple's story, as they debuted "Monsters" to considerable success at the Slamdance Film Festival, while failing to secure a deal for theatrical distribution. The series ended with the couple's break-up, yet their work still retains a certain magic, charm, and honesty that so many mainstream romances lack. I highly recommend seeking out this wonderful project, which is available in its entirety on one disc, rentable through Netflix.

6. Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall



Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall

Photo credit: WB

Though Bogie and Bacall may be best known for "The Big Sleep," their electric spark remains most resonant in the film where they first met: Howard Hawks's 1944 Hemingway-meets-"Casablanca" mishmash, "To Have and Have Not." The age difference between the two performers was striking, even at the time: Bogart was 45 while Bacall was only 19, yet her screen presence exuded the maturity of a young woman who was every bit the equal of her formidable co-star. The rapport between the actors appeared effortless right from the start, though Hawks took an immediate liking to Bacall as well, creating a feud between the director and his lead actor. Bogart became somewhat of an acting coach for Bacall, and freely allowed her to steal scenes from him. The couple married a year later, and are widely regarded as one of the great onscreen couples in film history. Though they starred in several more pictures together, no single moment in all of their collaborations has proved as memorable as the scene in "Have Not," where Bacall utters one of the most singularly seductive lines in film history. "You know how to whistle, don't you Steve? You just put your lips together and...blow."

5. Woody Allen and Diane Keaton



Woody Allen and Diane Keaton

Photo credit: WB

Allen, the compulsively prolific genius, has never had a shortage of muses, from Louise Lasser to Scarlett Johansson. Yet no actress ever came close to matching the phenomenally hilarious chemistry that Keaton possessed with Allen. Though the two stars broke up merely after a year of dating, around the same time of the Broadway run of "Play It Again Sam," the duo continued to act together. It can easily be said that

every one of their collaborations is a triumph, from the brilliant comic farce of “Sleeper” and “Love and Death” to the more elegant emotional complexity of “Manhattan” and “Interiors.” Their central film together, “Annie Hall,” represented a turning point in Allen’s career from broad comedy to more thoughtful and dramatic efforts. It’s not only one of the best films ever made, but also one of the most insightful portrayals of a relationship, in all its glorious messiness. As the New York comedian Alvy Singer, reflecting on the recent demise of his relationship with the beguilingly nutty Annie Hall (Keaton), Allen conveys a bittersweetness that feels as thoroughly authentic as his trademark neuroses. Keaton’s iconic performance deservedly won an Oscar, as did the film, famously beating out “Star Wars” for the top prize in 1977. I was flirting with the idea of including “Woody Allen and Mia Farrow” in my list as well, since their collaboration came to a jarring conclusion with the brutally candid “Husbands and Wives,” leading Farrow to drop out of Allen’s next picture, “Manhattan Murder Mystery.” Farrow was replaced by Keaton, and her chemistry with Allen proved to be as incomparable as ever.

4. Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton



Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton

Photo credit: WB

Speaking of “Husbands and Wives,” in which the collapse of Allen and Farrow’s relationship was mightily apparent onscreen, here’s another example of life imitating art in exhilaratingly unsettling fashion. Though Taylor and Burton ultimately proved to be incompatible, their stormy love affair has become the stuff of legend, forever immortalized in Mike Nichols’s timeless 1966 debut film, “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” Edward Lehman’s searing adaptation of Edward Albee’s play was brought to spectacularly visceral life by not only an impeccable cast but also Haskell Wexler’s innovative, documentary-style cinematography, which still makes the film feel as fresh as the day it was made. After starring together in the bloated, elephantine dud, “Cleopatra,” it was stunning to see such larger-than-life actors delivering nakedly emotional performances in roles stripped of gauzy glamour. As George and Martha, the boozy middle-aged couple who are constantly at each other’s throats, Taylor and Burton seemed to be channeling elements of their own turbulent relationship. The couple was married twice, consecutively, and both actors were married to different partners multiple times before and since their temporary union. As bleak and disturbing as “Virginia Woolf” may be, it’s also quite moving to see these two fierce and passionate artists bringing out the best in each other, while fearlessly exposing their demons and insecurities to their audience.

3. Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz



Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz

Photo credit: WB

Though their film collaborations were less than memorable, there's no denying the transcendent appeal of America's favorite redhead and America's favorite Babaloo-playing nightclub singer. They starred in two films together: Vincente Minnelli's 1953 comedy "The Long, Long Trailer" and Alexander Hall's dismal 1956 effort "Forever, Darling," in which the ever-distancing couple are brought back together by a guardian angel, inexplicably played by James Mason (mimicking Cary Grant in "The Bishop's Wife"). Like so many celebrity couples, the professional pressures forever plaguing Ball and Arnaz inevitably led to the straining of their relationship. "I Love Lucy" was originally conceived as a way for the two busy stars to salvage for their marriage. Though the show ended in their divorce, it eventually became known as the single greatest sitcom of all time. Ball's fearless pratfalls and sensational gift for physical comedy was perfectly matched with Arnaz's deadpan timing and technical mastery. The show proved to be hugely influential, partly due to the contributions of master cinematographer Karl Freund, whose three-camera setup soon became the standard method studios utilized to shoot situation comedies, allowing the audience to become more involved in the program through the use of multiple perspectives, including close-ups. Yet what really has made the show last all these many decades is the strength of the chemistry Ball and Arnaz shared between each other, as well as their invaluable sidekicks, Vivian Vance and William Frawley. A subplot involving Ball's real-life pregnancy broke through taboos, while bringing out the sincere warmth between the two stars.

2. Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward



Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward

Photo credit: Fox

One of the greatest, most enduring love stories in Hollywood history, the fifty-year marriage between Newman and Woodward is a true rarity in a business where heartbreak is the norm. Their home in Westport, Connecticut was a safe distance from the hysteria of L.A., and perhaps was essential in keeping their family life grounded. It seemed like everything they touched turned to gold, from their excellent line of “Newman’s Own” products to their incredible series of Hole in the Wall Gang Camps, where seriously ill children are able to participate in outdoor activities at no cost to their families. Out of all their onscreen collaborations, three stand out from the crowd. Martin Ritt’s “The Long, Hot Summer” was released in 1958, the same year Newman and Woodward were married. Their chemistry in this problematic yet enjoyable melodrama was sizzling by way of sweltering. Ten years later, Newman’s directorial debut, “Rachel, Rachel,” showcased Woodward in one of the best performances of her career as a sexually repressed schoolteacher nearing middle age. It was a debut as accomplished as the one from Newman’s lifelong friend, Robert Redford (“Ordinary People”), yet it never received the recognition that it so richly deserved. And in James Ivory’s equally under-appreciated “Mr. & Mrs. Bridge,” Newman plays the role of a rigid, uptight father that many believed to be strikingly similar to his true self. Yet while the onscreen relationship between him and Woodward was stagnant and uncertain at best, the love that existed between the two stars never appeared to be in doubt off-camera.

1. Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn



Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn

Photo credit: WB

Who else? It would be tempting for me to simply end this article with those two words, since the unmatched excellence of these irreplaceable performers speaks for itself. Neither Tracy nor Hepburn were conventionally gorgeous, yet unlike Pitt and Jolie, they were always actors first, movie stars second. Their body of work specialized in “battle of the sexes” comedies where the verbal warfare between the two actors made them all the more desirable to one another. It’s still tremendous fun to see these two pros constantly one-upping each other. Tracy’s blue-collar charisma and subdued wit perfectly complemented Hepburn’s rapid-fire line delivery and New England accent. They made their first appearance together in 1942’s “Woman of the Year,” and went on to make several classic pictures, the best of which may be George Cukor’s indelible 1949 comedy, “Adam’s Rib,” where the duo portray a married couple working as opposing lawyers in a controversial case. The great irony of their relationship was that they could only play a married couple onscreen. Perhaps because of his Catholic upbringing, Tracy couldn’t bring himself to divorce his estranged wife, Louise Treadwell. Hepburn’s relationship with Tracy was a complex one, to say the least, though she remained devoted to him for the rest of his life. She took five years off just to care for Tracy when he was in ailing health, and helped him through their final, unforgettable collaboration in 1967’s “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.” These actors were clearly made for each other, and their collaborations are every bit as much a labor of love as they are cinematic classics, epitomized by this final exchange from “Adam’s Rib”...

Hepburn: What I said was true, there’s no difference between the sexes. Men, women, the same.

Tracy: They are?

Hepburn: Well, maybe there is a difference, but it’s a little difference.

Tracy: Well, you know as the French say...

Hepburn: What do they say?

Tracy: Vive la difference!

Hepburn: Which means?

Tracy: Which means hurrah for that little difference.



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Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 25 2024 - 12:13pm*):
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