SOFTWARE & TECH

Barbra Streisand Owl And The Pussycat

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Introduction: A Curious Pairing of Opposites

In the landscape of early 1970s cinema, few romantic comedies manage to capture the raw, unvarnished chemistry of two wildly mismatched souls quite like **Barbra Streisand Owl and the Pussycat**. Released in 1970, this film adaptation of Bill Manhoff's two-character play brought together Barbra Streisand and George Segal in a whirlwind of verbal sparring, physical comedy, and unexpected tenderness. While the title itself winks at Edward Lear's 19th-century nonsense poem "The Owl and the Pussycat," the movie trades in whimsical rhymes for sharp, urban wit. The pairing of Streisand's free-spirited, brassy "pussycat" (a flighty prostitute and aspiring actress) with Segal's uptight, intellectual "owl" (a blocked writer) remains one of the most electrifying examples of an opposites-attract narrative. But what made this film so memorable, and why does the phrase **Barbra Streisand Owl and the Pussycat**still resonate with movie buffs and critics alike? Let's dive deep into the film's origins, its starring performances, its cultural footprint, and the enduring legacy of this unlikely love story.

The Genesis: From Stage to Screen

Before it became a big-screen vehicle for two of the most charismatic actors of the era, *The Owl and the Pussycat* was a hit Broadway play that premiered in 1964. Written by **Bill Manhoff**, the play originally starred Alan Alda and Diana Sands, but it was the film adaptation that truly imprinted itself on pop culture. The transition from stage to cinema is never seamless, but director Herbert Ross (who would later helm *The Sunshine Boys* and *Steel Magnolias*) managed to open up the story beyond a single apartment set without losing the claustrophobic tension that makes the characters' confrontations so compelling.

For the film, the studio needed a star capable of bringing both vulnerability and volcanic energy to the role of Doris, the "pussycat." That star was, of course, **Barbra Streisand**. Already an Academy Award–winning actress (*Funny Girl*, 1968) and a chart-topping singer, Streisand was a formidable presence. Playing opposite her as Felix, the "owl," was **George Segal**, a versatile actor who had recently earned an Oscar nomination for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*The casting was perfect: Segal's neurotic intellectualism clashed beautifully with Streisand's earthy, unapologetic sensuality.

Plot Overview: One Night That Changes Everything

The story unfolds over a single, sleepless night in New York City. Felix (Segal) is a cantankerous, would-be writer who works in a bookstore and harbors delusions of literary grandeur. He lives a solitary, orderly life until he finds his quiet evening shattered by an unexpected knock on his door. In bursts Doris (Streisand), a loud, unkempt, and furious woman. She has been evicted from her apartment because Felix called the police on her —he had previously heard her noisy lovemaking through the thin walls.

Doris is no shrinking violet. She is a part-time model and occasional call girl who uses her street smarts and

rapid-fire chatter as shields. To Felix, she is the embodiment of everything he despises: vulgar, chaotic, and unashamed. To Doris, Felix is a judgmental prig. But as the night wears on, their insults evolve into confessions. Felix admits his writing is a sham; Doris admits she craves respect and love. The razor-sharp dialogue, peppered with profanity and raw emotion, reveals the fragility beneath the antagonism. By the time dawn breaks, each has forced the other to see beyond stereotypes, and an unlikely bond—part friendship, part romantic possibility—emerges.

Character Analysis: The Owl and the Pussycat as Archetypes

Streisand's Doris: The Pussycat with Claws and a Heart

Streisand's performance in **Barbra Streisand Owl and the Pussycat**is an acting tour de force. She discards her usual glamour entirely: Doris's hair is a mess, her clothes are tacky, and her makeup is smudged. Yet Streisand injects the character with such raw vulnerability and wit that Doris becomes instantly relatable. She is a survivor, not a victim. Her promiscuity is a job, not a compulsion, and her desire to be an actress is genuine even if her talent is questionable. Streisand's comic timing is impeccable—her delivery of lines like "You're a nut! You're a fruitcake!" land with perfect rhythm. But she also excels in quieter moments, such as when Doris tearfully admits she has never been told she is beautiful. That emotional honesty elevates the film above mere screwball comedy.

Segal's Felix: The Owl Trapped in His Own Ivory Tower

George Segal's Felix is the intellectual snob who looks down on Doris but secretly envies her freedom. He wears thick glasses, smokes a pipe, and pontificates about literature while having done nothing himself. Segal plays Felix with a twitchy, almost physical discomfort that makes his eventual thawing believable. His transformation from a man who uses words to wound to a man who finally listens is the emotional backbone of the film. The chemistry between Streisand and Segal is electric; their arguments sound like jazz improvisations, each feeding off the other's energy.

The Legacy of the Title: Edward Lear Meets Modern Romance

The title *The Owl and the Pussycat*is borrowed from Edward Lear's beloved nonsense poem, written in 1871. In the poem, an owl and a cat sail away in a pea-green boat, fall in love, and are married by a turkey. The parallels to the film are playful: the pair are mismatched species that nonetheless find common ground. But where Lear's poem is whimsical and innocent, Manhoff's play is bawdy and urban. The irony is intentional. The film's enduring charm lies in its ability to marry highbrow literary allusion with lowbrow comedy, much like its two protagonists.

Over the years, the phrase **Barbra Streisand Owl and the Pussycat**has taken on a life of its own. It is often invoked in discussions about romantic comedies that defy genre conventions. It also appears in trivia quizzes as the film that earned Streisand a Golden Globe nomination for Best Actress (Comedy/Musical) and showcased her range beyond musical roles.

Cinematic Style and Direction

Director Herbert Ross, making only his second feature film, understood that the success of **Barbra Streisand Owl and the Pussycat**depended on maintaining a tight focus on the two actors. The film's early scenes are confined mostly to Felix's cramped apartment, a set filled with books, a typewriter, and a perpetually claustrophobic feel. As the night progresses and the characters venture onto the streets of New York, the camera opens up, reflecting their expanding emotional horizons. Ross uses long takes to capture the furious verbal duels, preserving the rhythm of the original stage play. The score, composed by Dick Halligan of the band Blood, Sweat & Tears, mixes jazz and folk elements, underscoring the film's blend of sophistication and grit.

Cultural Impact and Critical Reception

Upon its release in November 1970, *The Owl and the Pussycat*received generally positive reviews. Critics praised the performances, particularly Streisand's ability to be simultaneously abrasive and lovable. Roger Ebert noted that the film "works because of the way Streisand and Segal inhabit their roles, not because of the story." Audiences responded as well; the film was a modest box-office success, grossing over $17 million domestically.

However, the film's rating was a point of contention. It was one of the first major studio comedies to earn an R rating in the early days of the MPAA system, primarily for its frank sexual dialogue (including the notorious "S-word"). This rating actually worked in its favor, positioning the movie as adult, daring, and sophisticated. It also marked a turning point for Streisand, who was proving she could succeed in contemporary, non-musical roles.

Decades later, the film enjoys a cult following. Feminist film critics have re-evaluated Doris as a complex female character—one who owns her sexuality without being a stereotype, and who refuses to be shamed. In the context of the #MeToo era, Doris's frankness about her work feels ahead of its time. Meanwhile, the phrase **Barbra Streisand Owl and the Pussycat**remains a favorite among classic-movie enthusiasts searching for a rom-com with intellectual and emotional heft.

Memorable Scenes and Dialogue

Several scenes from **Barbra Streisand Owl and the Pussycat**are etched into film history. One is the argument on the fire escape, where Felix and Doris trade insults while perched precariously above the city. Another is the moment when Felix finally reads her a story he has written—a children's tale about a lonely owl and a lost cat, a direct nod to the Edward Lear poem. That scene is devastating in its simplicity, revealing the tenderness beneath the vitriol. The dialogue is also filled with quotable lines: "You have a nervous breakdown just looking at a traffic light!" and "I may be a whore, but I'm not a cheap whore."

Comparisons to Other Films and Literary Works

Critics often compare **Barbra Streisand Owl and the Pussycat** to other two-hander romantic comedies like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (though that film is far darker) or *When Harry Met Sally...*(which uses a similar structure of arguing equals falling in love). The film also foreshadows the later work of Nora Ephron, who would master the art of witty, emotionally honest romantic dialogue. In literature, the characters recall the combative couples of George Bernard Shaw or the urban loneliness of John Cheever's stories.

The Music: Streisand's Vocal Touch

Although **Barbra Streisand Owl and the Pussycat**is not a musical, Streisand does sing one song: "The Best Is Yet to Come," a jazzy duet with a character (though in the film it is heard as background music during the final scene). The song was not originally part of the soundtrack, but it underscores the hopeful note on which the film ends. Streisand's voice, even in a brief appearance, reminds viewers of her extraordinary talent and adds another layer to the story's emotional impact.

Why the Film Endures

Over fifty years since its release, the appeal of **Barbra Streisand Owl and the Pussycat**remains undiminished. In an era of heavily manufactured Hollywood romances, the film offers real grit and real laughter. The performances are raw, the dialogue crackles, and the underlying message—that love can bloom in the most unlikely places and between the most unlikely people—is timeless. The film also benefits from a bittersweet quality: we don't know if Felix and Doris will stay together after the end credits roll, and that

uncertainty is honest.

Fans continue to discover the film through streaming platforms and DVD reissues. It is a popular choice for double features with other Streisand comedies like *What's Up, Doc?* or *The Owl and the Pussycat* co-star Segal's *A Touch of Class*. Its influence can be seen in modern television shows like *The Mindy Project* or *You're the Worst*, which celebrate flawed, fast-talking antiheroes who find solace in each other.

Conclusion: A Love Story for the Ages

To say that **Barbra Streisand Owl and the Pussycat**is just a romantic comedy would be an understatement. It is a taut, two-character drama about

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