PAUL STEWART

A HEAVYWEIGHT AMONG HEAVIES

By Eddie Muller

IT WAS PAUL STEWART, I now realize, who ushered me into the noir netherworld. I first saw him, and heard the inimitable voice, in *The Joe Louis Story*, the 1953 biopic of the heavyweight boxing champ. Stewart played the fictional role of Tad McGeehan, a seen-it-all sportswriter who acts as a sympathetic confidante and chronicler of the fighter's rise and fall. I was maybe ten years old when I watched the movie on television with my father. His sole interest was in how well Coley Wallace, himself a professional pugilist, portrayed the greatest boxer of the century.

My old man, you see, was a sportswriter. In fact, Tad McGeehan could have been one of his colleagues, guys who lived in newspaper offices and saloons, sweaty gyms and barely furnished apartments, their attitude equal parts cynicism and sentiment. At this point, I hadn't yet discovered *noir*, so I certainly knew nothing of *frisson*—which, in hindsight, was what I felt watching this confluence of real life and the movies.

Months later, my father, who was not a movie fan, encouraged me to watch another film with him: *Deadline U.S.A.* … And there was Paul Stewart again—still a sportswriter. "That's the guy who covered Joe Louis," I told Dad. He was impressed that I'd "pegged" the actor; he called it "good reporting." For me, seeing the same actor reappear in essentially the same role, but in a different movie, was a revelation. It was my initial insight into the parallel world of cinema, a manufactured realm where actors, authentically cast, embodied characters we recognized in our own lives.

So imagine my surprise, watching The Dialing for Dollars Movie, when I discovered my old man's sarcastic sports writing crony living in a grimy New York tenement, pimping out his hot housefrau wife, and plotting to kill a young boy—one whose vivid imagination was alarmingly like my own.

Yes, *The Window* made a big impression. It taught me to never trust *anybody* in the movies—especially that shifty Stewart guy, who could go from colleague to killer in a blink of his lizard-lidded eyes.

Paul Stewart's childhood pal and lifelong colleague Kenneth Roberts recalled the actor as a natural, right from the start, when he was still Paul Sternberg, a Manhattan public school kid: "We had met in a school production of a weighty play of the period, *Rosie from Paris*, in which Paul, at the age of twelve, played the unctuous, undulating, mustachioed villain of the piece—early training for his great villains to come."

Stewart's father was a textile merchant, who paid his son's way to Columbia University hoping he'd become a lawyer. His mother Nathalie (Nathanson) was a concert pianist, whose artistic genes proved stronger. Although he graduated with a law degree, Stewart regularly appeared, in bit parts, on New York stages in the late twenties. Equally adept at drama or comedy, he'd eventually replace Milton Berle as the featured comic in *See My Lawyer*. On New York's Straw Hat Circuit, he was intriguingly cast opposite Gypsy Rose Lee in *Burlesque*, and as Duke Mantee in *The Petrified Forest*, the role that would later boost Humphrey Bogart to stardom.

But Stewart wanted to do more than act. His hands itched for the gears and levers of production. In 1932 he moved to Ohio to take a job writing, producing, directing, acting, announcing, and creating sound effects for radio station WLW in Cincinnati. With thirteen months of top-to-bottom experience under his belt he returned to New York, catching on with the immensely popular *March of Time* radio show.

Most accounts credit Orson Welles with "discovering" Stewart, but it was actually Stewart who lured Welles into radio. Stewart remembered the young actor from a one-act play they'd done together years earlier, and in 1935 he hired the 20-year-old *wunderkind* for a role in *March of Time*. The duo proved simpatico. They were soon collaborating on numerous radio programs, writing, producing, directing, and acting. With stage colleague John Houseman, Welles created the Mercury Theatre, of which Stewart became a charter member. Others included Joseph Cotten, Martin Gabel, Vincent Price, Agnes Moorehead, Ray Collins, Hans Conreid, Will Geer, George Coulouris, Olive Stanton, and Everett Sloane. For radio, the troupe billed itself "The Mercury Theatre on the Air."

Stewart's biggest contribution to American performing arts may have been behind the scenes: In 1938 he was a founding member and original negotiator for the American Federation of Radio Artists (AFRA), later to become, with the addition of television performers, AFTRA. Throughout his career, Stewart proudly carried union card #39, and was often a delegate to the union's national convention.

He was also a co-writer and co-producer of the Mercury's most famous broadcast, the October 30, 1938 "War of the Worlds." The sensational show, which tricked many listeners into believing Earth had been invaded by Martians, led to Welles being offered a carte blanche film contract by RKO Radio Pictures. Stewart's movie debut was as Raymond, loyal valet to Charles Foster Kane, in the most influential film of the era, Welles' *Citizen Kane*.

When war broke out, Stewart failed the military physical. He left Hollywood to serve in the New York-based Office of War Information, but was granted temporary leaves to play roles in several wartime dramas (*Johnny Eager*, *Mr. Lucky*, *Government Girl*). He served as special radio consultant to the Secretary of the Treasury and narrated the documentary *The World at World*, which President Roosevelt ordered exhibited in theaters throughout America.

Postwar, Stewart returned to Hollywood, determined to direct. He became an associate producer with Dore Shary, who worked with David O. Selznick's Vanguard Productions, making films in a distribution deal with RKO. When Shary told the fledgling director he'd have to "wait his turn at bat," Stewart impulsively signed a contract with Paramount that stipulated he would direct, as well as act. Nothing came of it—no acting roles, no directing assignments. It was the low point of Stewart's professional career.

By contrast, his wife's career was going great guns. Stewart had married singer-actress Peg LaCentra in 1939; they'd met doing *March of Time* together in New York. She was already popular as the lead singer in Artie Shaw's band. When Shaw broke up the act, she moved into the top spot with Benny Goodman's orchestra. Somehow she also found time to work steadily as an actress, both on stage and radio. Although she didn't appear much on the big screen, she certainly was *heard*, having overdubbed singing voices for numerous stars, including Ida Lupino (*The Man I Love*) and Susan Hayward (*Smash-Up*). The Stewarts' marriage endured long stretches of separation due to the spouses' busy careers, but it proved to be a lasting union.

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When Dore Shary took over as RKO's head of production in early 1947, he hired Stewart, on loan from Paramount, to direct *Christabel Caine*, a prestigious "woman's picture" based on the 1929 bestseller *All Kneeling*. Joan Fontaine was signed to star. Pre-production stalled, however, while rewrites were ordered. The title changed to *Bed of Roses*. Stewart eventually was replaced by a more well known director, before RKO shelved the entire project. Stewart was so embittered, he returned to New York, vowing never to return to Hollywood.

Then came his big break.

Dore Shary sent a cast and crew to New York that winter (1947) to shoot on-location scenes for a low-budget thriller called *The Window*. He also convinced the relocated Stewart to play the role of cold-blooded, calculating Joe Kellerson. Stewart joined a terrific ensemble that gamely pretended the frigid Greenwich Village streets were sweltering from a summer heat wave. Stewart's seamy, sinister countenance was a perfect foil to the fresh-faced innocence of nine-year-old costar Bobby Driscoll; his voice was every child's nightmare—the Big Bad Wolf in human form.

Shary planned to release the film in summer 1948, a perfect marketing strategy. While briefly in Hollywood to loop some *Window* dialogue, Stewart provided voiceover narration, at Shary's request, for *Berlin Express* (1948). Then Shary cast Stewart in a small but crucial role in *Weep No More*, opposite his old Mercury Theatre colleague Joseph Cotten. The actor seemed poised for reconciliation with the movie business.

Stewart as Kirk Douglas's manager in *Champion*

But that May, Howard Hughes bought controlling interest in RKO. Dore Shary, the opposite of the new boss in every way, fled the studio to take over as production chief at MGM. Hughes, a proponent of sex-based dramas, deep-sixed *The Window*, believing no one would pay to watch a movie featuring an annoying little kid. David O. Selznick, executive producer of *Weep No More*, then demanded major changes before *that* film could be released. Once completed, Hughes opted not to release *Weep No More*, dismayed by its lack of stars, somber tone, and a leading lady confined to a wheelchair.

Stewart's "big break" was on indefinite hold.

(Adding insult to injury, Hughes resurrected *Christabel Caine*, retitled *Born to be Bad*. Stewart, a Dore Shary loyalist, was not on the short list of possible directors. Like most Hughes films, *Born to be Bad* would have a tortured production history. It's eventual director, Nicholas Ray, had his Shary-produced debut film, *They Live by Night*, shelved for almost two years by Hughes before it gained wide release in 1949, two years after completion.)

The Window, however, screened privately for Hollywood insiders, and Paul Stewart quickly became a hot commodity. By the time Hughes, facing dire prospects after 15 months at RKO's helm, relented and released *The Window* on August 6, 1949, Stewart was already in demand. That year he appeared in five films: the lowly B programmer *Illegal Entry*, and prestigious features *Easy Living*, *Twelve O'Clock High*, and *Champion* (boxing again!) All were well-received, but none more so than *The Window*, that year's "sleeper," a box office bonanza that filled RKO's coffers, at least temporarily.

Caught in the web of circumstance with Farley Granger in *The Edge of Doom*

Stewart's persona was the most vivid thing in *Edge of Doom* (1950), Samuel Goldwyn's adaptation of Leo Brady's sensational bestseller. Stewart plays Mr. Craig, the crafty, crooked neighbor of Martin Lynn (Farley Granger), an impoverished young man who in a fit of rage kills the priest who denies a lavish church funeral for the boy's devout mother. The film ended up a half-baked mess after Goldwyn ordered new scenes to dissipate the tale's existential despair. Untouched, luckily, were creepy passages—*The Window Redux* as it were—of Stewart and his moll Irene (Adele Jergens) playing cat-and-mouse with Martin, an older, even more troubled, innocent. Much of the film was shot on location, yet nothing was more redolent of the big city's underbelly than shots of Stewart, in human cockroach mode, skulking on tenement landings, lurking in doorways, shuttling in and out of cramped pay phones. He was noir personified.

Indeed, much of Stewart's screen work, including the finally released *Weep No More* (retitled *Walk Softly, Stranger* [1950])—was in crime dramas: *Appointment with Danger* (1951), *Loan Shark* (1952), *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), *Chicago Syndicate* (1955), *Hell on Frisco Bay* (1955), and the Elvis-noir *King Creole* (1958). His characters issued a jaundiced gaze from beneath those distinctively down-turned eyebrows—and that laconic rasp of a voice! Who better to ask *Kiss Me Deadly*'s Mike Hammer, "What's it worth to you to turn your considerable talents back to the gutter you crawled out of?"

One of Stewart's few "good guy" roles was in Stanley Kramer's rarely-seen *The Juggler* (1953), in which he plays relentless but kindly Lt. Karni, an Israeli detective pursuing fugitive holocaust survivor Kirk Douglas across Israel. The film was shot on location by Edward Dmytryk. He was especially effective as production executive Syd Murphy in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1953), a film he must have greatly appreciated given his own Hollywood travails. Whatever their station, Stewart's characters understood the cost of surviving in a corrupt world

While making *King Creole*, Stewart offered an interviewer his views on the "Method" acting craze. "Frankly, these kids baffle me. They'll rehearse a scene a certain way for six weeks and then play it differently on opening night. When you ask them why, they say they suddenly felt it that way. They have absolutely no obligation to the other members of the cast who might be thrown by the unexpected delivery. … These actors seem more concerned with their movements than with the meaning of the lines. An actor doesn't look at a girl and tell her he loves her. Instead he scratches his head, bites his fingernails, and looks out the window. This is realism?"

In the mid-fifties, Stewart finally got his hands on the gears and levers, directing television crime dramas: *Meet McGraw*, *Peter Gunn*, *Lawman*, *M Squad*, *Hawaiian Eye*, *Checkmate*, *Philip Marlowe*, *87th Precinct*, and *Michael Shayne*, which he also produced. Although he stopped directing such programs in the 1960s, he continued to act in them for more than 25 years, appearing in everything from *Johnny Staccato* (1960) to *Remington Steele* (1983). He was a regular on two shows, *Top Secret* (1955) and *The Man Who Never Was* (1966).

His most vivid later big-screen appearance was as Jensen, the newspaper reporter ("Don't people in this town lock their doors?") covering the Clutter family killing in Richard Brooks' *In Cold Blood* (1967). The director cast Stewart again in his 1975 Western epic *Bite the Bullet*, but his role was truncated when the actor suffered a heart attack on location in New Mexico. It slowed, but didn't stop him. He worked steadily in film and television for the next eight years, until a prolonged illness led to fatal heart failure on February 17, 1986. He was 77. Peg La Centra lived another ten years as a widow.

In the final tally, Stewart directed more than 5,000 radio and television programs, and acted in more than 100. He admitted in an interview that he once thought he might become a tough-guy star in the Bogart mold. "But I came along on the cusp of that trend," he said. "It was going out of fashion and I got stuck as a heavy. I played subtle heavies, assistant heavies, and stylish, rich heavies." ■