The Last "Classic Film Noir"

By Gary Deane
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When theorists and aficionados attempt to locate a definitive "end point" for the classic period of film noir, four films emerge as the leading candidates:

- *Touch of Evil (1958)*, for its baroque inflations of character and style;
- *Odds Against Tomorrow (1959)*, for its modernism and progressive tonal shifts;
- *Psycho (1960)*, for its narrative and generic dislocations;
- *Blast of Silence (1961)*, for its all-pervasive moral desolation.

Disagreement is inevitable, given that the very definition of film noir is itself fluid.

Each of these four films, however, represents some kind of distinct *change* from what went before. Thus the actual endpoint of "classic noir" might more logically be found in a film that sums up what that "fluid" consensus had been.

A final and unapologetic evocation of *exactly* what went before is precisely what we're in search of … and is what brings us to *The Scarlet Hour* (1956).

Despite its release date, *The Scarlet Hour* is a film far more in character with '40s noir, with many of the insistent thematic, narrative, and visual motifs of the earlier decade:

- A male protagonist obsessed with a sexually alluring woman;
- Another female, good and dutiful, in love with the man;
- An urban setting where lives are lived out unhappily by day and by night;
- A lurid and convoluted plot conveyed with hard-boiled urgency;
- Shadows, low angles, and "trick" shots adding unsettled atmosphere.

The Scarlet Hour was produced and directed by the renowned Michael Curtiz. Backed by Paramount, the film received a healthy A-feature budget. However, the cast was populated with mostly "new faces," including Tom Tryon, Carol Ohmart, James Gregory, and Jody Lawrance. When completed, the film was released with little fanfare and quickly disappeared from screens. For more than fifty years, it has languished in total obscurity.

Is its obscurity justified? Contemporary reviews of the film were lukewarm at best. It actually played more in Great Britain than in the States—and the UK press, so often harsh in its assessment of crime films, did not make an exception to this rule for *The Scarlet Hour*:

> "It is a very drab hour and a half, in the company of actors who have not yet established their reputations and are unlikely to achieve them as a result of this movie. The story combines a rather unsavoury triangle with a jewel robbery and the director Mr. Curtiz has achieved a certain amount of suspense but little else." (*UK Times*, May 1957)

To present-day eyes, *The Scarlet Hour* isn't drab at all, merely dense in its complications and saturated with character types that seem contemporary and anachronistic at the same time. It's a familiar tale of dark love, obsession, duplicity and murder. Tryon is E.V. "Marsh" Marshall, the protégé of land developer Ralph Nevins (Gregory), who happens to be having an affair with his boss's wife, Paulie (Ohmart).

Tom Tryon and Carol Ohmart in *The Scarlet Hour*

Elaine Stritch (right) almost steals *The Scarlet Hour* out from under star Carol Ohmart

Nevins' secretary Kathy Stevens (Lawrance) is the "good girl," a la Virginia Huston in *Out of the Past*, who pines for Marsh.

Paulie wants the life Ralph's wealth affords her, but she doesn't want him. In order to take her leave from him with the requisite wherewithal, she uses her considerable charms to seduce Marsh into hijacking a jewelry heist that they overhear being planned while parked in a lovers' lane. However, Ralph is aware that Paulie has something going on behind his back. Prone to violence, he begins to keep tabs on his wandering wife. When he decides to take action, the plot thickens and darkens.

That's about as much as you should need or want to know going into this film. A good deal of the pleasure to be had from these tales of triangulation and treachery is inevitably in the details. The plot twists are ably supplied by lead screenwriter Frank Tashlin, better known for his work in comedy—*The Lieutenant Wore Skirts (1956)*, *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* (1957)—with the hard-boiled lines served up by Alford "Rip" Van Ronkel and Curtiz' protégé and stepson, John Meredyth Lucas, who would polish his skills in TV crime dramas over the next decade. This is Tashlin's sole noir credit, but a desperate undercurrent was palpable in his comedies, well noted by film critic Dave Kehr: "More than most of his contemporaries, Tashlin was attuned to the ways in which our own desire betrays us." That quality is abundantly on display here.

Part of the potential in *The Scarlet Hour* is compromised by Tom Tryon's lack of range. Some of this stems from the script, which leaves little leeway for his character to connect the dots between virtue and temptation. A more adroit actor might have provided such a connection, but the most Tryon can manage here is a kind of hangdog haplessness.

The rest of the actors, however, pull their weight admirably. Former model and beauty queen Carol Ohmart was spot-on casting for Paulie, who's far more complex and sympathetic a character than the stereotypical femme fatale. While Paulie uses Marsh and is prepared to betray him, she does so out of jealousy, not malice: her actions and betrayals are never straightforward.

Director Curtiz clearly saw more in Ohmart than simply a flawless figure. There is a direct link to the resignation behind the ruthlessness found in Phyllis Dietrichson: Ohmart gives Paulie a similar duality. With her cool, smoky voice, and those long, shapely legs, she harkens back to the "fire and ice" sirens of the 40s and does so without being merely derivative.

Other winning talent on display: James Gregory as the vengeful husband; David Lewis as the jewel heist mastermind (who makes a memorable reappearance via the film's bravura plot twist); and E. G. Marshall and Ed Binns as the investigating police officers. All had established their acting bona fides in television, and all would become fixtures on the small screen in the 60s.

Jody Lawrance, on the rebound from an aborted launch at Columbia earlier in the decade, does what she can with her role, but in her bottle-blonde incarnation she is too reminiscent of the edgier and far more distinctive Jan Sterling. She might have stood out more as a brunette. (Lawrance disappeared from Hollywood in 1961).

One actress who stands out here—and does so with style—is Elaine Stritch, playing Phyllis Rycker, friend and confidante to Paulie. In her film debut, Stritch displays her trademark skill at wresting attention away from anyone sharing the screen with her.

Phyllis is a retired-but-not-quite-reformed B-girl who's found true love in the arms of a blue-collar hedonist (husband Tom plumbs for a living, but lives to keep his own pipes well-lubricated). She and Paulie have a long backstory—all the way from tenement days—and it's through their intimate exchanges that we learn something more of who Paulie is and what motivates her. While she's cunning and dressed to kill, we're also allowed to know her as a woman damaged by life and burdened with regret. When Phyllis toasts her ever-solicitous and slightly sozzled husband, "Here's to happy marriages made in heaven," Paulie replies: "Here's to happy marriages made anywhere."

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Stritch, always a brash scene-stealer, also challenges Ohmart to stand up to her. Ohmart manages to do so, and then some: their scenes together invigorate the film.

Stritch would later dismiss her role in the film as little more than a random walk-on, but she creates one of the great "bit" parts in all of noir and barely breaks a sweat.

Clearly, *The Scarlet Hour* doesn't shy away from its indebtedness to *Double Indemnity*; in fact, Curtiz pays further respect, most explicitly in a scene where Marsh and Paulie furtively meet up across the aisle in a record store. Their troubled tryst could easily have taken place just down the street at Jerry's Market on Melrose.

Similarly, Curtiz might well have seen the opening of Byron Haskin's *Too Late For Tears* (1949), where a criminal rendezvous on a dark mountaintop road overlooking Los Angeles sets the tone for an escalating series of tawdry events. His rendition is better elaborated, adding visual luster and character dimension, setting in motion several story elements in one fell swoop.

And the script has its share of well-turned one-liners, most of them handed to Paulie. They are not only memorably hard-boiled, they add character resonance:

"Don't try to brush me off, Marsh—when I stick, I stick hard."

"I never thought about the things I wanted, only the things I didn't want."

All in all, Paulie Nevins is an unusually self-reflexive femme fatale. Many of her lines function in the film the way Walter Neff's voiceover frames *Double Indemnity*. Like Neff, she goads herself into a criminal act to tap into a strange nether region of self-worth. She's Phyllis and Walter combined, wrapped up in one leggy, complicated package.

Despite these flourishes, the film suffers from an odd type of flatness. All the elements of a top-notch 40s noir are present, but the combination of a weak lead actor (Tryon), overly glossy production values, and a lack of velocity in the final reel make things seem a bit stale. Even with such a kinetic script, the film is just not as emphatic in style and pacing as it needs to be.

A major reason is that the visuals, despite their enhanced use of low lighting (thanks to a new lens from Japan employed by veteran noir cinematographer Lionel Linden), are less seamless than they ought to be. Not every shot or sequence is as creatively or carefully composed as it might have been, and camera movement is much less fluid than one is accustomed to in a Curtiz film.

Thus Curtiz' attempt to return to the more ornate noir style—one that he'd virtually invented in *Mildred Pierce*, embroidered to baroque perfection in *The Unsuspected* (virtually a textbook example of Foster Hirsch's notion of "italicized [visual] moments"), and synthesized in *The Breaking Point*—was derailed by a combination of factors he could not overcome. In those earlier films, the complicated choreography of plot, visuals, and actorly presence meshed into something greater than the sum of its many parts: in *The Scarlet Hour*, the yeast doesn't quite rise. We have only intimations of the robust flavorings that classic noir provides.

(Finally, there's the title. Moviegoers may have wondered, as we do today, just what the heck a "scarlet hour" is. The working title for the film was *Too Late, My Love*. While that's a bit too "woman's picture" for a script that so nimbly ups the ante on James M. Cain, it's a lot closer to what's on the screen.)

While all this might dampen one's enthusiasm a bit, as it means we're not dealing with a truly "Great Lost Noir," we shouldn't dismiss the film. What we have is a case study on celluloid for how classic noir was supposed to operate: we can see the components for a great and satisfying dark film, and trace how all of these elements manage to not quite mesh.

And that's why, in *The Scarlet Hour*, we see what is truly the last attempt to build a noir from the classic recipe. The icy sexual cunning of Carol Ohmart, deployed with both nuance and desperation throughout the film, brings that arc of the noir cycle to a close—an arc that wouldn't be reopened until *Body Heat* (1981) a quarter-century later. Her fate at the end of *The Scarlet Hour*, however, is a bit different from what's customary, in what surely seems to be Curtiz' recognition of Ohmart's acting skills (as opposed to her mere physical beauty). Thus it's also appropriate to read the film as our lens into the "what-if" career of an actress who was made for a film style becoming extinct just as she was given the chance to embody it. ■