

THE DARK VISION OF DOUGLAS SIRK



TARNISHED ANGELS

Imogen Sara Smith



n a hot night in New Orleans, in a half-lit, elegantly shabby apartment, two troubled souls share a bottle of cheap wine and an intimate, confessional conversation. Next door, a raucous costume party is in full swing, revelers dancing like hopped-up zombies to relentless Dixieland jazz. The man and woman speak tenderly about betrayals and disillusionment, building to a kiss that is jarringly interrupted by Death—

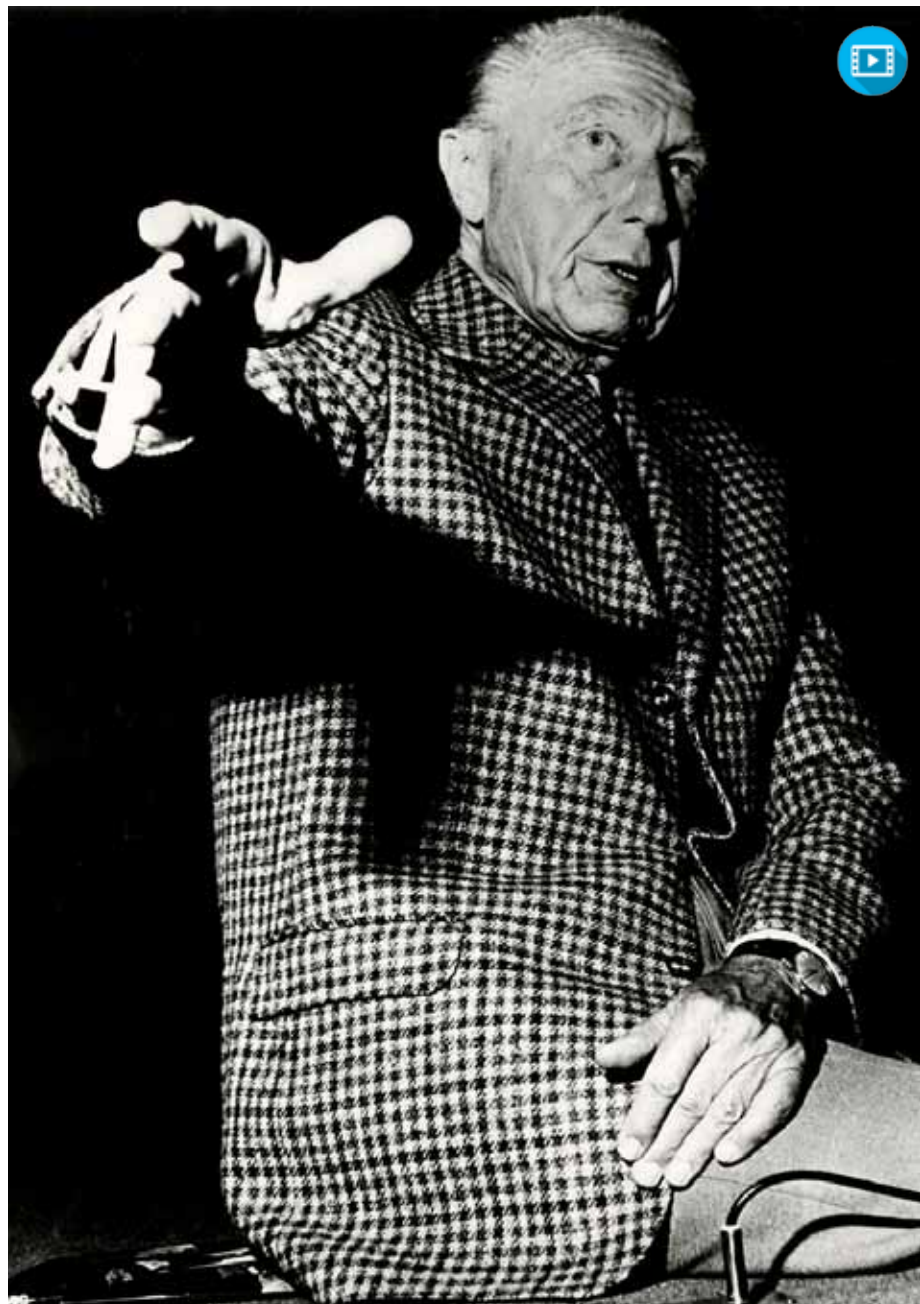
a guy in a leering skull mask who bursts in from the party.

This scene, from Douglas Sirk's underappreciated drama *The Tarnished Angels* (1958), dramatizes one of the director's key themes: people struggling for authentic connection, surrounded by an oppressive, sinister masquerade of happiness. Sirk is best known for baroquely stylized Technicolor melodramas, once dismissed as sudsy kitsch but now embraced by many cinephiles for their formalist rigor and their subversive notes of unease. The work of a European intellectual often saddled with projects he disdained, Sirk's films are complex, oblique, and visually incisive. One of the few German refugee filmmakers who did *not* specialize in film noir, Sirk shared his fellow exiles' gimlet eye for his adopted country. His lush melodramas strike a dissonant note, resonating from the hollowness behind the false front of the American "good life." Like his sophisticated noir films of the 1940s, they reveal an insatiable hunger bred by idealized visions of plenty, and the paradoxical seduction of death in a willfully complacent society. Profoundly ambivalent, Sirk saw America's vitality and vacuity, its frankness and phoniness, as only an outsider could.

Civilized Evil: The Noirs

Born Hans Detlef Sierck in 1897 to Danish parents living in Germany, he studied art before establishing himself as a theater director and then joining UFA, Germany's leading movie studio, where he helmed a series of successful melodramas in the 1930s. His first wife later became a devoted Nazi; his second was Jewish, and with her he fled Germany in 1937, finally arriving in Hollywood two years later. At first he scrabbled, literally, running a failing chicken farm in the San Fernando Valley before Columbia finally hired him as a screenwriter in 1942. His early directing jobs were for independent producers from the German exile community, and his first four American films, starting with the anti-Nazi *Hitler's Madman* (1943), were all set in Europe. The second, *Summer Storm* (1944), was based on Chekhov's story "The Shooting Party," and became a surprise hit largely thanks to steamy ads featuring Linda Darnell.

The story is almost boilerplate noir: a respectable man, happily engaged to a nice woman, falls under the spell of a greedy, ambitious *femme fatale*, winds up killing her, and



Director Douglas Sirk

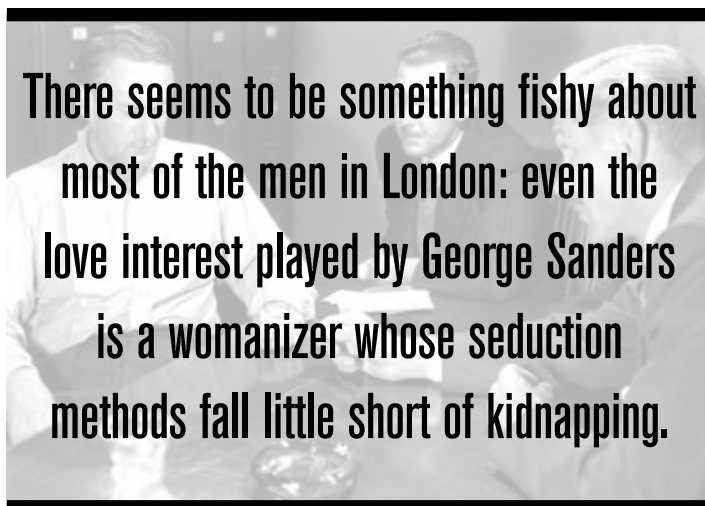


Ball surprises Sanders by going undercover as a maid in *Lured*

sinks even lower when he allows an innocent man to be convicted of the crime. Yet the film never has the look or feel of noir: set in Russia just before and just after the Revolution, it has a genteel period prettiness, deliciously witty dialogue, and a tone that's often lightly humorous. This makes the utterly bleak, unredeemed ending all the more shocking. *Summer Storm* was a turning point for Darnell, who seized her first chance to be bad as the peasant temptress Olga, a girl raised in a squalid hovel who naively dreams of riches and revels in her power over men. She's vain, cruel, and ignorant, yet has, along with beauty, an irresistible combination of earthiness and unearthliness.

But what lifts this modest film is the brilliant delineation of the central character, provincial judge Fedor Petroff. George Sanders, in the first of three consecutive films with Sirk, makes Fedor charming, intelligent, attractive, and incorrigibly weak. Early on, we see how quickly he resorts to self-pity and petulant self-justification when he knows he's in the wrong; how passively he accepts his inability to break free of a degrading obsession. The story is framed as his confession of guilt, but his desire to clear his conscience is never as strong as his ignominious will to survive.

Sanders, who became one of Sirk's closest friends in Hollywood, starred in *A Scandal in Paris* (1946), another period piece about a legendary French criminal who wound up as prefect of police, and took a secondary role in *Lured* (1947). This delightful, Hitchcockian blend of suspense and comedy was a remake of *Pièges* (1939), a French film by another refugee from the Nazis, Robert Siodmak. Sirk's version is set in the familiar London of fog, wet cobblestones, and wily serial killers. Lucille Ball, statuesque and magnificently deadpan, plays a stranded American chorus girl working as a taxi dancer, until she's enlisted by Scotland Yard to help track down a



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killer who preys on women through personal ads. They propose that she respond to all suspicious-looking ads seeking attractive young women, and she blithely agrees. Why not? The most memorable of her misadventures involves Boris Karloff as a mad dress designer who hires her to model his prized creation to an audience of a few broken mannequins and an obese bulldog that he addresses as "Your Excellency." Next up is a sinister butler (Alan Mowbray) running a white slavery ring out of the servant's quarters of a gentleman's townhouse. There seems to be something fishy about nearly all the men in London: even the love interest played by George Sanders—the owner of a nightclub that appears to have been decorated by Salvador Dali—is a womanizer whose seduction methods fall little



As a crazed designer, Karloff is creepier than your average monster



Claudette Colbert is caught between scheming husband Don Ameche (right) and his menacing accomplice George Coulouris in the curdled-marriage thriller *Sleep, My Love*

short of kidnapping. But the chief detective muses that a man so successful with women would have no reason to kill them; the real culprit (fairly obvious from the start) is a mousy necrophiliac who pens Baudelaire-wannabe verses about his victims' "beauty that only death can enhance."

Sleep, My Love (1948), like *Lured*, takes an old-hat premise and makes it fresh: this time it's the *Gaslight* plot about a husband trying to drive his wife to madness and suicide. Produced, at least officially, by Mary Pickford and her husband Charles "Buddy" Rogers, this was Sirk's first film set in America, and he gives a fine flavor and specificity to the studio backlot settings. The knock-out opening, with a locomotive barreling through the night and a woman (Claudette Colbert) waking up on the train with no memory of how she got there, delivers a jolt of disorientation and terror. Colbert is arguably miscast as Alison Courtland, whose husband uses



Hazel Brooks models lounge-wear for the *femme fatale*

drugs, hypnosis, and staged incidents in a scheme to get rid of her. An actress who always conveyed a dry, wised-up sensibility, she is a little hard to buy as a woman so easily hoodwinked.

As Richard Courtland, Don Ameche makes a convincing, unctuous villain, but could anyone fail to detect his phoniness? The relationship between husband and wife is never as vivid as that between Richard and his accomplices (including the marvelously creepy George Coulouris), or between Alison and her wisecracking savior, Bruce (an exceptionally likeable Robert Cummings). Hazel Brooks, as Daphne, is almost a caricature of the *femme fatale*: a woman with the soul of an ice pick, but so sexy that even when she's hiding out with an elderly couple, she lounges around in a see-through negligee and black panties. As disgruntled and ill-tempered as she is gorgeous, Daphne reduces Richard to a feeble supplicant. Unimpressed by an



Sirk gives a glossy elegance to Sam Fuller's tale of a parolee (Patricia Knight) who kills her blackmailing ex in the inexplicably titled *Shockproof*

emerald bracelet and champagne at an empty roadhouse, she orders him to hurry up and get rid of his wife. Their dreary evening is intercut with a warm, ebullient one at a traditional Chinese wedding that Alison attends with Bruce. Sirk builds a potent contrast between a stifling miasma of deceit and hypocrisy, and a saving mood of humor, sanity, and openness. As the joyfully tipsy Alison explains, "Some people say what they mean, and they have a happy time. Others get all tightened up inside. They don't talk. They can't even feel. And they don't have a happy time."

Both *Lured* and *Sleep, My Love* have clever scripts by humorist Leo Rosten. Sirk's next film, *Shockproof* (1949), was written by none other than Samuel Fuller; the result is more seamless than such a strange mash-up of sensibilities might suggest. Fuller intended this story, about a parole officer who falls in love with one of his cases and flees with her after she kills another man, to depict the hero's journey from imposing rules to rebelling against them. The finished film was marred by studio-imposed changes, including a cop-out ending, but it has strong elements. It is, to start with, terrific-looking. Early scenes are shot in the iconic Bradbury Building, on the streets of downtown L.A., and in a Victorian house inscribed with elaborate gingerbread trim. Sirk arguably lavishes too much attention on such interiors, filling every frame

with fancy details and lacy patterns of light and shadow. But the characters are well-drawn, reflecting Sirk's rapport even with limited actors: the typically wooden Cornel Wilde is unusually warm and engaging as Griff Marat, and Patricia Knight is especially good in

early scenes as the stubborn, embittered convict. They wind up as another couple on the run: stealing a car with a "Just Married" sign, riding freight trains with psychotic hoboes, almost getting run in by a cop for littering in the park, living in a hellish shack in the oil fields. Much of this section, including its improbable denouement, would be recycled a few years later in the gritty gem *Tomorrow is Another Day* (1951).

James Harvey, who has written superbly on Sirk, calls the director's 1940s thrillers "noir *mit schlag*," comparing them to Viennese coffee with whipped cream. For all the dark and bitter streaks running through them, these films have an élan that lightens their stories of crime and death. Ironically, Sirk would

ultimately express a bleaker and more caustic view of life through that despised form, the woman's melodrama.

Imitations of Life: The Melodramas

Douglas Sirk arrived at Universal Pictures in 1950, just as noir expert Robert Siodmak was leaving. It might have seemed natural

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for Sirk, with a string of crime thrillers behind him, to continue mining this vein, but instead Universal put him to work making wholesome comedies; they also assigned him war movies (*Battle Hymn*), westerns (*Taza, Son of Cochise*), swashbuckling romances (*Captain Lightfoot*), sword-and-sandal epics (*Sign of the Pagan*). Most of Sirk's Universal films were produced by Ross Hunter, who was in many ways his temperamental opposite: a young, enthusiastic, all-American optimist who believed movies should look beautiful and paint a positive view of life. Somehow, what should have been a recipe for disaster produced, along with a fair amount of dross, the signature melodramas for which Sirk is best remembered. Unlike more rebellious auteurs, he took whatever projects he was given, though he later dismissed many of the results, and he found ways to subvert Hunter's rosy vision—sometimes subtly, sometimes not subtly at all.

In amongst the Technicolor bombast, he made two understated, exquisite black and white dramas starring Barbara Stanwyck — *All I Desire* (1953) and *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956). No one has better summed up Stanwyck's greatness than Sirk, who spoke of her "amazing tragic stillness" and her incapacity for phoniness, the way she struck him as "someone who had really been touched deeply by life in some way." With her steely poise and dry as charcoal voice, her reserves of fresh, undefended emotion, Stanwyck seems older

than anyone else on screen, and younger. She embodies that rarest of values in a culture cocooned by illusions: the ability to face reality and force others to face it.

In *There's Always Tomorrow*, she appears like a savior to Fred MacMurray, as a successful middle-aged paterfamilias who has come to feel desperately trapped in suburban domesticity, ignored by his self-absorbed, conventional family. Sirk turns his middle-class home into a mausoleum as shadowy and suffocating as the Dietrichson house in *Double Indemnity* (1944). Joan Bennett plays the smug wife whose refusal to recognize her husband's unhappiness becomes a deadly kind of power; their selfish, narrow-minded children represent Sirk's scathing view of American teenagers. Stanwyck, as an old friend grown into a glamorous, single career woman, sees all of this, but though she has clearly carried a torch for him, she crushes his dream of escape, telling him flatly that it is too late. With its rainy, gloomy settings, this is a quietly devastating film about getting older, about how disappointing and lonely even an outwardly successful life can be. Despite pressure from the studio, Sirk gave the film an uncompromising ending that strikes a chord of utter hopelessness. "It's such a good life—and you will be happy!" Stanwyck cries as she sends him away: not for a moment do you believe it.

"It's beautiful! And it's home," a new bride gushes to her father-in-law, a Texas oil millionaire, about the pompous white-columned family mansion she's just moved into with her drunken playboy husband. This line from *Written on the Wind* (1956) rings utterly false, even spoken by the usually straight-shooting Lauren Bacall;





Hudson is perturbed and Malone is on the make as they motor past the oil wells that pump out her family fortune in *Written on the Wind*

and Sirk plays up the falseness, as he does with so many of the lines, settings, and performances in this film, and with its flamboyant lighting and colors. (Like most of Sirk's Universal melodramas, it was lensed by the great Russell Metty.) A lurid soap opera about a family corrupted by toxic wealth, *Written on the Wind* is a strangely moving film, with a wicked sense of humor and an undercurrent of melancholy.

The producer was not Ross Hunter but Albert Zugsmith, an amiable schlockmeister who produced exploitation classics like *High School Confidential* (1958) and *The Beat Generation* (1959)—but also Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958). He and Sirk got along beautifully, since the director recalled that Zugsmith never interfered with productions except to ask for "more bosom." Instead he got incredible flourishes of style, like the gorgeous opening to *Written on the Wind*, with its striking contrasts of warm and cool colors: the bright yellow of a speeding racecar against the deep blue of a Texas night, the crimson glare of a bed and a storm of dead leaves blowing across a white floor. A whiskey bottle smashes against a wall, a gun goes off, bodies fall: the mood is at once feverish and ceremonial.

The four characters introduced in this prologue are caught in a maelstrom of frustrated desires and long-

nursed resentments. Lucy (Lauren Bacall) is a sensible working girl from New York who impulsively marries Kyle Hadley (Robert Stack), the wastrel heir to an oil empire. Kyle's lacerating insecurity, which he treats with cheap corn liquor, is compounded by his envy of Mitch (Rock Hudson), a poor boy taken in by the Hadleys, who has become the reliable good son Kyle can never be. His sister Marylee (Dorothy Malone) is desperately in love with Mitch, and treats her unrequited longing with cheap sex, seemingly turned on as much by degrading herself in her beloved's eyes as by tawdry encounters with lower-class men. Mitch, meanwhile, quietly yearns for Lucy; these two are admirable, and we want them to be happy, but they are never very interesting.

But Kyle and Marylee are grotesquely riveting. After a doctor tells Kyle, who is fixated on having a child, that his tests show "a weakness," his whole body expresses self-loathing and physical shame, cringing and huddling, lurching into ineffectual violence. Marylee, with her hot pink dresses and blazing platinum hair, is another matter, erupting with so much physical energy that, in the film's most infamous scene, she does a demonic mambo in her bedroom that appears—through rapid, agitated intercutting—to be the cause



Don't believe the smiles: Bacall and Stack play a couple whose marriage disintegrates in glorious Technicolor



Artist Reynold Brown's original gouache artwork for the 24-sheet of *The Tarnished Angels*

of her father's fatal heart attack. The scene is outrageous, yet too knowing to be camp; Malone won an Oscar for her performance.

Malone, Stack, and Hudson were reunited in *The Tarnished Angels*, a brooding black-and-white drama set in 1920s New Orleans. Sirk had long wanted to adapt William Faulkner's novel *Pylon*, about barnstorming pilots, and after the success of *Written on the Wind* he got the chance, with Zugsmith again producing. Burke Devlin (Hudson), a sensitive, alcoholic reporter, becomes fascinated by and then entangled with a tortured family group he encounters at a

carnival air show. Roger Shumann (Stack) is a WWI hero turned stunt flier, more in love with danger than with his wife, Laverne (Malone), a farm girl who became a parachute jumper to win him. Their young son is teased by nasty rumors that his real father might be Jiggs (Jack Carson), Roger's mechanic, who carries a hopeless torch for Laverne. In fact, everyone wants Laverne, including rich, sleazy promoter Matt Orde, and Devlin, whose gentleness leads her to open up about the neglect and humiliation she has suffered.

The air show, with its frequent fatal crashes, is described as "a cheap, crummy carnival of death." It is set amidst a ghoulish Mardi Gras, with torchlit parades, giant grotesque masks and floats, a banjo-playing Grim Reaper, a costumed couple kissing in an automobile while a wrecked plane is dredged up from the lake. Everything revolves around Roger, whose attraction to death makes him daring and glamorous, but also inhuman. With his cold, dead eyes, Robert Stack gives a chilling performance as a man so single-minded he is stunted. When his plane is damaged just before a big race, he is so desperate to fly that he sends his wife to convince the lecherous Matt Orde to give him a replacement. ("I need this plane like an alcoholic needs his drink," he confesses.) This ultimate betrayal almost drives her into Devlin's arms, but the sudden intrusion of that trickster death shatters their fragile bond.

The Tarnished Angels is about how low people can sink when they pursue shining ideals. So, in a far more submerged and troubled way, is Sirk's last film, *Imitation of Life* (1959). "I would have made it for the title alone," Sirk said: this glossy weeper was his final statement about the lies and loss embedded in the American dream of self-transformation. Ending with a spectacular, cathartic funeral, the film was a monster hit. The same year, Sirk left Universal and America. He had said what he had to say. ■



Dorothy Malone looks skeptical, but, as Sirk's friend Irene Heymann recalled, "He worked awfully hard with actors," noting how Rock Hudson hero-worshipped the erudite director