NOIR...OR NOT?

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THE LAST OF SHEILA

s *The Last of Sheila* a whodunit? No question. A show business satire? You bet. A dark comedy? Unquestionably. But is it noir?

Your captain says yes. In order to make the case, though, we're going to have to take a close look at the film. Quite close. Unmask-the-killer close. So if you haven't seen the movie, you may want to head ashore before the gangway is raised.

> A weekend in the country, the bees in their hives,
> The shallow worldly figures, the frivolous lives.
>
> — "A Weekend in the Country" from
> *A Little Night Music*
> Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

The 1973 film, directed by Herbert Ross from a script by Stephen Sondheim and Anthony Perkins, collects a half-dozen Hollywood friends for a week-long Mediterranean cruise aboard the *Sheila*, the yacht of imperious producer Clinton Green (James Coburn). The industry insiders are gorgeous actress Alice (Raquel Welch); her loutish manager/husband Anthony (Ian McShane); Philip (James Mason), a once-esteemed director now helming TV commercials; struggling screenwriter Tom (Richard Benjamin); his wealthy wife Lee (Joan Hackett); and brassy agent Christine (Dyan Cannon).

Our unsuspecting passengers are in for more than just a vacation. Clinton has planned the trip to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the hit-and-run death of his wife Sheila, killed the night of a party attended by several of the invitees. The driver was never identified. The pre-credit sequence, in which Sheila (played by Hammer Films actress Yvonne Romain) runs along the dark streets of Bel Air doesn't reveal much except that caftans worn without bras were acceptable hostess attire in the early seventies.

It's an incestuous little group—grieving widower Clinton is bedding Christine, while Tom and Alice are having an affair—and when Clinton announces he's producing a film about Sheila's life, to be called *The Last of Sheila*, eyes brighten with desire at the prospect of a high-profile payday. To keep his friends wriggling on the hook, "minor-league sadist" Clinton unveils "the Sheila Green memorial gossip game." Each passenger is given a card bearing a backstory better kept under wraps. "You are a shoplifter," reads one. Another: "You are an ex-convict." Each night the group will venture ashore for a scavenger hunt-style search aimed at unearthing the holder of that day's sordid story. It's soon apparent the secrets on the cards are those of the guests, each person vouchsafed someone else's crime. (Keen-eyed viewers will notice sly references to specific sins as the characters are introduced.)

The audience for Ross' *TLOS* could play a game themselves, guessing which
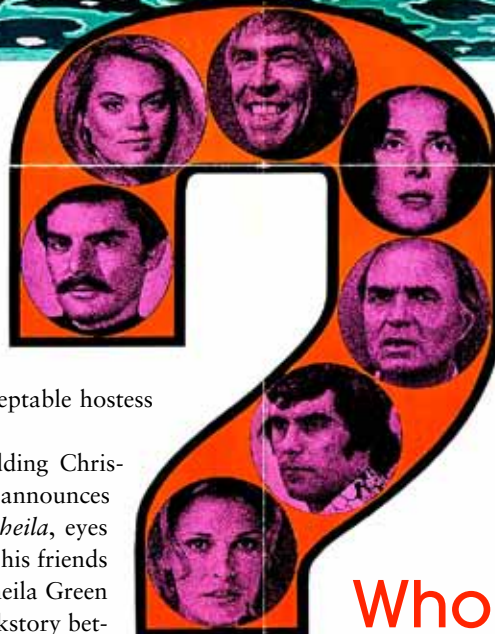
Who done it

The passengers on the fateful cruise: James Mason, Raquel Welch, James Coburn, Joan Hackett, Ian McShane, Dyan Cannon, and Richard Benjamin

real-life celebrities inspired the fictional ones. Welch's vapid actress and her controlling husband were said to be based on Ann-Margret and Roger Smith (or even Welch herself and husband Patrick Curtis). Is the venerable director reduced to overseeing dog food advertisements modeled on George Cukor or Orson Welles? Cannon's Christine was openly fashioned after high-powered talent broker Sue Mengers. Brian Kellow, in his recent biography *Can I Go Now? The Life of Sue Mengers, Hollywood's First Superagent*, notes Christine was "pure Sue, right down to her pink-tinted glasses: a Miss Full Charge who treats the whole Hollywood world as a game, laughing at it and herself every step of the way."

Mengers, in on the joke, packaged the project—co-writer Perkins was one of her clients, along with Ross, Coburn, Benjamin and Cannon. The first half of the film uses the idyllic French Riviera setting beautifully, with sunlight dancing across blue water and postcard-ready villages seen from the sea. The movie grows increasingly claustrophobic, with more scenes set in the ship's interior. What seems a canny directing choice was due to more practical concerns. Production designer Ken Adam, observing that "a) people get seasick, and b) you can't hold a yacht still in one position," ultimately recreated the ship's cabins on a soundstage at La Victorine studios in Nice.

> Being close and being clever
> Ain't like being true
> —"Not While I'm Around," *Sweeney Todd*

> ## The film plays as a savage Hollywood exposé *a la The Bad and the Beautiful* ... and a bitchy comedy along the lines of *The Women* (1939) or 1970's *The Boys in the Band.*

The Last of Sheila is an amalgam of three different genres. First and foremost, it falls squarely in the tradition of country house mysteries exemplified by *And Then There Were None*, with a small group of people in an isolated location serving as suspects in a murder investigation—at least until they become victims. The body count in *TLOS* stays low, but there are clues and red herrings enough for any Agatha Christie fan.

The film also plays as a savage Hollywood exposé *a la The Bad and the Beautiful*. In Stephen Faber's contemporary essay on the film he writes, "Inside-Hollywood movies always set out to expose the rot beneath the glitter of Tinseltown, and end up glamorizing their monster characters. One watches their intrigues in horrified fascination, as if they were an exotic species of poisonous snakes."

Much of that poison comes in the form of acerbic dialogue, casting *TLOS* as a bitchy comedy along the lines of *The Women* (1939) or 1970's *The Boys in the Band*. This entitled, narcissistic circle of friends is not very friendly at all. Christine has many of the best lines, saying to Clinton, "This is the same B-group that was at your house the night Sheila got bounced to the hedges."

The writing duo behind *TLOS* seems like an odd pair to pen a mystery. Anthony Perkins, for better or worse, was inextricably linked to his famous role as Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Stephen Sondheim was best known at the time for shows such as *Company* and *Follies*. A polymath, Sondheim wrote episodes

Above: Hack screenwriter Tom (Richard Benjamin) is one of the likely suspects in Sheila's murder. Below: a souvenir button depicting another suspect, Tom's wife Lee (Joan Hackett)

of the 1950s television series *Topper* and devised tricky crossword puzzles for *New York* magazine in its 1968 debut. *TLOS* wasn't his only whodunit. His 1996 mystery play *Getting Away with Murder*, co-written with George Furth, closed after 17 performances on Broadway. ("We didn't get away with it for long," Sondheim later said.) In his more than 60-year career Sondheim has won shelves of awards for his musicals, including a Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Mysteries have long intrigued Sondheim. Throughout his career, he's compared lyric-writing to puzzle-solving, and the form appeals to his methodical nature. "To me, the connection between puzzles and detective stories is all about order and solution. The nice thing about them is that there's a solution and all's right with the world—as opposed to life."

> You gotta have a gimmick
> If you wanna have a chance
>
> —"You Gotta Get a Gimmick," *Gypsy*

Sondheim's love of games made *TLOS* a reality. Before they were co-writers, Sondheim and Perkins staged elaborate, immersive events for friends. In one treasure hunt larded with complex clues, four teams rode around New York City in limousines, the solution to each puzzle pointing the way to the next. At one stop on the journey an older white-haired woman (Perkins's mother) served chocolate cake to her visitors. When team members put the slices back together the clue to their next destination was written in the frosting. Actress Lee Remick's team ate their cake and lost the game. Herbert Ross' team won. Appreciating the showmanship involved, Ross

suggested Sondheim write a murder mystery for him to direct. Sondheim agreed, bringing in Perkins to add Hollywood verisimilitude.

The script constructs a web of clues and misdirection so dense even Perkins confessed, "There were parts of the plot I was hoping [Sondheim] would never quiz me on." The murders and their motives are explicated in the last twenty minutes of the film via flashbacks. Sondheim knew a detective walking the audience through the solution wouldn't make a satisfying third act. "When I was plotting it, I thought I've got to make it quote cinematic; people have to be breaking down something or stabbing or shooting each other, even though it may be seen through a rear-view mirror." Those revelations steer *TLOS* from sun-dappled waters into the dark seas of noir.

A final reminder from your captain: rough waters ahead, and spoilers ahoy!

> It's not so hard to be married,
> It's much the simplest of crimes.
>
> —"The Little Things You Do Together," *Company*

On the second evening of Clinton's gossip game, the ringmaster himself is murdered. Tom, analyzing the clues, posits a theory implicating his own wife. Lee, he suggests, killed Clinton to prevent him from revealing that, while driving drunk, she ran down Sheila. Lee confesses and, out of remorse, commits suicide.

Or so it would seem.

Philip, taking on the manner of a detective right out of Christie, launches a competing investigation, treating Clinton's murder as

Director Herbert Ross (left) preparing a scene on the French Riviera with James Coburn. Ross had suggested to Sondheim that he write a murder mystery for him to direct

the victim would have: a puzzle to be solved. Philip's analysis brings us to our first destination on the *Sheila*'s grim voyage. He correctly deduces that Tom murdered Clinton. The mild-mannered writer seethes with resentments, hating Clinton for selfishly keeping his best original script in limbo and Lee for cheerfully supporting him while he grinds out hackwork. Inspiration finally strikes when he envisions a way to inherit his wife's millions *and* run off with Alice.

In amused fashion, Philip lays out how Tom exploited Lee's guilt over killing Sheila and manipulated Clinton's game. Tom murdered Clinton; framed his vulnerable wife for the crime; then drugged her and slit her wrists. Philip asks for confirmation of his theory without really asking: "Lee's estate must be worth about three million?" Tom confesses with one word: "Five."

Resorting to murder to get the money and the girl. Noir enough for you?

At this point in a traditional mystery Tom would be led away in handcuffs to meet his legally-mandated destiny. But Sondheim, for all his love of the classic whodunit, has a much darker future in store for Tom, one that makes the most of the inside-Hollywood milieu. What would be the fitting comeuppance for a man like Tom? A screenwriter who's squandered his talent on endless rewrites of spaghetti westerns? Who's been having an affair to assuage his ego? Who's been living off his wife, begrudging her all the while?

Welcome to the second stop on our midnight cruise. Philip, no Miss Marple (he cheerfully admits to trying to kill Clinton himself during the trip), intends to profit from Tom's misdeeds while condemning the writer to a living hell. After an aborted struggle, Philip dusts himself off and outlines blackmail in the friendliest of tones. Lee's estate, all $5 million of it, will finance production of *The Last of Sheila*—which Philip, naturally, will direct. Poor Tom, too close to the events to write the screenplay, can consult ... and, of course, do rewrites. With that word, Tom's fate is sealed.

And now we reach our third noir port of call. The final sequence takes us out of the film's story into the experience of watching it, making the viewer complicit in Tom's downfall. As Tom, stunned and ruined, stares into the camera, the supremely ironic Bette Midler

song "Friends" begins and the typewriter from the beginning of the film is heard again. The movie itself laughs at Tom's annihilation, and invites us to laugh along. When the song fades out the typewriter continues clacking away, mocking Tom, the man who killed the only woman who loved him for money he'll never see, while he must live among people who treat him, and each other, as means to an end. While the audience gloats.

All ashore who're going ashore. ∎
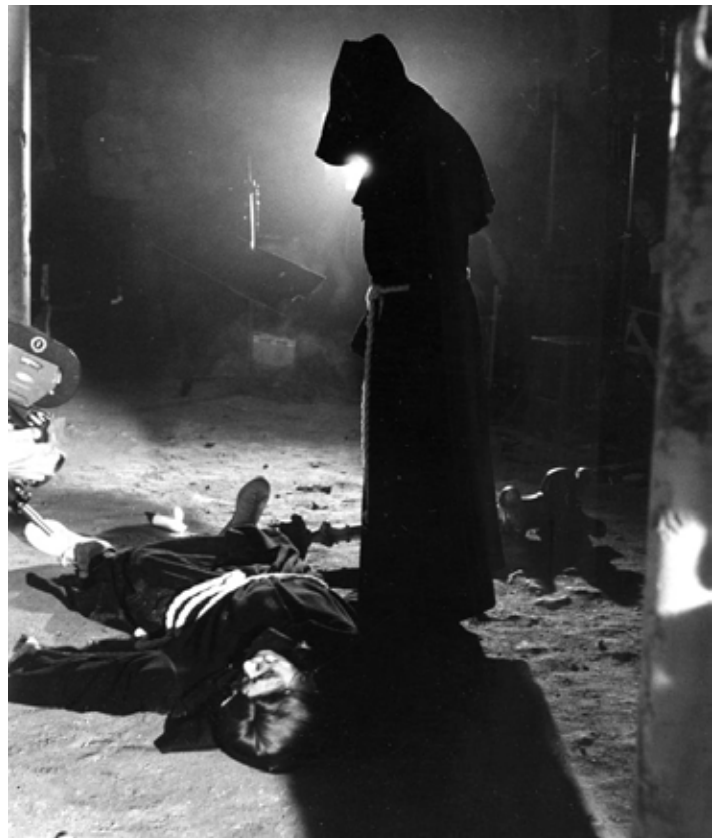
The film becomes darker and more claustrophobic as it goes along