



Meet Douglas Sirk

The films that inspired *Far from Heaven*



It's impossible not to acknowledge the pervasive influence of the films of Douglas Sirk on Todd Haynes' *Far from Heaven*. From the blinding Technicolor and the heightened, expressionistic melodramatics to the too-formal acting style and sweeping orchestral score, much of the latter is almost interchangeable with the former. Even Haynes' title, a reference to Sirk's 1955 film *All That Heaven Allows*, is a sly play on the similarities—and differences—between the two movies.

Sirk was a Danish expatriate who began his career as a rigorous intellectual within 1930s German theater, directing such projects as Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*.

His Hollywood career began upon his early 1940s emigration. Like William Faulkner and Gore Vidal, he was a thoughtful, literate artist who found ways to subvert Hollywood's strictly controlled, assembly-line "creativity," injecting style and strangeness into ordinary projects he could easily have considered beneath him. Prominence came in the '50s with his hugely successful "women's pictures"—melodramas aimed at housewives thirsting for glamour and passion.

Though Sirk himself wasn't gay, his films are firmly entrenched in the canon of queer cinema. The most notable of them starred Rock Hudson as the Sensitive, Handsome Leading Man and were guided by the hand of producer Ross Hunter, a gay man firmly opposed to cinematic realism.

The Sirk obsession of gay German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder—who wrote and directed 1972's astute, complex, socially aware and riveting *Fox and His Friends*, a truly

great piece of queer cinema—was made obvious in the extremely Sirkian visual aesthetic of most of his work.

Sirk's well-cloaked mission—later shared in the '60s and '70s by women and racial and sexual minority artists and activists—was to subvert the idealized, suffocating notions of '50s social morality. Martin Scorsese calls Sirk a "smuggler" in *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies*: "Beneath the surface of seemingly ideal settings lies a sharp indictment of American small-town life."

Todd Haynes, who was exposed to Sirk in college through Fassbinder's fandom, uses *All That Heaven Allows* and Sirk's most successful film, 1959's *Imitation of Life*, as templates for *Far from Heaven*.

All That Heaven Allows stars Jane Wyman—just divorced from Ronald Reagan—as a widow who, like Julianne Moore in *Far from Heaven*, falls in love with her gardener to the vicious disapproval of her community. The visual elements of Haynes' racial themes can be seen in *Imitation of Life*, the story of the friendship between a showbiz star (Lana Turner), her black maid (Juanita

Moore) and the racially divided fates of their children.

All That Heaven Allows is available on video and DVD; *Imitation of Life* is available on video, with a planned January DVD release.

Anyone interested in the uniquely queer tradition of which *Far from Heaven* is a part should see them. Their provocative visuals, strange artificiality and skeptical, eccentric humanity make for a galvanizing, gratifying experience.

—CM

they've changed.... To have the guy who neglected his family, overworked, come home, tell his wife how much he loves her and show us how he's changed and grown.

The movies that this film comes out of never do that. They are almost pre-psychological in that there's not the sense of a psychological subtext that the characters eventually unearth and reveal. They don't articulate what they learn, if they learn it at all. They're simply moved around by the forces of their society usually to a very disappointing outcome.

So, in a weird way, the message or the interpretation of those events is left in your hands. It gives the audience somewhere to go, where you have to kind of think about what happens.

CM: I'm sure it's too early to ask you what your next project will be, but is it fair to say we can always expect the unexpected from you?

TH: Yes, you can expect that, at least. But I can tell you a little bit about the next

one. In the same period of time [that] I wrote *Far from Heaven*—which felt more like a social time, like meeting people and going to see bands, going out way more than I was doing in New York, taking beautiful little trips—I was also writing this other script and developing this other idea about Bob Dylan.

I got really into Bob Dylan again when I drove out here and started thinking about a film that would be a very experimental way of telling a life story, like refracted into several characters. He kind of gave us the approval to go ahead. I've never met him, never even spoken to him, but he got the synopsis, and we've been dealing with his manager.

I'm eventually going to get into that project, which I left in a rough, early form before making *Heaven*. So, that little season in Portland is going to keep me busy for many years. Little did I know! [J]

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Seattle free-lance writer.



From left: Julianne Moore, Todd Haynes, Dennis Quaid and Dennis Haysbert make for one heavenly film crew

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