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Heavenly Haynes

Todd Haynes's '50s-style Melodrama "Far From Heaven" Plays it Gay and Straight

BY ERNIE MCLEOD

I used to try to catch every queer-themed flick that came along. Until not so long ago, this was easy to do, since they were few and far between. Then, after a few indie-successes in the early 90s, suddenly the choices multiplied. Abundance does not guarantee quality, alas.

After enduring a string of forgettable films with cookie-cutter actors impersonating urban gay stereotypes, my patience wore thin. Too often these generically gay movies had no sense of style or tone: the fluffy romantic comedy would be jarringly interrupted by a gay-bashing or AIDS deathbed scene; the coming-out tale would be unfurled once again with no fresh insights.

The queer films I want to watch either uniquely reflect the complex realities of queer life, or, better yet, open up a whole new queer cinematic world. Todd Haynes, arguably the brightest talent to emerge from what was dubbed the "the New Queer Cinema," specializes in the latter.

Since the beginning of his career some fifteen years ago, Haynes has proven himself an original who enjoys playing within established parameters. He made his debut with *Superstar*, an unlikely Barbie-doll docudrama of Karen Carpenter's tragic life-story (unfortunately the film was pulled from distribution when brother Richard wouldn't permit use of Carpenters' songs), and has since gone on to make the features *Poison*, *Safe*, *Velvet Goldmine*, and now, *Far From Heaven*, his most accomplished film to date.

Unlike some of the faux-auteurs who caught the "Queer New Wave" and rode it with minimal cinematic smarts, Haynes is a genuine filmmaker. Each of his films thus far has been utterly distinctive.

Poison, divided into three parts — one based on the work of Jean Genet — was an alternately gorgeous and grotesque B-movie blend spiked with a healthy dose of homoeroticism. The more mature and subdued but equally disturbing *Safe* (starring Haynes's favorite

leading lady, Julianne Moore) pulled viewers into the world of environmental illness and New Age cure. Haynes could have gone for satire here — anything New Agey is an easy target — but instead followed a more solemnly ambiguous path. It's a brave, cool, creepy work.

Velvet Goldmine, on the other hand, was Haynes's giddy, glittering tribute to the 70s glam-rock era when artifice was king and sexuality was fluid. Much more overtly queer than *Safe* — even Oscar Wilde makes an appearance — *Goldmine* got mixed reviews, though few critics disputed Haynes's talent or ambition.

With *Far From Heaven*, Haynes reinvestigates an earlier era still — the 1950s. Haynes's *Heaven* isn't a nostalgic ode to a more "innocent" time, however. Rather, it's a breathtaking homage to another filmmaker who pushed cinematic and social envelopes while staying true to genre constraints.

Born to Danish parents, Douglas Sirk (1900-87) worked in theater and film in Germany until he fled with his Jewish wife in 1937. Today he's best known for the Technicolor Melodramas (also known as "Women's Pictures") he made in the U.S. in the 1950s, including *Magnificent Obsession*, *All That Heaven Allows*, *Written on the Wind*, and *Imitation of Life*.

At the time, Sirk's pictures were a hit with audiences but generally not with critics. It wasn't until the '70s that critics and filmmakers reevaluated Sirk and began to appreciate his keen sense of style and irony, his sophisticated use of artifice, and his ability to skewer American cultural mores without bursting soap opera bubbles. Combine these attributes with a cast that typically included Rock Hudson and a pre-Endora Agnes Moorehead, and you have a queer film buff's dream come true.

While Sirk himself wasn't gay (miraculously!), it's hard to view these films today without imagining the term "gay sensibility" was coined with them in mind. And from the opening frames of *Far From Heaven*, it's clear Todd Haynes has spent many hours in the dark with Sirk.

Because Haynes so

uncannily recreates the atmosphere of Sirk's melodramas, at first it's hard to get a handle on *Far From Heaven*. Sure, everything looks fabulously '50s (the color-coordinated sets and dresses are, as they say, to die for), but is this simply a camp exercise or something weightier? The seemingly clichéd dialogue — liberally sprinkled with amusingly obsolete terms like shucks and jeepers — initially hints at the former, but it's quickly obvious Haynes's intentions are earnest rather than camp. While staying true to the look and obligatory restraint of Sirk's films, Haynes brings to the screen issues that clearly existed but which couldn't be dealt with directly in '50s America, namely homosexuality and interracial romance.

Far From Heaven begins by introducing the 1957 postcard perfect Hartford world of Frank and Cathy Whitaker (played by Dennis Quaid and Julianne Moore). The Whitakers have two fine children, a lovely suburban home (the subject of a society paper profile), and what seems to everyone to be the perfect marriage. Frank is an executive with Magnatech corporation; Cathy is a busy housewife with a social conscience. Around Connecticut they're known as Mr. and Mrs. Magnatech.

All is not quite as it appears, of course. Soon enough, Cathy discovers Frank doing more than paperwork in his office, and Cathy makes the mistake of befriending their rather-too-saintly black gardener (played by Dennis Haysbert) in the public eye. While Frank's transgression is initially known only to Cathy, Cathy's moral breach immediately hits the gossip grapevine that twists through their social circle. This is ultimately Cathy's story and her tragedy. One of Haynes's truest moves is to show Frank's chauvinistic sense of entitlement as vividly as he does the pain and vulnerability that surround Frank's emergence from denial regarding his sexuality.

I won't reveal more of the plot, though what eventually transpires seems less surprising than inevitable. It's the delicacy with which the plot points are handled that lends the film its poignancy. In interviews Haynes has said it was all about weight