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other films were mostly in movies based on Edgar Allen Poe stories, but in his long career he did about everything; horror, drama, comedy, documentaries and cartoons (as narrator—he had a great voice when he wasn’t putting on that southern accent he uses in Laura). Some of his films are House of the Seven Gables 1940, The Invisible Man Returns 1940, The Song

Joseph LaShelle (9 July 1900, Los Angeles—20 August 1989, La Jolla, California) was nominated for 9 best cinematography awards; Laura was his only win. His first cinematography credit was for Rocking Moon 1926, then he did other things until Happy Land in 1943. Laura was his third film. After that, he did 66 more, among them A Bell for Adano 1945, The Late George Apley 1947, The Foxes of Harrow 1947, River of No Return 1954, Marty 1955, I Was a Teenage Werewolf 1957, The Long, Hot Summer 1958, The Naked and the Dead 1958, The Apartment 1960, Irma la Douce 1963, How the West Was Won 1962 (the Civil War segment), Kiss Me, Stupid 1964, The Chase 1966, The Fortune Cookie 1966 and Barefoot in the Park 1967.

Otto Preminger’s classic detective film was originally identified as a ‘film noir’ in the article which coined the term in 1946 in Ecran français by Nino Frank. The fascinating, witty mystery features the gorgeous Gene Tierney and a subtle Dana Andrews, with standout performances by Clifton Webb as the cynical Waldo Lydecker and Vincent Price as a suave Southern gigolo. Pauline Kael called it “everybody’s favorite chic murder mystery.” Andrew Sarris sees Laura as one of Preminger’s “moodily fluid studies in perverse psychology,” his best-remembered film, his Citizen Kane. Preminger directed, produced and rewrote it (uncredited) and it established his international reputation with great critical and commercial success. It won Oscar nominations for direction and for Webb as best supporting actor and took the Oscar for Joseph LaShelle’s dreamlike cinematography.

The French and British were enthusiastic, calling Laura “one of the best thrillers ever made,” and “superb in its timing and understatement.” Revue du Cinéma wrote “The characters in Laura—the situation is rare—have a real existence. . . In the final analysis it matters little that the story is a detective story. Laura could also be put in a family or love story without in any way altering her destiny as an attractive and troubling girl who does nothing either to provoke or retain men and who only very soberly profits from her gifts in order to protect herself. . . the miracle is to have brought her to life.”

Laura was remade twice, first for television in 1953 with Dana Wynter as Laura, George Sanders as Waldo Lydecker, and Robert Stack as the detective. It ran only 43 minutes and was broadcast in the US as Portrait of Murder. A1968 tv production starred Lee Radziwill (Jackie Kennedy’s sister) in the title role but it wasn’t well-received and seems to have disappeared. The original Laura has remained a favorite over the decades.

Laura is the first of Preminger’s “Fox quintet,” melodramas which explore sexual obsession. The others are Fallen Angel (1945) also starring Dana Andrews “the ideal Preminger hero whose presence encourages moral uncertainty”; Daisy Kenyon (1947) with Joan Crawford, Dana Andrews and Henry Fonda; Whirlpool (1949) starring Gene Tierney, Richard Conte and Joe Ferrer, and Angel Face (1952) with Robert Mitchum and Jean Simmons. Discussing this “unique collection of haunting masterpieces” Jean-Pierre Coursodon wrote that these films are “not only thematically similar, they look alike, and generate the same kind of atmosphere. . . The fluidity of the camerawork is the concrete expression of his attitude to his material. The camera unobtrusively but relentlessly follows the characters around in medium shots and long boom or dolly shots, so as to integrate them to the surroundings. Preminger’s vision is a global one, he strives to capture the whole, not details—hence the paucity of close-up and reaction shots in his films. . . This stylistic option is consistent with Preminger’s unfailingly objective attitude toward characters and situations. . . If the harmony of form and content, expression and intention, is the mark of ‘classic’ art, Preminger is one of the great classics of the American film.

Preminger elicited strong feelings. Pauline Kael wrote that “his films are consistently superficial and facile.” Dwight Macdonald said he’d never seen an interesting Preminger film and praised his intelligence with reservation: “brains I respect as much as I don’t the uses to which he puts them.” Truffaut remarked that his talent was instinctive but his behavior odious. Sarris named him an “auteur” and admired his “impassive gaze–accepting the good with the bad, the beautiful with the ugly, the sublime with the mediocre.” Sarris also remarked that “his enemies have never forgiven him for being a director with the personality of a producer.”

The online film journal Images has excellent film noir comments: www.imagejournal.com/issue02/infocus/filmnoir.htm.

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