

The Buffalo Film Seminars



SEPTEMBER 13, 2000

Laura

20th Century Fox, 1944, 88 minutes

Gene Tierney... Laura Hunt
Dana Andrews... Mark McPherson
Clifton Webb... Waldo Lydecker
Vincent Price... Shelby Carpenter
Judith Anderson... Anne Treadwell
Dorothy Adams... Bessie Clary

DIRECTOR Otto Preminger
SCRIPT Jay Dratler, Samuel Hoffenstein, Elizabeth Reinhardt, and Ring Lardner Jr. (uncredited), based on a novel by Vera Caspary
PRODUCER Otto Preminger
MUSIC David Raskin
CINEMATOGRAPHER Joseph LaShelle
EDITOR Louis Leffler

ART DIRECTORS Leyland Fuller and Lyle Wheeler
SET DECORATION Thoms Little
COSTUME DESIGN Bonnie Cashin



OTTO LUDWIG PREMINGER (5 December 1906, Vienna, Austria—23 April 1986, New York) began his directing career in Germany in 1932 with *Die Große Liebe*. He came to the US after the Nazis took power and directed (and, beginning with *Laura*, produced most of) his other 35 films here. Some of them are: *Forever Amber* 1947, *Daisy Kenyon* 1947, *The Moon is Blue* 1953, *Carmen Jones* 1954, *River of No Return* 1954, *The Man with the Golden Arm* 1955, *Saint Joan* 1957, *Bonjour Tristesse* 1958, *Anatomy of a Murder* 1959, *Porgy and Bess* 1959, *Exodus* 1960, *Advise and Consent* 1962, *The Cardinal* 1963, *In Harm's Way* 1965, *Hurry Sundown* 1967, *Skidoo* 1968, *Tell Me That You Love Me*, *Junie Moon* 1970, and *Such Good Friends* 1971. He played Oberst Von Scherback in

Stalag 17 1953 and Mr. Freeze #2 in two episodes of "Batman" in 1966. Preminger's last film for Fox, *River of No Return* (1954) with Robert Mitchum and Marilyn Monroe, was the first widescreen Western. Preminger was known for controversial subjects and difficulties with censors: he treated the taboo of heroin addiction in *The Man With the Golden Arm* and rape in *Anatomy of a Murder*.

GENE ELIZA TIERNEY (19 November 1920, Brooklyn—6 November 1991, Houston) last acted in "Scruples," a 1980 TV miniseries. She appeared in 38 films, among them *The Return of Frank James* 1940, *Tobacco Road* 1941, *Belle Starr* 1941, *Heaven Can Wait* 1943, *Leave Her to Heaven* 1945, *The Razor's Edge* 1946, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* 1947, *Where the Sidewalk Ends* 1950, *The Mating Season* 1951, *The Egyptian* 1954, *Black Widow* 1954, *The Left Hand of God* 1955, *Advise and Consent* 1962, and *Toys in the Attic* 1963.



DANA ANDREWS (Carver Dana Andrews, 1 January 1909, Collins, Mississippi—17 December 1992, Los Alamitos, California) appeared in more than 80 theatrical and made-for-tv films, among them *The Westerner* 1940, *Kit Carson* 1940, *Tobacco Road* 1941, *Belle Starr* 1941, *Berlin Correspondent* 1942, *The Ox-Bow Incident* 1943, *The North Star* 1943, *Up in Arms* 1944, *Wing and a Prayer* 1944, *The Purple Heart* 1944, *State Fair* 1945, *A Walk in the Sun* 1945, *The Best Years of Our Lives* 1946, *Daisy Kenyon* 1947, *The Iron Curtain* 1948, *Where the Sidewalk Ends* 1950, *Elephant Walk* 1954, *While the City Sleeps* 1956, *In Harm's Way* 1965, *Battle of the Bulge* 1965 and *Airport* 1975 1974. He also appeared in several tv series: "The Hardy Boys Mysteries," "Ellery Queen," "Night Gallery," and "The Twilight Zone."

CLIFTON WEBB (Webb Parmalee Hollenbeck, 11 November 1889, Indianapolis—13 October 1966, Beverly Hills) appeared in four silent films between 1920 and 1925, then did no more filmwork until *Laura* in 1944. Some of his other films were *The Razor's Edge* 1946, *Sitting Pretty* 1948, *Mr. Belvedere Goes to College* 1949, *Cheaper by the Dozen* 1950, *For Heaven's Sake* 1950, *Stars and Stripes Forever* 1952, *Three Coins in the Fountain* 1954, *The Man Who Never Was* 1956, and *Boy on a Dolphin* 1957.

VINCENT PRICE (27 May 1911, St. Louis—25 October 1993, Los Angeles) is known for playing scary characters, mostly in movies based on Edgar Allen Poe stories, but in his long career he did just 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*



of *Bernadette* 1943, *The Keys of the Kingdom* 1944, *The Three Musketeers* 1948, *Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein* 1948 (the voice of the Invisible Man), *House of Wax* 1953, *The Ten Commandments* 1956, *The Fly* 1958, *The Tingler* 1959, *House of Usher* 1960, *Pit and the Pendulum* 1961, *Edgar Allen Poe's Tales of Terror* 1962, *Confessions of an Opium Eater* 1962, *Diary of a Madman* 1963, *The Raven* 1963, *L'Ultimo uomo della Terra* 1964 (also known as *The Last Man on Earth*, *Naked Terror*, *Night Creatures*, *Night People*, *Vento di morte*, and *Wind of Death*), *The Masque of the Red Death* 1964, *Spie vengono dal semifreddo* 1966 (aka *Dr Goldfoot and the 'S' Bombs*, *Dr Goldfoot and the Girl Bombs*, *Dr. Goldfoot and The Love Bomb*, *Dr. Goldfoot and the Sex Bombs*, *Spies Come from Half-Cols*, *The Spy Came from the Semi-Cold*, and *Two Mafia Guys from the FBI*. Don't ask.), *The Heiress* 1969, *Theatre of Blood* 1973, *Bloodbath at the House of Death* 1984, and *Edward Scissorhands* 1990. He was the voice of Vincent Van Ghoul in "13 Ghosts of Scooby-Doo," 1985. Some of his other tv appearances were on "The Love Boat," "Bionic Woman," "Ellery Queen," "Night Gallery," "The Brady Bunch," "Here's Lucy," "Batman" (as Egghead in five episodes), "F Troop," "The Man from U.N.C.L.E.," "Playhouse 90," "The Alcoa Hour," and "The Red Skelton Show."

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 LaSelle'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*. A 1968 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 Jose 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.imagesjournal.com/issue02/infocus/filmnoir.htm.

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