

# Heaven Sent

## Todd Haynes and Julianne Moore Reopen Douglas Sirk's Melodrama Fakebook

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"I really wanted people to cry," Todd Haynes says of his new movie, *Far From Heaven*, a domestic weepie set in 1957 Connecticut and swaddled in the Technicolor opulence of the period. From the delirious palette to the prim, italicized performances, Haynes's meta-melodrama (in theaters November 8) pays homage to German-born maestro Douglas Sirk. A Weimar stage director who emigrated to the States in 1940, Sirk went on to make a string of Brechtian soaps in Hollywood, wrapping up his film career as resident tearjerker at Universal Pictures. Resurrecting *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), Sirk's attack on bourgeois repression, and *Imitation of Life* (1959), his tempestuous saga of race and identity, Haynes revels in the ebullient artifice of the originals. *Far From Heaven*,

pace Courtney Love, fakes it so fake it is beyond real. There may be no filmmaker better equipped than Haynes to navigate a Sirkian simulacrum. Having cast a Barbie doll as an anorexic chanteuse (*Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*), anatomized the existential panic of a blank-slate SoCal housewife (*Safe*), and wreaked semiotic havoc with glam rock's cut-and-paste identikit (*Velvet Goldmine*), he's well acquainted with the pleasures and perils of inauthenticity.

[\*Far From Heaven\*](#) doesn't remake the Sirk movies in question so much as direct their mirrored surfaces at each other—transposing signs, exposing subtexts, renewing resonances. As in *All That Heaven Allows*, a middle-class heroine scandalizes her community by getting too friendly with her gardener. But Haynes's ill-fated pair, Cathy (*Safe* star Julianne Moore) and Raymond (Dennis Haysbert), face a taboo more virulent than the age and class differences that

keep the earlier film's Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson apart: Cathy is white, Raymond black. (The skin-color conundrum allows Haynes to acknowledge *Imitation of Life* as well as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, in which Sirk's most ardent acolyte updated *All That Heaven Allows* to '70s Germany as a tale of verboten interracial love.) Haynes engineers a further complication: Cathy's husband, Frank (Dennis Quaid), is trying furtively to suppress his homosexual impulses—a twist that locks the three characters into what Haynes calls "this almost beautiful diagram of residual pain" (and effectively springs Rock Hudson from the celluloid closet). He explains, "There's not necessarily a bad or evil character, but when one of them steps toward their

photo: Ted Soqui



Artificial ingredients: Haynes and Moore cook up a Technicolor weepie.

needs or desires, it ends up harming everybody in that tangle."

Venturing into a gay bar, a black neighborhood, and even a therapy session, *Far From Heaven* makes explicit some of what was pointedly excluded in '50s melodramas. But Haynes says it was important not to create a sense of anachronistic rupture: "I think about [Chantal Akerman's] *Jeanne Dielman*, which is so much about the power of the small action. I was trying to do that with *Safe*—reduce the level of activity and crisis, so that smaller things would have a bigger impact. Before *Safe* becomes a film about illness, it's a film about a couch, or a film about the absolute blankness of the things that make up people's lives. With *Far From Heaven*, I set myself a similar challenge: How can you make the word *fuck* a shocking event again? It made sense to use that as an overall strategy, to keep everything at the minimum. It helped to balance out the grand themes."

Ironically, Haynes first thought of *Far From Heaven* as an attempt to work on a narrower canvas. "I said to myself after *Velvet Goldmine*, 'Dude, you don't have to put the universe into every movie.' Maybe it's OK to do a small domestic drama. But it ends up like, Race! Sexuality! Gender!"—albeit as configured by an alum of Brown's art and semiotics program. "I do believe in the limits of representation," he continues, "and I think they define all three themes. It became clear as I was writing the script that the themes of sexuality and race were counterbalances, with the woman as the force separating them. One was condemned to secrecy and the other to a public backdrop; one was buried within the domestic setting and the other was unavoidably visible and open to rampant projection."

He toyed with several scenarios involving race and sexuality and even considered a '50s gay Hollywood milieu, but never deviated from his goal of making a woman's picture. "Male homosexuality, even in the '50s, could enjoy a double standard over the role of a woman, who would still be harnessed with the responsibility of appearance and the household and the maintenance of traditional values."

*Far From Heaven's* flavor of brazen pastiche—at once nostalgic and defamiliarizing—suggests a late-night AMC marathon experienced through a hallucinatory fog. As Haynes puts it: "It doesn't flatter our collective idea of what reality is, based on these codes that we all agree on. There are no securing nods to how much more we know today." Eschewing the self-satisfied perspective of hindsight, the movie actually illustrates how little things have changed. Though Haynes briefly flirted with the idea of setting the story in the present, he says, "I thought it would be interesting to use the '50s as a metaphor for today, to ultimately draw questions back about contemporary society." He adds: "And I also couldn't resist the fabric and color of the '50s"—not least the richly complementary hues of *All That Heaven Allows*. "Visually, it's the most supple and subtle of the Sirk melodramas, and the most surprisingly expressionistic. You're astounded by how intensely the simple, quiet domestic themes are depicted."

Moore, it turns out, had a hand in the chromatic choices as well. Haynes, who conceived the film with Moore in mind, had written Cathy as a redhead. But the actress, thinking of "Doris Day's voice and Lana Turner's blondness," convinced Haynes that she should wear a wig. "A redhead is marginal," Moore explains. "We're 4 percent of the population. We're the best friend, the sexy one, or the funny one, but Cathy's the classic American ideal. I wanted her to be the perfect blond with the perfect family. I wanted to see that person transform. Watching it, I realized I've never smiled so much in a

film—I smile all the way through. I thought, oh my god, Cathy is the ultimate American optimist—and Todd has made a movie about the failure of American optimism."

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*Velvet Goldmine*, the most optimistic and celebratory of Haynes's films, left him "bummed out and exhausted," he says. "I tried to take a break and paint and travel—I went to Hawaii alone and finished Proust. But I wasn't very inspired." He embarked on *Far From Heaven* "almost as a last resort—going back to film as a way of working through other things in my life."

After he lost his Williamsburg apartment in the summer of 2000, Haynes moved to Portland, Oregon—"a great physical, emotional, psychological change," he says. With "the absurdity and innate arrogance" of the film world at bay, what was intended as a rest cure ended up being a highly fertile work period. The writing process proved unusually painless: "I did a sketch of Julianne as Cathy, in sunglasses with a scarf and a little basket, pinned it up, and I wrote it in 10 days. I was listening to a lot of sad music, like *The Thin Red Line* soundtrack, but it was almost like I was in this . . . playland. I hate when people say, 'The script wrote itself,' but I felt like I was a bit of a spectator to my own process.

"Constraints are the most inspiring things in a creative process if you trust them," Haynes continues. "A set of rules can be exhilarating." The challenge was not merely to adopt Sirk's rococo style but to wholly internalize his brashly synthetic tone—in other words, to imitate an imitation of life. "From the outset, I think it was about embracing this beautiful, almost naive language of words, gestures, movements, and interactions that were totally prescribed and extremely limited—not condescending to it, but allowing its simplicity to touch other feelings that you can't be over-explicating."

Moore concurs: "There's a trend now of a so-called naturalistic acting style, with content that's less emotionally realistic or is somewhat heroic. But I prefer it the other way around, like it is in this film. I love the artifice of filmmaking. I love nothing more than working inside, on a fake set. I always think, Why do we have to be in somebody's house? Just build it if you can." (And build it they did: *Heaven* is a soundstage in New Jersey, where a quintessentially overappointed Sirk home was re-created, complete with split levels, strategically placed mirrors, and a curved staircase.)

The *Far From Heaven* diorama induces a vertiginous disorientation—what Haynes calls "an ignited, electrified distance that can happen with a certain kind of representational experience." He likens it to watching performance artist John Kelly as Joni Mitchell: "He sounds just like Joni Mitchell, he imitates her stage banter, he's in drag and looks like a ghoulish version of the little pixie Joni Mitchell from the '60s. You're laughing, but you're laughing at yourself, at your own intensely serious investment in Joni Mitchell when you were in high school. But you're also crying, at the beauty of the music, and for that person in high school who loved those songs and who you feel rekindled. There's this freedom to go from one emotion to the next, neither one undermining the other. If the real Joni Mitchell was up there, you'd be going, oh god she's older, oh she can't hit that same note—you get caught up in all the discrepancies of the real. There's something about a beautiful surrogate that opens up this wealth of feeling that you wouldn't have with the real thing. And to me, the best kind of cinema is not about the real—it's about a distance that you fill in, participate in with your life experiences, your memories, and your associations."

Viewers haven't always been willing to bridge that gap. Though he has long been a critics' favorite

(*Safe* was voted best movie of the '90s in the *Voice*'s poll of film writers), *Far From Heaven* is his first release to premiere amid a crescendo of ecstatic, across-the-board acclaim. Moore won the Best Actress prize at the Venice Film Festival, and a media mob descended on the film's Toronto press screening the following week (causing irate shutout Roger Ebert to throw what the Canadian press termed "a hissy fit"). An *L.A. Times* Oscar odds article last week ranked it among the early front-runners (Moore is already a two-time nominee for *Boogie Nights* and *The End of the Affair*). Haynes seems somewhat bemused by the decidedly alien notion of award-season prospects: "Maybe I'm not enjoying it as much as I should be." He adds, a little nervously, "I don't know what all this is going to do to me."

One likely side effect: heightened expectations for his next project, a Bob Dylan movie that he describes as "an untraditional biography, where the multitude of changes that he's gone through are literalized by separate characters whose stories are being told simultaneously." He elaborates: "There's a Dylan quote that best describes it: 'You've got yesterday, today, and tomorrow all in the same room, and there's very little you can't imagine happening.' None of the characters really are him; they don't look like him. One's an 11-year-old black boy. The closest I'll come is a woman who'll play *Don't Look Back*-era Dylan and look the most like the real Dylan."

On the subject of what-nexts, both Moore and Haynes report that post-screening discussions have revolved around possible future scenarios for the film's heroine. "It's so funny how people want to talk about what happens after," Haynes says. Moore, who once again dons mid-century domestic drag in December's *The Hours*, notes, "People have told me, 'It'll be OK—the '60s are just around the corner!'" Haynes says, "Movies today have to show the cathartic articulation of what a character has learned. It's the Aristotelian thing. But these melodramas are in some respects pre-psychological. The characters are moved around by the society, and there's never a point where they master those experiences and articulate them. That burden passes to the viewer, and I think that's why people are almost possessed by it. You have to do something with what she's experienced, on her behalf, and in a way it's really moving, just to be her articulation."

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