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# "Movies are nothing until we bring emotional life to them"

**Writer-director Todd Haynes talks about "Far From Heaven," his exploration of race, sexuality and the glorious '50s visions of Hollywood legend Douglas Sirk.**

BY AMY KROIN



Chisel-jawed lotharios, pointy-breasted housewives, violins played at fever pitch: Such is the stuff Douglas Sirk's films are made of.

Born in Hamburg in 1900 (as Detlef Sierck), the legendary director hobnobbed with the likes of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill in 1920s Germany, then fled the Nazi regime at the beginning of World War II. In Hollywood, he rechristened himself and made his name off a series of bold Technicolor weepies — "Magnificent Obsession," "Imitation of Life," "Written on the Wind" — shot for Universal Pictures in the 1950s. Sirk's films wed a moralizing instinct to a genre, the domestic melodrama, known for its overheated emotions and torrid plot turns.

Sirk's vibrantly hued and socially engaged movies served as the inspiration for director Todd Haynes' newest film, "[Far From Heaven](#)." Set in Hartford, Conn., in 1957, "Far From Heaven" centers on the seemingly picture-perfect Whitaker family. Early on in the film, well-heeled housewife Cathy (Julianne Moore) finds her hunky husband (Dennis Quaid) in a compromising position that throws their marriage into doubt. As Cathy's home life starts to unravel, she strikes up a friendship with her African-American gardener, played by Dennis Haysbert. Using the conventions of '50s melodrama — the swelling music, the stagy dialogue, even the ornately curlicued script in the credits — Haynes explores the impact of Cathy's culturally taboo relationship.

"Far From Heaven" cements Haynes' reputation as one of the most daring filmmakers of his generation. From the get-go Haynes has revealed an interest in the world's misfits and outcasts. His 43-minute directorial debut, "Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story," uses Barbie dolls to relate the tale of the AM pop princess's demise from anorexia (the film was yanked from distribution after Haynes made unauthorized use of the Carpenters' music, prompting A&M Records to file a cease-and-desist order).

Haynes' first full-length feature, 1991's "Poison," generated even more controversy. Partly funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the film was slammed as pornographic by opponents of the NEA. Inspired by the work of French novelist, poet and playwright Jean Genet, "Poison" features three intersecting story lines that explore sexual transgression, making use of familiar genres — the documentary, the love story, B-movie science fiction — to communicate its themes.

Haynes achieved greater prominence with his next two films, "Safe" and "[Velvet Goldmine](#)." "Safe," perhaps the director's most horrifying work, centers on a California housewife (Julianne Moore) who develops an environmental illness and ends

up shuttered away from society, quarantined in a metal igloo at a spiritual retreat. And in the eye candy-rich "Velvet Goldmine," a David Bowie doppelgänger drops from view at the height of his fame, prompting a reporter to investigate the disappearance 10 years later.

"Far From Heaven" is not as explicitly disturbing as its predecessors. In fact, in many ways it stands as Haynes' most sentimental and visually seductive work. But the story it has to tell — about a culture that denies homosexuality, condemns interracial romances and refuses women the opportunity for true change — is decidedly dark nonetheless.

I spoke with Haynes by telephone a month before his film was set to open.

**You have said that you used very few close-ups of Julianne Moore in "Safe" because you wanted to distance the viewer from the Carol White character. Is Cathy Whitaker a character you wanted viewers to have a stronger emotional identification with?**

Ultimately I wanted this film, despite its very reverent use of outmoded styles, to draw you in emotionally. But I also didn't want it to deviate from the language of films from the 1950s. When you look at these films and start to understand their terminology, you see that they operate at a certain distance; they're very presentational. So we don't go in as close as you do in most movies today. Almost all of Cathy's shots where she's talking to another character are filmed over her shoulder so you're very much aware of the character in her social dilemma at any given point. But what's so amazing to me is how it seems to have worked, how people get past these old codes and find those emotional connections.

**Why did you cast Julianne Moore in this role?**

Because she's the best! I'm amazed at how she starts from scratch with each role and rebuilds it, almost on a molecular level. I knew the kind of acting involved in "Far From Heaven" would pose a technical challenge for the actors, to overcome its staid quality and not have it sound like the movie dialogue it really is. It's a subtle process because I also didn't want actors who would be nodding to a contemporary audience and doing things that would betray the vernacular of this particular period of acting. I knew Julianne would be up for the task as few others could be.

**You've got actors trained in a naturalistic tradition delivering lines that have a deliberate staginess or dated feel to them — lines like "Aw, shucks." What impact were you trying to create with the acting style?**

We hoped to re-ignite what is innately powerful about cinematic experience. Movies are basically nothing until we bring an emotional life to them; they're just shadows on a wall until they affect the viewer sitting in the dark. That's why I've never been drawn to a more realist model, à la John Cassavetes or people like that, with the goal being to create reality on screen completely intact. Because it's all artificial, it's all a code, a trick, and it takes the viewer's real-life experience and identification to make it something else.

What I love is using this completely dismissed, rejected, degraded form of narrative — the melodrama — and watching it play out really earnestly, without big quotation marks around it. We were trying to give it the respect it was due; none of us were treating this material as a parody.

The hope was that ultimately you wouldn't be watching the form anymore, but would find yourself entering it and engaging it and bringing it to life with your own memories of movies like it, your connection to the content of the film — that combination of things we all bring to movie experience. We hoped that the form wouldn't stay materially present in your mind's eye but that it would come and it would go.

**You've now made several films — "Superstar," "Safe," "Far From Heaven" — that explore the lives of women**

**who are to some extent outsiders. What has drawn you to these kinds of stories?**

Despite a lot of obvious advancements made since the 1950s in terms of roles and options and choices, women are still generally the ones who have to run the household and raise the children. The story of women's struggle with marginality comes into this film in a very interesting way because both men on either side of Cathy can be called marginal in the sense that one is dealing with a homosexual life and the other with race and prejudice. Yet you have this social hierarchy that still puts Cathy on the bottom.

Getting this film made for what by Hollywood standards was not a huge amount of money — this is a \$14 million film — was perceived as this enormous financial risk just because it's a story about a woman who was not going to be portrayed by Julia Roberts. Hollywood is still a male-dominated industry aimed at a male market. It's insane to me but that's the reality.

**Could you talk about Douglas Sirk's influence on this film?**

We all looked at three of the best ones: "Imitation of Life," "Written on the Wind" and "All That Heaven Allows." I'd be fibbing if I didn't say that my film draws most from "All That Heaven Allows" in terms of both content and visual style. The other films have a palette that's more primary and stoplight-bright, even garish at times, while "All That Heaven Allows," which has less explosive material, is much more muted and complex in its color strategy.

When you watch it on DVD and freeze the frames, you realize how expressionistic each shot is in terms of color, shadow and intensity. But when you actually watch the movie the visuals don't clobber you over the head; they serve the narrative needs of the story in a way that was our goal with this film.

**Suburbia is generally presented as a site of repression in your work. Yet in "Far From Heaven" it's also depicted as this physically beautiful place.**

I'm taking up the incredibly excruciating attention to visual detail in the films of Douglas Sirk. They're immaculately, painfully beautiful, almost oppressive in their beauty and their meticulousness, where every object, every dress and every hair has to be in place. It becomes an awful burden to maintain, and contributes to the pressure you feel Cathy having to negotiate as the floor is dropping out from under her. You see what's at stake in this beauty, in what this idealized life is supposed to look like. It's a friction that plays out at every level in Sirk, who created these fashion-plate movies with actresses who are lit beautifully, who wear perfect clothes and have perfect hair and makeup, but whose actions reveal they're actually very ordinary people who fail in their desires and buckle under cultural pressures.

**Why did you choose Hartford, Connecticut?**

I was using this gut sensory instinct that took me to New England. Somehow Massachusetts seemed a little too progressive and New Haven seemed too defined by Yale. Hartford felt like this lost city. In the 1950s it was this prosperous, very important city with a healthy economy and its own brand of sophistication but it was still very provincial, subject — or so I imagined — to social pressures to be a certain way. I cultivated this whole movie fantasy of Hartford in the 1950s. I saw it as this place governed by a sense of decorum that people would embrace but would also find very stifling at times.

**On one level your film confirms the view of the 1950s as a culturally repressive era, but there's also something more complicated going on here.**

We wanted to suggest that the 1950s bear a far more disturbing resemblance to today's society than we generally want to admit or cop to. There's this idea that history is innately progressive and that as we move forward we become a more open and sophisticated society. Sorry, guys! It's just not true.

The '50s were an intense recuperation of traditional values after a war era that put women in the work field and completely changed everyone's role from what their parents did. That was a radical, amazing period with Eleanor Roosevelt traipsing up and down the country, lesbians living in the White House, and then this victory over Hitler and Japan. They needed to do a lot to reinstate a sense of old-fashioned order to secure male ego and give it prominence. They had to really let women know what their place was.

At the same time, the civil rights changes that had begun during the war were starting to bristle under the surface. The '50s are interesting because there's so much going on under the surface that was about to explode; the decade was just this very quick patch job from what had just preceded it.

**"Poison" was an exploration of a theme through multiple genres, and "Far From Heaven" is a 1950s melodrama filtered through a contemporary sensibility. How does rooting a film in a specific and recognizable genre open up possibilities for you?**

Genre is definitely something I've always been interested in, because genres bring a series of historical references along with them and, as a result, create expectations in viewers that I like to tap into and slightly derange.

"Poison" was almost a textbook example of the ways in which different genres connoted different attitudes about the material at hand, the material being these stories about outsiders being shut out of or threatening their societies. For me, using genre in this way ultimately has a freeing effect.

**Most of the time with film we're manipulated by music in a very insidious way; it cues emotion and tells us how to feel. But here you're not trying to conceal the role music can play, the way it prompts or reflects emotion in this grand, almost operatic way.**

The Latin root of melodrama is "melos," which is music plus drama. The very construction of the term implies this intense marriage between what drama and music do to us, whether that's music literally interacting with drama or drama that provokes intense emotional feelings that aren't always articulated or verbalizable.

Music in a lot of contemporary movies is irritating to us because it's reiterating what's been told in so many ways in the narrative. It's just doubling it and it starts to feel overdetermined and you feel locked into a reaction you have no choice over. The music in Sirk's films is almost a central character or chorus that fills in for the things characters can't really express for themselves. These kinds of movies are almost pre-psychological. Characters are moved around by forces of society; there isn't that privileged moment of knowledge at the end. So there's a space for music in these films in a way there generally isn't in movies today.

In "Far From Heaven," the music goes from something so overt — like in the beginning, where most of the people watching are going to say "Oh my God, they really went for it, they didn't hold back, we're going to have a whole period postcard here." By the end of the film the same music and the same intensity has accumulated a lot of our trust and involvement. You can't imagine getting emotionally involved in the film at the beginning but by the end you really are and that dance from one to the other is also a model for how I hoped the overall film would work.

**You've said that the film "deviates from the thematic possibilities afforded films in the 1950s in its depiction of homosexuality." And in fact the film reflects a deeper ambivalence regarding the possibility of an interracial relationship in this era than a homosexual one.**

It has a lot to do with what can be covered up and what can't, which is what Sirk's "Imitation of Life" deals with. Homosexuality has always been something that could be concealed and the movie is very much about surfaces. These two

dueling themes on either side of Cathy's story are mirrors of each other in a weird way. One — Frank's homosexuality — is concealed by this carefully tended domestic life, and Cathy participates in that concealment. The other, race, is unconcealable, is in fact so hyper-visible that it takes on a charged meaning that doesn't really reflect the facts of Cathy and Raymond's relationship; it assumes an intense volatility in this particular time and this particular climate.

**When you were filming "Safe" you added a shot, very late in the process, of the retreat leader's mansion at Wrenwood, all in an attempt to make the audience more aware of the nature of your critique. Were there any points during the filming of "Far From Heaven" where you felt similarly concerned that the audience wouldn't grasp your intentions?**

No. The difference is that in this film the style puts everything on the surface. There's something so naked it almost makes you squirm, how it's all stated at a direct level. The content is made so painfully clear that there was never a point where I thought people weren't going to get it.

If anything, I wanted to make sure that we didn't hold back. I didn't want to look back at Sirk's films and say they were bolder than we were. His films were so bold in their exposure of what they were about, they were sort of screaming their themes. So in "Far From Heaven" you get these shots of spectators staring at Cathy and Raymond in these almost cartoonish depictions of prejudice, and that's almost more interesting, where you see how all the pieces of the story are bald but somehow you're not pulled out of the narrative and the hand that's putting it all together disappears.

**The line "She's as devoted to family as she is kind to Negroes" is referred to repeatedly — sometimes ironically — throughout the film. And yet even as Cathy's experiencing this awakening racial sensitivity, she remains a product of her class and circumstances, and so you have the scene where she basically ignores the NAACP volunteers who come to her house to solicit her signature on a petition.**

We used the NAACP theme and Cathy's ostensible "kindness to Negroes," her tendency toward compassion, as a kind of instigator or marker of tiny little steps that she might be taking towards some kind of liberation from her own constraints. People who saw the film or were involved in financing said they thought the NAACP scene was stilted; or some said, "Oh, I think it makes Cathy look a bit disingenuous." And I was like, no kidding.

But it was very important to depict Cathy as a character who has these sympathies but is incapable of taking any real action on her own. It's necessary for the NAACP to come to her doorstep and hand her a brochure, for the brochure to already be in her possession, where after a series of events escalate and disturb her, that she might consider doing something about it in some small way. I was very careful to chart that, that she's very passive, that she's not proactive, because it's going to take some radical changes for her to really realize the limits of her choices.

I wanted to show how Cathy's role within the family binds her, how the ultimate burden a woman had in this time period was to her family and to the maintenance of that domestic tradition, the raising of kids and the making of home. To a large degree, that hasn't changed.



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