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## Two Weeks in Another Town: Interview with Douglas Sirk

*Jane Stern and Michael Stern* April 30, 2005

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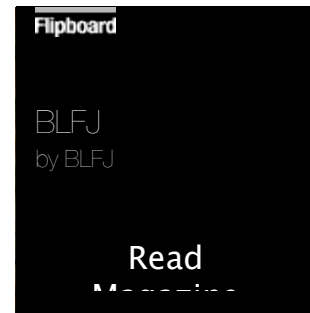
*Introduction (Jane Stern)*

There are more drugstores in Lugano, Switzerland than in any other town in Europe. They are small clinics, filled with Jacuzzi pumps, sitz bath salts, pine oil perfumes, elderberry pastilles, and rainbows of pills. Lugano is a town obsessed with health. Even its tourist brochure acknowledges it to be “beneficial to the mucous membranes.” There is another Lugano — a town dotted with Italian-Swiss restaurants perched on the undulating slopes surrounding the lake. This is a Lugano of wealth, of gold watches draped on jewelers’ velvets, of 15th-century villas hung with Titians. Douglas Sirk lives in Ruvigliana, a district perched celestially above the two Luganos.

Swooshing up the elevator shaft of Condominio Vall’Orba in a mirrored elevator to meet Sirk: He is still Sirk, never Douglas. Not yet anyway. You search your mind for an appropriate image of him. There are few to choose from: black and whites on the back of a book, a few auteurist articles with pictures decades-old, showing a man with a tweed jacket, piercing pale blue eyes and wavy hair. He is awesome-looking, aloof. Best forget these pictures.

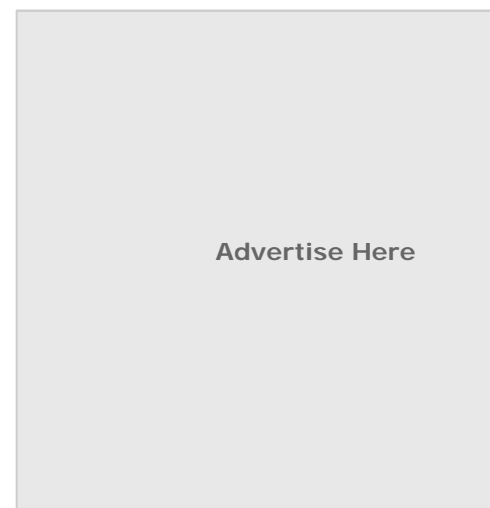
The door glides open and you stand in a small vestibule, nervously examining a variegated croton plant in a pot. You try to remember why you came at all. Maybe it would be better if you just asked for an autograph and ran away. The pains of fanhood leave no dignity at all. But you persevere. “What the hell,” you can bluff it. The sheer agony of a nine-hour flight makes you at least a serious idolater. So the bell is rung, and a shuffle is heard on the other side in Apartment 3a. The blood drains from your head.

Hilde Sirk grabs your hand in hers — small-boned hands that tug you into the warmth of the apartment, out of the cold climate of the marble hallway. She is shoulder-high, a sparrow lady with darting movements, a presence devoid of age, a devil child in an old body. With uncertain English she speaks — too many emotions to form from limited words. English meshes with German into pure energy. It is easy to understand Hilde, for



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she communicates without language.

A few feet behind comes Douglas. “Douglas?” Yes, if she is “Hilde” he can be “Douglas.” Try not to stare. Forget the autographs. But it is hard to talk, because there is so much to say and you have come so far to say it. Hilde ushers you down the hall towards the living room. You sneak peeks into the rooms along the way making mental notes: “Sirk’s bedroom,” “Sirk’s bathroom,” “Sirk’s guest bathroom.” Like a child peeking into a convent you stare foolishly, sure you will see something extraordinary, but ashamed of your own passion to look.

You engage in small talk. Yes, the plane ride was awful. They laugh at your description of “Tours for Texans,” a 747 filled with outsized westerners. They seem amused at your American sensibilities, your naiveté in the strange land, the trouble with the train, the bidets, the muesli. But they laugh with you, since they have been foreigners most of their lives — in Germany, in Hollywood, and now in Switzerland.



Hilde does much of the talking, between trips to the narrow kitchen where she retrieves a silver thermos of coffee and a chocolate chip cake. This is a special cake, for guests. One feels like a pampered grandchild, since a quick glance at the kitchen shelves reveals a strong stock of health foods, grains and vitamins. No sweets or junk food. “Frozen yogurt for dessert keeps you healthy and alert.”

As Douglas talks you lift your eyes from the well of black coffee in the cup to compare the man with his black and white photos. He is still dressed meticulously in tweeds. As the days go by, a preference for small checks and hound’s-tooth jackets emerges. He smells as clean as the edge of a lemon peel, a distillation of Lugano pines and fine soaps, a distinctly European clean. He is still tall, six feet or so. At 76, age has worked around him, not swallowed him whole, softening him from his photo likeness, freckling the skin and hands, pulling at the neck and hooding the eyes. He is slim with a regal nose and good carriage.

Douglas and Hilde sit on the couch together. We sit across

An advertisement for PHOTOFES. At the top, the word "PHOTOFES" is written in large, bold, white letters on a black background. Below it, the text "Specialists in entertainment stock photography." is written in a smaller white font. On the left side, there is a black and white photograph of a woman with blonde, wavy hair, wearing a dark, strapless dress, looking slightly to the right. On the right side, the following text is written in red: "www.photofestnyc.com", "Tel: 212-633-6330", and "email: requests@photofestnyc.com". At the bottom right, it says "art by Hiram Baker" in white.

An advertisement for ALAN VANNEMAN'S LITERATUR R US. At the top, there is a small icon of an open book with the letters "A" and "V" on either side. Below this, the text "ALAN VANNEMAN'S" is written in a serif font, flanked by horizontal lines. Underneath, the word "LITERATUR" is written in a large, bold, serif font. Below that, "R US" is written in a similar font, with a dot on either side. At the bottom, the text "opinions, reviews, and a little j..." is written in a smaller, italicized serif font. At the very bottom, there is a black rectangular button with a yellow arrow pointing left and the text "CLICK TO VISIT!" in white.

from them, looking at the rooftops of Lugano but speaking of America.

Days go by. We arrive in the morning, talk most of the day, and go out for a while.

Activities are planned for our enjoyment. Hilde takes us for a

ride in their car. It is a blue sedan, ten years old, but looking like it just emerged from the showroom. Hilde's pattern of driving resembles an EKG gone haywire. We are told she is the better driver. But we sit relaxed since it is ridiculous to think of meeting death in Douglas Sirk's car. Other days we walk to a nearby park. Douglas frowns, "No photos." Rudely we insist, as he skulks through the foliage trying to evade our lenses. He finally retaliates. Hilde holds the camera, Douglas directs the shot, never touching the camera. We pose arm in arm in front of an ancient statue. Hilde clicks. Our heads are chopped off.

We eat at the Grotto, a favorite restaurant, a restaurant only Douglas Sirk would take you to, where Rock Hudson might take Jane Wyman. There is a warm Italian innkeeper, there are soft-hued walls, a special pasta, a flow of Chianti. Douglas impetuously drinks wine and eats roast pork. We know this is a special time for all of us. We have fallen in love with Douglas and Hilde.

The idol known as "Sirk" has faded. Douglas is in his place. We forget to ask questions. We bathe in the long, sunny afternoons in the terrace. We nibble the chocolates and cookies. We gossip about Nixon, American television, mutual friends, and health spas. They love to hear our stories about New York. We love to hear theirs about Hollywood. Douglas tells us about raising chickens.

"Douglas is ill," Hilde tells us. He has talked too much and has a cold. She tells us to visit the next day. Guilty for straining his health, we rent a Fiat and travel over the border to Italy, buying our quota of souvenirs and postcards.

Back in Lugano, still hungry for mementos, we buy a walkie-talkie robot at a toy store, the twin to "Rex, the mechanical man." The next day we arrive back at the Sirks with a bunch of yellow tulips.

Douglas is hoarse. Hilde watches him protectively. She sets a limit on how much he can talk. She is after all in charge of the magic that cures him repeatedly. We talk and look from their faces to the decor of the now-familiar room: the clean lines, neutral colors touched with blues and oranges, the Etruscan vase, the rows of books, the records, the silly little wood carving we brought from Connecticut, now displayed on top of the television — grandparents couldn't have placed it more lovingly.

Hilde talks of her youth, the days she wandered the streets of Germany as a little girl, a pistol in one hand and a snake in the other to scare people. She is an enigma, an actress by profession, a writer with a manuscript so dense that it remains untranslated. She is of course the director's wife, content to sit with Mrs. Ed Muhl in Beverly Hills discussing



the running of Universal Studios; and she is also Douglas' indispensable guardian, who still shakes the invisible snake at anyone who intrudes.

Hilde frowns over the silver thermos as Douglas hoarsely talks on. He is describing Lana Turner's work in *Imitation of Life*. He describes their rapport. But one listens too casually, relaxed as with an old friend, and the mind wanders. But something strange starts to happen. You are off-guard. The old man starts to direct. He is showing you how he manipulated Lana Turner in her scenes. But instead of the Golden Goddess, he is doing it to you. The hooded blue eyes unfurl, revealing beneath the lids an unquenched intensity. They fix on you, the voice hypnotically cajoles and shames. "You like that, don't you? You like that feeling," he asks seductively. "Well, then, you are a fool!" Back and forth, changing your face, pulling the adrenalin to the surface. You aren't an



actor, so what is to explain these emotions shooting through you as he talks? You remain riveted, in confusion accepting the reality that you are now seated twelve inches away from Sirk the director on a couch somewhere far away from home. Douglas has vanished, and has been replaced by two ice-blue eyes and a commanding voice. You sit stiffened, the bones in your spine locked together until a hoarse laugh and a cough end the game. Sirk has receded and there again is Douglas, leaning back into the cushions on the couch, offering you a piece of cake.

Two weeks have passed. Douglas' cold has vanished, and a freak snow storm has bathed nasally beneficial Lugano with sheets of ice. The Trans-European Express waits to hurl us back through the Alps to Zurich, where a Texan-filled jet will fly us home. We are loaded down with mementos, cards, books, a robot, and some crushed red roses — remembrances of the small bouquet left by Douglas and Hilde for us in the hotel room. We board the train, throwing kisses to them as they stand on the platform waving to us. We watch as they walk cautiously down the wooden steps of the train station, looking to all the world like any other genteel elderly couple. And as Hilde's car bucks off towards Ruvigliana, we wave one last time before we cry.

#### *Sirk Speaks (Michael Stern)*

*Douglas Sirk:* When we first came to America, I bought a tiny piece of land far out in the country. But there was no place to live on it, only a shed. For a house, somewhere near Los Angeles I found an old church. Very old, no longer used. So we moved the church to the land, and I took off the steeple, and I got my hands dirty. I was raising chickens then. The neighbors were wonderful, and I



remember a cafe on the corner. I'd go in there and the owner was a typical American cafe owner. This was the only place in town then. It was only a farming community. I'd say to him, "Why don't you get some newspapers in here?" "What for?" he'd say. "Nothing ever happens." Well, being from Europe, I was still interested. This was 1939, and some things were happening, you know. So I kept after him. Then – I don't know how he did it, because this was miles from L.A. over the mountains – he began to get the L.A. Times in every morning. That was fine. And even some of the truckdrivers and farmers who stopped in for their coffee or sandwich or what-do-I-know started to read it. Then I suggested he attach the paper to a stick of wood. "Now why would I want to do that?" "Look," I said, "these truckers come in here and use the paper for rags. It's lost, dirty." So sure enough, he got the two pieces of wood and I showed him how to clamp them together along the side of the paper. And here was this goddamned cafe in the middle of nowhere with the L.A. Times hung up like it was in Paris. "Say, that's kind of chic," the owner said. "Real smart." And I'd go in there every day when I wasn't working on the farm and read that paper.

*Michael Stern: How did you get along with the American film community? In particular, with your producers, the studio ...*

I enjoyed working there very much. Only on *Thunder* did I have a producer who was interfering with my work. He was the only one at Universal. After that film I believe they fired him. Ross Hunter was my assistant on *Take Me to Town*, He was a young man, an actor before that, and learned a lot on the picture. During shooting, Goldstein left, and Ross was most pleasant. He never interfered. In fact, I explained to him my theories of melodrama, and he understood. But I still remember him begging me, "Douglas, please, please make them cry."

Muhl was a very nice guy, but not a producer. He had no showmanship. And in movies you must be a gambler. To produce films is to gamble. Muhl, I believe, began as a bookkeeper, and he never had that sense of show. Zugsmith understood audiences. He was like other producers – a man who makes money. But he was more honest about



it than L.B. Mayer and the others.

There was no bullshit, no arty pretensions. “Doug,” he’d say when we were doing *Written on the Wind*, “Give me some bosom.” You know we still had the Hayes office then, so I said, “Zug, I can’t. They’ll cut it out.” “Let’s try it anyway,” he said. “As much as you can get away with.” Then in *The Tarnished Angels*, of course, we had Malone parachuting from the sky with her skirt blowing up. Zugsmith loved that. He didn’t want her to wear anything underneath ... What a character! I never knew him without the baseball cap on his head. He has newspapers, TV stations, radio, and movies. The man dabbles in everything – except art and culture. “That’s why I hire you and Orson,” he told me. I really liked him very much. He had something that I did not, and I had something that he didn’t. And both of us were smart enough to understand that and tolerate each other. I even came to him with that Faulkner book, which nobody would touch. “Doug,” he said, “you’ve made so much money for me, I’ll do it. I trust you.” And I must say, he backed me all the way. People ask, “How is it possible that you can get along with that vulgar, crude specimen of Americana?” Well, it was a pleasure. As a producer, he never interfered, except to ask me to show more bosom.

*I am curious about whether you felt you had any intellectual colleagues in '50s Hollywood. Certainly it wasn't like Germany in the '20s.*

Well, let us go back to after the war. I was a university guy – 1/2 literary, 1/2 a painter. And it really began with Einstein. We attended his lectures. Now the theory of relativity remained – and still remains – only a theory. It has not been proven. But it suggested a completely different picture of the physical world. Now in theory, if there is no straight line in the universe, this has its effect on art. Art must consist of something bent, something curved.

We had come back from the war, and we were really too old for the university. We had seen too much. The war was the end of an era, in art as well. And we were trying to create a new philosophy. At the same time, of course, Marxism arose – Rosa Luxembour, Leninism, anarchism – and art became political. In the 19th century, you had bourgeois art without politics – an almost frozen idea of what beauty is. We were trying to negate beauty, and negate that art which was a synonym for beauty. We were soaked with it. We were deeply steeped in Art. We were looking for something completely different.

*In Magnificent Obsession, Rock Hudson has a line: “As far as I’m concerned, Art is just a guy’s name.”*

Exactly! In Hollywood, the producers said, “Never say Art. Nobody wants to know about it.” Arty is ok, but Art is for crazy painters, or sculptors, or what-do-I-know. Now after the war, we were looking for something completely different. Artaud’s essay in *The Theater and Its Double* describes a completely new era for the theater. It explains simply, “No more masterpieces,” for God’s sake, no more Art. We are really not interested. Together with Marxism, this was to be something populist – this is different from the American term populism. It would be something the average man could understand, but with something additional – style. There arose a belief in style – and in banality. Banality encompassed politics, too, because it was a common belief that politics were not worthy of art.

As a theater man, I had to deal with

high art. I would play farces and comedy to make money, and classics for the elite. But we were trying to escape the *elitaire*. So slowly in my mind formed the idea of melodrama, a form I found to perfection in American pictures. They were naive, they were that something completely different. They were completely Art-



less. This tied in with my studies of the Elizabethan period, where you had both *l'art pour l'art* and you had Shakespeare. He was a melodramatist, infusing all those silly melodramas with style, with signs and meanings. There is a tremendous similarity between this and the Hollywood system – which then I knew from only far away. Shakespeare had to be a commercial producer. Probably his company or his producer came to him and said, “Now, look, Bill, there’s this crazy story – ghosts, murder, tearing the hair, what-do-I-know. Completely crazy. It’s called *Magnificent Ob* ... no, *Hamlet* it was called. The audiences love this story, Bill, and you have to rewrite it. You’ve got two weeks, and you’ve got to hold the costs down. They’ll love it again.” So, my God! A director in Hollywood in my time couldn’t do what he wanted to do. But certainly, Shakespeare was even less free than we were.

But let’s go deeper into drama. How was it with the ancient Greeks? I have studied pieces of the Periclean period, and all of them are crazy situations. But there is a difference there. The role that style plays today was then taken by religion. Take Oedipus, for instance. The Freudians don’t like this, but in reality Oedipus is a detective story, a mystery, nothing other than that. The mother thing, the complex, is bullshit, because he didn’t know. He’s not guilty, really. It’s sheer melodrama, for the masses.

Now I talked with Brecht about this, and I told him that it was religion that made such crazy melodrama possible for the ancient Greeks. That, of course, is not possible any more. He agreed. But he was at a complete dead end. *L’art pour l’art* offered nothing, so finally he escaped into Marxism. There is no doubt that this is what made it possible for him to continue. It was politics that made his art possible, as religion did for the Greeks.

Now my idea of the melodrama he carried into the “drink and smoke theater,” where there was nothing sacred. The idea was, Let’s forget, for God’s sake, the word Art. In this theater, there is really something going on. Beer is served; you meet a few whores. Of course, we were conjuring the Elizabethan theater. Slowly into my program in the theater I was sneaking in the melodrama – popular plays – and I discovered they were making lots of money.

At the time I belonged to the socialist party, and Hitler came to power. The intellectuals were all saying, “Give him a year. Give him two years. It will all blow over. He’ll go away.” I wanted to escape. But what did I know? I knew Law, and I knew





theater. I didn't, of course, know American law, and in America the theater did not exist, except for

Broadway. But America to us – especially to Brecht – was raw and rough. That was our idea of it – boxing, triviality, banality, killing, and the American melodrama, which *was* the American cinema. This goes for Stroheim, for Sternberg. All of it was melodrama; but in their hands, given a style.

When Brecht was there he tried to sell his ideas as a literary man, which didn't work. Not in America. And for movies he had no feeling. He was not a visual character. He didn't see. In his movie scripts he didn't catch movie style or technique. It was only theater. Furthermore, he insisted on his Marxist way of thinking. Of course, McCarthyism finished any possibility of that.

*You use the term "we" in describing the early formulation of your aesthetic. In your talking about America I sense that you did feel, intellectually at least, alone.*

Intellectualism came very late to America. That's why Americans are so proud of it. I found very few real intellectuals in America. But there are so many pseudo-intellectuals. They carry their Freud or their Marx around in front of them on a platter, and say, "Hello, I'm so-and-so, have you heard of Karl Marx?" Yes, thank you. This kind of pseudo-intellect is worse than the man who lives by instinct. You can't talk to the American intellectual.

But I was one of the few who stayed. Brecht, Mann, they all left. There is no tradition in the United States. In anything. It was different in New York, which was highly Europeanized. But California was a mixture of Mexicans, early settlers, people who had been in the Pacific during World War II or Korea. It was open. Your wife could go to the supermarket in her bathing suit. When we came, there was no industry at all. Just blue skies, no smog. Of course, after the war, the picture changed completely. But before, everything was movies. And you have no idea how this shaped your life. The movie stars were a strange aristocracy. If Lana Turner walked down the street to buy dark underwear, Hedda Hopper would tell all about it. It was so primitive, and at the same time it was so pleasant. We liked America in spite of everything. Europe was so old, so burdened with guilt complexes. California was a center for mass art. Europe to an artist after the war was not at all interesting. I had become a complete foreigner in Germany. And there, in Hollywood, was an industry for a new art. America, after *Magnificent Obsession*, was for me an opportunity.

*That is very interesting. You mean you welcomed the opportunity of Magnificent Obsession?*

Yes, for the first time, I began to realize here my ideal of melodrama. It was my first real

opportunity. That film, and the melodramas that follow, are all attempts to formulate something.

*You were in America over ten years before you took that step.*

Yes, I was hired by Universal because they needed a comedy director. They had seen *Scandal* and liked it. I saw an opportunity even in those comedies to begin my project of American films.

*But your reputation in Germany was based on your success with melodrama. None of your pictures during the '40s seem to follow up on that.*

I wasn't so sure then. I didn't think I could continue to do the melodrama as I had done in Germany. I couldn't know how it would go over with audiences here. When I was able later to get free of Columbia, I took up that offer from Universal. Although I was hired to do comedy, strangely enough the first one I did was that submarine picture, *Mystery Submarine*. I got it, I suppose, because I had been in the Navy. It was alluring to shoot in a submarine, with hand cameras and so forth. But



it was a miserable little story. Here the auteurship of the studio comes in. But I did want to do pictures about America. Not just appeal to American tastes. The French call it *contes moraux* – a series of episodes. Not so much moral tales, as tales about peoples' morality. *The Lady Pays Off*, for instance. I wanted there contrast to all those silly women you see in pictures. Now this predated women's lib. I wanted to draw a picture of a woman who is free to the extent that she wasn't even likeable. I wanted to contrast a masquerade world of gambling and unreality to a new woman's world. I wanted here to take a woman who is beautiful – a very luscious girl – who wanted to have her way, but not because she is beautiful. I used Linda Darnell because she *was* beautiful, not one of those ugly things that people look at and say, "Who'd want her?" She was wonderful to work with, putty in a director's hands. Unfortunately all this was tamed down by the studio – even before I started on the script.

*You mentioned the FBI questioning you about morality in No Room for the Groom. How do you see this picture in your plan for a series of contes moraux?*

I have just seen this film, and I am surprised that it still holds up. It still seems sharp to me. It never becomes doctrinaire. It never preaches values. It is always dissolving itself into funny situations. Now this picture was supposed to make something of Tony Curtis, but he complained to me that he was only a clown in it, just the butt of the jokes. "Oh no," I said, "Tony, you are the whole antithesis of the picture. You have to be dynamic. You have to fight against everything, the whole establishment. You are all the and values of the film." And he was really very good.

My idea at this time, which was slowly developing, was to create a *comédie humaine* with little people, average people – samples from every

period in American life. Now I had something in mind, a definite design; but of course I had to grab the opportunities as they came. That is why sometimes I took on a lousy project – just to have the chance to



work my plan. In this series, the furthest back in time in *Take Me to Town*. I haven't seen this film, but in my memory it lingers as a pleasant picture.

*It's delightful. Bob Smith said it's your most optimistic picture. It certainly is the most "open" of your films. The characters don't seem so completely trapped; the situation isn't hopeless ...*

Of course. This is early America, and therefore it is almost a fairy tale. The women of the establishment are the evil queens, and the hero, he is completely stalwart. A preacher!

Now the Sheridan picture is a society that is still to an extent open. So there are just the slightest signs. It is all mellowed down, which of course, has to do with the period. Then later on there is an establishment. *Written on the Wind* is the ultimate degeneracy of the system. The kaput superstructure. There the old man, the capitalist, is drawn a bit too nicely only to show the degeneracy of the son and the daughter. It is also a picture of nostalgia, with the characters always wishing they could go back to the river, to their youth, maybe to the world of *Take Me*. But they can't go back, they can't return.

For instance, take this picture *There's Always Tomorrow*. I think this is a very sad picture because here is the American man dominated not by his wife so much as by the rules of society. She is as miserable as he, only she doesn't even know it! He can't escape. He can't make up his mind. He is the American man remaining a child. He is a producer of toys; still playing with toys. Then, his youth comes back. Knocks right on his door. And at the end, of course, he walks to the window and there is the plane flying away. It is his youth, his happiness. You will see exactly the same thing at the end of *The Tarnished Angels*. Throughout my pictures there are these recurring signs – the plane, those goddamned cars, and the pond to which they all want to return, all these victims.

*There is certainly a wealth of prison imagery in your films. Perhaps you could discuss in more detail these recurring images; the iconography of your films.*

I considered that the homes that people live in exactly describe their lives. They are always behind those window crossings, behind bars or staircases. Their homes are their prisons. They are imprisoned even by the tastes of the society



in which they live. In *All*

*That Heaven Allows* this woman is imprisoned by her home, her family, her society. They are imprisoned in two ways – by their personal habits, and by the class to which they belong, which is slightly above the middle class. The middle class is more anonymous. For instance, in *All I Desire*, it is the academic society which is another prison. The drama teacher is in love with the guy, but he can't make a move. He wants his goddamned promotion. He's in his prison, too. This goes all the way up to *Written on the Wind*. There they are imprisoned by wealth. They are the kaput haute bourgeoisie. They have gone from the simple society to complete decadence. But in between, in the upper middle class, there is upper middle class elegance only. That living room in *All That Heaven Allows* has a certain elegance. I worked for UFA as a set designer, you know. I believe my pictures reflect this, even in a sort of continuity. In *Written on the Wind* the mirrors that run throughout are marbelized. They are not clear mirrors anymore. Even the reflections have become clouded.

In *All That Heaven Allows* the town is shown as being arranged around the church steeple. You don't see them going to church, because that would be too much on the nose. But even that church is a prison, just like the homes, which are their cages. People ask me why there are so many flowers in my films. Because these homes are tombs, mausoleums filled with the corpses of plants. The flowers have been sheared and are dead, and they fill the homes with a funeral air.

*Your films often do end with either a wake, or a wake-like situation. If the characters aren't dead, their fate is certainly sealed.*

All my endings, even the happy ones, are pessimistic. Of course, in *All I Desire* I wanted her to go back to the stage – to the seal act. It was only a stopover. That would have been very sad. Perhaps too pessimistic. But now it is only an unhappy happy end. As Brecht has said, you must think further, after the curtain goes down. What will happen to her? The end of every story is death; but here, what can happen? Maybe, *maybe* a flicker of the old love. But it is impossible. Pretty soon she'll be one of those housewives, inviting in the academic crowd for tea and cake. She'll be lost. She'll disappear.

*I wonder if we might talk about your craft as a director.*

Of course. If I can say one thing for my pictures, it is a certain craftsmanship. A thought which has gone into every angle. There is nothing there without an optical reason. I never regarded my pictures as very much to be proud of, except in this, the craft, the style.

Your camera is the best critic there is. Critics never see as much as the camera does. It is more perceptive than the human eye. So it is not enough to look beautiful. But if I move my camera in to do a close up, closer, looking into the eyes, you must think, think, ... "I'm going to kill him." Look at this picture from the silly Columbia movie



(*Shockproof*). Frozenness. The average director might say, "Now, look, I'm just doing a

long shot so just stand there.” That’s not enough, not for the camera. The actor must think, “My god, what have I done? Will the police get me? Where will I go? My whole life ... ” Then, the face regains life, and you create the line. The moment your actors understand this, you’re on safe ground as a director. They’ll follow you like a dog.

On the stage, I’m a great imitator of people, a mimic. I do voices, gestures. It’s not enough there to tell them what you want. You have to play it for them – in a slightly overdone way, like a cartoon. So they understand, they see the highlights. You absolutely cannot do that in movies, because they imitate you. Then you get always Mr. Sirk on the screen and not George Sanders. The main thing on the screen is to preserve the personality. Sometimes, I’ll tell you, this is easier to do with a horse than with an actor. You can’t destroy the personality of that horse, because it will be there on the screen and it will say, “Fuck yourself, I’m a horse.”

*How much did you discuss the meanings of your films with the actors?*

Of course, that would depend on who it was; and on the picture. Rock Hudson found *Pylon* difficult; so did Stack. Rock hung around my house looking for guidance on that. I knew he needed some introduction, some explanation to the film beyond the novel, which made no sense to him. So I gave him *My Antonia* as a sort of explanation. An explanation of what was not in the film, of what Malone is supposed to be leaving for in the end. This he understood. With Malone I had a different problem. She was very prudish.

*You’re kidding.*

Not at all. I even had to watch my language. If I said, “This scene needs more balls,” or “that light’s fucked up,” she’d walk out. So with her I had to be devious. But I did arrive at it. For instance, her dance in *Written on the Wind*. We almost came to an *éclat* about that. I had to call in Zugsmith, and he took her aside and said, “Now look, I wanted you to dance completely nude in this scene. But that prig Douglas – he insisted you wear the clothes.” So finally she did it.

Rock Hudson was not an educated man, but that very beautiful body of his was putty in my hands. And there was a certain dialectic at work in his casting, especially after *Magnificent Obsession*. This film he did not understand at all. But after it, I used him as a straight, good-looking American guy. A little confused, but well-meaning. In the novel – in *Pylon* – that reporter is a complex character, interwoven perhaps too much into the other world, the world of the flyers. I wanted to use him as a drab guy, with no experience but his shitty job in his drab, shitty office. Then he falls in love with these gypsies of the air. He wants to find out about their life. He’s fascinated. He begins to imagine. He is the outsider looking up into the prison of the air. Because up there, in those planes, is a prison too. These flyers are trying to leave the prison of society – which was terrible after the war. They think they are escaping into the air. But we are all



prisoners, into the final prison, which is the grave, and death. This is something that I don't think Rock understood, but for his part, as the outsider, his confusion as an actor helped. There is always in the films a dialectic – between the imprisoned group, and the one who wants to come *inside*. Stanwyck in *All I Desire* moves from the stage into that small town. In *There's Always Tomorrow*, it is from outside the house to that goddamned plane at the end.

*There are two important diversions I've noticed between the film and the script in *Written on the Wind*. One surprising one is that the script has nothing about Malone's dance, as the old man is dying.*

That is a scene I added later – the one she objected to. The picture I felt was sagging. It needed a climax to bring it together. I improvised that scene on the stage. Zugsmith liked it, but we kept it from the front office. They didn't like such changes in the script. When Mrs. Sirk and I saw the film just last year, that scene was missing.

*But that's the central scene in the film!*

Sure. It was probably cut out for TV.

*The last scene in the script is Malone in her office. Only there she is pushing the buttons on her phone, rather than hugging the oil well. And there is no shot of Hudson leaving.*



Sure. We know they'll go away together. Why show it? My idea was to end on Malone. And of course I added that well – another sign from the whole film – and the portrait, and the whole desk. That's the way it ended. But then later, long after shooting, Hudson's agent, I believe, complained about that. So we shot them driving away from the house. It doesn't hurt the film too much.

*But Hudson was convinced that *The Tarnished Angels* would be different?*

It is different. I told Rock, "You are a goddamned crazy shitty newspaperman who wants to go into another life. My Antonia wants to escape like you." He took the book and read it and loved it. And he understood. He knew Malone at the end there was going back to the cornfields, to the earth, to her youth. Of course, I didn't tell him she was only *trying* to go back. It's a very unhappy ending, because she is going away for good. His idealizing speech at the end is crap of course. This man will never be another Faulkner. Just a shitty, drab reporter, who is really very pitiful. And his heart is broken because he thinks love has entered it. There is a strong ambiguity there.

*As you say, it sounds very much like the structure of *There's Always Tomorrow*. There too is a man who is heartbroken because something exciting has entered his life, and left for good. There too is the ambiguity. Is it love or just a childish escape, as Stanwyck tells him.*

It's an impossible situation. Very sad. The children there are looking at strange animals. The parents have become monuments, sculpted by society and their children. Of course, these children don't realize they'll become the same kind of fools. They are already more orthodox than the parents. These children are very different from the American ideal of children as little angels.

*One of the remarkable – and consistent – elements in your films is their distinctive camera style. There is a unique visual quality to every one of your films, not merely in your use of mirrors, screens, veils, and decor, but in the cinematography itself. How much do you concern yourself with the purely technical aspects of the craft?*



Completely so. All this, of course, I learned at UFA. And I learned it well there. In fact, I rarely look through the camera, because I can judge exactly. I tell the cameraman to put on a 2 inch or a 25mm lens. I give him the distance. Then I can tell exactly where the side angle is for movement.

*What about the lighting in your films? It seems that especially in the color melodramas, say All That Heaven Allows or Magnificent Obsession, that you employ a radically different lighting scheme than that which is usually prescribed for color film. Your total lack of front lighting, for instance, in dramatic scenes. Or, even in the black and white films, an extraordinarily complex pattern of shadows. This is not only “anti-natural.” It breaks any rules of balanced lighting.*

Throughout my pictures I employ a lighting which is not naturalistic. Often the window will be *here*, and the light from *there*. With color, too, I did this, to attain a lighting that is almost surrealistic. As Brecht has said, you must never forget that this is not reality. This is a motion picture. It is a tale you are telling. The distanciation must be there. It creates an unreal quality, a certain heightening. You can't just show it. You have to shoot it through with a dialectic.

*What about Russell Metty? Was he cooperative?*

More than that. He was original. He understood. After a while, he came to me with ideas which I had used. The director must listen, too, and in his own way Metty had a feeling for what I was after. His lighting was the best.

*Back in the '50s the Cahiers people spoke of your moving camera – a series of lateral tracks, in almost every shot.*

I always loosened up the camera. It was very rarely static. Many of these movements you wouldn't even see unless you studied the film on the moviola. But every movement followed one rule, which was a rule of iron with me. (It has been discarded today.) That is, that a camera movement ought to be justified by your actors' movements, and that your actors' movements must be justified by the camera. I lay out my camera moves before plotting the actors'. There must be a constant flow of inspiration between camera



and people. The goddamned camera must react. And the actors must respond to the camera. Always. With Sanders I'd tell him, "Now we'll pan with you as you move." And he'd say, "Why in the hell do that?" (He knew what I was up to.) And I'd say, "Because the camera is interested in you" – which is true. "The good camera is curious." And he'd say, "Douglas, you goddamned intellectual."

*What about the use of rear-projection in your films? I am always running into people who say, "That's the best he could do. It's just lousy rear projection, that's all. It doesn't mean anything." Could you say something about this – say about the rear projection in *Written on the Wind* when Kyle is driving in his sports car.*



I will tell you. Many pictures I have shot against the wishes of the studio totally on location. But the moment you go inside the studio, it is dangerous to go out again. The moment you hop from that studio to the wilds of Utah, you must artificialize nature. You must somehow integrate nature into your story. So you use back projection. For instance, there in *Written on the Wind*, the whole story is artificial. The back projection has to be this way. "Artificial" used to be a negative word. But every artist today must proceed with a certain artificiality.

*In the Cahiers interview you say that the 1940s were a golden age of American movies, like primitive painting, full of courage and audacity. How do you see the 1950s?*

It was the twilight of the Gods. Drama is impossible today. I don't know of any. Drama used to be the belief in guilt, and in a higher order. This absolutely cruel didactic is impossible, unacceptable for us moderns. But melodrama has kept it. You are caged. In melodrama you have human, earthly prisons rather than godly creations. Every Greek tragedy ends with the chorus – "those are strange happenings. Those are the ways of the gods."

And so it always is in melodrama. ... In *Magnificent Obsession*, I was feeling my way. It is perhaps too much when Rock Hudson finally succeeds. This God-like creature is sitting up there. It is a good old image of God. He is benevolently smiling down on that stupid story. Of course, this is something that few critics penetrate. But I actually built the operating room for that scene. Throughout the picture this man is never being taken seriously. He's just a funny little man with crazy ideas. He's needed because down there on the operating table, a miracle really is happening. And it really has to be a Rock Hudson type there. At first he's just a stupid guy. All he can do is race his car. His change is quite impossible, and therefore just right.

*In *Magnificent Obsession* you have what I consider to be a quintessential scene – really a manifesto for the melodramas which followed. When Wyman is groping blindly in her room ...*

Yes, there is this huge bulging pole, like a phallus. It's sitting there, in front of her and she can't find it. She can't see it, yet she is reaching out, reaching ... These are aspects



you can't hit too much. It must be subconscious. Like the oil well in the Zugsmith picture. It's riches, it's a phallus. The real end there is this poor bad girl behind that huge desk, behind all that money, with only the oil well instead of what she wants. She's stuck there in that house.

*Like Clifford Groves, in There's Always Tomorrow?*

Yes. I like that ending. It's ironic. But the way it was before I reshot it was even more direct. There Groves goes back to his office and watches the plane fly away. The shot's still there now, as the robot walks towards the camera. But now it cuts. I had it keep walking, walking, then fall off the table. The camera pans down, whom! And there's the robot, on the floor, spinning, rmmm, rhmm, rhmmm

... rhmmm, slowly spinning to a halt. The End. That is complete hopelessness. This toy is all the poor man has invented in his life. It is a symbol of himself, an automaton, broken.



But here is another difference. In tragedy the life always ends. By being dead, the hero is at the same time rescued from life's troubles. In melodrama, he lives on – in an unhappy happy end.

— *Jane Stern*

Jane Stern, in addition to collaborating on more than 40 books with Michael Stern, published a memoir, *Ambulance Girl*, that was made into a Lifetime TV movie directed by and starring Kathy Bates.

— *Michael Stern*

Michael Stern is the author, with Jane Stern, of more than 40 books on food and pop culture, including best sellers *Elvis World* and *The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste*. Michael is the author of the Twayne monograph on Douglas Sirk.

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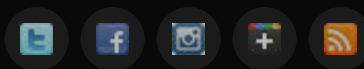
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