

Laura

USA 1944 88 minutes

Director and Producer: Otto Preminger
Screenplay: Jay Dratler, Samuel Hoffenstein and Betty Reinhardt
(from the novel by Vera Caspary)
Photography: Joseph La Shelle
Music: David Raskin
Editor: Louis Loeffler
Art Directors: Lyle Wheeler and Ieland Fuller

Cast:

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

The film's tagline was "The story of a love that became the most fearful thing that ever happened to a woman!"

Few who knew of the chequered production history of the film would have thought that it would become influential in the development of film noir. The extraordinary black and white photography set the style for future film noir films to follow.

Having been developed by Otto Preminger from the Vera Caspary novel, it was destined to become a Fox B picture before studio head Darryl Zanuck intervened to give it A level production values. The relatively untested Preminger was not permitted to direct the film, and Walter Lang and Lewis Milestone had been approached for the task before Rouben Mamoulian was signed.

Mamoulian had previously directed *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), *Queen Christina* (1933) and *The Mark of Zorro* (1940). He was staunchly independent in his views as to how films should be made, which often resulted in clashes with the Hollywood Studio hierarchy.

Such was to be his fate with this film as Zanuck, dissatisfied with his results, fired him replacing him with Preminger. (Incidentally the exact same thing happened in 1959, when Preminger again replaced Mamoulian to direct *Porgy and Bess*). In turn Preminger replaced the cameraman, Lucien Ballard, with Joseph La Shelle.

The selection of the cast was no easier, with Jennifer Jones and Hedy Lamarr both rejecting the role of the alluring Laura before Gene Tierney (who was aged twenty four) accepted. Zanuck had to be persuaded as to the casting of Clifton Webb as the

waspish Waldo Lydecker (incidentally a character inspired by noted columnist and wit Alexander Woolcott).

Despite its development problems, *Laura* has come to be regarded as one of the best of the Film Noir pieces.

This is a wonderful film for any connoisseur of classic cinema or even just anyone looking for a good movie to watch. Great dialogue and spot on characterisation are brought to life by director Preminger's talented cast.

Gene Tierney stars as Laura Hunt, a beautiful career girl who, as the picture opens, has been murdered. (Shot in face with a double barreled shotgun, a point of information not dwelled on by Preminger. Today's directors, of course, would have begun with a full facial shot of the corpse). Dana Andrews comes across exactly right as the hard boiled detective who falls in love with Laura's picture and then with Laura herself. Vincent Price is delightfully weak and despicable as the boyfriend, Shelby Carpenter, who could afford to have his reputation blemished, but not his clothes! Dame Judith Anderson hits just the right note as his wealthy "patron".

However it is Clifton Webb, in his first starring role, who steals the show. With a sharp tongue and even sharper wit, his character holds centre stage in every scene. He's the man you love to hate and he plays it to the hilt.

It's easy to see why three men fall for Gene Tierney in the title role. Not only is she stunningly beautiful (incidentally wearing gowns designed by her husband at the time, Oleg Cassini), but as Clifton Webb says, she also has grace, class, and warmth. She also wears one of the greatest hats in film history!

The strength of the movie is in the intriguing storyline featuring surprising but agreeable plot twists, and especially in the fine acting. I think this is a good example of Otto Preminger getting a lot more out of his actors than he is usually given credit for. See *Anatomy of a Murder* from 1959, starring James Stewart and Lee Remick, for another example. Known for turning commercial novels into commercial movies (e.g., *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955); *Exodus* (1960); *Advise and Consent* (1962)) Preminger is at his best when he lets the material have its way. His is an almost invisible style of directing and he follows it here, where it is said he was unpopular with most of the cast.

Laura was nominated for five Academy awards. Although winning the Best Cinematography Oscar, it was unsuccessful for Best Director; Best Screenplay; Best Supporting Actor (Webb); Best Art Direction/Interior Decoration. (The winner of the best film in 1944 was *Going My Way*).

Add the beautiful score by David Raksin and *Laura* has it all. Murder, intrigue, double-dealing, plot twists and suspense right up until the film's end. The ending, although it may not come as a surprise, will still enthrall you. This is a superior film which lingers in your memory long after you have seen it, as will the title tune. Sing it, as

if no one is listening!

Iain McGlashan Chairman