

# PARADISE LOST

## Todd Haynes Feature

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Upon learning that that the studio loved the title of his film, *All That Heaven Allows*, because it implied you could have everything you wanted, Douglas Sirk insisted that he'd meant it the other way around. "As far as I'm concerned, heaven is stingy," the cantankerous German émigré famously barked.

It's an attitude that couldn't better sum up the multi-layered approach of Todd Haynes' four feature films. Especially his latest, the revisionist Sirk melodrama, *Far From Heaven*, which catapults the forty-two-year-old writer-director to the front rank of American cineastes after more than a decade of critical acclaim in independent and queer filmmaking circles.

*Far From Heaven* is the achingly beautiful account of a fragile 1957 Connecticut housewife who contemplates an affair with her black gardener after catching her husband *en flagrante delicto* with another man, only to suffer the slings and arrows of social ostracism by her uptight peers. Julianne Moore's Cathy Whitaker character comes to discover heartbreak and rejection in what outward appearances would indicate to be some sort of idealized heaven on earth.

Referencing Sirk's 1955 masterpiece *All That Heaven Allows*, in which a widow played by Jane Wyman embarks on an affair with her swarthy gardener (Rock Hudson, no less) that sends ripples of tension through her staid community, Haynes re-examines the creamy, dreamy women's pictures of the 1950s, revealing the unsettling reverberations of unfulfilled desires that still echo today. You can't always get what you want, those films indicated with a vengeance, no matter how much society promises otherwise.

This is what the heroines of vintage women's melodramas, from Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* to Max Ophuls' *The Reckless Moment* (remade two years ago as *The Deep End* starring Tilda Swinton) have discovered time and again. And it's what lends *Far From Heaven* so much contemporary resonance. American audiences have already been reduced to tears by Cathy Whitaker's descent into some of the more sobering realities of modern life, including divorce, racism and hypocrisy. Her melodrama is our own.

"That's the other side of *All That Heaven Allows* — what heaven forbids," Haynes says during a recent interview in New York City. "I was trying to find a title that had a similar double-edged sword to it. *Far From Heaven* was concise, and rhythmically it felt appropriate, but it doesn't come anywhere close to the dialectic titles of other Sirk films, which sound like they're made out of air." Haynes goes on to mellifluously pronounce the titles of some of Sirk's Universal International melodramas of the era, including *Written on the Wind*, *Tarnished Angels* and his own favorite, *Imitation of Life*, which he declares the most beautiful title of any film ever, "because any film could be called *Imitation of Life*." Certainly any of Haynes' own films could be called that.

While *Far From Heaven* is at first glance a straight-up Sirk homage — the crisp Technicolor cinematography, all those lush surfaces and perfectly coiffed hairdos — it's really more an imitation of *Imitation of Life*. A strict simulation would be too simple for the former semiotics student whose first feature, 1991's award-winning *Poison*, re-imagined three Genet stories as a triptych of false appearances, encoded desires and bizarre bodily transmutations.

*Poison* artfully introduced artificiality as Haynes' most indelible theme, which he then wove into the fabric of his contemporary horror film *Safe*, the story of a repressed Los Angeles housewife (Julianne Moore in her first Haynes role) who discovers she is allergic to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its deceptively idyllic sheen and narcotic-like delirium of consumerism. 1998's *Velvet Goldmine*, a lavish glam-rock opera that traced the lavender lineage of the Seventies glitter scene from Oscar Wilde to Ziggy Stardust, reveled in the artificiality of performance and re-invention. In fact, *Velvet Goldmine* coalesced many of Haynes' recurring themes into one garish fantasia of broken dreams, repressed urges and perfect makeup. In the film's opening sequence, a narrator speaks of a world where all things are perfect and poisonous. This construct could apply to any of Haynes' films.

"I think I prefer the poisonous," Haynes admits. "The perfect might apply more to my interest in film as a visual medium, where the look of the film and the style and the way the stories are told is so important. I put a great deal of time and thought into that, and I work with fantastic people who can bring it to fruition. My films, for what they cost, are all really beautiful visual experiences — I can say this because I know how much other people have made it possible. But they often describe situations, lives or societies that are far from perfect, and the ways in which we always bristle against that, and what happens in the process."

*Far From Heaven* furthers an interest in the films of Douglas Sirk that began when Haynes was a post-graduate student at Brown University in the early Eighties. Leading a course on narrative and cinematic coding, he focused on *All That Heaven Allows*, developing an understanding of what makes Sirk's female characters tick. "The performances of the women in those films are really subtle and beautiful when you look at them again," Haynes says. "We think of them as stiff and over-determined, but there are beautiful nuances in Sirk's characters. As Fassbinder said, they're the first films in which he remembers seeing women thinking on screen. There's that space for thought, for women trying to figure out their lives. We have to sometimes speak for them, or else the music, the color or the style supplements what they can't say."

This is the essence of 1950s melodrama, that suppression of dramatic voice through various elements in a lavish production design, and it's what Haynes has recreated so effectively through two landmark performances by Julianne Moore. "I thought about Sirk when I was making *Safe* but I was looking at him more from a contemporary manifestation: those disease-of-the-week television dramas," Haynes says. And just as Jane Wyman went back for more in the form of *All That Heaven Allows* after working with Sirk on *Magnificent Obsession*, Moore readily agreed to *Far From Heaven* after her stunning work in *Safe*, in which her mute, almost paralyzed character finds the ultimate safe place from society's poisonous veneer inside a sterilized igloo-like structure: closer to heaven for Moore's character, far from it for most people.

“The thing about Julianne — and you can see it in the kind of roles she continues to go after, and it’s similar to some of the themes I tend to go after in my films — she’s not interested in characters that redeem her as a likeable, attractive actor,” Haynes says. “She’s interested in difficult, elusive, inarticulate women whose crises are often left unresolved. The result is that you’re seeing a series of characters on screen that you’ve never seen before. She’s somebody who takes enormous risks and yet in the process has garnered a kind of genuine star status and respect. She’s raised the bar for how an actor can do what they do and continue to take risks and challenge themselves and their audience.”

Next up for Haynes is a filmic meditation on, of all people, Bob Dylan, whose vast songbook has inspired legions of folk obsessives since the early Sixties — ironically, exactly the time Sirk stopped making feature films. Haynes has received permission from Dylan’s record company to use actual songs on the soundtrack, unlike his experience on *Velvet Goldmine*, for which David Bowie refused to release his music. But you can bet Haynes won’t go the route of realism and churn out a routine rock & roll biopic on the grizzled folk bard. It’s really not his style. “A lot of people are busy trying to hide the fact that in film we’re constructing an artifice,” Haynes shrugs. “You know, Godard said that film was 24 frames of truth; Fassbinder said film was 25 frames of lies. I think I’m in the latter camp.”