

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *Far From Heaven*

France/USA, 2002. PG-13. 107 min. Cast: Julianne Moore, Dennis Quaid, Dennis Haysbert, Patricia Clarkson; Music: Elmer Bernstein; Cinematographer: Edward Lachman; Producer: Tracy Brimm, George Clooney; Writer/Director: Todd Haynes

Todd Haynes majored in art and semiotics in college. What is surprising is not that a potentially soul-crushing subject as semiotics should even have an academic major available (Haynes went to Brown), nor that a budding filmmaker should focus on a topic which would allow him to learn about signs and signifiers—what is odd is that he came away from this training with his iconoclastic artistic vision intact and a veteran craftsman's ability to utilize this language of symbols and suggestion. (In case you were wondering, Haynes' semiological contemporaries from Brown include Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Jeffrey Eugenides (*The Virgin Suicides*), independent film producer Christine Vachon, and author of *The Ice Storm*, Rick Moody.) Semiology has been called a way of discussing things we already know in a language we've never heard. For filmmakers, the art of communicating with objects, colors, gestures, lighting, music (in short, everything but narrative) should ideally be second nature. We all know what *mise en scene* is, but what does it feel like? More to the point, how does one separate it from film's narrative elements of plot, dialogue, acting? Films which stress visual and other wordless elements over story sometimes suffer, even if that is the point (think of Peter Greenaway's less-successful, because inscrutable, work). And if you want to see a film which stresses story over *mise en scene*, you've no further to travel than your local dodecaplex.

Far From Heaven works so well because the story and the stylization of it were clearly crafted of one piece. Its director and writer conceived of a story with modern relevance which illuminated an often parodied or under-valued era (in film, anyway): the 1950s. And he did it in conscious homage to Douglas Sirk, whose Technicolor-saturated domestic dramas such as *All That Heaven Allows* provided Haynes with a lush, emotional and visual template to tell this story of a woman struggling to come to terms with the illusory quality of her seemingly-perfect life.

Steeped in rapturous color, tense and provocative, *FAR FROM HEAVEN* is an artful etude that follows a straightforward story of Cathy, a woman in a New England suburban town whose life and marriage are falling apart. She discovers her husband is leading a double life—as he grows distant and then hostile at home, his clan-

destine liaisons with men become more and more public and scandalous. Since Cathy's friends can't quite bring themselves to be sympathetic beyond a superficial smile and plate of cookies, Cathy's need to express her unhappiness finds its level when she meets Raymond, the handsome, elegant son of her gardener, who takes over the job when his father dies. But her friendliness is misinterpreted by the community since Raymond is black, and Cathy's reputation for "being kind to Negroes" because of her NAACP affiliation is tinged with nastiness when her friends turn their backs on her for "going too far." For Cathy and Raymond to conduct an illicit affair would certainly make sense, to parallel her husband's secret life. But Haynes has something less obvious in mind. The love affair between these two attractive, intelligent people kept apart because of prejudice is expressed with excruciating subtlety—Raymond captures a fluttering lavender scarf as the wind carries it away from Cathy and returns it to her, saying he knew it was hers because "the color—it just seemed right." This happens at a moment when Cathy has just begun to



understand her husband's sexual preferences, and her costumes are suddenly all pastel lavender, pink and pistachio green—as if she were expecting to play a game of golf with drag queens. But the language of color here is fascinating in its unabashed theatricality. Cathy Powell's costume design (an often-overlooked aspect of cinematic art) is an integral part of this film, every bit as much as the carefully-chosen locations (Hartford, Connecticut at the height of autumn), the antique automobiles, the candy-colored suburban homes. Ed Lachman's stunning photography and Elmer Bernstein's lyrical, perfect score further complement this visionary film, which seems so oddly out of time in its careful reconstruction of Sirk's signature look and feel that someone arriving late to the theatre might think they'd stumbled upon a restored vintage print, if it weren't for the contemporary faces beaming on the screen.

Julianne Moore's portrayal of the ideal 1950s New England housewife is as fine as any work she has ever done. Here is

an actress whose beauty and grace often, bewilderingly, take a back seat to her quiet intensity and intelligence. Moore is deserving of the best roles out there, although her recent forays into romantic comedy and horror seem to belie her ability to continue to make the artful choices she is known for. Dennis Quaid, as the husband undergoing a severe identity crisis, gives a powerful performance as well, his repression and rage and impulsive self-destruction often terrifying to watch. The third impressive performance, and the other point in the triangle, is from Dennis Haysbert (who was excellent in the little seen and prematurely canceled sci-fi thriller series "Now and Again") as Raymond. Haysbert is an actor of some range, but this role asks little beyond projecting warmth and sensuality and a sensible restraint in the face of impossible love. He has a Poirot-like quality that makes us yearn for that actor's incomparable animal grace, humor and elegance.

The actors seem chosen for their visual attributes as much as for their emotional suitability. Moore, pregnant when this picture was shot, is not her usual gaunt but rosy self: she is filled out, all full skirts and red-gold carefully-set curls, an earthy goddess cut from Waterford crystal. Her opalescent face reflects the glints of autumnal color that seem Haynes' paean to Moore's beauty from the first frame: a tree exploding with flame-hued leaves, wind-blown and shimmering in the sun, opening out to manicured lawns in a perfect neighborhood. Haysbert moves easily among all the film's locations, despite his being the character least welcomed in them; his warmth and solidity ground Moore's fragile brightness, and their costumes in their scenes together, believe it or not, tell this story nearly as effectively as any of the dialogue or action. Haynes' masterful and intricate color structure has the presence of an additional major character, and the script contains moments which, perhaps too slyly at times, comment upon this. The clothing, cars, furniture, food, buildings and even the natural landscapes you'd think Haynes wouldn't have much control over, meld together in a seamless and unutterably sensuous parade of tableaux. If not for the stunning performances (including a nice supporting turn from Patricia Clarkson), this film could stand on its visual artfulness alone. How nice for audiences that Haynes is ever the artist, ever the semiologist, and gives us art for the eye and for the psyche. *Far From Heaven* is that rare film that appears simple, even formulaic, on its surface, yet houses infinitely-layered depths and chambers, drawing us in as gently, surely and mysteriously as a forest moves from autumn to spring.

- Peg Aloï