

# Brattle Theatre Film Notes: **Laura**

USA, 1944. Not Rated. 88 min. Cast: Gene Tierney, Dana Andrews, Clifton Webb, Vincent Price, Judith Anderson; Music: David Raksin; Cinematographer: Joseph La Shelle; Producer & Director: Otto Preminger

So you've fallen in love with a dead woman—what now? Sure, you've saved yourself the cost of a second dinner, but when the lights are low and you're soaking in your bath, or pacing in your trench coat, or visiting your next-best girl, what do you do to keep your love alive? If your love is Laura, you do your best to weave together what you know of her life and hope that after you've reexamined the evidence and written the whole thing out a few different ways, she will become more alive to you than she was before. If your love is Laura, she just might.

But who is Laura, as the melodramatic old trailer asked? In the beginning of the film all we know of her is the elegance of her portrait and the allure of David Raksin's famous musical theme, which would later be fitted with appropriately opaque lyrics by Johnny Mercer ("Laura is the face in the misty light / Footsteps that you hear down the hall"). The first thing we are told about Laura is that she is dead—murdered—and soon it becomes clear that the void she left is being filled by the many men who were, and continue to be, drawn to her: the cynical newspaper columnist Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb); the charming but hapless socialite Shelby Carpenter (Vincent Price); and the level-headed detective Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews), who becomes bewitched by Laura even in the course of investigating her death. Lydecker and Carpenter reminisce about the time they spent with her, and Lydecker and McPherson piece the stories together into com-

peting portraits-in-words—Lydecker for his newspaper column and McPherson for his case file. This storytelling competition seems to be as much about creating Laura as remembering her, and the prize to be won, in the minds of the competitors, is Laura's heart, to be captured retroactively; thus the early scenes bear the aura of a Wild West duel turned noir, Lydecker seated behind his typewriter on the left side of the frame, McPherson with his notebook on the right, then the two men standing nose to nose, chins slightly elevated, ready to draw.

When it comes right down to it, Laura is defined by her absence, which persists



sometimes despite her presence, leaving us to wonder what it is, anyway, that these men find so compelling. From Lydecker and Carpenter's stories we learn little about her personality, and from her portrait we learn only her gaze, her hairstyle, and her dress—and Lydecker claims credit for the last two. Gene Tierney, playing Laura, whom we meet in flashback sequences, is beautiful and winning, but is she any more filled out than her portrait? Here's the test: when Laura's maid discovers, to her dismay, that McPherson has violated the dead woman's privacy by reading her diary, can you imagine anything she might have written? My hunch is that the pages are blank, or perhaps

filled with pasted-in clippings of Waldo Lydecker's column.

Even with a face in misty light for a heroine, Laura deserves its place in the canon. It is not, unlike some noirs, a suspense picture, or a morality tale, or a battle of wits (exactly); it is entertaining and well-paced, with a fine ensemble cast that is always being recombined and isolated in groups of two and three. One cut juxtaposes a conversation between Lydecker, Carpenter, and McPherson with a similarly framed shot of a trio of musicians playing the Laura theme; the pianist looks at us for a moment, and we make the connection between the two groups of distinct, interweaving voices. It is this interplay and the amiable unfolding of the story (shorter than *Mildred Pierce*, cleaner than *Double Indemnity*) that makes Laura such a pleasure to watch. Otto Preminger, who reshot the film after the work of another director and cinematographer disappointed the studio boss, unites multiple characters in a single frame instead of relying on close-ups, which would cue the viewer to the filmmaker's moral judgments. The effect of this technique, which the critic Andrew Sarris has described as "perversely objective," is to lend an air of credibility to what is essentially a melodrama. Certainly there are many reasonable questions to be asked about the film's plausibility—why does anyone love Laura? can Laura really love him?—but sometimes wit, music, rain, and light falling through venetian blinds should be enough.

- Joshua J. Friedman