

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *Mildred Pierce*

USA, 1945. Unrated. 111 min

Cast: Joan Crawford, Jack Carson, Zachary Scott, Eve Arden, Ann Blyth; Music: Max Steiner; Cinematographer: Ernest Haller; Producer: Jerry Wald, Jack L. Warner; Director: Michael Curtiz

Realism, I have become convinced, is just about the only thing an audience wants from their movies anymore. Most films are judged simply on how well they replicate the audience's conception of reality, and those that fail, invariably are deemed lacking. Even those movies with the faintest dedication to plausibility - action films, for instance - are simply creating a hyper-reality, an exaggerated version of the lives we live every day. It seems people have come to expect a sheen of authenticity even from their lies.

Of course, it may be naive to assume this is a new phenomenon, that audiences ever really wanted anything more than to see credible duplications of life's trials and conflicts. But when considering the popularity of films like *Mildred Pierce*, which was nominated for six Oscars, I have to believe that once, before audiences were inundated on a nearly round-the-clock basis with the conventions of realist narratives, they had a more flexible notion of film's possibilities and magic. When people say, "I don't like old movies," it's movies like *Mildred Pierce* they're usually thinking of. And what they're often reacting to is the incongruity of what they see on the screen and what they see in the world every day.

Indeed, if what you want is a realistic representation of modern life, or even a time capsule of life in the mid-1940s, you have no business watching *Mildred Pierce*, the story of a mother of two (Crawford) who splits from her ne'er-do-well husband (Bennett) and strikes out on her own with her two daughters, tomboy Kay (Marlowe) and spoiled Veda (Blyth). Handicapped by her lack of work experience, she is forced to take a job as a waitress, much to the horror of Veda, who in her early teens already considers herself ill suited for

life among the plebeians. But Mildred excels at the work and soon has saved enough money for a down payment on her own restaurant. Within a few years, she's a mink-clad restaurateur with a chain of eateries, still working tirelessly to support the material demands of the increasingly monstrous Veda, her dedication to whom has only been strengthened by Kay's premature death from pneumonia.

It would be unfair to say that Mildred Pierce is unrealistic per se. Certainly it is not impossible to imagine a single career mother succeeding in business, even in the 1940s. And with today's headlines, even the tale of love, betrayal and murder couldn't be called improbable. What makes the movie unpalatable for most modern audiences is a series of stylistic characteristics which, when taken as a whole, identify Mildred Pierce as a member of that



nearly extinct genre, the potboiler. With its shocking and unlikely plot twists, its scheming characters and its crashing, bombastic musical accompaniment, the potboiler is now rarely seen and never considered useful for any purpose other than irony. (If you're looking for evidence that modern audiences are unable to accept such melodrama as anything other than irony, look no further than the collective blank stare that greeted last year's *Far From Heaven*.)

Only in a potboiler of this period, for example, could you find a character like Monte Baragon (Scott), Mildred's second husband and her ostensible entree into the upper class. A shiftless, martini-swilling playboy if there ever was one, Monte is given to saying things like, "When I'm close to you there's a sound in the air

like the beating of wings. You know what it is? My heart, beating like a schoolboy's." Even the casting of the part reveals how audience tastes and expectations have changed. Scott, a chinless pipsqueak with a Snidely Whiplash moustache, seems an unlikely matinee idol, but that is exactly what he was. The question for me becomes not whether movies like this appeal to modern tastes. By and large, they don't. The real puzzler is: did audiences of the era accept them as 'realistic' in the way we use the word now?

Certainly, Monte's inane romantic ramblings are entirely a creation of the movies, and not an especially impressive one. Sitting in the audience on the night *Mildred Pierce* opened, how would we react to Monte? To Mildred, with her overwrought devotion to her daughter? Or to the plainly manipulative death of Kay? Did audiences of the time really think this was how their world looked, how people talked, or did they realize its embellishments and understand how movies could be something more than just a mirror held up to their daily lives?

I often wonder if there will come a time when the charms and accomplishments of movies like *Mildred Pierce* simply become lost, leaving modern audiences to stare at the screen dumbfounded, incapable of comprehending what its purpose might have been, or who ever enjoyed such a spectacle. Already appreciated on a relatively small scale, I wonder if, as the generation of people who witnessed Hollywood's epoch die off; there will be a declining understanding of the broader stylistic possibilities of the medium.

- Written by Lawrence Fahey