



Far from heaven

Director: Todd Haynes

Country: USA

Date: 2002

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*:



This extraordinary film, written and directed by Todd Haynes in homage to the "women's drama" Hollywood pictures of Ross Hunter and Douglas Sirk, is a cinematic event - an event where I came to mock and stayed to pray. At the premiere at last year's [2002] Venice film festival, we were all giggling in the first five minutes at what looked like a bafflingly elaborate "Hi-honey-I'm-home" 1950s skit, like something by David Zucker and Jim Abrahams. But quickly, through total immersion in this impeccably acted, brilliantly designed and unflinchingly serious drama, the giggling disappeared in my own case, and

was replaced by nothing less than passionate endorsement of its every detail, every nuance, every narrative contour. We all came out stunned by what we'd just seen, instantly and correctly hailed as a *capo lavoro*, a masterpiece.

I've seen it enough times now to watch dozens of other people go through this same change of mind, and maybe you do need to experience and savour its knife-edge of absurdity, and your own initial incredulity, to appreciate the movie's Wildean connoisseurship of the seriousness in small things. It beats me how some look down on this film as just one big, camp joke. *Far from Heaven* is much more than camp or pastiche. It is an incredible cinematic séance or even a secular High Mass, at which the real presence of the past is quite unexpectedly summoned up and made to live, spectrally, all about you.

The setting is the autumn of 1957 in the affluent small town of Hartford, Connecticut. Cathy Whitaker, played by Julianne Moore, is a beautiful but sobersided mother of two, married to Frank (Dennis Quaid), a ruggedly handsome, go-ahead executive at the Magnatech television company, who has, we are given to understand, seen active service in the second world war as a US naval officer. It is a blissfully happy family scene into which drama and tragedy have yet to intrude.

Everything about *Far from Heaven* playfully yet reverently alludes to the 1950s as a movie genre. The rich and digitally enhanced autumn leaves feature as tableaux, and as a discreet and tasteful design for the opening and closing credits. Elmer Bernstein's score imitates the lush foliage with its extravagantly emotional strings, later arranged with much emphasis on brooding keyboard and woodwind, dotting and crossing the drama's every "i" and "t". Mark Friedberg's production design is outstanding, surpassing his period work on *Pollock* and *The Ice Storm*. Sandy Powell's costumes are superb, especially for Moore herself who is allowed noticeably fuller skirts as the queen bee of her daiquiri-sipping ladies' circle, and some truly showstopping elbow-length gloves for a party scene.

But writer-director Haynes is able to make explicit an issue which could not be tackled by the Sirk movies at the time, and is still partly implicit in a modern and distinctively gay critical sensibility which treasures them now - homosexuality. Frank's terrible secret is that he has encounters with anonymous men met in alleys or in Edward Hopper-type darkened cinemas. Astonished by this discovery, and Frank's self-loathing and drunken cruelty to her, Cathy finds solace in a friendship with her black gardener, Raymond:

a cultured widower with a business degree whose appearance at a local art show scandalises the local bigots. It is a performance to which Dennis Haysbert brings a Poitier-esque dignity and poise.



So racism is the second theme. In this world, the black "help" silently take coats and serve drinks at cocktail parties, while boorish suburbanites unburden themselves of their reactionary opinions. But when Cathy earnestly assures Raymond of her support for "negroes" and the NAACP, Raymond is all charm and gentle tact at Cathy's maladroit token of solidarity, as if to calm the horrified frisson now running through the cinema audience itself.

Introducing race and sex into a genre in which they have always been understood to be excluded - showing what's underneath social and cinematic convention - creates a giddy heightened perception, like a drug. But there is something fundamentally serious about what is presented in this movie. Frank's tortured estrangement from his marriage, his coming to terms with himself, and Raymond and Cathy's doomed relationship are stories about human decency and human courage.

Irony or postmodernity are not permitted to undermine them. Cathy suggests to Frank they take a holiday in Miami as a break from the psychiatric treatment he is undergoing for his homosexuality, and he grimaces at her unthinkingly bubbly remark that everything there is pink. "Maybe we'd better not go, then," he smiles, and his heroic attempt at self-deprecatory humour is nothing like an arch wink tipped at the audience. It's a gentle, tender moment between man and wife. Later, Frank bursts into tears in front of his shocked children: his little boy is solemn and silent; his daughter bursts into tears too in uncomprehending sympathy and fear. It is a stunningly real moment of family dysfunction.

When Raymond and Cathy confront the real feelings they have for each other, the effect is just as visceral. Raymond admires the way she can see beyond the surface of things; Cathy asks if he believes that to be truly possible, and Raymond says that he does. They mean the colour of their skin, of course. But here Haynes is also showing his own hand, showing how his story goes beyond the surface of things, goes beyond artifice and pastiche. It is a sensational affirmation of how he has availed himself of these things as craftsman and artist, and yet transcended them. He has used them as a ladder which he has been able to kick away at the last, to produce a brilliant essay in history and genre: a radical dive into the past.

Far from Heaven is such a remarkable achievement - made possible by superb performances from Moore, Quaid and Haysbert - and probably uniquely so. It's difficult to see how it could be developed any further, unless a modern Japanese director wishes to duplicate its effect with reference to Ozu movies like *Late Autumn*. Todd Haynes has directed a miraculous picture which has dispatched the tired debate about postmodernism; he has given us a vivid human story and a compelling love-letter to cinema itself.

From: <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2003/mar/07/artsfeatures2>

Further viewing:

Independent director Todd Haynes has experimented with many different styles in his five feature films to date. After *Far from heaven*, he made *I'm not there* (2007), an idiosyncratic biography of Bob Dylan in which Dylan is played by six actors: Christian Bale, Cate Blanchett, Richard Gere, Marcus Carl Franklin, Heath Ledger, and Ben Whishaw. Before that, he also collaborated with Julianne Moore on *Safe* (1995), a critically well-received story of a housewife who appears to develop an allergy to all aspects of modern life.

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