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MELODRAMA MASTER John M. Stahl

"Perhaps the most significant factor in John M. Stahl's success . . . is his accurate understanding of 'the woman's viewpoint,'" a *Los Angeles Times* reporter wrote in 1931. Stahl's reputation as a man who made women's pictures would reach its height in the years that followed, with films like *Back Street*, *Only Yesterday*, and *Imitation of Life*. These movies were guaranteed to "make the femmes cry," as one *Variety* reviewer put it. But they came by those tears honestly, with a sharp focus on the contradictions that women faced in society and on the screen.

These days, Stahl (1886–1950) is probably best known for the dazzling daylight noir *Leave Her to Heaven* and for the fact that three of his films, *Imitation of Life*, *Magnificent Obsession*, and *When Tomorrow Comes*, were remade by that other great melodramatist, Douglas Sirk. But Stahl was no mere precursor. Where Sirk was hyperbolic and acerbic, Stahl's style was assured yet unassuming. Favoring medium shots over dramatic close-ups, his films observed improbable events and irrational emotions from a respectful distance.

This was a director who had the courage to take melodramas—and the people who watched them—seriously. This series dares you to do the same. Graced with several rarely screened films, it's a chance to reconsider an underrecognized career. And while you're considering, go ahead and get out your handkerchief. The movies deserve that much.

Juliet Clark

Series curated by Senior Film Curator Susan Oxtoby. Thanks to Todd Wiener and Steven K. Hill, UCLA Film & Television Archive; Paul Ginsburg and Jeff Pirtle, NBC Universal; Caitlin Robertson and Barbara Crandall, 20th Century Fox Library; and Katie Dintelman, Criterion Pictures. Thanks also to Mark McElhatten and Jerome Hiler for their programming suggestions.

THURSDAY / 6.18.15

LEAVE HER TO HEAVEN

JOHN M. STAHL (US, 1945) RESTORED PRINT!

Leave Her to Heaven is Technicolor melodrama stained with noir: it reveals the devoted wife and the femme fatale as two sides of the same character, the romantic dream as nightmare. Gene Tierney stars as a woman who, in her mother's words, "loves too much." When she tells her new husband "I'll never let you go," it's both a promise and a threat. The film's hysterical plot and lavish looks are tempered by Stahl's fundamental reticence. As the camera observes Tierney gliding sharklike in a pool or floating impassively on a glassy lake, the real turbulence stays just below the surface. JULIET CLARK

Written by Jo Swerling. Photographed by Leon Shamroy. With Gene Tierney, Cornel Wilde, Jeanne Crain, Vincent Price. (110 mins, Color, 35mm, From Criterion Pictures)

SATURDAY / 6.20.15

ONLY YESTERDAY

JOHN M. STAHL (US, 1933)

Only Yesterday unfolds in flashback from the 1929 stock market crash to the early days of World War I. A young woman (Lovely Margaret Sullavan in her screen debut) spends the night with a handsome lieutenant about to leave for the front. She bears his child and eagerly awaits their reunion, only to discover that he has forgotten her. She, of course, can never forget. "This sort of thing is no longer a tragedy. It isn't even good melodrama," says the heroine's thoroughly modern aunt (Billie Burke). Stahl's very self-aware film both supports and disproves that argument. JULIET CLARK

Written by William Hurlbut, Arthur Richman, George O'Neill, based on the novel by Frederick Lewis Allen. Photographed by Merritt Gerstad. With Margaret Sullavan, John Boles, Edna Mae Oliver, Billie Burke. (105 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Universal)

FRIDAY / 6.26.15

WHEN TOMORROW COMES

JOHN M. STAHL (US, 1939)

"I've never met a woman before who could make speeches, call strikes, serve pancakes, and look beautiful all at the same time," pianist Philip tells waitress Helen. But such unexpected conjunctions are all in a day's work for this film that manages to combine Depression-era labor struggles with dreamlike romance. Helen and Philip (Irene Dunne and Charles Boyer, renewing a pairing from 1939's *Love Affair*) take shelter for a night from a stormy world, but reality intrudes in the morning, in the form of Philip's wife. Based on a James M. Cain story, *When Tomorrow Comes* was remade by Douglas Sirk as *Interlude*. JULIET CLARK

Written by Dwight Taylor, based on a story by James M. Cain. Photographed by John J. Mescall. With Irene Dunne, Charles Boyer, Barbara O'Neil, Onslow Stevens. (90 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Universal)

WEDNESDAY / 7.1.15

SEED

JOHN M. STAHL (US, 1931) ARCHIVAL PRINT!

The Charles G. Norris book *Seed* was subtitled *A Novel of Birth Control*, but this adaptation makes a case for the virtues of motherhood. John Boles plays a would-be writer, Bart, whose ambition has been dampened by domestic life. A former flame (Genevieve Tobin) holds out the promise of escape from the squalling brood, and soon Bart's wife (Lois Wilson) is left to tend their offspring on her own. An admiring *LA Times* reporter wrote, "Dominating the picture is the feminine reaction to life. And this is Mr. Stahl's forte." Bette Davis puts in a brief appearance as Bart's daughter.

Written by Gladys Lehman, from a story by Charles G. Norris. Photographed by Jackson Rose. With John Boles, Genevieve Tobin, Lois Wilson, ZaSu Pitts. (96 mins, B&W, 35mm, From UCLA Film & Television Archive)



- 1 *Leave Her to Heaven*, 6.18.15
- 2 *When Tomorrow Comes*, 6.26.15
Photofest
- 3 *The Foxes of Harrow*, 6.11.15
Photofest
- 4 *Magnificent Obsession*, 7.3.15
- 5 *Imitation of Life*, 7.25.15

FRIDAY / 7.3.15

MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION

8:30

JOHN M. STAHL (US, 1935)

Robert Merrick (Robert Taylor) seems to be a magnet for morbid coincidences. First he's indirectly responsible for a great doctor's death, then the doctor's widow (Irene Dunne) is blinded because of him. But further chance occurrences, plus a sort of spiritual pyramid scheme, will set this callow playboy on a path toward redemption. Questions of life and death, power and payment hover over what is, at its best, a tender love story. *Magnificent Obsession* was remade by Douglas Sirk, but Stahl's evenly lit world of unlikely happenings has less in common with Sirk than with some imaginary hybrid of Borzage and Buñuel. JULIET CLARK

Written by Sarah Y. Mason, Victor Heerman, George O'Neil, based on the novel by Lloyd C. Douglas. Photographed by John J. Mescall. With Irene Dunne, Robert Taylor, Charles Butterworth, Betty Furness. (110 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Universal)

SUNDAY / 7.5.15

BACK STREET

6:30

JOHN M. STAHL (US, 1932)

Stahl adapts Fannie Hurst's bestselling novel into a surprisingly clear-eyed, quietly devastating story about what happens when a woman has nothing but a man, and not much of him. Bright, sought-after Ray Schmidt (Irene Dunne) falls for Walter (John Boles), but chance prevents them from pursuing their romance—until years later, after he's married someone else. The ironies in Ray's loyalty to her lover are keenly evident, as when she advises a neighbor against carrying on with a married man, then runs right back into Walter's arms. Yet, unlike many of the characters, Stahl seems to withhold judgment in favor of calm observation. JULIET CLARK

Written by Gladys Lehman, based on the novel by Fannie Hurst. Photographed by Karl Freund. With Irene Dunne, John Boles, George Meeker, ZaSu Pitts. (93 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Universal)

FRIDAY / 7.10.15

THE FOXES OF HARROW

8:50

JOHN M. STAHL (US, 1947) STUDIO PRINT!

In antebellum New Orleans, Irish gambler Stephen Fox (Rex Harrison) wins a plantation and a beautiful, aristocratic wife (Maureen O'Hara), but can he master them? With its tale of tumultuous romance in an opulent, overheated Old South, *The Foxes of Harrow* was seen as an answer to *Gone with the Wind*. But *Foxes* draws a darker picture of the Southern culture of power and property, suggesting disturbing parallels between marriage and slavery. The script was loosely based on a novel by Frank Yerby, the first African American author to sell a book to a Hollywood studio. JULIET CLARK

Written by Wanda Tuchock, based on the novel by Frank Yerby. Photographed by Joseph LaShelle. With Rex Harrison, Maureen O'Hara, Richard Haydn, Victor McLaglen. (117 mins, B&W, 35mm, From 20th Century Fox Library, permission Criterion Pictures)

FRIDAY / 7.17.15

HOLY MATRIMONY

7:00

JOHN M. STAHL (US, 1943) STUDIO PRINT!

This droll fable of class and authenticity reveals Stahl as a capable director of comedy. In pre-World War I England, celebrated and misanthropic painter Priam Farll (Monty Woolley) takes advantage of a case of mistaken identity to escape an impending knighthood. Posing as his own valet, he marries a middle-class widow (Gracie Fields) and lives in quiet contentment in Putney—until the insatiable art market finds Farll, and a scandalized nation is left to question the distinctions between gentleman and servant, genius and fraud. JULIET CLARK

Written by Nunnally Johnson, based on the play *The Great Adventure* by Arnold Bennett. Photographed by Lucien Ballard. With Monty Woolley, Gracie Fields, Laird Cregar, Una O'Connor. (87 mins, B&W, 35mm, From 20th Century Fox Library, permission Criterion Pictures)

SATURDAY / 7.25.15

IMITATION OF LIFE

6:00

JOHN M. STAHL (US, 1934)

Stahl's was the first adaptation of Fannie Hurst's tearjerking tale of two working mothers, one black, one white. (It was remade by Douglas Sirk.) Widowed Bea (Claudette Colbert) begins as a syrup saleswoman and eventually builds a pancake-mix empire using the special recipe of her maid and best friend, Delilah (Louise Beavers). While both women make sacrifices for their daughters, Delilah takes the deeper losses. As Delilah's light-skinned daughter, Fredi Washington plays the character's attempts to pass for white as an outraged refusal to accept her "place"—maybe the strongest proof that this movie is not just selling syrup. JULIET CLARK

Written by William Hurlbut, based on the novel by Fannie Hurst. Photographed by Merritt Gerstad. With Claudette Colbert, Warren William, Louise Beavers, Fredi Washington. (116 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Universal)

SUNDAY / 7.26.15

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

6:30

JOHN M. STAHL (US, 1944) STUDIO PRINT!

In telling the story of a Catholic priest sent to a remote mission in China, Stahl is less concerned with religious doctrine, politics, or culture than with the nuances of individual character. The young Gregory Peck garnered an Oscar nomination for his performance as Father Francis Chisholm, a humble Scotsman who refuses to buy converts but wins them anyway through compassion, tolerance, and common sense. Any risk of sentimental sanctimony is relieved by Thomas Mitchell as an endearing, unrepentant atheist and Vincent Price as an officious cleric whose ambition defines the difference between a career and a calling. JULIET CLARK

Written by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Nunnally Johnson, based on the novel by A. J. Cronin. Photographed by Arthur Miller. With Gregory Peck, Thomas Mitchell, Vincent Price, Rosa Stradner. (137 mins, B&W, 35mm, From 20th Century Fox Library, permission Criterion Pictures)