



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Laura

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Otto Preminger had come out of Vienna (born in 1906), the son of a famous lawyer, and himself qualified in law before he threw in his lot with Max Reinhardt and the theatre. That was in the early 1930s, yet *Laura* didn't happen until 1944. In the years in between he was not quite himself. Rather like that earlier Austrian Erich von Stroheim, he earned money from American audiences by playing stiff-backed Prussians – they were Nazis now. On Broadway, in 1939, he was a German consul in *Margin for Error*, and that was one of the films he directed ahead of *Laura*. But even then he only got *Laura* by firing its first director Rouben Mamoulian.

It was quite a coup. Darryl Zanuck had entrusted Preminger only as producer on *Laura*, but then started hounding him. Very neatly Preminger acted as if it were all Mamoulian's fault – so Zanuck said take over yourself. Just to add a zinger, Preminger told Mamoulian's wife Azadia that he wouldn't be using her portrait of Laura for the movie. He sent Gene Tierney to photographer Frank Polony and had a few brushstrokes laid on the surface of his photo.

According to Tierney, Preminger drove the cast and crew like a fury; he always had the reputation of a task-master, and that didn't help the world to recognise his very delicate touch.

Of course, any rehabilitation of Otto Preminger needs to recognise the dreadful decline in his work after the early 1960s. What happened that a very knowing producer suddenly lost touch with the public? I don't have the answer, but I can only surmise that if it looked bad from the outside it must have felt worse inside the intelligent being of Otto Preminger. From *Laura* to at least *Advise & Consent*, he is an immaculate stylist, a master of the moving camera and deep focus, and of keeping grouped figures in the same frame and spatial context. The style and the meaning are as one and – as with all the great directors – Preminger is advising us on the necessary way to watch his film.

To make that point more forcefully, come back to *Laura*, the 1944 film. In so many books and guides *Laura* is typed as a *noir*, and this is a useful place to ask for that label to be rested a little. Yes, *Laura* has a *noir* look (thanks to Joseph LaSelle, who shot six Preminger pictures). But it's not really *noir* in any thematic sense, even if it is a murder mystery. It's a story of love and possession. Think of it in these terms: Waldo Lydecker, a rich Preminger hero, has made Laura out of very little into a career woman and a social figure. He loves her, but he is gay. The film doesn't say that, but Preminger and Clifton Webb (in his movie debut) leave no doubt (and show no alarm – indeed, Waldo is a model of eloquence, taste and intelligence, things that mattered to Preminger). So Waldo destroys Laura rather than let her fall into the hands of some male thug who can't put words together or enjoy good wine.

Such a thug is Dana Andrews as the detective who investigates the murder of Laura Hunt, shot in the face. Andrews is an essential Preminger actor, a lead but not really a hero, and with a moral lassitude Preminger detected ahead of anyone. This detective is common and rough – he smokes and drinks, lolls on the furniture, plays a stupid ball-in-the-hole game. And *Laura* is a film about

class that has no sentimental feeling for this uncouth detective. He is fed 'Laura Hunt' night and day.

This leads to the brilliant scene at night in her apartment. He is there alone. He loosens his tie and throws off his jacket. He is too bored to read her private letters, yet he tosses them around like garbage. He goes to look at her bedroom. He is drinking her Scotch. He inspects her underclothes. He smells her perfume. He sees himself for a moment, coarse, in her mirror, and hurries past the spectre. He revels in his possession of her portrait. He sits down beneath it. The camera tracks in as he starts to sleep. It tracks out. We hear a door opening and there is Laura Hunt on the threshold, his dream come back to life.

It's a great scene, shot with a deep love of light and space, gesture and acting (as well as David Raksin's yearning theme). And now suddenly this cop has his dream love for real – and he turns on her. He tries to break her down. He proves to himself that she is just an ordinary woman – not the goddess Waldo saw. Ladies and gentlemen, I don't want to take away at all from your feelings for *Vertigo*, but I do think that the sado-masochistic element in character recreation is told here more swiftly, with more wit and in ways truer to life.

Long ago, in September 1962, the second issue of *Movie* magazine contained a superb appreciation of *Laura* by the writer Eugene Archer. Here he is on the warped dynamic between detective and 'victim': 'When Laura returns to life, he greets her tenderly, as in a dream; but almost immediately his attitude changes. Instead of a victim, she becomes a suspect; he accuses her, torments her and finally assaults her physically, brutally transplanting her from her comfortable surroundings to the stark interrogation scene in police headquarters, where beaming searchlights drench her face with illumination as he vainly tries to probe beneath the surface on his mystical quest for "truth". The interior meaning is obvious; the man hates her, and cannot forgive her for coming back to life.'

That is very good commentary, entirely justified by the picture. What is *noir* in *Laura* is only the fact of a killing and the ingrowing depression of the detective and the way he has justified his pessimism and brutality. The rest of the film is low-key, to be sure, but no more so than most Mitchell Leisen romances – and that is the world Laura Hunt wants to be part of.

Archer gives his knife one extra turn, and this had a very big influence on me: 'One can visualise their future – the tormented detective brooding into his liquor before the omnipresent portrait, while poor, unwitting Laura, the merest shell of his erotic fantasy, ponders her unhappy lot while washing his socks in her kitchen sink.'

Or, suppose he gives up the police force and joins the army. Then it's possible one day, I believe, that he might be an alcoholic sociopath while she tends to flirt with any man who notices her. In other words, the Laura who might have had hopes once of being a Madison Avenue socialite ends up in a trailer park or in a Michigan paper, in lurid close-up, with the caption, 'Was this woman raped?'

All of which is another way of saying that great directors build their world or their place, and like to use the same fixtures. Dana Andrews is in five Preminger films, Gene Tierney in four. Three cameramen – LaShelle, Leon Shamroy and Sam Leavitt did most of his pictures. And most of the good ones turn on the same thing: how can you look at a pretty girl and know how

far you can trust her, or yourself? This is a pattern that easily contains those other great works *Angel Face* (1952) and *Bonjour Tristesse*. By my count Preminger made seven great films (I’d throw in *Daisy Kenyon*, 1947, apparently a women’s picture yet one in which Joan Crawford nearly rids herself of a reliance on men). There were bad pictures, all the harder to account for when you realise what lucidity and control and enduring doubt or caution meant to Preminger. But when he is good, he is like Renoir crossed with Fritz Lang (another Viennese). One day we are going to have to recognise just how much thrilling uncertainty Vienna brought to the bloodstream of our movies.

These days we do not appreciate unlikeable characters in our films – unless they are spectacular murderers. But Preminger always did his best work with people just like us: the ardent, spiteful girl in *Bonjour Tristesse*; the devoted, vicious discoverer in *Laura*; the blank-faced psychotic who is *Angel Face*. And everyone in *Anatomy of a Murder*, all with their own reasons. If we ever regain adulthood, and recognise our flawed selves, then there is a chance that Otto Preminger will be known as a genius.

**David Thomson, *Sight & Sound*, May 2005**

**LAURA**

*Director:* Otto Preminger  
©: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation  
*Production Company:* Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation  
*Producer:* Otto Preminger  
*Screenplay:* Jay Dratler, Samuel Hoffenstein, Betty Reinhardt  
*Additional Writing:* Ring Lardner Jr, Jerome Cady  
*[Based on the novel] By:* Vera Caspary  
*Director of Photography:* Joseph LaShelle  
*Special Photographic Effects:* Fred Sersen  
*Film Editor:* Louis Loeffler  
*Art Directors:* Lyle Wheeler, Leland Fuller  
*Set Decorator:* Thomas Little  
*Costumes:* Bonnie Cashin  
*Make-up Artist:* Guy Pearce  
*Music:* David Raksin  
*Musical Director:* Emil Newman  
*Sound:* E. Clayton Ward, Harry M. Leonard

*uncredited*  
*Assistant Directors:* Tom Dudley, Robert Saunders  
*Camera Operator:* Lloyd Ahern  
*Camera Assistant:* Ray Mala  
*Stills:* Frank Polony  
*Transparency Projection Shots:* Edwin Hammeras, Edward Snyder  
*Associate [Set Decorator]:* Paul S. Fox  
*Pianist:* Urban Thielmann  
*Music Mixers:* Murray Spivack, Vinton Vernon  
*Research Director:* Frances Richardson  
*Research Assistant:* Ruth Fox

**Cast**

Gene Tierney (*Laura Hunt*)  
Dana Andrews (*Detective Mark McPherson*)  
Clifton Webb (*Waldo Lydecker*)  
Vincent Price (*Shelby Carpenter*)  
Judith Anderson (*Ann Treadwell*)  
  
*uncredited*  
Buster Miles (*Johnny, office boy*)  
John Dexter (*Jacoby*)  
Dorothy Adams (*Bessie Clary*)  
Kathleen Howard (*Louise*)  
Lee Tung Foo (*Waldo’s servant*)  
Harry Strang (*detective*)  
James Flavin (*McAvity*)  
Ralph Dunn (*Fred Callahan*)  
Clyde Fillmore (*Bullitt*)  
Grant Mitchell (*Corey*)  
Dutch Schlickemeyer, Lane Chandler (*detectives*)  
Frank Larue (*hairdresser*)  
Jane Nigh (*secretary*)  
Cy Kendall (*inspector*)  
Dorothy Christy, Alexander Sacha, Aileen Pringle, Jean Fenwick, Terry Adams, Forbes Murray, Yolanda Lacca, Kay Linaker, Cyril Ring, Cara Williams, Nestor Eristoff, Beatrice Gray, Kay Connors, Frances Gladwin, Gloria Marlen, Charles Sullivan, William Forrest  
  
USA 1944©  
88 mins  
  
Pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large (Wed 8 Sep only)

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Stranger

Wed 1 Sep 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by film critic Farran Smith Nehme); Fri 17 Sep 21:00; Fri 1 Oct 14:30

Detective Story

Thu 2 Sep 18:00; Fri 24 Sep 18:00; Sun 3 Oct 12:10

Double Indemnity

Thu 2 Sep 14:45; Sun 12 Sep 15:00; Wed 29 Sep 17:45 (+ intro by Lucy Bolton, Queen Mary University of London); Sat 2 Oct 20:50

Call Northside 777

Fri 3 Sep 20:40; Thu 9 Sep 14:30; Tue 14 Sep 17:50; Mon 20 Sep 17:50

The Hound of the Baskervilles

Sat 4 Sep 15:15; Thu 30 Sep 18:15

Cry of the City

Sun 5 Sep 18:10; Thu 9 Sep 18:10; Sat 18 Sep 21:00; Tue 21 Sep 14:45

The Undercover Man

Mon 6 Sep 18:10; Thu 23 Sep 14:45; Sun 26 Sep 12:00

The Big Sleep

Tue 7 Sep 20:45; Sun 19 Sep 11:00; Mon 4 Oct 17:45

Laura

Wed 8 Sep 18:10 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Thu 16 Sep 14:30; Tue 21 Sep 21:00; Fri 1 Oct 20:50

The Third Man

Wed 8 Sep 21:00; Fri 10 Sep 14:30; Tue 14 Sep 20:50; Sat 2 Oct 11:30

Rear Window

Thu 9 Sep 20:45; Wed 15 Sep 17:20 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sat 25 Sep 11:30; Tue 28 Sep 20:45; Tue 5 Oct 14:30

The Big Heat

Sat 11 Sep 14:30; Mon 13 Sep 21:00; Wed 22 Sep 18:00 (+ intro by Simran Hans, writer and film critic for ‘The Observer’); Mon 27 Sep 17:50

Philosophical Screens: Temptation and Coincidence in

‘Double Indemnity’

Wed 29 Sep 20:00 Blue Room

NFTS AT 50

Saint Maud + Q&A with director Rose Glass

Thu 2 Sep 17:45

The Last Tree + Q&A with director Shola Amoo

Sat 11 Sep 17:00

Il Postino (The Postman) + Q&A with director Michael Radford

Sun 12 Sep 17:00

An Evening with Roger and James Deakins

Sun 12 Sep 20:30

Absolute Beginners + Q&A with director Julian Temple and cinematographer Oliver Stapleton BSC

Wed 15 Sep 20:25

The Souvenir + Q&A with director Joanna Hogg

Fri 17 Sep 17:45

The Selfish Giant + Q&A with director Clio Barnard

Mon 20 Sep 20:50

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit + Q&A with director Beeban Kidron

Thu 23 Sep 18:00

Kurt & Courtney + Q&A with director Nick Broomfield

Sat 25 Sep 14:30

Theatre Girls + Q&A with director Kim Longinotto

Sun 26 Sep 15:40

Surge + Q&A with director Aneil Karia

Tue 28 Sep 17:40

Of Time and the City + Q&A with director Terence Davies

Sat 2 Oct 14:15

Rocks + Q&A with director Sarah Gavron

Sat 2 Oct 17:30

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