

# Trapped in the '50's

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [December 4, 2002](#) issue

To understand and appreciate the revisionist genius behind *Far from Heaven*, directed by Todd Haynes, one needs to appreciate the cinematic impact of Douglas Sirk (1900-1987), a director whose jaundiced view of American life played out in a series of films in the 1950s that have been rightly celebrated for their panache.

Born in Denmark, Sirk moved to Germany as a teenager, and eventually became an accomplished stage director. Movies followed, and he was on his way to a successful film career when the Nazis came to power. Sirk had always been left-leaning in his politics, and since his second wife was Jewish, he left, eventually landing in the U.S.

His American career proved successful (not, at first, with the critics), but he never was able to get over his sense that something was not quite right in this country. He came to regard America as morally complacent, inclined to ignore its developing class system, its racism and sexism, and its penchant for greed. He returned to Germany in the early 1960s.

Sirk's best-known films are *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Written on the Wind* (1956), which use screaming Technicolor, arched production design, ornate costumes and lush music to tell sparkling tales of moral ambiguity and personal deceit. These and other Sirk films were sometimes called "women's pictures" or "domestic melodramas." They often involved men who are living a lie and women deeply trapped by social roles--so trapped it takes a major shock to make them realize just how isolated and unhappy they are.

Haynes, 41, goes far beyond merely adopting Sirk's visual style and storytelling technique. If that's all he wanted to do, it would have been easier, cheaper and a lot more fun to set a Sirk-style tale in 2002. Rather, he goes back to the 1950s to dig a bit deeper into the issues that easily might have surrounded and stifled characters of that era. And by borrowing the cinematic consciousness of an earlier generation, he is able to merge the idea and the technique until it is impossible to separate the message from the messenger, the style from the story. In other words, by telling the tale through the prism of Sirk, he is commenting not only on the perpetrators of the

emotional crimes but also on us, the passive and fearful onlookers.

Julianne Moore (who also starred in Haynes's *Safe*) plays Cathy Whitaker, a seemingly content and upwardly mobile Connecticut housewife with a cheery smile, a fabulous wardrobe, a lovely home, a black maid, two obedient children and, best of all, a handsome and successful husband named Frank (Dennis Quaid). All seems right in Cathy's world until, in true Sirkian fashion, the layers of lies and deceit begin to fall off.

First, Cathy discovers that Frank is a closet homosexual. In her desperation, Cathy turns to Raymond Deagan (Dennis Haysbert), a sensitive and intelligent black gardener. They do nothing improper--certainly not by contemporary standards--but in 1957 Hartford their public chats in a black-owned restaurant are enough to ostracize Cathy and her two kids.

It would seem that Haynes's main mission is to take a slap at the racism and homophobia that permeated the white-bread suburbs in the 1950s. But as the stylized story plays out, we realize that both Frank and Raymond have escaped to greener pastures. Why are they allowed to move on? Because more important than the fact that they are gay and black, respectively, is that they are men. And as men, they are able to dictate, for better or for worse, what happens to them. Cathy? She is left to lick her wounds in private. (Even her best friend, Eleanor, brilliantly played by Patricia Clarkson, abandons her when the issue of race pops up.)

Haynes's style--via Sirk--takes a bit of getting used to, with garish colors, spotless locations and exaggerated performances, but once one gets used to it the film plays out like a specific type of tragedy, correct in its own way as a play by O'Neill, Ibsen or Chekhov.

A major part of the movie is Elmer Bernstein's musical score. The 80-year-old Bernstein is the only member of Haynes's creative team who was actually making movies in the 1950s, and he plugs into this world well, providing all the flourishes and crescendos.

Though some may cheer the film as an homage and others deride it as a rip-off, it is a wise foray into the cinematic past. It reveals that in matters of tolerance and acceptance, the more things change, the more they stay the same.