

Laura—both the 1944 film and the immortal David Raksin score that supports and, in the opinion of some, lends it classic status—is the ultimate in noir-ish Hollywood glamour: a dark masterpiece that somehow transcended all the difficulties strewn along its path to production to become one of the great exemplars of the accidental artistry of a largely commercial studio system. Not atypically, the film began with a mess—with several messes, in fact, the first being a swiftly written first draft of a play by prolific scribe Vera Caspary, sent to an Austrian immigrant director then desperately seeking a project. This was Otto Preminger, exiled (yet again) from Hollywood to New York after a nasty dust-up with Twentieth Century Fox studio chief Darryl F. Zanuck.

Preminger didn't actually like Caspary's play, but saw something intriguing in it and offered to help her with a rewrite; she frostily declined and decided to turn *Laura* into a novel. As the fates would have it, Fox was the studio that ended up buying the rights to her book (Preminger later and probably apocryphally claimed that he persuaded the honchos to make the purchase); by this time, the wily Otto—taking advantage of Zanuck's absence for World War II service—had wormed his way back onto the Pico Boulevard lot. He pounced on *Laura*, only to have Zanuck return during pre-production; while grudgingly allowing Preminger to produce, Zanuck sternly denied him the director's chair. Making the best of a bad situation, Preminger settled on Rouben Mamoulian to direct, figuring that Mamoulian's recent hits, *The Mark of Zorro* (1940) and *Blood and Sand* (1941), would ensure the confidence of the studio.

But in the event, Mamoulian had little feeling for *Laura's* shadowy narrative, which focuses on a group of New York sophisticates: a decadent dandy of a newspaper columnist-cum-radio personality, Waldo Lydecker (that non-pareil, Clifton Webb); a charming but parasitic gigolo, Shelby Carpenter (Vincent Price); a wealthy, proto-cougar socialite, Ann Treadwell (Judith Anderson); and the ultraglam young woman around whom they revolve like moons, Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney). As the film opens, Laura has (apparently) been brutally murdered by a shotgun blast to the face; we are guided into her urbane and seemingly classy world by an echt outsider, the police detective, Mark MacPherson (Dana Andrews), who is investigating her death.

From the beginning, Mamoulian had problems with the film's tone and with his cast, virtually ignoring relative newcomers Tierney and Andrews, allowing Anderson to chew the scenery, and offering little but barely concealed annoyance to Webb, who he hadn't wanted for the part (he had favored Laird Cregar, a choice that today seems positively awe-inspiring in its wrong-headedness).

All this carelessness apparently showed in Mamoulian's rushes; Zanuck called a meeting, at which Preminger proceeded to act out what he proposed as a more naturalistic approach (oh, to have been a fly on that particular wall). The executive responded, allowing the producer to fire Mamoulian and take the helm, himself. "Otto had an idea about the material, and he was right," Vincent Price would recall later. "The New York society depicted in the film are all darlings, sweet and charming and clever and bright—on the surface. But underneath, they're evil. And Otto understood this in a way that Mamoulian did not. 'Mamoulian is a nice man, isn't he, Vincent?' Otto asked me. And I said, 'Yes, he is a nice man.' Otto said, 'I'm not, and most of my friends are these kind of people.'"

In fact, *Laura* posits a world in which just about everyone—despite wit or wealth or beauty or charm—is capable of committing a cold-blooded murder. And yet, with utterly typical ambiguity, Preminger insists on presenting this world as deeply seductive. Reflecting his own taste for the high life, he gives us spacious apartments stuffed with fine art and French antiques, nightclubs packed with glitterati who make the folks on *Mad Men* look like pikers, and—ever so appropriately—a score that cloaks the director's icy Prussian precision with a dark, velvety romanticism.

Like virtually everyone connected with *Laura*, composer David Raksin came to the picture, as he would later explain, *faute de mieux*: for lack of anything better. Preminger originally wanted Alfred Newman, head of the Fox Music Department, to write the score, but, Raksin reported, "Al had heard the rumors [about Preminger's intransigence], so he declined the honor. Then, since Laura was thought of as a detective melodrama, he tried to fob it off on our irascible colleague, Bernard Herrmann. Benny reacted characteristically by refusing the assignment on the theory that if it was not good enough for Newman it could hardly be good enough for him."

Largely self-taught, the brilliant Raksin had found his way to Hollywood in the mid-1930s as musical arranger for Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936); what Chaplin would whistle and hum, Raksin would turn into full-fledged score. He was then consigned to jobs as arranger and (often uncredited) composer for what he called "grue-and-horror" films, along the lines of *The Lady in the Morgue*, *The Gorilla*, *Dr. Renault's Secret*, and *The Undying Monster*. *Laura* was his first major assignment, and it came about, as he noted, because "I was the next detective-mystery composer in line"—and because Newman, an inveterate talent-spotter, saw something special in the young man who happily described his own musical techniques as "far out."

Characteristically, the very independent Raksin nearly blew the assignment at the outset, attending an editorial screening at which the primary guest was none other than Zanuck, depicted by the composer as "a shrewd producer and a resourceful editor; above all, he was a powerful executive" whose judgment was rarely challenged. But challenge him Raksin promptly did:

I liked the picture at once, but was disheartened to hear Zanuck immediately zero in on an essential scene in which Dana Andrews, as the detective assigned to solve the ostensible murder, wanders disconsolately around Laura's apartment at night. This sequence had already been severely shortened, and now it was about to be still further reduced. There was a horrified hush when I was heard to interject, "But if you cut that scene, nobody will understand that the detective is falling in love with Laura."

"Who's that?" Zanuck asked his trusted head editor, Bobbie MacLean. But—every bit the astute picture man he claimed to be—he stayed to listen to Raksin's argument. "This is one of those scenes," Raksin told the redoubtable executive, "in which the music could tip the balance—tell the audience how the man feels. And if it doesn't work, you can still trim the sequence." "Fair enough," Zanuck responded.

Next, Raksin had to contend with his testy director. Preminger had already tried—and failed—to get the rights to two popular songs as a theme for *Laura*: Jerome Kern's "Smoke

Gets In Your Eyes” and George Gershwin’s “Summertime.” Now he was intent on using Duke Ellington’s “Sophisticated Lady.” Raksin boldly told Preminger that although he admired the tune and its composer, he considered it wrong for *Laura* “because of the accretion of ideas and associations that a song already so well known would evoke in the audience.” Raksin dared to wonder, further, if Preminger’s insistence on “Sophisticated Lady” might have something to do with the title and what it might suggest about the character of Laura. “‘The girl is a whore—she’s a whore!’ he stormed. ‘By whose standards, Mr. Preminger?’ said I, already enchanted by Gene Tierney’s beautiful face. In exasperation he turned on Al [Newman, in whose office the meeting was taking place]: ‘Where did you find this fellow?’”

Newman, as he was wont to do, came to Raksin’s rescue, suggesting that the young composer might come up with something interesting if Preminger would only give him a chance. Typically, in what Raksin described as “the lofty manner of King Solomon,” the autocratic director gave him a single weekend to produce the all-important theme for *Laura*. The story of how Raksin rose to the challenge is a famous one, told many times over. The gist: Raksin spent most of the weekend demoralized, both by the failure of “the dozens of themes” he had written and by the arrival of a “Dear John” letter from his estranged wife, which he had stuffed into the pocket of his work jacket (who has a work jacket? David Raksin!), hoping, as he put it, that “it would go away.” By Sunday night, his dreams of striking musical gold fading fast, he resorted to an old trick: “From the time when I was a boy, when the music wouldn’t flow I would prop a book or a poem on the piano and improvise. The idea was to divert my mind from conscious music-making.” Now he pulled out his wife’s letter, set it on the piano stand, and began to play. As the full import of the lady’s words came over him, Raksin recalled, “I felt the last of my strength go, and then—without willing it—I was playing the first phrase of what is now known as ‘Laura.’”

When he played his haunting and straight-from-the-heart melody for Preminger and Newman, “There was no further talk about ‘Sophisticated Lady.’” For Raksin and Preminger, it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship; they would work together again and again (*Forever Amber*, *Fallen Angel*,

Daisy Kenyon). As for Newman, he loved the theme so much that, as Raksin worked on the score, he kept encouraging the composer to return to it. At one point, Raksin protested: “Al, I don’t want to overdo it.” Newman’s response—“If you think the audience is tired of the melody by reel two, maybe you ought to think again”—determined the final course of *Laura*’s score. It would be, as Raksin wrote later, “monothematic ... there would be no other reiterated themes, merely needed fragments.”

And this is what we have here, on this extraordinary Kritzerland release: transcendent variations on what is, perhaps, the best-known, best-loved, and certainly one of the most frequently recorded themes in movie history. With sublimely misterioso lyrics added post-release by the incomparably conversational Johnny Mercer, “Laura” has literally hundreds of recorded versions, by everyone from Erroll Garner and Charlie Parker to Frank Sinatra and Julie London (yes, a woman can sing the song with superb authority). But as evocative as the lyrics are, it’s the music that makes the song—and the score—one of the most unforgettable in American musical and cinematic annals.

As Raksin, himself, has noted, it is a love theme presented in distinctly untraditional ways. Except in its frequent use as source music (by a restaurant orchestra, on record, on radio—when Shelby comments, “One of Laura’s favorites. Not exactly classical, but sweet.”), the theme is never allowed to come to a resolution, which maintains its sense of mystery: like the woman it describes, it is, in some sense, a wandering ghost, musically diaphanous, shimmering, ever-changing. Note, however, that the tune is in mostly minor chords, with a pronounced descending pattern: perfect for the dusky glamour of film noir. (It’s worth noting that the mystery of the melody extends to much musicological discussion about its key; Raksin has said, definitively, that it begins and ends in G in the film, but that he modulated the tune for the song, so that it began in G and ended in C—a device he considered unprecedented in popular song of the era.)

The score’s other mystery revolves around the “special effects” Raksin was determined to produce, particularly for the previously mentioned sequence in which the detective stalks Laura’s apartment, reading her letters

and diaries, pawing through her lingerie, gazing at her portrait, and realizing that, essentially, he’s fallen in love with a dead woman. Raksin’s intention here, as he recalled, was “to find a way of coloring [the theme] that would set it apart from versions heard earlier, during narrative flashbacks.” He settled on the idea of producing quaver or “wow”; to do so, he borrowed a technique—involving altered capstans on a recording device—used by Harry Leonard, chief of a Fox rerecording/mixing crew, to lend an old-age tremor to Gregory Peck’s voice in the film, *Keys of the Kingdom* (1944). Raksin devised a multi-step process in which he would record auxiliary piano chords, mechanically cutting off the instrument’s customary “attack”; add these to the *Laura* theme; then run the whole admixture through the machine with the altered capstans, producing an eerie vibrato. “Today,” Raksin would write, “such a procedure would be simulated with synthesizers (though not as effectively), but *Laura* was years before such electronics were available. In any event, my idea not only accomplished its primary purpose, which was to suffuse the scene with a haunting, mysterious sound, but also stirred up quite a flap among various composers who were importuned by their copycat producers to figure out how I had done it. For all I know, some of them may still be wondering.”

For all its technical legerdemain, the score for *Laura* remains a wonder for simpler reasons. It provides, first and foremost, the perfect support for a strange film peopled by fascinatingly, even shockingly ambiguous characters, with Laura herself at the top of the list. As incarnated by the exotically gorgeous Gene Tierney, with her razored cheekbones, slanted eyes, and husky voice, Laura is, in essence, an empty vessel: we know her only through the visions of those who surround and adore her. Johnny Mercer’s lyrics for the song hint at this: she is “a face in the misty light,” “footsteps that you hear down the hall,” “the laugh ... that you can never quite recall,” and, most tellingly, “only a dream.” Raksin gives us this indefinable, ever-shifting vision of loveliness in musical form: alluring but—with its rapidly wandering tonalities and irregular resolution—near-impossible to grasp. In the end, this is the essential quality of *Laura*’s extraordinary beauty: its very evanescence, fleeting, fading, a lustrous will o’ the wisp.

— Julie Kirgo