

The Wayward Pleasures of *His Kind of Woman*



Like many people, I have a fondness for several old Hollywood movies that nobody would list as masterpieces. Most of my favorites come from the 1950s, the twilight of the classic studio system, which was a less conservative and more artistically interesting period than historians have made it seem. Every few years I pull one out of my DVD collection and re-visit it like a familiar tune from the American song book or the cinematic equivalent of comfort food. Among these is RKO's *His Kind of Woman* (1951), supervised by studio chief Howard Hughes and starring Robert Mitchum and Jane

Russell, an acting team described by Lee Server as “the screen’s two greatest chests, together for the first time.”¹ For me it has special status--not as a guilty pleasure, a term I dislike, but as a personal pleasure in something that critics have seldom given four-star endorsement.

I’m nevertheless happy to report that in his January 1952 column for *The Nation*, the legendary Manny Farber, one of the most talented writers in the history of American film criticism, listed *His Kind of Woman* as the third best film of 1951, just below *Little Big Horn* and *Fixed Bayonets* and above such worthies as *The Thing*, *The Prowler*, and *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Farber was impressed by the “expressive dead-pans” of Mitchum and Russell--an oxymoron perfectly capturing the innuendo of two actors “who would probably enjoy doing in real life what they have to do here for RKO.” (In real life Mitchum and Russell were just pals.) He also praised supporting actor Vincent Price, “superb in his one right role--that of a ham actor thrown suddenly into a situation calling for high melodramatic courage.” (Always hammy and fey, Price is equally good playing a ham in *Theatre of Blood* [1973].) An incidental pleasure Farber especially enjoyed (and so do I) was Russell’s singing of “Five Little Miles from San Berdoo,” which he described as “high art of a sort.”² Six years afterward, in his classic essay “Underground Films,” he listed *His Kind of Woman* along with *The Big Clock* (1948) as praiseworthy achievements of director John Farrow, whose forte was “a fine motoring system beneath the veering slapstick of his eccentric characterizations.”³

Although *His Kind of Woman* is usually classified as a film noir, some commentators have worried about whether it fits the category: it not only has eccentric

characters but also high-key scenes, strong comic elements, and musical numbers. (Russell's singing of the romantic "You'll Know" is almost as good as the San Berdoo tune, and she originally sang a third song, which was cut.) They should stop worrying. There's no rule that film noir has to have shadows and a completely somber atmosphere--it's an amorphous category, and like all Hollywood genres can accommodate a variety of moods and settings.

In any case, whatever one wants to call *His Kind of Woman*, it was planned from the start as a slightly unorthodox thriller with an unusual romantic couple. Mitchum plays Dan Milner, a gambler who drifts through a diner, a cantina, and a glamorous resort, but who, unlike most noir types, never smokes or drinks. Russell plays Lenore Brent, a broke lounge singer masquerading as a rich playgirl; she's recently become semi-engaged to aging movie star Mark Cardigan (Price), who seems more devoted to hunting and fishing than to her. At the beginning of the film Dan suffers a series of troubles: he emerges from jail after serving time on a bogus charge, has his pocket picked, and is beaten by thugs. He's then called to a gangster's mansion, where he's offered \$50,000 to leave the country and live for a year in Mexico. Without knowing the reason for the offer, he accepts the job and is given a \$5,000 advance. On the journey south he encounters Lenore and travels with her to Morro's Lodge, an expensive resort in Baja, where an unidentified contact is supposed to give him further instructions.

At least half of the film consists of Mitchum strolling around the lodge in his panther-like, chest-out style and meeting various characters, some amusing, some sinister, any one of whom could be the mysterious contact. In addition to Lenore and

Cardigan, there's lodge owner José Marro (Philip Van Zant), who knows relatively little about his guests; Wall-Street broker Myron Winton (Jim Backus), whose chief interests are women and gambling; honeymooning couple Jennie and Milton Stone (Leslie Banning and Phillip Bergren), who seem troubled; novelist Martin Krafft (John Mylong), who plays chess with himself ("Maybe he hates to lose," Dan says); and a tough fellow named Thompson (Charles McGraw), who carries a gun. Then one stormy night an apparently drunken pilot named Bill Lusk (Tim Holt) flies to the lodge. He's actually a federal agent of the immigration service, who informs Dan that "novelist" Krafft is an ex-Nazi plastic surgeon. He also says that deported mob boss Nick Ferraro (Raymond Burr) has left Italy and is secretly on his way to the lodge, where he plans to eliminate Dan and assume his identity. Not long afterward, Lusk is killed by Thompson and spectacularly sadistic violence blended with slapstick comedy ensues.

I've omitted subplots--chiefly Dan and Lenore's growing romantic attraction and Cardigan's marriage problems and ultimate redemption--but I hope I've suggested the mixed moods and pleasantly meandering quality of the film. One reason for this mix has less to do with the film's original intentions than its wild production history. The opening credits announce *His Kind of Woman* as a "John Farrow production," written by Frank Fenton and Jack Leonard (more about Fenton later). Farrow did indeed direct the pre-release version, but Howard Hughes became obsessed with the project. He wanted to increase the violence and sadism of the climactic fight scenes and give more attention to the comedy of the Vincent Price character. In addition, he ordered a new beginning of the film, showing the exiled Ferraro brooding in his Sicilian villa and arranging to change

his identity. This opening changes the effect of the rest of the film: the audience knows from the start why Mitchum is sent to Mexico.



By this time Farrow had walked away, so Hughes had Richard Fleischer direct the new material with writing help from Earl Felton and Hughes himself, who wrote dialog for the plastic surgeon Krafft. (Mitchum and Russell's next outing for Hughes, *Macao* [1952], was also complicated: Josef von Sternberg started it and Nicolas Ray finished.) Fleischer, who is uncredited in the released film, initially turned down the job, but Hughes resorted to extortion: he refused to release Fleischer's excellent low-budget thriller, *The Narrow Margin*, until Fleischer complied.⁴ Hughes then had a set rebuilt for the fight scenes, changing it from the bridge of a yacht into a complete 150-foot vessel with fully equipped interiors. Once the fighting and torture scenes were shot, Hughes became dissatisfied with the actor who initially played Nick Ferraro (Howard Petrie) and had the everything reshot with another actor (Robert Wilke). Then he saw Raymond Burr in a picture and had everything reshot with Burr. The many reshoots inside the yacht so infuriated Mitchum that he exploded, beating up a stunt man and wrecking the lighting

equipment. Years later, in an interview with Gerald Peary, Jane Russell recalled, "It was a good film until they took John Farrow off and put in this nonsense at the end, the gore and needles."⁵

Richard Fleisher was a fine director, but Russell was right; except for some of the comic moments when Price comes to Mitchum's rescue, the charm of the film is due to its first three quarters. Farrow was a virtuoso of scenes involving long takes, depth of field, and the moving camera (assisted in this case by photographer Harry J. Wild), and although his style was more elaborately employed in the mostly high-key *The Big Clock*, it's pleurably evident here in the early sequences.



Consider the long take when the weary Mitchum enters his tiny walk-up apartment and finds three beefy men playing poker at his kitchen table. As usual in the sinister moments, the camera views the scene from a low angle, looking up at shadows cast on the ceiling; it barely moves as the dead-panned Mitchum circles the crowded room; then a fight suddenly develops, leaving him unconscious on the floor. When the thugs gather

up their money and leave, the camera tilts down to show a ringing telephone in the foreground.

In the next sequence, Mitchum enters a mansion, and the low-angle camera tracks as he walks the full length of a broad corridor, at the end of which he stops, drinks a ginger ale, loses a dime in a slot machine, and has a long conversation with two politely civilized gangsters. The most spectacular tracking shot, however, is the introduction to Morro's Lodge--one of the largest sets in 1950s cinema, beautifully designed in mid-century modern style by J. McMillian Johnson and decorated by Ross Dowd. We see a bathing beauty diving into the lodge pool as the camera tracks right along an open façade beside a beachfront and follows a waitress with drinks; she turns and the camera moves forward with her along a lengthy, luxurious bar, until it reaches a dance floor filled with couples doing the rhumba; then it pans left and moves forward as Mitchum enters from the wide, sunlit patio beside the pool, walks over to the bar, and orders a ginger ale.

Another pleasure is the dialog, as when Mitchum, after being beaten in his room, loosens his tie and tells his phone caller, "I'm just taking my tie off, wondering if I should hang myself with it." This was almost certainly written by Frank Fenton, who was also a writer (uncredited) on Mitchum's most celebrated noir, *Out of the Past* (1947).⁶ In that film, Fenton was responsible for a memorable exchange between Mitchum and Jane Greer: "Is there any way to win?" she asks. Mitchum replies, "There's a way to lose more slowly." For the same film he wrote another exchange between Mitchum and his innocent girlfriend, who says Greer "can't be all bad, nobody is." Mitchum replies, "She comes the closest."

Fenton was a gifted novelist who had a long career as a screenwriter. In the November 1938 issue of *The American Mercury*, he wrote a savage critique of the industry entitled "The Hollywood Literary Life," which served as a warning to aspiring writers.⁷ Unless the newcomer to the studio system was a celebrity like Chandler, Fitzgerald, or Faulkner, he wrote, he or she would need an unscrupulous agent, and would be placed on option with a salary less than the average schoolteacher. Furthermore, all his or her screenplays would be read by producers and directors who had ideas for scenes, or simply "touches," usually inconsistent with what was submitted and requiring convoluted rewrites by other hands. It was a mug's game, but somehow Fenton persevered, occasionally finding time to write novels while he made little-recognized contributions to films.

Fenton was an ideal writer for Mitchum's relaxed, wry, seen-everything style, which in *His Kind of Woman* has hipster overtones, as if Dan Milner (like Mitchum in real life) might smoke an occasional joint. Russell ends her rendition of "Five Little Miles" with a jazz-inflected "San Bernardino, man!" and Mitchum compliments her by saying "I'm hip." One of his favorite words is "man," as when he tells the gangster who offers him money, "I'm not knocking it, man, I'm just trying to understand it." Later, when Vincent Price says he can't figure out why Russell likes him, Mitchum says, "If she liked me, man, I wouldn't try to understand it." (While Russell is still pretending to be a millionaire, Mitchum kids her with a country-western accent: "Who's your friend the gee-tar player?")

Fenton probably thought up the film's most off-beat scene, ideal for a movie that enjoys going nowhere, when Russell visits Mitchum's room at the lodge and finds him ironing the money gangsters gave him. "Whenever I have nothing to do and can't think," he casually explains, "I iron my money." "What do you do when you're broke?" she asks. "When I'm broke I press my pants," he says. I suspect Fenton was also responsible for the scene (no doubt inspired by *Casablanca*), when Mitchum comes to the rescue of the newlywed couple. The young husband has been playing poker and losing a great deal of money to the Wall Street broker, who wants to seduce the wife. Mitchum, who has confessed to Russell that he makes a living as a gambler ("The way I do it, it isn't gambling."), decides to enter the game. By sleight of hand, he gives the husband four aces and backs him against the broker. When both sides bet all their chips, the broker raises by tossing his wallet on the table. "If you're betting leather," Mitchum says, "we call." He removes one of his big shoes and drops it on the table with a thud. "There's a thousand dollars in my leather," the broker says. "And there's a thousand in my leather," Mitchum replies, reaching into the heel of the shoe and pulling out a bill.

Most of the film alternates almost dialectically between shadowy, up-shot moments of suspense and laid-back, relatively sophisticated comedy. Mitchum and Russell are likeable as a tough couple with a sleepy, sexy attitude toward one another, who gradually realize how much they have in common. Howard Hughes does everything he can within the limits set by censors to give Russell costumes emphasizing her breasts; at one point she goes sun-bathing on the beach in a one-piece swimsuit, and

when she Mitchum to rub oil on her back his understated double-take is worth some kind of comic award.



The most overtly comic character, however, is the movie star Cardigan, played by Price, who gave Fenton a chance to satirize Hollywood. One evening Cardigan shows everyone at the lodge his latest film--an Errol Flynn-style swashbuckler in which he swordfights with villains and ends the combat by giving the leading lady a kiss. Sitting alone in the dark during the film and wearing a plaid dinner jacket, he squirms with prissy delight, applauding himself and occasionally looking around at the audience, which seems bored.



In his spacious rooms at the lodge he has a collection of guns and hunting trophies, and during the day he tries to emulate Hemingway by killing all the wild game in the area. Underneath his bravado, he's a narcissistic, rather feminine man with no apparent interest in women. Among his best scenes is when he invites Russell and Mitchum to his rooms for dinner. Clad in an apron, he lovingly strokes a plucked duck, which he aims to cook with sage, salt, and pepper (Vincent Price was in fact a gourmet cook). Suddenly his wife (Marjorie Reynolds) and his manager-agent (Carleton Young) interrupt the party. The wife has been to Reno for a divorce but has changed her mind. The manager reminds Cardigan/Price that "You're not as young as you used to be," and that publicity about his affair with Russell will endanger his faltering career. Price, still holding the carcass of the duck, lamely complains, "I've never been in love before." Russell slaps the manager, everyone exits, and Price looks mournfully at the duck in his hands. "It was going to be such a lovely dinner," he says.

At Hughes' command, Fleisher amped up the comedy involving Price at the end of the film, just as he amped up the violence to a point that challenged censors. For all his efforts, however, the result is standard melodramatic suspense mixed with slapstick. Mitchum is captured by Nick Ferraro's men and taken to the yacht, where he's beaten, blasted with steam, whipped with a belt buckle, and almost injected with a deadly serum. All this is cross-cut with Price coming to the rescue, seizing his chance to do in life what he's only pretended to do on screen. He grabs his rifle and hunts down several of the gangsters, quoting Shakespeare after every kill. Then he dons a cape, commandeers a

gaggle of unwilling and inept Mexican cops (the racial stereotyping of these characters is an embarrassment), and leads them in a raid on the yacht.



Some of the jokes during his adventure are far over the top, but Price emerges as a proud, wounded hero. The leading man and real hero of the film is of course Mitchum, who gets the opportunity to kill Raymond Burr.

The film closes with a scene that was probably in Farrow's original version. Bearing champagne, Russell visits Mitchum's room at the lodge and finds him ironing his pants. She asks how it felt when he shot Ferraro, and he replies, "I don't know. He didn't say." They kiss. It's a cliched Hollywood ending, like the one that closed the film-within-the-film, but it's also self-reflexive and deliberately unspectacular. It turned out to be slyly appropriate for Howard Hughes' promotion efforts. He advertised the initial release with a giant, fire-blazing billboard spanning Wilshire boulevard, showing Russell bending over Mitchum, her cleavage on display.



The original audience probably expected something very steamy, but what they got was a perfect ending for a noir romantic comedy: when Russell and Mitchum kiss, the camera pans away to the ironing board to show the unattended iron burning a hole in Mitchum's pants.

¹ Lee Server, *Robert Mitchum: "Baby, I Don't Care"*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001), p. 209.

² Manny Farber, *Farber on Film*, ed. Robert Polito, Library of America (2009), pp. 374-75.

³ *Ibid*, 487.

⁴ For details about his experience with the film, see Richard Fleisher, *Just Tell Me When to Cry* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1993). See also Server, pp. 209-16.

⁵ Gerald Peary, "Russell," *Film Comment* (24.4, July 1992), p. 31.

⁶ See Jeff Schwager, "The Past Rewritten," *Film Comment* (January-February 1991), pp. 12-17.

⁷ Frank Fenton, "The Hollywood Literary Life," *The American Mercury* (Nov. 1938), pp. 280-86.