

Released: 1944

Production: Otto Preminger for Twentieth Century-Fox

Direction: Otto Preminger

Screenplay: Jay Dratler, Samuel Hoffenstein, and Betty Reinhardt; based on the play and novel of the same name by Vera Caspary

Cinematography: Joseph Lashelle (AA)

Editing: Louis R. Loeffler

Costume design: Bonnie Cashin

Music: David Raksin

Running time: 88 minutes

Principal characters:

Laura Hunt .....	Gene Tierney
Mark McPherson .....	Dana Andrews
Waldo Lydecker .....	Clifton Webb
Shelby Carpenter .....	Vincent Price
Anne Treadwell .....	Judith Anderson
Bessie Clary .....	Dorothy Adams

It comes as a surprise to find that *Laura* was described in film trade papers of the 1940's as a "detective thriller." It is a sharply written, literate, and beautifully adapted film, made at a time when Hollywood was turning out some of the best entertainment films ever made. Although contemporary reviewers compared it favorably to *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Double Indemnity* (1944), it does not actually fit into that genre.

*Laura* is set in the sophisticated world of cafe society, ornate Park Avenue apartments, and expensive restaurants. As the film opens, the audience learns that the body of a young woman has been found in an expensive New York apartment, and, although identification is impossible, it is assumed to be that of Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney), who lives there. Police Detective Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews) is called in to find the murderer. He is a rather taciturn young man who at first treats the case as routine, remarking that "some two-timing dame" gets murdered in her apartment every day.

Laura Hunt's closest friend has been Waldo Lydecker, played superbly by Clifton Webb. Lydecker is a middle-aged columnist and critic, witty and sophisticated but also a waspish, vain egoist. Lydecker is obviously a suspect, but far from finding this an intrusion into his private life, he seems strangely flattered by the accusation: "To have overlooked me would have been a pointed insult," he says, and he insists on accompanying McPherson on his investigation. It is difficult to imagine any actor who could have played this role better than Clifton Webb, with the possible exception of George Sanders, who appeared in a remake.

The other major suspects are Laura's aunt, Anne Treadwell (Judith Anderson), and Shelby Carpenter. Shelby is being kept by Anne but has recently become engaged to Laura. They were to have been married that week. Shelby has his own strange moral code and claims he has not borrowed any money from Anne since becoming engaged to Laura. But it is clear that Anne is not going to give Shelby up, although she knows he is quite worthless. They have no illusions about each other and are well-suited. Vincent Price plays Shelby as a Southerner, making his weakness just charming enough to convince us that two women could want him.

Some of the film is in flashback, and it is Waldo Lydecker's voice that is used to narrate these sequences; through him we learn of his first meeting with Laura. She approaches him in the dining room of the Algonquin Hotel. Laura is in advertising, working on a campaign for fountain pens, and wants Lydecker to endorse one of the advertisements. He refuses sharply, saying "I don't use a pen, I write with a goose quill dipped in venom," but afterwards realizes that there is something very appealing about Laura. She is young, beautiful, and obviously at the beginning of her career, and the jaded Lydecker wants to see her again. He seeks her out at the agency and endorses her advertisement with an imperious flourish; and the two become close friends. Lydecker introduces Laura to his circle of acquaintances and is a great influence on her cultural development.

McPherson finds himself drawn back again and again to Laura's empty apartment, and he is haunted by the portrait of her which hangs in the living room. It is a picture of an exquisite young woman, exotic and desirable but very refined. McPherson is a stolid, unemotional man.

Lydecker, always alert for signs that men are attracted to his protégée, maliciously points out to McPherson that he is behaving strangely, more like a suitor than a homicide investigator. The detective has fallen in love with the murder victim, but somehow it is not distasteful as Preminger has handled the situation with great delicacy. McPherson is in love with a woman out of his class: not a "dame" but a lovely and successful young woman, unattainable, not only because she is from a different world, but because she is dead. Ironically he has been admitted to her circle only to solve the murder.

Dana Andrews is perfect in the role of the detective, underplaying to the extent that he hardly appears to be acting. McPherson should be out of place with Laura's friends, but he moves among them, saying little and manages to make them appear shallow and brittle.

The plot grows more complicated when McPherson is half-sleeping at Laura's apartment, and Laura herself enters suddenly and demands to know what he is doing there. She has been at her country cottage, without newspapers or radio, and knows nothing of the murder. She went away to think things over, presumably having serious doubts about her marriage to Shelby Carpenter, and is horrified to find herself in the midst of a murder case.

The real victim is model Diane Redfern, who has been using Laura's apartment for a liaison with Shelby. This discovery is treated in a rather detached way; the audience never knows the model and is not expected to feel her loss. It is enough that Laura is alive.

As the film progresses, the audience is drawn deeper into the mystery. Was the victim murdered because she was mistaken for Laura, or was it Laura herself who killed Diane Redfern out of jealousy? McPherson, who constantly plays with puzzles during the investigation, falls deeper in love with Laura, while, at the same time, he suspects that she may be the murderer. At one point he actually arrests Laura, but then lets her go when she tells him that she is breaking her engagement to Shelby. McPherson and Laura realize their mutual attraction, although few words are spoken about it; they share only one good-night kiss.

Lydecker senses that Laura has begun to return McPherson's love, and in the final scene, he is shot by the police after attempting to kill her. He explains that he could not allow his adored Laura to be "pawed" by McPherson, just as he could not allow her to marry Shelby. He had attempted to kill her before, but had mistakenly shot Diane Redfern instead.

In a sophisticated, eerie last moment in the film, Lydecker's radio broadcast ends with the words "good night," and an announcer informs the audience that the broadcast has been prerecorded.

One of the difficulties encountered in filming *Laura* was that the leading actress is missing for a considerable part of the screen time, and, apart from the occasional flashbacks, her presence has to be felt, not seen. A great deal of credit for the success of this technique must go to David Raksin, who composed the title song. It is an excellent example, perhaps the best ever, of a piece of theme music not merely tacked on to publicize the title, but used as a vital part of the characterization. Raksin was at that time a virtually unknown composer at Twentieth Century-Fox, and the score had been offered first to Alfred Newman and then to Bernard Herrman, both of whom had declined. Otto Preminger had wanted to use the song "Summertime" from George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, and when this proved impossible, he had wanted Duke Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady." Raksin had some difficulty with the score, but at the eleventh hour came up with one of film's most enduring musical themes.

Gene Tierney is very convincing, but her portrayal of the screen "Laura" is quite different from Vera Caspary's original "Laura." Why the character was altered is not known; perhaps Gene Tierney seemed too "nice" to play the amoral young woman that the character was originally described as.

The stage origins of *Laura* are apparent, and since there are virtually no exterior shots, cinematographer Joseph LaShelle was confined mainly to studio sets. It is unfortunate that little use was made of the city of New York as a location site, but despite this drawback, the film did receive an Academy

Award for Best Cinematography.

*Laura* has been remade twice, the first time in 1953 with Dana Wynter as Laura, George Sanders as Waldo Lydecker, and Robert Stack as the detective. This version was a television production, directed by John Brahm, and ran for only forty-three minutes; it was shown in the United States as *Portrait of a Murder* (sometimes called *Portrait of a Murderer*). A television production in 1968 starred Lee Radziwill in the title role, but this version was not well received and does not appear to have been screened again. Thus, the original *Laura* has taken its place as one of the best black-and-white films of the 1940's and has remained a viewing favorite for decades.

Elizabeth Leese