

# THE STRANGE LOVE OF MARTHA IVERS [1946]

by

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*The Strange Love of Martha Ivers. Directed by Lewis Milestone (assisted by Robert Aldrich and Byron Haskin), written by Robert Rosen from a story by Jack Patrick, music by Miklos Rozsa, cinematography by Victor Milner.*

The Pennsylvania factory town, Iverstown, is dominated by Mrs. Ivers. Her niece, Martha, suffers under her brutality. Young Martha's only friend, poor Sam Masterson, supports her attempt to run away. However, with Mrs. Ivers begins to beat Martha's kitten with a cane, Martha strikes her with a fireplace poker and kills her. Walter O'Niel, Sr., Martha's tutor, knows what happened but is willing to cover it up as long as he and his timid son, Walter, Jr., benefit. Through his machinations, the murder is blamed on an innocent man who is executed. Sam leaves town to return 17 years later. Walter Sr. is dead, and Walter Jr. is now the town district attorney and Martha's husband who she does not love. Martha is overjoyed at seen Sam again, but it sets Walter into a fit of jealousy. In addition, Sam is now involved with a girl from out of town, Toni Marachek. He tries to kill Sam but is easily disarmed. When drunk Walter falls down a flight of stairs, Martha urges Sam to kill him. When he refuses, Martha threatens to shoot him in "self-defense." Sam turns and walk out of the house. Walter, now awake, embraces Martha who manipulates the gun to kill herself. Sam, hearing the shot, returns to the house only to see Walker commit suicide.

There were many strong career women in movies of the 1940s – Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* [1940], Katharine Hepburn in *Woman of the Year* [1942], Ginger Rogers in *Lady in the Dark* [1944], Joan Crawford in *Mildred*

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*Pierce* [1945], to name just a few. But I do not think any of them ever had a scene that was quite as potent an expression of a woman's pride in her work as Barbara Stanwyck had in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*. Stanwyck's Martha is talking in her office with Sam Masterson (Van Heflin), a childhood sweetheart who has just come back to town. She asks him to look out the window at the grounds of the factory that she owns, and she tells him that since she took command, the work force has grown from 3,000 to 30,000. "And I did it all by myself!" she exclaims, not even trying to conceal her own exultation in her own achievement.

Of course, the movie *en toto* is far from an unabashed tribute to power-driven women. Most movies of the '40s ended by condemning women who subordinated romance to career. In *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, the left-wing screenwriter Robert Rossen and director Lewis Milestone meant to indict Martha as a ruthless capitalist. That may have been their intention, but the scene in the factory, like several others in the film, stirs more complicated emotions. Rossen always had a knack for creating complex and seductive villains (George C. Scott in *The Hustler* [1961] is another excellent example), and Stanwyck brings something to the part beyond what was written in the script. When she talks about how she built the factory, the infectious, insinuating lilt in her voice puts us on her side. With Stanwyck playing the villain, nice guys and girls recede. Not that *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*

has too many nice people in its cast of characters. In 1946 the Motion Picture Herald called it "a disagreeable story about essentially disagreeable people with criminal tendencies and above-the-law attitudes."

Stanwyck dominates the film's rogues' gallery; the hard-edged movie is a perfect showcase for her distinctive blend of fire and ice. She is sultry and inviting at some moments, and she is heartbreakingly touching when she expresses her genuine love for Sam and her yearning for the innocence she lost long ago. Yet her ferocity can freeze the blood. There is a great scene near the end of the film when she goads Sam to kill her alcoholic husband (Kirk Douglas), purring to him, "It can be so easy." The scene is played off Martha's face as she watches Sam approach her husband. At first her eyes are afire with excitement, and then we see her expression change to shock and dismay – not because Sam has killed his prey, but because he has decided not to.

Unlike most heroines of American movies, Stanwyck's Martha Ivers is a woman who takes charge. She even takes charge of her own demise in a classic film noir ending. When Sam finally rejects her, she is left alone with the husband she despises. As they embrace, he pulls a gun out of his pocket, but it is Martha who takes his hand, presses the gun against her own heart,

and pulls the trigger. This is a woman who won't leave important matters to men; she knows that she is the only one who can get the job done.

We can tell that *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* has a superior screenplay when Sam Masterson finally gets around to telling Martha Ivers that she has become just like the hated woman she killed seventeen years ago – the only script hint relating Martha to her domineering Aunt Ivers (Judith Anderson) has been a shot way back at the beginning where we think Martha is lighting a candle, and it turns out to be Mrs. Ivers. The film abounds in touches like this, that must have been engineered into the script.

The film is practically a film noir version of *Our Town* [1940] painted black with a hardboiled sensibility. The picture oozes doom and fatality as if Iverstown were some kind of evil Eden. Greed for money and power take the place of original sin, as the oppressive Aunt Ivers passes her curse down to the next generation. In a disturbingly emotional prologue, the old lady's body is not even cold before her self-appointed heirs (mainly, a local teacher and his son) enter into an unholy pact with Martha, the troubled teenaged killer. When we return to Iverstown half a generation later the entire community is dominated by the dirty secret of that night in 1928: Martha and Walter have inherited everything, but at the cost of their souls. She is an unfulfilled captain of industry while her now-husband is self-destructing from terminal self

hatred. The breezy Sam Masterson has no idea that he's entered Rotten City, U.S.A. The outwardly prosperous community is like the one described by Uncle Charlie in Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* [1943], with the house fronts that peel back to reveal the ugly secrets inside.

Many noirs create moods of corruption but Robert Rossen's script for *The Strange Loves of Martha Ivers* gives us characterizations of uncommon depth. Barbara Stanwyck's Martha makes a few noises like Phyllis Dietrichson of *Double Indemnity* [1944] but is far more sympathetic. As destructive and manipulative as she is, she is still the scared and confused girl who wants to kill Aunt Ivers. After suppressing the truth and living a lie, the only thing she really understands is self-interest. She and Walter hide a second, much more heinous crime directly related to their guilt – a truly ugly joint effort that was designed to lock them together forever. Kirk Douglas (in his first role and playing a weakling we hardly recognize) has consolidated Martha's power by taking the job of local district attorney. He controls the police and uses company detectives to enforce his will. Success in Iverstown is based on an ethos fixed by Martha and Walter O'Neil: The local mechanic can mistreat his customers and run illegal crap games in his garage, but a too-attractive out of town girl wearing an expensive coat is assumed to be a thief.

Martha and Walter are studies in perversity – he drinks to forget while she invents a new reality for herself by finding lovers. They're so caught up in their own corruption that they panic when Sam Masterson hits town. Sam was present on the night of the original murder. Although he just wants to get his new girl out of jail and move west, the O'Neills assume his intention is blackmail and put the heat on him. Van Heflin does not play Masterson as a heroic soldier back from the war. He admits he was a shady character and plays his cards close to his chest, amused when people assume he is working an angle. He makes knowing remarks about sex and the world to Martha when she takes him on a tour of her house. Their complicated relationship is immediately resented by Walter: He-man Masterson can take care of himself and is quick to establish himself as the biggest rooster in the room. It is a complicated dramatic tangle.

The only sign of hope is the fourth member of the quartet, Toni Marachek. Hal Wallis launched Lizabeth Scott the previous year in a now-rare but popular picture called *You Came Along* [1945], and Martha Ivers confirmed her as a star. Toni is the hope of the future, the reward for Masterson should he extricate himself from the Iverstown mess and make a better life for himself. Toni herself is on the edge of despair but she refuses to abandon Sam to the night lights of the evil city that Martha loves to look at from afar. As

she helps Sam escape, he warns her not to look back with the lesson of Lot and the Pillar of Salt.

Toni is the film's closest thing to an average person (an almost impossible task when played by the statuesque Lizbeth Scott). She has been pushed around and abused in life, first by her father and now by local cops and judges determined to brand her a fallen woman. She wants to escape to something better and she sees that hope in Sam, but the pain and coldness shows in her eyes too. It is a fine performance from an actress that receives compliments too seldom. *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* does not start from a position of neutrality – even the most innocent of the four has an unhappy stain of societal disapproval to remove.

*The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* has a solid hard-boiled sheen. Iverstown is a tough place where thugs call Sam out of a restaurant for a fight that turns into an ambush. O'Neil does all of his bargaining through go-betweens, and forces Toni to put on a mortifying charade. Everywhere we look we see authority being abused, and for a hero we have a tough guy who started as a runaway and still likes to play the odds. Sam has no compunctions about presuming that D.A. Walter O'Neil will get Toni out of jail just for the asking. Sam also likes to see people bending to his will, whether roughing up a guy at a bar or baiting Martha to see just how depraved she really is. By the time the



film is heading into its final act death scenes, tough-talking Toni Marachek is looking like the most honest person he has ever met.

The use of symbolism in this film is very interesting. Objects are constantly placed between people that signify their relationship. For instance, when O'Neil and Martha meet in his office and begin worrying about what Sam wants, a plant is placed between them, but the plant does not signify growth since the branches go out in all directions. Rather it signifies disorder, chaos. Perhaps the high point of the fine filmmaking is when Martha gives one of her evil speeches and a cabinet behind her head gives her a nice pair of devil's horns.

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