



## Written on the Wind

Directed by: Douglas Sirk  
© Universal Pictures Company  
Production Comany/Presented by:  
Universal-International  
Produced by: Albert Zugsmith  
Assistant Director: William Holland  
Dialogue Director: Richard Mayer  
Screenplay by: George Zuckerman  
Based on the novel by: Robert Wilder  
Director of Photography: Russell Metty  
Technicolor Colour Consultant: William Fritzsche  
Special Photography: Clifford Stine  
Editor: Russell F. Schoengarth  
Art Direction: Alexander Golitzen,  
Robert Clatworthy  
Set Decorations: Russell A. Gausman, Julia Heron  
Gowns: Bill Thomas  
Make-up: Bud Westmore  
Hair Stylist: Joan St. Oegger  
Music: Frank Skinner  
'Written on the Wind': Victor Young (*Music*);  
Sammy Cahn (*Lyrics*); The Four Aces (*Sung by*)  
Music Supervision by: Joseph Gershenson  
Sound: Leslie I. Carey, Robert Pritchard  
uncredited  
Unit Production Manager: Norman Deming  
2nd Assistant Director: Wilson Shyer  
Costumes: Jay A. Morley Jr  
*Cast:*  
Rock Hudson (*Mitch Wayne*)  
Lauren Bacall (*Lucy Moore Hadley*)  
Robert Stack (*Kyle Hadley*)  
Dorothy Malone (*Marylee Hadley*)  
Robert Keith (*Jasper Hadley*)  
Grant Williams (*Biff Miley*)  
Robert J. Wilke (*Dan Willis*)  
Edward C. Platt (*Dr Paul Cochrane*)  
Harry Shannon (*Hoak Wayne*)  
John Larch (*Roy Carter*)  
Joseph Granby (*R.J. Courtney*)  
Roy Glenn (*Sam*)  
Maidie Norman (*Bertha*)  
William Schallert (*reporter*)  
Joanne Jordan (*brunette in bar*)  
Dani Crayne (*blonde in bar*)  
Dorothy Porter (*secretary*)  
uncredited  
Jane Howard, Floyd Simmons  
(couple drinking beer)  
Cynthia Patrick (*waitress*)  
Glen Kramer, Phil Harvey, Coleen McClatchey,  
Carlene King Johnson (*college students*)  
Robert Brubaker (*hotel manager*)  
Bert Holland (*court clerk*)  
Don Harvey (*taxi starter*)  
Carl Christian (*bartender*)  
Gail Bonney (*hotel floorlady*)  
Paul Bradley (*maître d'*)  
Susan Odin (*Marylee as a child*)  
Robert Lyden (*Kyle as a child*)  
Robert Winans (*Mitch as a child*)  
Robert Malcolm (*hotel proprietor*)  
USA 1956©  
100 mins  
Digital

Too Much: Melodrama on Film

# Written on the Wind

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

### Laura Mulvey on 'Written on the Wind'

Sexual frustration is the driving force of *Written on the Wind*. When its director, Douglas Sirk, said it was 'a film about failure' he hardly did justice to the way pent-up, unfulfilled sexuality spills onto the screen and into the visual excess that has come to be regarded as his cinematic trademark.

The frustration is of two kinds: Robert Stack's Kyle Hadley drowns his sexual insecurity in alcoholism and Dorothy Malone, as his sister Marylee, tries to drown her unrequited love with promiscuous pickups. Marylee is literally frustrated by her family and the forces of moral order. Kyle's fear of impotence turns into fear of sterility after he marries and fails to conceive a child. The film responds to these frustrations by crowding the screen with answering images, from the overtly Freudian to highly stylised lighting, colour and décor.

This is not a kind of cinema that demands complicated psychoanalytic deciphering, but one that assumes its audience will absorb its symbols intuitively, sensing the visuals' emotional resonance more than that of the spoken word. Paradoxically, sexuality is so central to the content of *Written on the Wind* that it undermines its stars' usual erotic charge or fascination. For instance, Dorothy Malone's sexual display here is more a matter for empathy than enjoyment and although Rock Hudson is exquisite in the role of Marylee's love object, Mitch Wayne, his character is staid to the point of sexlessness. From the perspective of 1998, these scenes of frustration seem to produce a more spectacular cinema than scenes of sexual satisfaction – which may, perhaps, be arousing but are rarely visually interesting.

At the time of its release, however, in December 1956, *Written on the Wind* was hyped precisely for being 'adult' and dealing daringly with hitherto taboo material ('nymphomania, adultery, sterility, alcoholism, violence'). In an article, the scholar Barbara Klinger traced Universal International's promotional strategy which she describes as, 'one of the most intensive pre-selling campaigns ever mounted in [their] history.' The press reacted by describing WOW (as it was known in the trades) as, 'the frankest motion picture ever made.'

1956 was a difficult time for Hollywood. The studios were adopting every possible means to combat cinema's new rival, television. CinemaScope and colour could, of course, show up the visual limitations of the little black and white box. But the box was also limited in other ways. Located in the living room of the, generally, all-American home, it was expected to provide entertainment suitable for all the family. The movies fought back by offering something more sophisticated and, as sex became a selling point, the Hollywood cinema became more daring than it had been since 1934. There was also competition from abroad. 'Foreign' films that addressed adult interests and concerns came on to the market. Under these combined pressures, the Hays Code was relaxed slightly and modified in 1956, the time of WOW's release.

Douglas Sirk had only recently achieved A-picture status at Universal. Having carefully nurtured Rock Hudson in a series of smaller pictures, he finally found the opportunity to launch him as a major star with *Magnificent Obsession* in 1954. Paired with Jane Wyman in this so-called 'women's weepie', Hudson became big box office. WOW was the brainchild of Albert Zugsmith, one of the new independent producers flourishing in Hollywood as the old studio system came under increasing strain. Sirk had spent a long time in the wilderness as a small-budget contract director, suffering the double burden of exile and having arrived at the wrong time.

Sirk was in the very last wave of German directors who came to Hollywood, leaving in 1939 and only making his first American film in 1942. That he had made extremely successful films at UFA during the Nazi period and was not himself Jewish set him apart from the main body of exiles. But he was, in many ways, supremely prepared for work in Hollywood. Like so many European intellectuals whose tastes were formed in the 20s, he was already fascinated by the contradictions of American culture. Hollywood cinema personified that particularly

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American achievement, the combination of modernity and kitsch. Furthermore, Sirk had worked in an industry that restricted personal and aesthetic freedom. His German films 'bend' their stories, take refuge in formal inflections, and 'struggle against the grain' in ways that foreshadow the terms of critical reappraisal used by the auteur theorists for their favoured Hollywood directors.

The connecting threads between *WOW* and Sirk's earlier, fragmented, careers, both German and American, are slight but still residually perceptible. Although he is usually associated with women's films and melodramas, Sirk's most interesting movies have masculinity and male crisis at their core. Sirk's favourite star of his German period was Willy Birgel, whose qualities he describes as 'doubtful, ambiguous, uncertain' and whose lack of moral courage in *Zu Neuern Ufern* finally drives him to suicide. There, in 1937, after a tracking shot across the shadowy room, Birgel's reflection appears on a darkened window in an image that echoes across the decades to Robert Stack's despairing confrontation with his own reflection in 1956. In *Written on the Wind*, the melodrama is heightened. Stack flings his glass of whisky at the mirror before driving off in his sports car through the landscape of pumping oil wells. And in between these two is Sirk's other favourite star, George Sanders (who sustained his early American career). Sirk described him, in *Scandal in Paris* for example, as having 'a great capacity for understanding in-between values, being an in-between person himself. He got all the vacillation of the character, its irony.'

Like many directors in the studio-system days, Sirk paced his Hollywood movies. Certain scenes receive meticulous care and are expanded and elaborated with detailed *mise-en-scène*, camera moves and colour-coding. *WOW*, however, is particularly well colour-coded throughout. In the opening scenes of the movie, Lauren Bacall and Robert Stack are dressed in almost matching blue-grey suits which echo the significance of their pre-wedding plane ride to Miami, 'up in the blue' (as Stack puts it). The colour separates them from Hudson, who is dressed in brown, his key colour throughout the film. Passers-by in Miami airport are kept within these tones. As Bacall switches her affection from Stack to Hudson towards the end of the film, her colour-coding subtly changes.

But the scale of *WOW* also allows Sirk the scope to build key scenes in which his style could achieve its characteristic use of *mise-en-scène*. The Miami hotel sequence is beautifully patterned around five scenes in which Kyle's expectant arrival at the hotel and his attempted seduction of Lucy with a suiteful of finery are rhymed with his subsequent disappointment. As Kyle shows Lucy around the suite, the place of the bed is underlined. Melodramatic music accompanies its arrival, white and carefully illuminated, in the background of the shot.

And Sirk introduces one of his favourite visual motifs, the mirror which creates another plane within the surface of the shot, here ironically reflecting Hudson as he lounges, watching in the background, his image inserted between Kyle and the woman he loves. The best-known visual feature of *Written on the Wind* is the large hall in the Hadley mansion, with mirrors on both sides and the famous 48-step Universal staircase in deep-focus in the background. Sirk makes multiple use of the staircase in the film's key scene: as Marylee's jazzy music blasts through the house, accompanying her wild solo dance, Mr Hadley climbs slowly up the stairs towards her bedroom, only to fall to his death from the top. The intercutting of the two spaces creates a montage sequence that was rare in studio-system Hollywood; the literal 'poetics of space' is transformed into the space of pure cinema.

In *Written on the Wind*, and his following film with Zugsmith, *The Tarnished Angels* (1958), Sirk built up the parts of his second-rank stars, Stack and Malone. Both deliver their sometimes clumsy lines with bravado, bringing an ironic inflection to the script. Lauren Bacall, on the other hand, sleepwalks through the film. Her part, of course, is her real problem. Fassbinder, in a great article 'Six Films by Douglas Sirk' sums up the film in the following terms: '[Lauren Bacall] makes us more and more sick and we can see more and more clearly how well she would get on with Rock Hudson who also makes us feel sick and is also noble... In *Written on the Wind*, the good, the "normal" and the beautiful are always utterly revolting; the evil, the weak and the dissolute arouse our compassion.'

Laura Mulvey, *Sight and Sound*, February 1998