

Hot Spell/The Matchmaker

How many women star in their first movie at age fifty-four – and win an Oscar for doing so? Well, that's what happened to Shirley Booth when she made her film debut for Paramount, reprising her Tony Award-winning role in William Inge's *Come Back, Little Sheba*. Booth had already had a hugely successful theatre career and stage work is what she preferred, making only a total of five films before going on to become a TV star in the hit series *Hazel*. She made her final two films in 1958 and both of them are represented on this world premiere CD release.

Hot Spell, based on a novel by Lonnie Coleman, had a powerhouse cast; in addition to Booth, the film starred Anthony Quinn, Shirley MacLaine, Earl Holliman and Eileen Heckart. The story concerns a loving and devoted housewife, Alma Duval (Booth), who clings to the past when things were simpler and better and who tries to cling to her philandering husband (Quinn). She also tries to cling to her three grown, not-so-loving children (MacLaine, Holliman, and Clint Kimbrough), but it's all a fantasy. Alma would like nothing more than to escape into the past, to get out of the city and its sweltering heat and back to her happier times, 20 years ago. Her husband eventually takes a powder with another woman and it ends tragically. But Alma learns that you can't go home again and finally accepts that life must go on.

The film's screenplay by James Poe is clearly in Tennessee Williams and William Inge territory. Booth has a field day with her role – delusional, flighty, and eternally optimistic in the face of the drama around her. She'd already made two films with *Hot Spell*'s director, Daniel Mann – *Come Back, Little Sheba* and *About Miss Leslie*. Quinn is powerful in his role as someone who doesn't want to be clung to and whose mid-life crisis results in tragedy for everyone. MacLaine was wonderfully fresh and unique at this point in her career – there wasn't anyone else quite like her working in movies – and Holliman and Heckart both shine.

The score for *Hot Spell* was by the brilliant Alex North. By that point in his career, North had been composing for Hollywood films since 1951, when he came out swinging with three incredible scores – *The 13th Letter*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Death of a Salesman* (he received Oscar nominations for both *Streetcar* and *Salesman*). He

went on to do amazing scores for films like *Viva Zapata!*, *The Rose Tattoo*, *I'll Cry Tomorrow*, *The Bad Seed*, *The Rainmaker* and *The Long, Hot Summer*. Subsequent to *Hot Spell*, he continued to write unique and brilliant scores for films like *The Wonderful Country*, *Spartacus* (his magnum opus), *The Misfits*, *Cleopatra*, *The Children's Hour*, *All Fall Down*, *Cheyenne Autumn*, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, the TV miniseries *Rich Man, Poor Man* – right into the 1980s with *Carny*, *Prizzi's Honor* and *The Dead*. And he's one of the few film composers who have had the good fortune to write a huge pop hit – “Unchained Melody” – one of the most enduring pop classics ever written. Nominated for fifteen Academy Awards, North never won, but was given an honorary Oscar in 1986.

North's *Hot Spell* score is all yearning, delusion and heartbreak. His music is truly the spine of the film and illuminates the drama and the characters – their hopes, their dreams, their heartaches. Thanks to North and the actors (as well as the excellent writing and directing), what could have easily devolved into a melodramatic potboiler becomes a compelling character-driven drama.

Shirley Booth's other star turn that year was the polar opposite of *Hot Spell*: the delightful film adaptation of Thornton Wilder's popular stage success, *The Matchmaker*. *The Matchmaker* has a rather unusual and colorful lineage. It began life as a one-act play written in 1835 by John Oxenford, entitled *A Day Well Spent*. In 1842, the one-act was turned into a full-length play called *Einen Jux will er sich machen* by Austrian playwright Johann Nestroy. Flash forward to 1938 – when playwright Thornton Wilder adapted the Austrian play into *The Merchant of Yonkers*, which was a 39-performance dud on Broadway. In 1954, director Tyrone Guthrie became interested in doing the play, and Wilder rewrote it extensively, retitling it *The Matchmaker*. The most significant change he made was taking a secondary character named Dolly Gallagher Levi and making her the lead. That version opened on Broadway in 1955 and ran for 486 performances.

Three years later, Paramount brought it to the screen, starring Booth as Dolly Gallagher Levi, Paul Ford as Horace Vandergelder, Anthony Perkins as Cornelius,

Shirley MacLaine as Irene, and Robert Morse reprising his stage role as Barnaby. The screenplay was by the great John Michael Hayes (*Rear Window*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*) and the film was directed by Joseph Anthony, who, the year before, had brought the play *The Rainmaker* to the screen for Paramount. Of course, it would be just a few years later when *The Matchmaker* would undergo yet another transformation, this time being turned into a big, splashy hit Broadway musical, *Hello, Dolly!*

The film of *The Matchmaker* is a wonderful, charming comedy, with expert performances by the entire cast. Helping the fun immeasurably is the score by Adolph Deutsch, which captures the homespun Americana beautifully. His music includes quotes from traditional music of the era (“Buffalo Gals”), but is also filled with his own wonderful, melodic themes. Deutsch wittily underscores the monologues of various characters delivered straight to the camera, or budding love, and Dolly's machinations to bring everyone together in blissful happiness – including her own.

Deutsch was a really unsung film composer, especially considering the large number of huge hit films he worked on. Although his name is not that well known today, he wrote some absolutely stellar scores during his long career, including the music for such all-time classics as *They Drive by Night*, *High Sierra*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Mask of Dimitrios*, *Father of the Bride*, *Tea and Sympathy*, *Some Like it Hot* and *The Apartment*. He also worked on quite a few classic musicals, including *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *The Band Wagon*, *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma!* and *Funny Face*. During his long career, he took home three Academy Awards (*Annie Get Your Gun*, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* and *Oklahoma!*). Deutsch retired from film in 1961 and passed away in 1980 at the ripe old age of 83.

So, two great Golden Age scores – one steamy and tragic, one charming and delightful – by two great composers: Alex North and Adolph Deutsch.

— Bruce Kimmel