

A Place in the Sun

“I LOVE YOU.
I’VE LOVED YOU
SINCE THE FIRST MOMENT
I SAW YOU.
I GUESS MAYBE
I’VE EVEN LOVED YOU
BEFORE I SAW YOU.”

Theodore Dreiser’s novel *An American Tragedy* was published in 1925 and became hugely popular despite its two-volume length. The book was based on a real-life criminal case from 1906 that had fascinated Dreiser for years. The novel was so popular that the following year it was dramatized for the stage by Patrick Kearney, premiering on Broadway on October 11, 1926, at the Longacre Theatre. In the late 1920s, filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein did a screenplay for the film, which he hoped to produce during his Hollywood stay in 1930. It didn’t happen, but the following year Paramount Pictures brought *An American Tragedy* to the screen, directed by Josef von Sternberg. That film version was not a hit with either critics or audiences – or Theodore Dreiser. It took another twenty years for Paramount to revisit *An American Tragedy*, but this time everything came together in perfect harmony to create what is certainly one of the greatest movies ever made.

Thanks to a perfect cast, perfect direction and an excellent screenplay, the story of a poor working class young man who comes to work for his wealthy uncle and gets embroiled in relationships with two very different women – one a fellow worker, and one a stunningly beautiful socialite – resonated with audiences and critics. The perfect direction was by George Stevens, who’d already made several other perfect movies, including *Swing Time*, *Gunga Din*, *Penny Serenade*, *Woman of the Year*, *The Talk of the Town*, *The More the Merrier*, to name but a few. The excellent screenplay was by Michael Wilson and Harry Brown, and the perfect cast included iconic performances by Montgomery Clift, Elizabeth Taylor and Shelley Winters, along with a great cast of supporting players that included Anne Revere, Fred Clark, Raymond Burr, Keefe Brasselle, Herbert Heyes, Shepperd Strudwick and Ted de Corsia.

The film was shot in 1949 and was originally going to be released the following year. However, Paramount delayed release until 1951 so it wouldn’t have two blockbuster hits competing against each other in the 1950 Academy Awards (the other blockbuster being Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Blvd.*). Director Stevens used the extra time to edit and fine-tune the film. When it finally came out it was an instant hit

with critics and audiences – one of those movies that enters film history on its first day. At Academy Awards time the film received a whopping nine nominations and took home the prize for six of them (Best Director; Best Writing, Screenplay; Best Cinematography, Black-and-White; Best Costume Design, Black-and-White; Best Film Editing; and Best Music, Scoring of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture). Its only losses were in the Best Actor, Best Actress and Best Picture categories – but it was a very strong year and Humphrey Bogart (for *The African Queen*), Vivien Leigh (for *A Streetcar Named Desire*) and *An American in Paris* won those three awards.

From the opening shot of Montgomery Clift (one of the greatest star close-ups ever) to the rhapsodic close-ups of Clift and (stunningly beautiful) Elizabeth Taylor in any number of scenes, and with the high-toned world of the rich contrasted with the drab and dreary dwellings of the not-so-fortunate, the hand of a master director is evident. The Oscar-winning camerawork of William C. Mellor has some of the most beautiful close-ups ever put on film. But it would be difficult to imagine *A Place in the Sun* without its brilliant Franz Waxman score, distinguished by what is surely one of film music’s most beautiful and exquisite main themes.

Franz Waxman had already composed some of the greatest film music ever written, starting way back with *The Bride of Frankenstein*, and continuing through such high spots as *Rebecca*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Woman of the Year*, *Old Acquaintance*, *Dark Passage*, *The Paradine Case*, *Sorry, Wrong Number*, *Alias Nick Beal*, *Night and the City*, *Sunset Blvd.*, *The Furies* and *Dark City* – which is just scratching the surface of his output up until that time.

The heart and soul of Waxman’s score is “Vickers Theme,” and it recurs throughout the score in many guises. It’s a stunning theme and one that captures the essence of the film with sublime perfection. But *all* of Waxman’s music for the film is sublime – there’s really not much more to say than that because the proof is in the hearing. This is film music as film music is meant to be – not padding, not filler, not sound design – film music designed to underscore the images on screen, the characters, the drama.

The delay in release enabled director George Stevens to keep tinkering with the editing and, in so doing, he decided that a few cues would need to be re-scored. Since Waxman did an astonishing seven films in 1951, it was probably impossible for him to do the re-scoring himself, so Daniele Amfitheatrof and Victor Young were both enlisted to perform the task. (It certainly

was not the first time this had happened in the movie business, and it wouldn’t be the last.) Both composers honored and adhered closely to Waxman’s music. Some of their work consists merely of subtle rearrangements of the original cue, often involving “Vickers Theme.” Occasionally it’s a bit more than that, but again, it’s always of a piece with what Waxman had originally written. If that weren’t the case the score would seem like a patchwork, and it most certainly does not.

The composer’s son, John Waxman, tells a wonderful story: “In 1958, Waxman conducted the West Coast premiere of Dimitri Shostakovich’s Eleventh Symphony. While studying the score he noticed a striking resemblance between the end of the second movement and the chase fugue in his *A Place in the Sun* Suite written seven years earlier. Waxman knew full well that Shostakovich could not possibly have seen the film (since it had not been shown in the Soviet Union), and was genuinely amused at this strange coincidental quirk of musical fate.” Which just goes to show: great minds think alike.

It’s a good thing Paramount *did* delay the release of *A Place in the Sun* or Franz Waxman would have been competing with himself at the Oscars. The delay, however, enabled him to do what no film composer had done up until then – win the Oscar two years in a row. And some of Waxman’s greatest achievements were yet to come – the next decade would produce some of the greatest film music ever written by one man, including *My Cousin Rachel*, *Prince Valiant*, *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, *Rear Window*, *Mister Roberts*, *The Spirit of St. Louis*, *Sayonara*, *Peyton Place*, *The Nun’s Story* and *Taras Bulba*. It’s probably safe to say that it’s not really possible to think of film music without thinking of the name Franz Waxman. He was simply the *crème de la crème*, and *A Place in the Sun* is one of his true masterworks.

This world premiere release of the surviving *A Place in the Sun* music masters stored in the Paramount vaults – augmented by a few cues from the music and effects tracks – adds up to over fifty-one minutes of glorious music. Our wizard audio restoration man, Chris Malone, did amazing work on the cues taken from the masters, and – for the others – was somehow magically able to keep the music and eliminate the effects while never compromising the audio quality. Several cues are in the original form in which they were written by Waxman, and some are the re-scored versions.

— Bruce Kimmel