

# PREMINGER AT FOX

Otto Ludwig Preminger was born on December 5, 1905. In his late teens, he was mentored by the legendary theatre director, Max Reinhardt, and then began his young life in the theater. In 1935 fate came calling in the person of producer Joseph Schenk, who, with his partner Daryl F. Zanuck, were looking for new talent to bring to Twentieth Century-Fox. The meeting obviously went well, since Preminger was immediately signed to work for Fox.

Thus began his tenure at the studio, where he directed some low budget features. But his already notorious temper was beginning to be in evidence and he and Zanuck had a tremendous row that ended up with Preminger storming out and slamming the door in his boss's face, at which point Zanuck had the locks changed on Preminger's office, his name removed, and his parking space banished to a far corner of the lot. Zanuck tried to buy Preminger out of the rest of his contract, but Preminger wouldn't have it and insisted he be paid throughout the remainder of the contract.

Preminger returned to the theater, where he had several successes, including a well-regarded turn as an actor in a play called *Margin for Error*. Due to that success, writer Nunnally Johnson offered Preminger a role in the film *The Pied Piper*, which Preminger accepted. The studio? Twentieth Century-Fox. Zanuck was, at the time, in the Army, having signed up right after Pearl Harbor. When the film version of *Margin for Error* was announced (to be directed by Ernst Lubitsch), Preminger was approached to reprise his role – also for Fox. When Lubitsch withdrew from the film, Preminger somehow convinced the powers-that-be that he should direct and direct he did. After that, and still in Zanuck's absence, he made another film, *In the Meantime, Darling*. And he'd found a project to develop that he would also direct – Vera Caspary's novel, *Laura*.

Zanuck returned, and even though he forgave Preminger, he wouldn't let him direct *Laura* – he could produce it while Rouben Mamoulian would be in the director's chair. But things didn't work out with Mamoulian and Preminger took over the film and the rest is film history. *Laura* was an instant hit with critics and audiences, Preminger received an Oscar nomination, and he was on his way as an A-list director.

After one film that Zanuck made him do, *A Royal Scandal*, where he took over for an ailing Ernst Lubitsch, Preminger began making a series of films that would cement his position as a world-class director.

For *Preminger at Fox*, we concentrate on five films, all of which were released on DVD under the Fox Film Noir umbrella. While one could argue about the use of the word noir in one in-

stance, all five films have the look and feel of noir, they're all very much of a piece and they're all brilliantly directed.

First up on CD 1 is *Fallen Angel* (1945), based on the novel by Marty Holland (who turned out to be Mary Holland). The film starred Dana Andrews, Alice Faye, Linda Darnell and Charles Bickford. *Fallen Angel* has all the classic noir ingredients – a down-at-the-heels drifter, a sultry siren that men will do anything for, an innocent nice girl, a tough cop, and various other archetypes. For *Fallen Angel*, Preminger was working once again with cameraman Joseph LaShelle, whose photography is just as beautiful as it was in Preminger's *Laura*. And back again was *Laura* composer David Raksin.

As with *Laura*, Raksin provided another classic noir tune, this one called "Slowly," which plays as source music throughout the film (and is sung by both Alice Faye and Dick Haymes). Additionally, Raksin provides his usual expert background score, beginning with a nervous, bustling, and exciting main title, which then segues into Dana Andrews' arrival by bus into a small town, where he enters a diner and becomes entangled in much noir drama. There's nothing quite like Raksin in noir mode and *Fallen Angel* is a Raksin classic.

Next up we jump to the 1950 Preminger film, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. Based on William L. Stuart's novel, *Night Cry*, the film had a screenplay by Ben Hecht, photography by Joseph LaShelle, and it reunited the stars of Preminger's *Laura* – Dana Andrews and Gene Tierney. Also featured were Gary Merrill, Craig Stevens, Tom Tully, Karl Malden, Bert Freed and Neville Brand.

Andrews plays a hardboiled cop whose "methods" of interrogation get him in trouble with his superiors. While giving the hardboiled treatment to a murder suspect, he hits the drunken suspect in self-defense, accidentally killing him. He dumps the body in the river. And then in a classic noir twist of fate, he's assigned to find the killer. No need to spoil the wonderful plot, but it's a tangled web of lies, blame, love, and, in the end, redemption. The performances are terrific and Preminger's direction is taut and outstanding. It would be his final film for Fox.

The composer for *Where the Sidewalk Ends* wasn't Preminger regular David Raksin, but a Fox staff composer named Cyril J. Mockridge, with whom Preminger had worked on *In the Meantime, Darling*. Mockridge based his score around Alfred Newman's classic "Street Scene" music – a piece that was used regularly in films of all types at Fox during that era. But what Mockridge does with it is wonderful, and his own original music suits the film perfectly. Mockridge wrote some great film music over the years but

his name kind of gets lost in the shuffle, which is a shame, since he was a very talented composer.

No *Preminger at Fox* collection would be complete without the film that started it all – *Laura*, Preminger's 1944 classic. There's really no need to write about that film or score – its place in the pantheon of classic noir is no secret and the brilliance of its David Raksin score has been written about many times – in fact, we refer you to Julie Kirgo's excellent liner notes for our release of the complete score, which can be found at [http://www.kritzerland.com/KL\\_Laura\\_Notes.pdf](http://www.kritzerland.com/KL_Laura_Notes.pdf). For this CD, we include *The Laura Suite – Theme and Variations*.

Next we move to CD 2 and *Daisy Kenyon* (1947), a drama with a romantic triangle at its center, which involves Joan Crawford, Dana Andrews, and Henry Fonda. Based on a novel by Elizabeth Janeway, the film has luscious black-and-white photography by Leon Shamroy, great performances by its above-the-title trio, and wonderful supporting performances from Ruth Warrick and Peggy Ann Garner. It's a terrific drama, filled with Preminger's directorial touches that elevate it from being just another potboiler. Once again, the composer is David Raksin. Although the film has almost no music, the little that's there is wonderful.

And finally we have *Whirlpool* (1949). Based on Guy Endore's novel *Methinks the Lady*, *Whirlpool* has a screenplay by Ben Hecht and Andrew Solt, photography by the great Arthur Miller, and a cast that includes Gene Tierney, Richard Conte, Jose Ferrer, and Charles Bickford. Tierney plays the wife of a psychoanalyst. One day she's caught stealing something in an upscale department store and is arrested for shoplifting. But she's saved from that scandal by a dapper hypnotist who offers to help her with whatever emotional problems led her to the theft. Of course there's blackmail and murder and a killer to be caught. It's all very stylishly done by Preminger and is one of his best Fox films. And once again a Preminger film features a classic David Raksin score, this one filled to the brim with one great cue after another beginning with its dramatic and then beguiling main theme. For this film, Raksin is at his most atmospheric and it's one of his best scores.

Five great films by one great director for a great studio – four with scores by David Raksin and one with a gem of a score by Cyril J. Mockridge, all of which adds up to great Golden Age film score listening.

— Bruce Kimmel