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Review of Whirlpool

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Whirlpool
(Fox Home Entertainment, 9.6.2005)

Otto Preminger is either a great director or a hack, depending upon who's judging him. Best known to many as Mr. Freeze in the television Batman, Preminger ended his career with a long string of flops. He was unfortunate in having directed his greatest film, Laura, early on, but this romantic melodrama is hardly his only good film, with Fallen Angel, Angel Face, and Anatomy of a Murder almost as good. When Preminger strayed away from crime, as with costume dramas like Forever Amber and Saint Joan, his usual command eluded him.

Whirlpool does not represent Preminger at his best, often tittering on the edge of silliness, but it finally satisfies, primarily because of a terrific performance by Jose Ferrer. The film opens as Ann Sutton (Gene Tierney) is nabbed for stealing a piece of jewelry from a ritzy Los Angeles department store. David Korvo (Ferrer) gets her out of the spot by revealing she is the wife of a distinguished psychiatrist (Richard Conte) and has an account with the store. When Korvo arranges to meet Ann for lunch later, she naturally assumes he is a blackmailer and writes a check for $5,000 only for him to tear it up.

Korvo, you see, is just a kind soul who wants to help Ann overcome her kleptomania and insomnia. Although he calls himself a doctor and his clients his patients, Korvo is a con man who uses hypnotism and astrology to wheedle his way into the beds and pocketbooks of wealthy, susceptible women. My kind of guy. Theresa Randolph (Barbara O'Neil), a former patient/lover/victim tries to warn her, but Ann trusts Korvo. When she rejects his romantic overtures, he frames her, with the help of hypnosis, for Theresa's murder. Sleepwalking into Randolph's house, Ann is caught near the body by security guards. And where is good old Korvo, you ask. The clever boy is undergoing a gall-bladder operation at the time of the murder. I repeat: my kind of guy. But Lt. Colton (Charles Bickford) is sympathetic to Ann's plight, and he and the shaken Dr. Sutton set out to prove Korvo is framing Ann despite his ironclad alibi.

Pauline Kael called it “a real stinker,” but the film's loopy, baroque plot, with several gaps in logic, makes it fun. Otto knows how to pace the film, frame his shots, and move the camera when necessary, as with a dreamy swoop during Ann's sleepwalk. Though some have complained that Whirlpool doesn't belong in Fox's film noir series, it has the genre's moody lighting and Korvo clearly displays the cynicism central to noir.

The miscast Conte is stiff and unbelievable as a psychiatrist, but the often pompous Bickford gives a sensitive performance as the cop whose beloved wife recently died. With her breathy, upper-crust voice, Tierney is a limited actress who nevertheless managed to be more than adequate in seven or eight films, including Laura. Her vulnerability, which later manifested itself as mental illness,
is appropriate for conveying Ann’s confusion. Ferrer steals the movie as a slimier variation on Clifton Webb’s wonderful Waldo Lydecker from Laura. The best of Ferrer’s many fine moments comes when Ann refuses to hold Korvo’s hand during hypnosis and he progresses from disappointment to self-disgust to anger in seconds.

As is usual with the Fox noir series, the transfer is excellent. Stucco walls are textured, and the blood on a wooden floor gleams. Time critic Richard Schickel offers a lazy commentary, beginning with a did-I-really-agree-to-do-this tone. Schickel perks up a bit when discussing screenwriter Ben Hecht’s interest in psychology, also on display in Alfred Hitchcock’s Spellbound. Schickel makes mistakes like saying RKO’s Angel Face was a Fox film and identifying the cinematographer as Joseph LaShelle rather than Arthur Miller, but he is good at describing how Preminger moves the camera through a scene rather than relying upon cutting.—Michael Adams