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Review of The Strange Love of Martha Ivers

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The Strange Love of Martha Ivers
(Paramount Home Video, 10.25.2005)

The Strange Love of Martha Ivers is a film noir akin to *The Letter* and *Mildred Pierce*: a soap opera with noirish elements. Since many of the major Hollywood soap operas of the thirties and forties starred Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, or Barbara Stanwyck, it is fitting that each starred in a soap noir. Though *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* is highly watchable, with several baroque touches, it is not quite as good as *The Letter* or *Mildred Pierce*.

Sam Masterson (Van Heflin) returns to his hometown of Iverstown, somewhere in middle America, in 1946 after having run away with a circus eighteen years earlier. He is surprised to learn that his boyhood acquaintance Walter O'Neil (Kirk Douglas) is running for re-election as district attorney since Walter always struck him as a crybaby weakling. Sam is even more surprised that Walter is married to Martha Ivers (Stanwyck) because she was his girlfriend until he ran off. (All the characters are supposed to be the same age, though Stanwyck is nine years older than Douglas and looks it.) Martha has inherited the Ivers fortune from her cruel aunt (Judith Anderson) and runs her family's factory.

Martha has married Walter only because they share a dark secret, one that has driven Walter to drink, and they go into a tizzy for fear that Sam knows it and will ruin their lives. (The secret is unveiled in a 1928 prologue with young actors as the three protagonists.) Sam has met and fallen for the beautiful Toni Marachek (Lizabeth Scott) just as she is released from jail. Walter threatens to send her back unless she sets Sam up for a beating that will encourage him to leave town.

Martha is disgusted by her husband's drunken ineffectiveness but resigned to her fate. That is, until she sees Sam again, but it's clear that he has no romantic interest in her. *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* is a misleading title because Martha is not in love with anything other than wealth and power, and what's strange about that? Excluding the prologue, Martha is actually on screen less than Sam, Walter, and Toni. We know that the O'Neils will get theirs and wait patiently to see how.

Director Lewis Milestone and screenwriter Robert Rossen keep things running along smoothly, as the soap-opera elements are balanced by a noir tale of guilt and revenge, but the film needs to be a bit more overwrought to be truly memorable. Cinematographer Victor Milner, who would later shoot Scott in *Dark City*, provides evocative lighting of both interior and exterior scenes. A climactic shot of Sam outside the O'Neil mansion in the rain, turning back to see the resolution of the plot through a window, is wonderfully framed and lit.

This is the 29-year-old Douglas' first movie, and it's odd that he begins his long career as a weakling while Heflin, who specialized in playing ordinary folk, is the tough guy. Douglas' patented mannerisms are not yet on display, and Heflin is

quite likeable. Stanwyck has little to do but glare, though she does that quite well. Noir icon Scott, in her second movie, is, as usual, lovely but a tad tentative.

The Strange Love of Martha Ivers has been available on DVD previously in shoddy public-domain copies. Paramount seems to have assembled a much better version from several sources. The images are not consistently crisp from scene to scene, and lines appear a couple of times. Generally, the quality is good, and the sound is excellent, with the great Miklos Rozsa's lush score thundering away. There are no extras.—Michael Adams