

Strange Love of Martha Ivers (1946) Milestone

P Michell, 2022

A famous film noir and deservedly so ...

An anonymous New York Times film critic said on July 25, 1946:

Miss Stanwyck is twice the hard-boiled, lustful vixen that she played in "Double Indemnity," though her characterization of Martha is more on a one-dimensional plane. [Kirk Douglas](#) is convincing as her husband. But it is Van Heflin as Sam who has the meatiest role, and he makes the most of it. This is the actor's first part since he was discharged from the Army, and he brings to it the quality of rugged integrity and certainty of action that is characteristic of Spencer Tracy's acting. Elizabeth Scott, as the girl on parole, has some pretty silly-sounding lines, and her performance generally lacks conviction, a circumstance that finds the author responsible, too, since the character is poorly written.

So, get ready for an excellent [Film-Noir](#) with a lot of snappy dialogue, a dame who has had some hard breaks, a drunk, an evil [Femme Fatale](#), and a guy that shouldn't be pushed.

Hollywood Collaboration -

With screenwriter [Robert Rossen](#) and some outstanding artistic support, Milestone directed [The Strange Love of Martha Ivers](#), a "striking addition" to the post-war Hollywood film genre of *film noir*, combining a grim 19th century [romanticism](#) with the cinematic methods of [German Expressionism](#).

Rossen and Milestone's script provided the capable cast, starring [Barbara Stanwyck](#), [Van Heflin](#) and [Kirk Douglas](#) (in his first screen appearance) with a "taut, harsh" narrative that critiqued postwar urban America as corrupt and irredeemable. Cinematographer [Victor Milner](#)'s camerawork supplied the *film noir* effects and musical director [Miklós Rózsa](#) effectively integrated sound motifs with Milestone's visual elements.

[Wikipedia]

I'd add - the talent of the three children as well – all featured child stars of the period.

Creative Talent:

Packed full of talent before and behind the camera!

Lewis Milestone – Director (53 credits)

Raised in Odessa, born in Bessarabia. He was fluent in both German and Russian and an avid reader. Successful director in most genres – including dramas, comedy, war and film noir!

Milestone directed his first silent film, [Seven Sinners](#) (1925), for [Howard Hughes](#) and two years later won his first of two Academy Awards for the comedy [Two Arabian Knights](#) (1927). He received his second Oscar for what most regard as his finest achievement, the anti-war movie [All Quiet on the Western Front](#) (1930).

Trademarks associated with his pictures were taut editing, snappy dialogue and clever visual touches, good examples being the screwball comedy [The Front Page](#) (1931), the melodrama [Rain](#) (1932)--based on a play by [W. Somerset Maugham](#)--and an adaptation of [John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men](#) (1939). When asked in 1979 about the secret behind his success, he simply declared "Arrogance, chutzpah--in the old Hollywood at least that's the thing that gave everybody pause".

Milestone had a history of being "difficult", having clashed with Howard Hughes, Warner Brothers and a host of studio executives over various contractual and artistic issues.

While he was not required to testify before HUAC, Milestone was blacklisted for a year in 1949 because of left-wing affiliations dating back to the 1930's. His output became less consistent during the 1950s.

A founding member of the Directors Guild of America.

[on [Marlon Brando](#) in [Mutiny on the Bounty](#) (1962)] *I thought Brando's performance as Fletcher Christian was horrible. I've only seen him act once, and that was on Broadway in "A Streetcar Named Desire"; a marvelous performance. But he was never an actor before and hasn't been one since."*

[on [Errol Flynn](#)] *"His faults harmed no one but himself."*

Had a quirky sense of humour: when the producer of "All Quiet on the Western Front", [Carl Laemmle Jr.](#), demanded a "happy ending" for the picture, Milestone telephoned, *"I've got your happy ending. We'll let the Germans win the war"*.

Robert Rossen – Script (28 credits)

Staged his first socialist-oriented plays for the Washington Square Players and the Maverick Woodstock Players, later moving on to work with the Theatre Guild.

Was a member of the Communist Party from 1937 to 1945. He was blacklisted by HUAC, 1951-53, after refusing to name names, after being subpoenaed. In 1953, he relented to save his career and implicated 57 people as having had communist affiliations. As a result of his cooperation, he was permitted to work again, though he did not return to Hollywood.

He has written three films that have been selected for the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically or aesthetically" significant: [A Walk in the Sun](#) (1945), [All the King's Men](#) (1949) and [The Hustler](#) (1961). He has also directed two films that are in the registry: All the King's Men and The Hustler. [Pretty impressive as he directed only ten features.]

"Macbeth" was Rossen's favorite Shakespearean play, which he described as a 'dramatization of the ambiguity of the human condition.'

"Real life is ugly, but we can't make good pictures until we're ready to tell about it."

Victor Milner – Cinematography (137 credits)

Pioneering cinematographer Victor Milner acquired his fascination with the celluloid media during the days of the nickelodeon. A versatile craftsman and a master at creating moods (in his own words, 'painting with light'), he was equally adept at shooting unsentimental black & white films noir ([The Strange Love of Martha Ivers](#) (1946)), or sprawling, romantic Technicolor adventure ([Reap the Wild Wind](#) (1942)). He often worked on the films of legendary director [Cecil B. DeMille](#), winning his only Academy Award (from nine nominations) for the epic [Cleopatra](#) (1934).

He was one of the founding members of the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC).

Miklos Rosza – Composer (97 credits)

Prolific cinema composer of many great films.

A child prodigy, Miklos Rózsa learned to play the violin at the age of five and read music before he was able to read words. In 1926, he began studying at the Leipzig Conservatory

where he was considered a brilliant student. He obtained his doctorate in music in 1930 (aged 23).

While writing the score for [The Thief of Bagdad](#) (1940), Rózsa relocated to Hollywood where he remained gainfully employed over the next four decades. An expert at orchestration and counterpoint with a great flair for the dramatic, he often concentrated on the psychological aspects of a film. One of his innovations was the use of a theremin for the famous dream sequence in [Spellbound](#) (1945) which accompanies [Salvador Dali's](#) transcendental nightmare images. Few composers have managed to convey suspense and tension as powerfully as Rózsa with his eerily haunting scores for some of the Golden Era's best films noir ([Double Indemnity](#) (1944), [The Strange Love of Martha Ivers](#) (1946), [The Killers](#) (1946), [The Naked City](#) (1948)) or his lush, stirring music for spectacular epics ([Quo Vadis](#) (1951), [Ivanhoe](#) (1952), [El Cid](#) (1961)).

Famous for the spectacular score of [Ben Hur](#) (1959).

Barbara Stanwyck – Martha Ivers / Janis Wilson (child) (7 credits)

Whilst only seven films - Wilson, a promising American juvenile actress who started quite big in a couple of [Bette Davis'](#) critically acclaimed tearjerkers of the early 1940s. After making her debut as Tina, an emotionally depressed child, who becomes the object of Davis' affection in [Now, Voyager](#) (1942), she moved directly in the role of Babette in the [Lillian Hellman](#) classic [Watch on the Rhine](#) (1943), as Davis' daughter. She retired from acting after [The Creeper](#) (1948), while still a teenager. Later became a pianist, organist and choir director.

Van Heflin – Sam Masterson / Darryl Hickman (child) (148 credits)

Brother of Dwayne Hickman ([Dobie Gillis](#)). Darryl however was at one time, deemed one of Hollywood's most talented child stars of World War II and post-war film.

Trivia - During his off-time while on military duty, he discovered the writings of the great Russian teacher [Konstantin Stanislavski](#). He later studied at the Actors Studio but broke away and formed his own teaching style called "The Process". He published the acting book "The Unconscious Actor - Out of Control In Full Command", which he considers a Zen-like acting guide for the 21st century.

Kirk Douglas – Walter O'Neil / Mickey Kuhn (child) (32 credits)

Kuhn acted with Vivian Leigh in both [Gone with the Wind](#) (1939) and [Street Car Named Desire](#) (1951). Did some Alfred Hitchcock Presents for TV (1957), Later managed airports!

Judith Anderson – Mrs Ivers (Auntie) (57 credits)

Long lived, born in Adelaide. Moved to NY in 1918. Became a successful Broadway star 1930s -1950s. Noted Shakespearean actress. Famously played Mrs Danvers in [Rebecca](#) (1940). In [Laura](#) as (1944). Started late in movies, but significant roles.

Has appeared in three films that have been selected for the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically or aesthetically" significant: [Rebecca](#) (1940), [Laura](#) (1944) as Ann Treadwell, and [The Ten Commandments](#) (1956) as Memnet.

She has appeared in four films that have been nominated for the Best Picture Academy Award: [Rebecca](#) (1940), [Kings Row](#) (1942), [The Ten Commandments](#) (1956) and [Cat on a Hot Tin Roof](#) (1958), with only the first being a winner in the category.

Trivia - lived in Santa Barbara and appeared in TV soap [Santa Barbara](#) (1984).

It is said that conductor [Arturo Toscanini](#) was so carried away by her performance in the title role of "Medea" on Broadway that he nearly fell out of his stage box applauding.

Lizabeth Scott – Toni Marachek (22 credits)

Known for her "smoky voice"^[4] and being "the most beautiful face of **film noir** during the 1940s and 1950s". After understudying the role of Sabina in the original Broadway and Boston stage productions of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, she emerged in such films as *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), *Dead Reckoning*(1947), *Desert Fury* (1947), and *Too Late for Tears* (1949). Of her 22 films, she was the **leading lady** in all but one. In addition to stage and radio, she appeared on television from the late 1940s to early 1970s.

Trivia

Kirk Douglas earned this, his debut role, with the help of his old drama school friend, Lauren Bacall. Bacall knew that producer Hal B. Wallis was looking for fresh talent and she suggested Douglas to him. She encouraged Wallis to watch a play featuring Douglas. When he did, Wallis was so impressed by the performance that he cast Douglas in this film.

Future movie Writer, Producer, and Director Blake Edwards had an uncredited bit part as a sailor who hitches a ride with Sam Masterson (Van Heflin).

Director Lewis Milestone is quoted in an article in the Los Angeles Sun Mirror on December 8, 1946 as having said that he would never make another movie with Producer Hal B. Wallis because Wallis wanted to re-shoot scenes in this movie for more close-ups of Lizabeth Scott. Milestone reportedly told Wallis to shoot them himself, so he did.

Analysis & Review

Toronto Film Society, 2017.

The New York Times' Assessment of what Stanwyck brought to *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* was correct. Having broken the ice as a villainess with Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*, she no longer had fears about being a nasty dame on the screen.

Martha Ivers has everything going for it: a superior script, hard-hitting direction, a score by Miklos Rozsa and exciting camera work. The script was written by director Lewis Milestone in collaboration with Robert Rossen, and Milestone explains: "I didn't take screen credit for it, but then I seldom did."

Film Daily called the picture "blue-ribbon" and said: "If the season discloses a drama related with greater intensity or one more intriguingly developed, it will be nothing less than a miracle." Important to this is the way the film probes its characters. Their deed, motives and guts are laid bare inch by inch.

Like *Double Indemnity*, *Martha Ivers* shows a crime that would be perfect if people did not "come apart at the seams." However, the character of Martha is more complicated than that of Phyllis. She does not come apart in a normal way; she is sick—her sense of values distorted by her childhood experience.

One of the reasons *Martha Ivers* is such a good film is because Lewis Milestone was inventive and his actors responsive. Milestone talks of their work together and of the reactions of an always alert Stanwyck who "was very knowledgeable about all phases of film production. She would come on a new set and carefully examine the placement of camera, lights, etc. Then she would call the cameraman over and introduce him to the mysteries of her own favorite key

light. She astonished everybody with her knowledge of lighting and her technical know-how in general.”

During the rehearsals, they were faced with the problem of how to establish the fact that Van Heflin had become a professional gambler. Build a casino? Expensive! And lengthy! Then Milestone recalled a piece of business he had noticed at many of the casinos in Las Vegas. Some of the dealers, superlatively skillful with their hands could take a coin, a dollar or half-dollar, insert it in the space between two knuckles, and deftly manipulate it to twist it end over end, over and over, to and fro across their knuckles. He decided that this would be the perfect piece of business to help Van establish a believable character as a professional gambler. When he suggested this to him, Milestone told him it wouldn't be effective unless he practiced it a long time so he would be able to do it mechanically. He would have to become so dexterous that he could concentrate on his dialogue without paying any attention to the business with the coin. Van practiced for hours, and everybody was amazed at the skill he acquired. He could deliver pages of dialogue while his hand performed the coin trick automatically. Barbara watched this during rehearsal. “Van,” she said, “that’s a wonderful piece of business, but if you do that during my important lines, I have a bit of business that will draw attention away from yours.” She pulled her skirt up way above her knees. “Any time you start twirling that coin, I’ll be fixing my garter. So be sure you don’t do that when I have important lines to speak.”

The observant will notice that the travelling coin appears in only one of Stanwyck’s scenes—one in which Heflin is *supposed* to be antagonizing her. It makes three bold journeys across his hand—and then gets the hell out of there!

Sourced from *Starring Barbara Stanwyck* by Ella Smith (1985/1974)

More info from Toronto ... notes by Notes by Oliver Kraeker

Background Information: John Patrick’s story about a group of children who witness one of their party commit a murder, and how this guilty knowledge affects each of their lives in the future, was the germ Rossen developed into the “tortuous plot typical of film noir” evident in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (Millichap 145). Producer Hal Wallis, greatly impressed with Milestone’s latest picture, *A Walk in the Sun*, was adamant that the two partner up for their next project, offering Milestone six properties with the right to film any one that piqued his interest. As Milestone had commissioned screenwriter Robert Rossen for *A Walk in the Sun*, it made perfect sense to bring him back for a Hal B. Wallis production, but the two of them couldn’t find anything of interest in the six properties that Wallis offered. Rossen, however, had had John Patrick’s story kicking around in his head for some time, and started writing a script springboarding off of it, leaving Wallis under the mistaken impression that one of his six properties was being filmed (Millichap 142).

Filming on *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* wrapped two days before Kirk Douglas’s 29th birthday. He had made a meager Broadway debut in 1941, and returned to the stage after Navy service during WWII, but *Ivers* was his first screen role. Douglas would go down as a giant in the history of Hollywood, and his work in *Ivers* is a premonition of such a feat; however, some might agree with Joseph Millichap. He felt that “Douglas’s strong personality—which we recall today from later films—somewhat submerges Walter’s weak identity”.

Indisputably admirable is Barbara Stanwyck as Martha Ivers. Martha was born into a family of class inequality when her mother, an Iverstown heiress, marries a working-class millhand at the family-run mill. It is explicitly stated that he died, though the fate of her mother is unclear.

Nevertheless, Martha's domineering aunt is determined to "wash the dirt and grime" out of her (in reference to her father), a sentiment that Martha abhors, instead identifying with the surname Smith. Ultimately, her escape from Iverstown fails, and she becomes the capitalistic magnate that she was destined to be, but her will to power exists in tandem with genuine love for Sam. Joseph Millichap and Alan Casty both point out that, while Stanwyck had already proved her worth as a *femme fatal* two years earlier, playing Phyllis Dietrichson in the seminal film-noir *Double Indemnity*, Martha Ivers is, in fact a much more difficult role. Dietrichson is "merely a scheming, put-upon housewife willing to do anything to get out from her trap and get the money". Martha Ivers shares some of these affinities, but one also discerns a noble dimension in her character, or at least a desire for something noble. She "does love, would like to love, has always loved Sam—though fate has kept them apart until it is too late for her to realize that love in a way that is not destructive" or *Strange*.

Lizabeth Scott appears here in her second feature film, her first being the lead in *You Came Along*(1945). Scott was never quite able to shake off comparisons to Lauren Bacall, and it appears that these comparisons started as early as *Ivers*. Millichap points out that a contemporary critic accused Scott of working "from Lauren Bacall's scrapbook" (Millichap 145). Producer Hal Wallis wasn't overly intrusive to the extent of bullying Milestone during production, but he nevertheless "insisted on inserting a number of pointless close-ups of his latest starlet, Lizabeth Scott, in Milestone's finished director's print" that "stand out in the final version like so many sore thumbs, as the rest of the film is as faultless in its visual rhythms as everything Milestone ever did" (Millichap 144). TCM writes: "Director Lewis Milestone is quoted in an article in the Los Angeles Sun Mirror on December 8, 1946 as having said that he would never make another picture with producer Hal Wallis because Wallis wanted to reshoot scenes in this film for more close-ups of Lizabeth Scott; Milestone reportedly told Wallis to shoot them himself—which he did." We can only assume that one of these reshoots was a sudsy Toni in the shower, looking a bit too glamorous for a paroled convict in the seedy hotel room of a stranger.

The only other personage who may have put an equally, or at least comparably, strong stamp of individuality onto the film was screenwriter Robert Rossen. "Compulsive, often perverse, psychoanalytic drives played out in a larger social world" were regular themes of Rossen's, both as a screenwriter and a director. Martha Ivers is unique, in that she is a female version of the "corrupted gamblers, boxers and politicians" that "[wreak] havoc on the people and the institutions around [her]" (Millichap 144). Rossen had a knack for symbolizing these psychoanalytic drives of the characters on screen. For example, Martha's burgeoning sexuality and the abuse it undergoes under the tyranny of her strict aunt is portrayed with some "rather obvious Freudian symbolism" (Millichap 146) in the scene where Martha's pussycat is presumably bludgeoned to death. One should also note the long spiral staircase of the Ivers Mansion, which features prominently in two of the film's most important sequences. It "realistically represents the opulence of the mansion, but also symbolically suggests the convolutions of its inhabitants' twisted psyches" (Millichap 148). This is particularly relevant to Martha, who murders her aunt on the staircase, and attempts to murder her husband there, years later.

Of Interest: The film's working titles were *Love Lies Bleeding* and *Strange Love* (TMC). Miklos Rozsa's score features a theme for each main character, each of which intertwine and contrast in an almost perfect counterpoint to the visual images (Millichap 144).

Anxiety in The Strange Love ... Christy DaBreo, 2010

<https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/eng3940h/2010/02/17/anxiety-in-the-strange-love-of-martha-ivers/>

[CUNY – is City University of New York]

This discusses a relative rarity – a weak male lead in movies.

Walter O'Neil of "The Strange Love of Martha Ivers" is one of the weakest male characters I have ever encountered. His anxiety is like a dark cloud hovering over the film. I feel anxious just watching Walter. In fact, Walter acts as a doormat for his father, Martha his wife, and his childhood friend Sam. When we first meet Walter he is under his father's rule. He looks like a scared little boy in the presence of the great heiress Mrs. Ivers. He says whatever his father tells him to say and even takes the credit for finding Mrs. Ivers' niece Martha after she runs away. In this situation Walter is unable to defy his father because his father is the authority figure. After Martha murders her aunt, Walter agrees to her made-up story because Martha forces him to do so and he sentences an innocent man to death for the murder years later. Sam also treats Walter as a pushover and doesn't take him seriously.

Walter's guilt over Mrs. Ivers' death consumes him and makes him a weak man. The only thing that Walter has control over is the amount of liquor he drinks. Whenever we see Walter, he has a drink in his hand. He drinks to rid himself of the anxiety. He doesn't want to think about how he sentenced an innocent man to death for a crime he did not commit. The only way Walter can carry a conversation is if he has a drink. When Martha tries to talk to him he says, "If there's to be a discussion, I need a drink." In Walter's drunken state, he even falls down the stairs. Walter has to drink so that he can face the world.

An essential part of Walter's anxiety had to do with his marriage. He is married to a woman who neither loves nor respects him. He knows that Martha only married him to keep her secret. Even when Walter kisses her, she stands stiff like a statue and does not show any affection. Not once in the film, did I get the feeling that these two actually loved each other. Martha is anxious because she believes that Walter will betray her secret and Walter is anxious because he believes that Martha will leave him. There is no trust at all in this marriage. Martha wants him to let go of her, but he won't and as a result their marriage cannot survive. Martha and Walter just cannot be together because their relationship is toxic.

Liquor helps Walter deal with his anxiety, but it doesn't put an end to it. The only way Walter is fully able to escape his anxiety is by killing Martha and himself. Strangely enough, it is through death that Walter asserts his control over his wife and himself.