

Review of “Clash by Night” • Manny Farber

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“Clash by Night,” a passable movie about sexual unrest on Cannery Row, is like a blues number given class by a Stokowski arrangement and a hundred-piece symphony orchestra. Barbara Stanwyck returns to her clapboard home-
stead near a sardine cannery after ten years of romantic misery in the city. Working around San Something, California, are Paul Douglas, a dumb fisherman whom Stanwyck decides to marry for security, and Robert Ryan, a movie projectionist who not only speaks in the hard, poetic language of Stanwyck but has the kind of left-handed charm that causes the lady to stay up nights gazing at the most costly sky-and-sea shots ever to grace a Howard Hughes-RKO production. Ryan is fine “for a ride on a roller coaster,” but after a cataclysmic affair—their “last shot at happiness”—Stanwyck finds she can’t forsake her year-old child and hurries back to the fishing boat where Douglas is busy fixing the baby’s formula. This old-fashioned sex drama is supposed to hit you in the belly with its candid shots of men and women screaming, yearning, fighting, and suddenly coming together in rib-cracking embraces. But what was intended as a hot James Cain type of shocker was cooled considerably in the making by a hundred classy devices for making clichés look important and artistic. For instance, that old gimmick in which the man mouths two cigarettes at once is dragged in for kicks and then neatly twisted around. When Ryan hands Lady Stanwyck her cigarette she throws it away as though she thought it unsanitary. Several reels later, after Ryan’s excitement has wormed its way into her torn and twisted little bitch’s heart, Stanwyck is lighting Chesterfields two at a time just like her boy friend.

Stanwyck has occasionally been thawed out—by Sturges and Wilder—but here she is up to her old trick of impersonating a mentholated icicle. With his mellifluous broadcaster’s voice and cafeteria manager’s body, Douglas just

seems out of place as a Sicilian fisherman and silly in a turtleneck sweater that outlines every pound of his C-shaped stomach. Marilyn Monroe, who is supposed to be burning up the screen with her size-36½ bosom and horizontal walk, has several scenes custom-built to her measurements. Someone holds her upside down on the beach—to shake the water from her ears; she gets out of bed in a tricky hip-length shirt—designed by Adrian for cannery workers; she walks around in dungarees which must have been broken in by a midget cowboy. Nothing happens because Monroe is still a tight amateur presented as a spectacle. Given four-word sentences and simple actions like eating a candy bar, she seems to break them up into dozens of little unrelated pieces paced in a slow, sing-song fashion.

“Clash by Night” doesn’t have too much to offer outside of two good actors (Ryan and J. Carrol Naish) and fluid, flexible direction (Fritz Lang), but they make it worth your time. Ryan is supposed to be enacting a “sort of imitation,” “the Kingfish of Buckman County” run down and out of luck, a cynical guy who plays every word and gesture halfway into paranoia and with hard-bitten pathos. The role has been played by everyone from Widmark to Mitchum, but Ryan is the first one to give you the sense of an ordinary citizen being destroyed by a neurotic urge to act and admire himself at the same time. With pantomime that gives the sensation of a clock ticking away inside his skull, he is almost always caught in the process of observing himself while seeming to be observing and philosophizing about his friends.

Starting with a talkative script that offers nothing more active than a “tight two” set-up between talkative characters, Director Lang moves the story around a Monterey village with the space-devouring glide of a seagull. One of his neatest tricks is to keep the central fact of a scene at a tantalizing distance, so that he forces you to use your own eyes and imagination on something the average director would wear out in a minute of screen time. He takes you to the beach with Monroe and her boy friend and then watches their antics from a block away as they affect a cynically interested onlooker. He plays through the first Stanwyck-Douglas date at a movie house without ever showing the action on the screen that draws at least five revealing comments from the mismatched love birds. The script, like so many adaptations of Broadway plays, consists of endless exits and entrances, but Lang makes you so familiar with the architecture that one of the minor pleasures of the movie is trying to guess which stairway, door, or hallway will pull forth the next action.

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