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BY J. HOBERMAN

THE TARNISHED ANGELS. Directed by Douglas Sirk. Written by George Zuckerman from the novel *Pylon* by William Faulkner. Produced by Albert Zugsmith. Released by Universal. At the Public Theater, through March 31.

HOLLYWOOD BEFORE THE CODE. Fifty-five American feature films produced between 1931 and 1934. At Film Forum 2, March 25 through April 21.

THE SKY SOCIALIST. A film by Ken Jacobs. At the Collective for Living Cinema, March 26.

Black and white and dread all over, *The Tarnished Angels* is the most European of Douglas Sirk's American melodramas—or maybe it's the most American of Euro-art films. This 1958 adaptation of William Faulkner's *Pylon* is like Ingmar Bergman at Mardi Gras. It's iconic, morbid, and stocked with symbols. There's a dusting of arctic frost where another director might have made steam.

The Tarnished Angels, which is at the Public Theater through March 31 in an impeccable new 35mm print, is the Sirk film for non-Sirkians. The mode here is less the ice-cream hyperrealism of *Written on the Wind* or the embalmed hysteria of *Imitation of Life* than a darkly nostalgic Americana. And, however ironic, the movie lacks Sirk's sense of the ludicrous. It's a shadowy danse macabre rather than a gaudy mambo of desire.

Even in Germany, Sirk attempted to film Faulkner's novel of itinerant stunt fliers, written in 1934 perhaps with Hollywood in mind (the story has a generic resemblance to *The Crowd Roars* and *Tiger Shark*, early talkies by Faulkner's erstwhile collaborator Howard Hawks). But the project only became possible with the success of *Written on the Wind*. *Tarnished Angels*, which was also scripted by George Zuckerman, is similarly obsessed with failure and features the same principals. Robert Stack, a World War I ace turned fairground daredevil, plays another haunted neurotic, with the boldly stylized Dorothy Malone as his exploited paramour. (A sideshow Circe, Malone is sensitive trash—men get a hopelessly stricken look when she passes out of their lives.) Rock Hudson gives his best performance; he's almost convincing as a hard-drinking newspaperman spewing out the sort of wildly purple, two-fisted obit that macho columnists live for. They're all of them junkies, and Sirk transforms their various needs into something like a chivalric code.

Played across a tawdry fairground and a few back streets, *The Tarnished Angels* makes elegantly skewed use of the Cinemascope format. There are looming masses and mirrors everywhere, but the carnival of souls is animated mainly by Sirk's choreographed crane shots. The film's overarching movement is circular. The planes fly a perpetual loop around the air-show pylons, tracing a fatalistic round from which oblivion or the sudden eruption of metaphor are the only release: A kid trapped on an amusement park plane watches in horror as an actual plane crashes; the moment that Hudson and Malone clinch, a Mardi Gras reveler dressed as Death bursts through the door in drunken confusion, destroying any possibility for their subsequent happiness.

The Tarnished Angels is constructed around these moments—and the frozen postures the actors assume. Sirk's scarcely known as an action director, but no one has ever been better at filming accidents. The impact of a plane crashing is felt over two shots. In the first, it smashes to earth; in the second, the pilot is flung at the camera with a sickening thud. It's a rare Hollywood movie where death seems so final—almost as though the grave were rising to greet him.



Big Blonds: Malone plays Circe to Hudson's fairground daredevil in *Angels*; at right, hilariously wanton Harlow vamps Bard in *Hold Your Man*, before Hollywood's 'Golden Age of Order.'



The *Tarnished Angels* isn't the only Faulkner adaptation surfacing in Lower Manhattan. The remarkably tawdry *Story of Temple Drake*, a 1933 version of *Sanctuary* starring Miriam Hopkins as a sexually debased heiress, is among the 50-odd vintage shockers that make up Film Forum 2's monthlong series "Hollywood Before the Code."

For hardboiled craziness, the 1929-34 period was unmatched in Hollywood history. Movies were doubly uncensored: The fertile confusion brought by sound gave way after the Crash to an economically

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determined sensationalism as, less from conviction than desperation, Hollywood challenged prevailing sexual and social mores. The "fallen woman" cycle of 1931-32 suggested that, three years into the Great Depression, the only thing a girl had to sell was sex. By 1932-33, with half the major studios finishing in the red, movies felt pretty much the same.

Even from the perspective of 1988, Depression movies can be startlingly suggestive, cynical, and violent. Not until 1934—as what Robert Sklar has called "the Golden Age of Turbulence" gave way to "the Golden Age of Order"—did the combined forces of the Legion of Decency, the Production Code, and the New Deal prevail to reinforce more traditional values. *Bombshell*, the 1933 Jean Harlow vehicle which opens the series, looks forward to Order in its self-serving tribute to the studio system but its cofeature—the previous year's *Red Headed Woman*, directed by Jack Conway from an Anita Loos script—features Harlow at her most hilariously wanton. Unfettered by scruples or brassiere, this most avid of gold diggers launches a relentless campaign to wrap her charms around her married employer. ("And there we were, like an uncensored movie..." is how she describes being caught *en flagrante* with the boss by his wife.) Nothing deters her. "Do it again, I like it!" she coos when her exasperated prey plants his fist on her chin.

Sunday's bill—*I'm No Angel*, 1933's biggest box office hit, starring Mae West, the Legion of Decency's public enemy number one, and Josef von Sternberg's 1932 *Blonde Venus*, with Marlene Dietrich reduced to selling herself in a New Orleans opium den—are frequent revivals. Not so the remarkable Monday-Tuesday pair, *Call Her Savage* (1932) and *Baby Face* (1933). The former, one of It girl Clara Bow's ill-fated comeback attempts, is a sluggish, ineptly made movie that nevertheless presents one jaw-dropper after another: a prologue in which a bit of hanky-panky in a Texas-bound Connastoga precipitates an Indian attack; a crazed hophead rising from his deathbed to rape the screeching heroine; a Greenwich Village gay bar favored by "wild poets and anarchists" with a pair of flouncing queens in frilly aprons providing the floor show.

But nothing in *Call Her Savage* is more bizarre than Bow herself as a manic debutante in continual danger of bursting out of her dress. Jumping, gesticulating, roughhousing with her dog, engaging in inane repartee, Bow's a perpetual motion machine, a breakdown waiting to happen (it did). Her uncontrollable nature is explained by her secret, half-Indian origins. This bit of racist pandering would have been impossible two years later. The worst sin in the Code was miscegenation.

Warners's ineffably tough *Baby Face* is a crude but powerful morality play in which Barbara Stanwyck splits her father's Erie, Pennsylvania speakeasy, where she's a waitress-hooker, for the wider opportunities of New York. Landing a job by granting the personnel clerk a lunchtime quickie, she systematically sleeps her way up the corporate ladder (one rung being a youthful John Wayne). More businesslike than Lulu or even the Blue Angel, Stanwyck needs a mere 70 minutes to conquer the bank's huge phallic skyscraper, climbing from one floor to the next as the soundtrack blares her raunchy trademark, "St. Louis Blues."

Men ditch their fiancées, lose their jobs, blow out their brains. When this force of nature finally marries the Chair-

man of the Board, the bank is shaken to its foundations; it nearly goes broke from the negative publicity. Code, shmcode. This movie probably couldn't be made today even as a comedy.