

All That Heaven Allows**Douglas Sirk / USA, 1955 / 1h29m****Programme notes by Laura Venning, Film Critic**

Is there a more sumptuous vision of 1950s America than Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955)? The jewel in the crown of Technicolor Hollywood melodrama, from the opening images of golden autumn leaves against a vivid blue sky to the glittering snowfall of the final scene, all accompanied by swooning strings, it's easy to see why audiences fall under its spell to this day. The story of lonely, well-to-do widow Cary Scott (Jane Wyman) who scandalises her children and snobbish neighbours by falling in love with her young gardener Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson) is tender and tragic, playing out against an unabashedly artificial backdrop of exaggerated shadows and impossibly rich colour.

And yet although the film certainly tugs on the heartstrings it isn't just a romantic weepy. It's also a cutting critique of conformity and an indictment of bourgeois family life concealing existential desperation. The lush visuals emphasise the rot within. When Sirk was interviewed in the early 1970s he recalled that: "The studio loved the title *All That Heaven Allows*. They thought it meant you could have everything you wanted. I meant it exactly the other way round. As far as I am concerned, heaven is stingy." Such a statement hints at the unsentimental ambiguity at the heart of his work, his intellectualism and the leftist politics that made him an outsider in his native Germany as the Nazis rose to power.



Sirk was born Hans Detlef Sierck in Hamburg in 1897. A leading theatre director during the Weimar period, Sirk would suffer a harrowing loss to the Nazi regime that would haunt him for the rest of his life. After their divorce, his first wife, actress Lydia Brincken, joined the Nazi party and obtained a court order forbidding Sirk from seeing their son because Sirk's second wife was Jewish. Brincken not only enrolled their son in the Hitler Youth, she also instigated his career as a child actor in propaganda films.

Unable to extricate his son, Sirk fled Nazi Germany in 1937 and eventually emigrated to the USA in 1940. He soon Anglicised his name at the advice of an agent. Leaving Germany and his estranged son, who would die on the battlefield in 1944 aged eighteen, was immensely painful, and it's hard not to see this trauma reflected in his stories of fractured families. Sirk failed to revive a career in Germany after the war, so instead signed a contract with Universal. By the late 1950s he was the studio's most successful director, with a string of hits including *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All That Heaven Allows*, *Written on the Wind* (1956) and *Imitation of Life* (1959).

Magnificent Obsession, an even more lurid melodrama also starring Rock Hudson and Jane Wyman, had been a box office sensation and Universal was keen to re-team the pair. It's interesting then that *All That Heaven Allows*, essentially a studio mandated cash-in and not a project Sirk remembered well decades later, should become probably his most beloved film. But it's undeniably a masterpiece, a perfect marriage of full-throated emotion and sly social commentary, the film's visual language beautiful and layered with meaning.

Intense coloured light floods certain scenes, as if expressing Cary's hidden emotional world. She often looks into mirrors around her luxurious but cold home, emphasising her isolation. This culminates in the heartbreaking image of her reflection in the television set as if she is imprisoned by the frame. "Drama, comedy, all life's parade at your fingertips," says the salesman, as the camera pulls in on Cary's expression of quiet despair. Here, a television, an unwanted Christmas present from her unthinking adult children, signifies bourgeois affluence that's totally removed from real human connection.



Probably because these films were so glossy and commercial Sirk was dismissed as a Hollywood filmmaker unworthy of serious consideration, and by the mid 1960s his films were perceived as dated. But before the decade was out melodrama as a genre began to be taken seriously by academics, and his films were reevaluated as masterpieces by the influential critics from *Cahiers du cinéma*, including Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut.

Sirk's films would also be admired by pioneer of the New German Cinema movement Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who helped organise a Sirk retrospective in 1971, helping to kick-start Sirk's reappraisal. Fassbinder made several films in the Sirkian melodramatic mode, the most overt being *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), a loose retelling of *All That Heaven Allows* with nods to *Imitation of Life*. Transferring the story from a small New England town of the 1950s to West Germany in the 1970s, in Fassbinder's homage an older white woman falls in love with and marries a younger Moroccan immigrant, to the consternation of her family.

Later, Todd Haynes, one of the key filmmakers of the New Queer Cinema movement of the 1990s, would make his own homage to the Sirkian melodrama with *Far From Heaven* (2002), in which Julianne Moore's 50s housewife discovers her husband is gay and embarks on a love affair with a Black gardener. The film's queer content also has a direct lineage to *All That Heaven Allows*: Cary and Ron's forbidden romance already lends itself to a queer reading but this interpretation is amplified by Hudson's homosexuality, not publicly known until his death from AIDS complications in 1985.

Interviewed by the BBC in 1979, Sirk said that "The moment you want to teach your audience you're making a bad film." *All That Heaven Allows* may not explicitly attempt to change its audience's viewpoint or behaviour but it certainly has a message. Proto-hippy Alita (Virginia Grey) describes her friend Ron's philosophy to Cary thus: "To thine own self be true. That's Ron. You see, Ron's security comes from inside himself, and nothing can ever take it away from him. Ron absolutely refuses to let unimportant things become important." *All That Heaven Allows* endures not just thanks to its swoon-worthy romance and vibrant Technicolor, but because of its ever-relevant ethos, as facile as it might sound, to reject convention and embrace your true desires.