

The Woman on the Beach (1947) by Jean Renoir

Jean Renoir's American masterpiece, *Woman on the Beach* (1947) is easily the best Hollywood film by the resolutely humanist director of such classic films as *Rules of the Game* (1939) and *Boudu Saved From Drowning* (1932). When Renoir fled France with the advent of the Nazi onslaught, he initially landed at 20th Century Fox, where he directed the torrid melodrama *Swamp Water* (1941), shot on location in Georgia. The film failed to click at the box office, and Renoir left Fox for Universal, where he began work on a Deanna Durbin musical, but walked off the film after a few weeks, upset with Universal's factory production methods. The film was eventually released as *The Amazing Mrs. Holiday* (1943), with writer/producer Bruce Manning taking sole directorial credit. Leaving Universal, Renoir landed at RKO, where he was able to direct the noirish French resistance drama *This Land Is Mine* (1943), starring Charles Laughton as a meek schoolmaster, through the film was marred by a stage bound, Hollywood "studio" look, in contrast to Renoir's best, more naturalistic films.

Renoir then left RKO, and made a brief propaganda short, *Salute to France* (1944), before creating *The Southerner* (1945) and *The Diary of a Chambermaid* (1946), both independent productions with modest budgets and shooting schedules. Renoir's American odyssey was coming to an end when he returned to RKO for his last Hollywood film, the brutally vicious *Woman on the Beach*, which effectively ended Renoir's ties with the American film industry.

Joan Bennett, then at the height of her box-office fame after her memorable role as the duplicitous prostitute Kitty Marsh in Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street*, heard of Renoir's interest in making a film for RKO, and insisted that Renoir direct her new project, then titled *Desirable Woman*. However, as the film was being readied for production, RKO's production chief, the gifted Charles Koerner, died on February 2, 1946 of leukemia 1, and Jack Gross took over as producer, much to Renoir's chagrin. Koerner, said Renoir, was ". . . an understanding man, a man who knew the film market, who understood the workings of it very well, but who allowed for experimentation just the same" 1. Gross was much less given to individual nuance in his films as producer, but nevertheless Renoir found that with Joan Bennett as his star, he could afford a relatively luxurious production schedule.

Still, the scenario and production of *Woman on the Beach* bothered Renoir, if only because it was unlike any other film he had ever attempted. As he noted at the time, "I wanted to try and tell a love story based purely on physical attraction, a story in which emotions played no part . . . In all my previous films I had tried to depict the bonds uniting the individual to his background . . . I had proclaimed the consoling truth that the world is one; and now I was embarked on a study of persons whose sole idea was to close the door on the absolutely concrete phenomenon which we call life" 1. This, of course, is the very essence of noir, and whatever his misgivings, Renoir embraced this new emotional terrain with his customary skill and insight.

Woman on the Beach tells the tale of Tod Butler (Charles Bickford), an extremely successful American artist, whose career has been cut short by an accident, in which he was deprived of his eyesight. His wife, Peggy (Joan Bennett), loves and hates Tod in equal measure, but remains bound to him, because it was she who blinded Tod during a lover's quarrel. The two live in a seaside cottage near a U.S. Coast Guard base, in a state of perpetual disharmony; Tod keeps his paintings locked up in a closet as his only link to the past, while Peggy wants to sell the paintings and move to New York, seeking the fast life the two once shared when Tod could see. Into this uneasy marriage comes Lieutenant Scott Burnett (Robert Ryan), a young officer who has recently survived a torpedo attack, and is now recovering from his physical wounds, but is still mentally unbalanced. Peggy immediately seduces Scott, much to the displeasure of Scott's fiancé, Eve Geddes (Nan Leslie).

Scott becomes obsessed with "freeing" Peggy from Tod, whom he believes is not really blind, but rather manipulating Peggy so that she will stay with him out of guilt. Scott creates a series of cruel tests for Tod, in one instance standing by while Tod walks off a cliff, in an attempt to prove his theory. Convinced at last that Tod really is blind, but unable to free himself from Peggy's grip, Tod and Scott battle for Peggy's affections, culminating in an astounding final scene, in which Tod sets his house and paintings on fire, in a desperate attempt to free himself of his past life. As the house explodes in flames, Tod renounces his past ways, and tells Peggy to go with Scott. But Peggy chooses to stay with Tod, who now intends to pursue a career as a writer; Scott returns to Eve, and domestic tranquility.

While the shooting of the film went smoothly, the release of *Woman on the Beach* was fraught with difficulties. The film was given a "sneak preview" in Santa Barbara before a crowd of young students who greeted the film with derisive catcalls, and Renoir was forced by RKO to recut the film. Scenes with Joan Bennett were reshot, and the love scenes with Ryan and Bennett were also revised (Bergan 262)1. The final result pleased no one, and the film was released in May of 1947 to "general public indifference" 1. Renoir, sensing that the political landscape in the United States was about to change for the worse, with the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings on the horizon, left Hollywood shortly thereafter; his next project would be *The River* (1951), a Technicolor feature shot entirely on location in India. From *The River*, Renoir returned to postwar France, making the gently elegiac *French Cancan* (1955) and other films before his final retirement from the director's chair. Summing up his Hollywood period, Renoir commented

that “Although I don’t regret my American films, I know for a fact they don’t even come close to any ideal I have for my work . . . they represent seven years of unrealized works and unrealized hopes. And seven years of deceptions too . . .”

But even if this is so, *Woman on the Beach* is still a remarkable film, the only true noir that Renoir ever made, and one of the most economical and relentless examinations of a marriage in collapse ever filmed, along with Jean-Luc Godard’s 1963 masterpiece *Le Mépris* (Contempt). As Tod Butler, Bickford gives the most nuanced performance of his career, at once tender and yet dangerous, while Robert Ryan brings an intensity to the role of Scott Burnett that is both haunting and achingly realistic. Joan Bennett’s foredoomed femme fatale is essentially a reprise of her role in *Scarlet Street*, but in *Woman on the Beach*, she seems more tragic and human than in Lang’s much colder moral universe. At 71 minutes, the film has little time to waste, and is harrowingly compact. *Woman on the Beach* is Renoir’s one true American masterpiece, unto which he distilled all his disdain for the Hollywood studio system and American culture.

Directed by Jean Renoir
Produced by Jack J. Gross, Will Price
Screenplay by Frank Davis, Jean Renoir, Michael Hogan
Based on the 1945 novel *None So Blind* **by** Mitchell Wilson
Music by Hanns Eisler
Cinematography Leo Tover, Harry J. Wild
Edited by Lyle Boyer, Roland Gross

Running time
71 minutes