

PARRISH

Directed by Delmer Daves
Produced by Delmer Daves
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 1961

There was a time in the late 1950s, when Hollywood rediscovered sex, that a series of thought-provoking potboilers hit the screen, thrilling a generation with tales of young love and the struggle to do right when one's body just wanted to do wrong. *Peyton Place* (1957), *A Summer Place* (1959), *From the Terrace* (1960), *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), and *Rome Adventure* (1962) fit the bill. These movies didn't address bedroom problems head on (they left that distinction to the lurid *Baby Doll* [1956]). These pictures were elegant and exciting.

Years later the sub-genre went off the rails with pictures like *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969) and *Carnal Knowledge* (1971). The ultimate destination for romance and sex stopped being marriage, and once that was dismissed nothing could satisfy.

Parrish is one of the best of the sexual-awakening revival. It is fitfully hokey, and the titular character's easy success with women produces, alternately, derision and envy; but the story is compelling. Parrish is a young man without a father eager to take on the world, eager to live life on his own terms. After a while he stops seeking the freedom to do what he likes, and instead seeks the freedom to do what is right. He could have been disturbingly obtuse and venal, a self-absorbed lout coasting on his physical charms; but because of his bravery, sense of nascent honor, and strong work ethic he proves endearing. His potential is apparent from the start. He respects his mother, calls his superiors "sir," and has this measured reply when destitute Lucy asks him if their new abode is "too crummy": "It's very picturesque. I kind of like old houses."

The characters are believable and winning. Judd Raikes is a corrupt Daddy Warbucks; his business instincts are unimpeachable, and he demands as much from himself as he does from others. But he is dishonest, and his biggest problem is that he must be in control. So he drives away the future of his company in a fit of pique.

The casting is spot-on, with the exception of Claudette Colbert. She's the right age to be Parrish's mother, but she's just a little too old to match up with Karl Malden's Judd Raikes. This was Colbert's last film role, and she took the job to secure an idyllic Barbados retirement. Her many monologues of admonition are made surprisingly believable and spontaneous by her performance—at one point hesitant, at another, fiercely strident.

For all that talk amongst film academics about the oppressive male gaze, what is notable about *Parrish* is how the three love interests all initiate the relationship and offer a very strong penetrating look. Director Delmer Daves sees to it that Parrish look right back, not averting his eyes, his steely blues challenging the querying femme to just dare trying to seduce *him*. If he does anything it's because he wants to. It's not the male gaze as patriarchal, phallic, or presumptuous; it's the male gaze undeterred by a 'liberated' woman, a gaze that meets strength

with strength. This should be reassuring to a woman, not threatening. No woman wants a weak man...that is, unless she's planning on doing the oppressing, herself.

As Sala Post says to Parrish, referring to his daughter Alison, after she's settled down to domestic despair with Wiley Raike: "She coulda had a real man—she settled for half."

After Parrish (in a scene that showcases Troy Donahue's talent), crosses swords with Judd Raike on his yacht, he tries to convince Alison to stick with him as he scrapes by as a hardscrabble tobacco farmer. She spurns him as a lousy hick-laborer. Parrish, devastated, retreats to the Navy, beginning a long-distance love affair with Paige Raike via mail. She, increasingly, is aligning herself with Parrish, against her father. (Sharon Hugueny's performance might be the most exciting in the film. The scenes where she, tear-streaked, chews out her father inspire us to "rage against the dying of the light." Dylan Thomas's immortal verse seems strangely apropos: "And you, my father, there on the sad height, / Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray. / Do not go gentle into that good night." Indeed, she loves him...and he doesn't care in the slightest.)

So Parrish returns, rejects Raike's offer of a job and a guaranteed buyer, fights back Edgar's blackmail scheme, and inherits Post's mantle as the last farmer in the Valley to upset the status quo.

All the story's plot threads come together when Edgar starts a fire on Post's land. Parrish takes a flying leap at his bitter rival. All their anger—regarding Parrish's mother, their fight for Judd Raike's approval, the fate of Lucy, and the night of the Tully fire—is channeled into their fists. Parrish wins, not so much because of his strength of body, but his strength of will: "Look! We have no blue mold here, no worms, no sickness, no blight or any other stinking thing you can *think* of. No fires like you pulled on Tully. So don't start thinking you can *fire* my cloths or burn my sheds—'cause I'll *get* you for it. I'll see—if I have to—it's the last thing I do, that you *burn* in hell, and the whole Raike empire with you! Now get out!"

Everyone present—Judd Raike, Sala Post, Paige, Lucy—realizes that Parrish is the future. He cannot be beaten.

The ending, Parrish above the canopy, joined by his bride-to-be, is perfect. It's like the pair have ascended into heaven. And for Parrish, his desire to make his way in the world and to find love have culminated in this triumphant moment. He's got it all.