



Webb, Clifton (1891-1966)

by Gary Morris

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Clifton Webb.

A remarkable character actor, Clifton Webb was a familiar presence in American movies of the 1940s and 1950s. He is especially memorable for his transformation of the Hollywood sissy into a more serious--even threatening--figure.

Webb was born Webb Parmalee Hollenbeck in Indianapolis, probably on November 19, 1891, though various sources also give 1889, 1893, or 1896. He showed a theatrical bent early in his life, appearing at age nine with an opera troupe, quitting school at thirteen to study painting and music, and singing with the Boston Opera Company at seventeen.

Ambitious and self-assured, he became a leading New York ballroom dancer in his early twenties before moving into stage roles in both straight drama and musical comedy. He was a respected player on Broadway from the mid-1920s through the early 1940s. He acted in five forgotten films in the 1920s, but came into his own as a movie actor when director Otto Preminger signed him for the classic film noir *Laura* (1944).

Webb's portrayal of the murderous aesthete Waldo Lydecker not only made him a movie star, it was also at once a summation and expansion of Hollywood's "sissy" characters. Sissies were a popular fixture of 1930s comedies and musicals, where the presence of effeminate character actors such as Franklin Pangborn and Edward Everett Horton instantly signified to audiences a sophisticated, sexually ambiguous world (the films of Astaire-Rogers abound with such characters).

The sissy was usually a fussy foil to the heterosexual star, female or male, a sexless comic figure who popped up briefly to liven things up with a bon mot or a raised eyebrow or a dramatic exit.

In *Laura*, the sissy retains all the old characteristics--sophistication, brittleness, cynicism--while adding a new element of suppressed violence and sexual passion that threatens not only the other characters but also widely held cultural assumptions about the passivity of the effeminate male.

Webb played this role to perfection; as Waldo he is at once droll and scary, capable of enormous pathos and vicious vitriol ("I should be sincerely sorry to see my neighbors' children devoured by wolves"). He is at once ridiculed and indulged by a straight policeman, standing in for society, who doesn't realize until it is almost too late that this sissy is also a killer.

Webb had the charisma and authority to single-handedly rescue the sissy from secondary roles; he is either the star or a major player in all of his films that followed.

The eternal puzzle of the sissy to straight society can be easily located in Webb's characterizations throughout his film career from 1944 to 1962.

Vito Russo reported in *The Celluloid Closet* that the pre-shooting script of *Laura* made Webb's Waldo Lydecker explicitly gay, a perverse Pygmalion to Gene Tierney's Galatea, but that many of these references

were cut. Despite the film's conflicted view of Lydecker, Webb's nuanced portrayal makes it possible to read him equally credibly as both spurned heterosexual lover and woman-hating queen.

Webb played a similar role in *The Dark Corner* (1946) as the wealthy art dealer Hardy Cathcart. Like Waldo, despite his seeming prissiness, Hardy is a dandy obsessed with a glamorous woman and resorts to murder when she rejects him in favor of a more "manly" male.

In *Laura* the audience doesn't see the pivotal murder; in *The Dark Corner*, Cathcart's crimes include luring a butch thug to a high-rise and stylishly pushing him out a window with his cane.

After *The Dark Corner* and his other homo-noir role in the 1946 *The Razor's Edge* (which garnered him one of his three Oscar nominations), Webb moved into a variety of comic and dramatic roles, some of which seem strange indeed given his early persona as what critic Parker Tyler called "the lone high aristocrat of professional sissies."

He was cast in historical-iconic roles (as John Philip Sousa in *Stars and Stripes Forever* [1952]), as a military intelligence officer (*The Man Who Never Was* [1956]), and as a Catholic missionary (in his last film, *Satan Never Sleeps* [1962]).

Yet Webb always seemed to have the last gay laugh. Even in films where he is improbably cast as hyperheterosexual--and there were several, including the 1950 *Cheaper by the Dozen*, where he has twelve children, or the 1959 *The Remarkable Mr. Pennypacker*, where he has two wives and two families--he never downplayed the bitchy evil queen that he perfected in his first roles.

In the huge mainstream hit *Sitting Pretty* (1948), which established a new identity for Webb as an unlikely parent-figure, he plays an "eccentric" babysitter who, among other things, dumps a bowl of oatmeal on the head of one of his charges. Even in a serious thriller like *The Man Who Never Was*, when he is asked to pick a code name, he says coyly, "With your permission, sir, Mincemeat?"

Webb was apparently as much a dandy off screen as on, and a noted taste maker at that. His *New York Times* obituary gives him credit for "having introduced into the American man's wardrobe such items as the white mess coat dinner jacket, the double-breasted vest and the red carnation boutonniere."

Details of his personal life have not been widely reported. Rumors have surfaced that he "helped" some notable younger actors such as James Dean in their quest for stardom.

But his most crucial relationship appears to have been with his mother, Maybelle, to whom he was devoted. She was his secretary, business manager, and by all reports his constant companion at parties; when she died at age ninety, he was inconsolable. His seemingly bottomless grief inspired Noël Coward's famous remark that Webb was "the world's oldest living orphan."

He died on October 13, 1966.

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