

# The unknown women of Joan Fontaine (1917-2013)

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It is unfortunate that tributes to actress Joan Fontaine, who passed away December 15 at the age of 96, have largely focused on the longstanding feud between Fontaine and her sister, fellow performer Olivia de Havilland. Certain tell-all revelations included in her 1978 memoir *No Bed of Roses* have also been given ample treatment. For the most part, the entertainment press concerns itself with gossip and little else.

Too little has been said about Fontaine's body of work. She was a remarkable actress who contributed performances of real depth and sensitivity to a number of Hollywood films of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. She was fortunate enough to work with many of the more interesting and talented film directors of that period, including George Cukor, Alfred Hitchcock, Max Ophuls, George Stevens, Anthony Mann, Fritz Lang, Nicholas Ray, William Dieterle, Mitchell Leisen, Jean Negulesco and future blacklist victim John Berry (she also apparently had a small, uncredited part in Orson Welles's *Othello* [1952]).

Fontaine appeared opposite many talented actors as well, among them Welles, Cary Grant, Robert Ryan, Burt Lancaster, Joseph Cotten, Charles Boyer, Tyrone Power, Louis Jourdan, Dennis O'Keefe, Zachary Scott, Mel Ferrer, Mark Stevens and others.

While Fontaine had performed on stage and screen from the mid-1930s onward (including a significant role in Cukor's *The Women* [1939]), her breakout role came in 1940, in Hitchcock's *Rebecca*. Based on the 1938 novel of the same title by Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* tells the story of a young woman who works as the paid companion of a wealthy society matron. She meets rich widower Maxim de Winter (Laurence Olivier) and the two fall in love. As she steps out of her class and apparently out of her depth to marry him, she soon confronts a darker reality under the surface of her

idyllic marriage.

De Winter's former wife Rebecca died under mysterious circumstances. Her presence still haunts his mansion, the gothic estate of Manderley. The frightening Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson), a servant fiercely devoted to the late Rebecca, makes life hell for the young wife (known only as "the second Mrs. De Winter").

Fontaine's terror is strongly felt, as is the warmth of her character contrasted to the cold world of shadows and insulating wealth in Manderley. A theme emerges over the course of Fontaine's work and it establishes itself in *Rebecca*. A fear and unease—a profound insecurity—dominates many of the characters Fontaine played, as fantasy turns to nightmare and promise into a prison. Something about the contradictions of the war years and the postwar period, the gap between the official "optimistic," "democratic" version and life as it was actually, frighteningly experienced by masses of people, finds expression in her best work.

The 1940s brought several significant projects to Fontaine. In *Suspicion* (1941), also directed by Hitchcock, she would again play a wife for whom wedded bliss turns into a torment. Her husband, played by Cary Grant, may or may not be plotting her murder. Fontaine won the Academy Award for her performance. In *Jane Eyre* (1944), a strong adaptation of the Charlotte Brontë classic, featuring Welles as Rochester, Fontaine gave an especially memorable and moving performance as the title heroine.

As was evident from *Rebecca* going forward, Fontaine was capable of contributing something rich and thoughtful. Her face and body language, alone, could speak volumes. She was, in this sense, a very physical actress.

In a 1978 interview with Doug McClelland collected

in *American Classic Screen Interviews*, Fontaine said “George Cukor ... gave me the best acting advice I ever had, and I had been to many teachers. In films, you must think and feel, and the rest will take care of itself, he advised me. The least gesture, you see, is what counts in films. Thinking and feeling are what really matter up there on the screen.”

Her best characters do have a weight to them, an internal life which one can discern. It’s unsettling to see, for example, the machinations beneath the surface of her social climber Christabel in Nicholas Ray’s *Born to Be Bad* (1950). The mixture of adoration and hatred toward the very wealthy which she carries inside her, and which can turn at an instant, is communicated well by Fontaine. Christabel’s words say one thing, while Fontaine’s face tells you the truth of her motives.

Fontaine would give another of her best performances for German-born director Max Ophuls, in his beautiful 1948 film *Letter from An Unknown Woman*. Fontaine’s character is a young working class woman who becomes infatuated with a famous musician. Fate brings them together briefly for a short but passionate affair, which ends as suddenly as it began. While the infatuation remains for the “unknown woman,” the famed pianist fails to remember her during later encounters. In the end, he has meant everything to her and she has meant little to him.

One is moved by the awkward and unsure effort of Fontaine’s character *to be seen*, to be recognized as someone of value. The character’s life could almost be summed up by the last words of the letter referred to in the film’s title: “If only...”

One gets the sense that Fontaine, who grew up in the well-to-do home of successful but troubled British parents in Tokyo, knew something about wealth and success, including its more vacuous, unfulfilling and sheltered aspects and brought this to her performances. She knew, intimately, how dreams, careers and lives could be dashed. Not for nothing did the actress once candidly describe Hollywood in this way: “I realize that one outstanding quality it possesses is not the lavishness, the perpetual sunshine, the golden opportunities, but fear.”

Many of Fontaine’s characters had the feeling and texture of real life about them and showed us something of the anxiety and unsettled nature of her time. Her best films continue to speak to us today.

Readers are encouraged to explore her work.



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