

Actress Dorothy Malone (1924-2018)

By Hiram Lee
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Actress Dorothy Malone died January 19, a little more than a week before her 94th birthday. She was a talented and appealing performer who too rarely appeared in films that allowed her to display and develop her abilities.

The future star was born Dorothy Maloney on January 30, 1924 in Chicago. She grew up in Dallas, where she was later discovered in the way most performers only dream about. While appearing in a student theater production at Southern Methodist University, a talent scout for RKO studios noticed her and within weeks Malone received a contract and headed with her mother to California. She was 18 years old.

Malone toiled for some time in uncredited, non-speaking, roles for RKO. Her first real breakthrough came with a brief but memorable appearance opposite Humphrey Bogart in the film noir classic *The Big Sleep* (1946). Directed by Howard Hawks, the film was an adaptation of one of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe detective stories. Malone plays the role of a bookstore clerk who surprises Bogart's Philip Marlowe, and the audience, with her beauty, intelligence and candor. For just a few minutes the story comes to a halt and the film is all hers.

Malone would go on to become a sex symbol, one of the so-called blonde bombshells of 1950s Hollywood. If any of the recent tributes to her are at all an indication, "sultry" is the word most often used to describe her. But along with her obvious physical attractiveness, her real appeal was her ability to convincingly portray the longing and disillusionment of a wide range of characters, all of those darker feelings one hides beneath a brave face. Her most interesting characters were driven toward and later disappointed by some illusory hope or means of escaping some unhappy situation. She had an uncanny ability to communicate loneliness even in a crowded room.

Perhaps the best film in which Malone appeared was *Written on the Wind* (1956) by German émigré director Douglas Sirk. It concerns a fatal crisis in the lives of a wealthy family in Texas. Robert Stack is Kyle Hadley, the son of an oil baron who wastes money and drinks too much. He falls in love with Lucy (Lauren Bacall), a more serious and decent woman than he normally associates with. Kyle's more grounded friend Mitch Wayne (Rock Hudson) also loves Lucy while Kyle's sister Marylee (Malone) loves Mitch. Each of the characters has everything except what they want. Selfishness and misunderstanding, fueled by the unaccountability and excesses of extreme wealth, tear them all apart.

Malone won an Academy Award for her performance. Her Marylee has all the looseness and recklessness of someone who never has to worry about money. The delight she takes in instigating one scandal after another is disturbing.

German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder, for whom Sirk was a major influence, once analyzed the film and Malone's character, writing "The sister, Dorothy Malone, is the only one who loves the right person, namely Rock Hudson, and she stands by her love, which is ridiculous, of course. It has to be ridiculous when, among all these people who take their compensatory actions for the real thing, it becomes absolutely clear that she does what she does because she can't have the real thing." Fassbinder adds later of the entire drama: "These people who were raised for a specific purpose and have their heads full of manipulated dreams are totally screwed up."

In one unforgettable scene, Malone dances wildly in her room ("the dance of a dead woman" - Fassbinder) as her father collapses and tumbles down the stairs just outside and dies. Sirk cuts back and forth between the two events, making it seem as though Marylee has conjured up his death by her dance.

Malone reunited with Sirk, Stack and Hudson in *The Tarnished Angels* (1957), based on the novel *Pylon* by William Faulkner. Not as strong as *Written on the Wind*, the film still impresses with the intensity of the performances and Sirk's direction. Here Malone is excellent as LaVerne Shumann, the young wife of a stunt pilot and former war hero (Stack), "a son of the twentieth century" who lives on the margins of society. She had fallen in love with him after seeing his picture on a poster for war bonds. Now they are poor, with a young son and a tagalong friend who serves as the pilot's mechanic. A journalist (Hudson) inserts himself into the family's life and forms a bond with LaVerne just when it seems she can't stand this way of life any longer.

All of them chase after one illusory ideal or another - Malone is that ideal for more than a few of them - only to be confronted with a hard, sad reality. Fassbinder also wrote insightfully about this film, saying "Douglas Sirk shows these dead souls with such tenderness and with such a light that you say to yourself that they're all in such a shitty situation and yet so lovable that something must be to blame for it."

Only rarely did Dorothy Malone have a chance to perform in works of this quality. Her career developed in a Hollywood which had already been damaged by the anti-communist witch hunts. Filmmakers like Howard Hawks, John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, and Sirk were still contributing something, but the blacklist had done enormous damage. Left-wing sentiment was largely purged from the entertainment industry and many of the new works lacked the depth and texture of earlier films by socialist-minded filmmakers. Hollywood was turning out more and more confections. By the early 1960s, Malone would appear in works like *Beach Party* (1963) that were well beneath her abilities.

Even on those occasions when Malone worked with more significant directors and performers, it was frequently in lesser efforts. Prior to her projects with Douglas Sirk, Malone worked with Michael Curtiz and Cary Grant in *Night and Day* (1946), a supposed biography of composer Cole Porter. She made two films with the comedy team of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, including *Artists and Models* (Frank Tashlin, 1955), which has some real merit. In Raoul Walsh's *Battle Cry* (1955), which follows a group of young

soldiers from their days in training to combat in the Second World War, Malone plays an older woman who begins an affair with one of the soldiers. *The Last Sunset* (1961) was a compelling but not entirely satisfying Western directed by Robert Aldrich from a script by Dalton Trumbo.

By the 1960s, Malone was working more frequently in television than in film. Beginning in 1964, she played the role of Constance MacKenzie on the early soap opera *Peyton Place*. Her relationship with the show ended badly when she was written out of the series for complaining that her character lacked substance and sued the makers for breach of contract.

She continued to act in a wide variety of projects during the 1970s and 80s, partly, she said, because she was obliged to for financial reasons. She retired in 1992, following her final film role in *Basic Instinct*.

If much of Malone's later career is a disappointment, that is explained first and foremost by the significant cultural difficulties and decline which coincided with much of her career. Malone's best work, in the films of Douglas Sirk and elsewhere, continues to be worthy of our attention.

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